

# Gallery text at the V&A

A Ten Point Guide

The image features a large, stylized logo for the Victoria and Albert Museum, consisting of the letters 'V&A' in a dark purple, serif font. The 'V' is tall and narrow, the ampersand is ornate and intertwined, and the 'A' is tall and narrow with a pointed top. The logo is centered at the bottom of the page.

*This complex and fascinating story is told with quite exemplary clarity. The label writing is a study in what can be done simply by the use of clear, elegant language to make difficult things accessible without a hint of condescension.*

*The Scotsman on V&A exhibition, Encounters, 2004*

This review from *The Scotsman* sums up what we are trying to achieve in the V&A. To write gallery text that is interesting, engaging and accessible for a wide audience is difficult but not impossible. In doing so, we do not have to 'dumb down' our scholarship and collections. Instead, we have to recognise people's needs and interests, and use the devices of good writing to communicate our ideas.

These guidelines are a quick survey of the main principles of writing good gallery text. They have been written specifically for V&A staff but may, of course, have a wider application. For further information, you should read the Text Guidelines and House Style on the V&A intranet and website. To refine and hone your style, you should study good and bad text wherever you are, whether visiting an exhibition or travelling on the tube.

We have tried to include photographs of the objects that go with the labels. For copyright reasons, this has not always been possible but you will often be able to find the image on the web.

Lucy Trench  
Interpretation Editor  
Learning and Interpretation  
2007

**One**

Write for your audience

**Two**

Stick to the text hierarchy and word count

**Three**

Build your text around the display

**Four**

Engage with the object

**Five**

Admit uncertainty

**Six**

Bring in the human element

**Seven**

Sketch in the background

**Eight**

Write as you would speak

**Nine**

Construct your text with care

**Ten**

Remember Orwell's Six Rules

## ONE

### WRITE FOR YOUR AUDIENCE

Over the past few years surveys have shown that V&A visitors have the following profile:

- 50% are graduates
- 21% have a masters or PhD
- 26% have a specialist knowledge of art or design
- 50% are in socio-economic groups 1 and 2

From this one might assume that our visitors tend to be well educated. This is true, but the one most important thing to remember is that they are unlikely to be educated in the subject you are writing about. 74% have no specialist knowledge of art and design. If they do have a specialist area, it might be in Renaissance book production not Buddhist sculpture.

Plus, DCMS requires an annual increase in audiences from socio-economic groups 5–9. We need also to be aware of people who have limited reading skills and a limited command of the English language, or do not share the general knowledge that we might take for granted.

This is not to say you should write specifically for these special audiences. If you do, you might sound patronising and alienate our core audience. Instead, you should work on tone, balance and the skilful manipulation of words and ideas to make your text widely accessible.

Also, different displays attract different audiences and so need a different approach. It is absolutely right, and one of the strengths of the V&A, that the text for the *Kylie* exhibition (2007) won't sound like that for the *Sculpture in Britain* gallery. The principles are the same; the tone is not.

In the 1990s the Getty Museum identified what it called the 'art novice'. It defined this hypothetical visitor as follows:

- Is curious and motivated to learn
- Spends less than 30 seconds looking at an object
- Has underdeveloped perceptual skills
- Is unfamiliar with art terminology
- Expects a quick pay off ('art should grab me')
- Senses that their knowledge is limited and limiting to their enjoyment
- Lacks confidence in their ability to make sense of what they see
- Makes emotional and personal associations with the object first
- Wants to connect with the people associated with the object

With this in mind, look at the text on the mirror frame. Imagine you are passing through the gallery on the way to the café. You know nothing about Renaissance art and are reading this label with an aged aunt who has lost her glasses and a small child who wants to know what it is about now. You have 30 seconds.



*Before*

MIRROR FRAME

Painted Cartapesta (papier mâché)

Workshop of NEROCCIO DEI LANDI (1447–1550)

SIENNESE; last quarter of the 15th century

850–1884

This type of mirror frame, showing an emblematic female head exists in several examples in various media; a maiolica version (C.2111-1910) is exhibited in room 14. This work is characteristic of NEROCCIO DEI LANDI, who trained under Vecchietta and was active in Siena both as a painter and a sculptor.

- Why is it called a mirror frame when it doesn't have a mirror and doesn't look like a frame?
- What is an emblematic female head? What is it doing here?
- Can you be bothered to go and find the other mirror frame in Room 14?
- Who is Vecchietta? Have you ever heard of him?
- Who is the writer talking to? Any visitor walking through the gallery, or specially to a fellow curator?

This text was probably written in the 1970s but it remained in Room 17 until 2006. Presumably it was once perfectly acceptable, but times have changed and now more people go to museums than to football matches. Most visitors are no more likely to know about the material culture of the Renaissance than a museum curator is likely to understand the offside rule.

We have now rewritten the label to explain why the mirror frame looks as it does and to explain the concept behind the design.

*After*

MIRROR FRAME

About 1475–1500

Workshop of Neroccio dei Landi (1447–1550)

The mirror, which is now missing, would have been a disc of blown glass or polished metal. As well as being an expensive novelty, mirrors were thought to reveal the inner truth. This frame invited a moral comparison, since the viewer's face appeared below the beautiful (and therefore virtuous) image above. [52 words]

Italy, Siena

Painted *cartapesta* (papier mâché)

Museum no. 850-1884

V&A, Room 17, *Renaissance 1400–1600*

Even in the V&A there are still labels that are addressed to fellow curators. They refer to places, people and objects that most visitors couldn't possibly recognise. They fail to explain what the exhibit is and why it looks as it does, on the assumption that the visitor already knows. And they often follow the academic convention of analysing a situation and then offering a conclusion. But with less than 30 seconds to look at an object, visitors need the conclusion immediately. Instead, we should be looking at the approach used in journalism, in which the 'hook' or the most important point comes first, as in the label for the Gaignières-Fonthill Vase.

## THE GAINIÈRES-FONTHILL VASE

China

Yuan dynasty; about 1300–30

This is the earliest recorded piece of Chinese porcelain in Europe. It was owned by Louis the Great of Hungary, who was probably given it in 1338, when a Chinese embassy passed through his kingdom on its way to the Pope. In 1381 the king had the vase mounted as a gift for Charles III of Naples. It was later owned by a number of important collectors, including the Duc de Berry and William Beckford. [75 words]

V&A exhibition, *Encounters*, section called *Discoveries*

For image, see V&A microsite

[http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1196\\_encounters/exhibition/star\\_objects/star\\_objects\\_2.html](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1196_encounters/exhibition/star_objects/star_objects_2.html)

This label illustrates many of the virtues of good gallery text:

- It gets straight to the point
- It has been crafted for a specific context. The theme here is the story of the early Asian imports into Europe
- It has, in miniature, a ‘pyramidal’ structure in which the information becomes increasingly detailed and argued
- There is a human presence in the phrase ‘his kingdom’
- There is a sense of action in the phrases ‘passing through’ and ‘had the vase mounted’
- It assumes no knowledge of history, nor does it patronise the reader. To say ‘the famous collector William Beckford’ would be patronising. This wording is not.
- The sentences vary in length, which makes for a lively text
- The first sentence is short. (We recommend that where possible the first sentence should be under 16 words.)



## TWO

### STICK TO THE TEXT HIERARCHY AND WORD COUNT

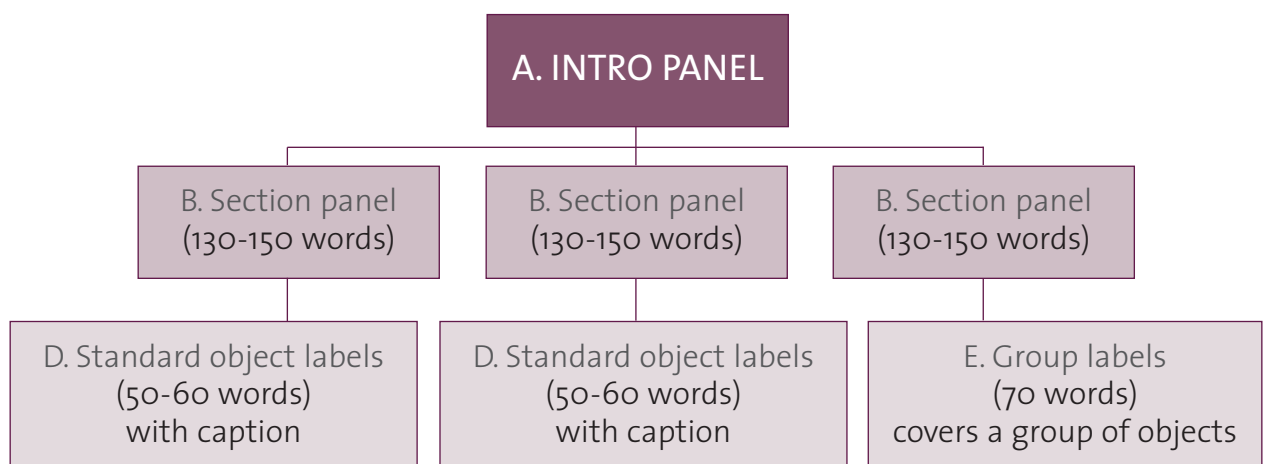
*What information consumes is rather obvious: it consumes the attention of the recipient. Hence, a wealth of information creates a poverty of attention.*

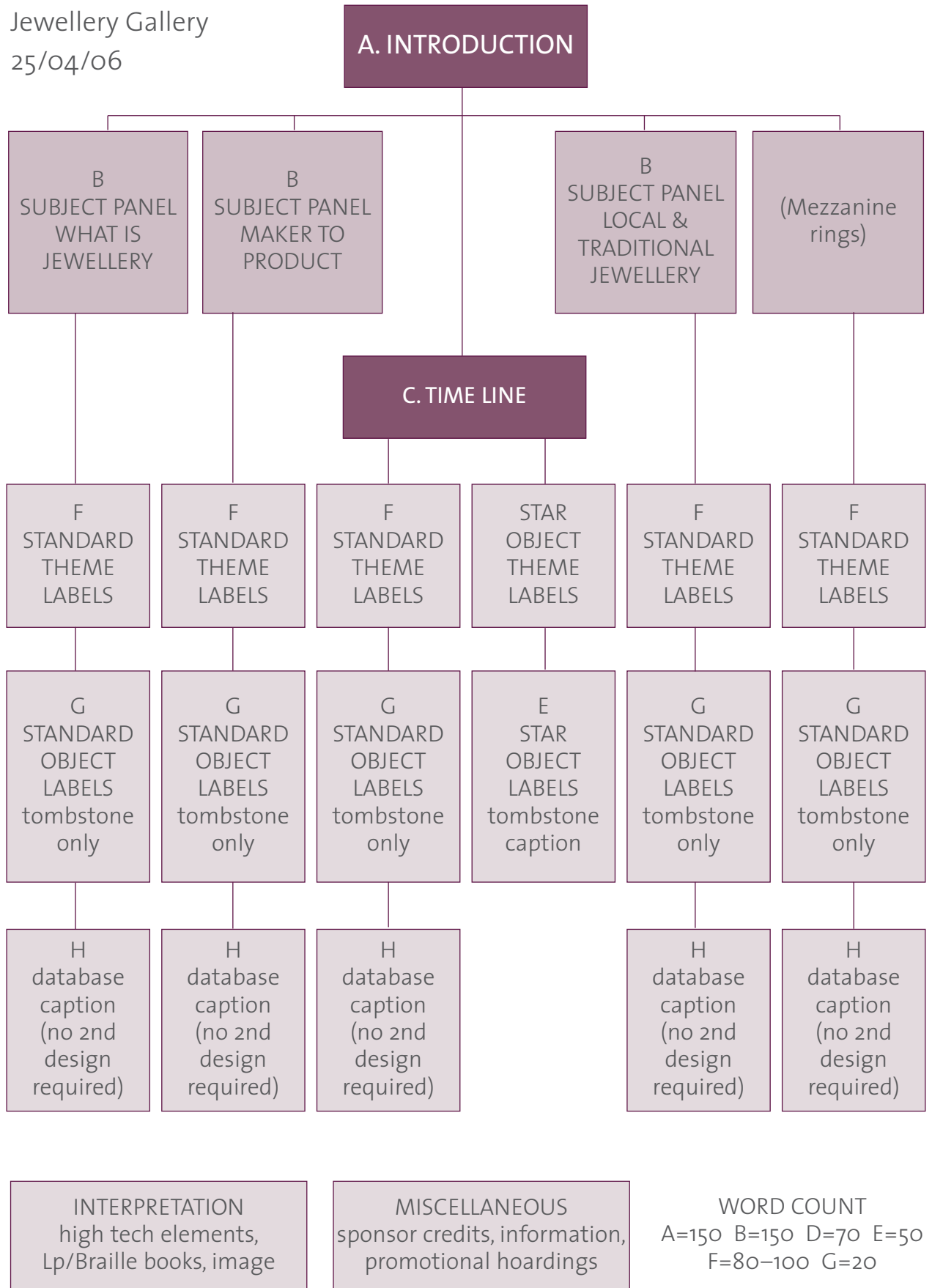
Herbert Simon

Museum visitors are bombarded with information – with objects, spaces, signage, text and ideas. We need to make it easy for them. This shouldn't mean reducing ideas to simple formulae. Instead, it means allowing every element of the graphics to speak clearly so that the emphasis lies always on the objects.

You should devise a text hierarchy that is uncomplicated but flexible enough to offer a clear path through complex ideas and information. Once the text hierarchy has been decided, stick to it. Don't be tempted to add extra bits of text that are difficult to incorporate into the design and confusing for the visitor.

Here are two examples of text hierarchies, one straightforward, the other more elaborate. Any new gallery is likely to require its own text hierarchy.





Similarly, with panels and labels decide on your word count and stay within it. If you write over-length, the text simply won't fit and will have to be cut at proof stage.

Learning & Interpretation's recommendations for word counts are as follows:

- Panels
  - A introduction, 130–50 words
  - B section panels, 130–50 words
  - C theme panels, 100–30 words
- Label captions (or body text)
  - D sub-theme labels, 70–80 words
  - E standard labels, 50–60 words
  - F group labels, 70–80 words

These word counts are not absolutely fixed. Some displays have a longer introductory panel (up to 220 words) followed by 'tombstone-only' labels, while some exhibitions such as *Leonardo: Experience, Experiment and Design* (2006–7) really do require longer captions (80–100 words). But the principle is non-negotiable. Visitors have come to look at objects, not to read books on the wall. They are tired, they are standing up, and they might well be craning over someone's shoulder.

These word limits don't restrict the amount of information that most visitors absorb. Instead, they increase it. In a gallery or exhibition, less really is more. There is a real difference between the complexity and nature of information that can be gained through an exhibition and that which is suitable for a book.

Remember, too, that we are providing other levels of information, in catalogues and on the web through Search the Collections. As time goes by, we hope that visitors will become more aware of the website and readily turn to it for further information.

### THREE

#### BUILD YOUR TEXT AROUND THE DISPLAY

A well devised gallery or display has a clear structure and a strong message. Your text will play an important role in this.

In writing the text, you should imagine you are walking around the display, reading the panels and labels for each section. As you write, keep an eye on the plans and elevations so you are aware of where objects lie in relation to each other. Gallery text is not a stand-alone narrative but an element within a 3-D matrix of design, objects and graphics. What works on the page might suddenly appear wrong on installation. A good way of checking this is to lay out the labels plus images in a sequence that replicates the display, or to pin them on a wall.

As an example, look at the original label for the stained glass panel at the entrance to the *Sacred Silver and Stained Glass* gallery. The panel shows St Peter holding the keys to the kingdom of heaven. When choosing it the curator was very much aware of its eventual location, but unfortunately the idea was not followed through in the label. Instead the original label assumed that the panel was part of the 'materials and techniques' sequence that runs along the window wall of the galleries. In rewriting the label, we introduced the purpose of stained glass and alluded to St Peter's role as founder of the church.



*Before*

ST PETER

About 1280

This figure comes from a 'band' window, so-called because strips or bands of figures are interspersed with plain or 'grisaille' glass. This type of window became popular in the years around 1300, introducing a visual clarity sometimes lacking in the earlier narrative windows. [43 words]

V&A, Room 84, *Sacred Silver and Stained Glass*, entrance

*After*

The imagery of medieval stained glass was not purely decorative. It was intended to tell a story. This panel depicts St Peter who became the first Pope. It shows him holding his special symbol, the keys to the kingdom of heaven. Jesus granted Peter these keys when he named him as the foundation stone (Latin 'petra') of the Christian church. [60 words]

In writing panels, remember that people remember ideas not facts. In other museums (but not in the V&A) you often see panels that are so packed with names, places and dates that the central message is lost.

A classic and well proven way of writing panels is to use this system:

- Topic
- Theme
- Message ('When people have read this they will know...')

To do this, you have to have a clear objective and be confident in making broad yet valid generalisations. You should examine the relationship between panel and labels and sift the text accordingly. Panels carry the big ideas, labels develop these ideas by linking them to specific objects. To put it another way, big stones go in the panel, medium sized ones in the caption, small ones in the tombstone.



This is the theory, but in reality visitors don't always read gallery text as diligently as we might like. In exhibitions perhaps they do, but in permanent galleries they tend to stop and graze – reading a few labels and moving on, often ignoring the panels. So while every piece of text should link to the display, it should also be independent and make sense out of context.

The following texts show panels that act as a 'broad brush' introduction to a display and leave the reader with a clear message.

## THE END OF ROMAN RULE

410

The last Roman troops left Britain for the Continent in 407. Three years later the cities of Britain appealed to the emperor Honorius for protection against attacks by Saxons and Picts. He refused. This marked the end of Roman rule in Britain.

Londinium, which had been the centre of Roman administration and of international trade, fell into ruins. But elsewhere, especially in the countryside, people simply stayed put and adapted to changing conditions. Angles and Saxons, arriving from northern Germany, either settled alongside them or took their land by force. Some Romano-Britains fled to the west, but the majority soon found themselves working for new Anglo-Saxon landlords. [107 words]

Museum of London, 2006

## KOREA

Korea has a long and continuous history as an independent country. Its people have their own language and a clear national identity. Unique traditions of clothing, cuisine and architecture all contribute to a strong sense of nationhood.

The teachings of the Chinese philosopher Confucius have been a strong influence on Korean society, as has Buddhism. Both have co-existed for centuries, but Confucianism in particular has promoted a respect for austerity, authority and social order.

Most of the objects in this gallery were made for the sophisticated and cosmopolitan Korean elite. They show the Korean preoccupation with simple shapes, plain colours and restrained decoration, along with a rich symbolism and love of nature.

This heritage is still venerated. In both North and South Korea the state offers financial support to artists who rework traditional forms and maintain traditional skills. [138 words]

V&A, Room 47g, *Korea*



## FOUR

### ENGAGE WITH THE OBJECT

A good label should address the object. It should encourage visitors to look, to understand and to find their own reward, whether aesthetic, intellectual or personal. To do this, the writer must fully engage with the object – which means, of course, looking at it, preferably for real but otherwise in a photograph.

The first and most obvious aim of a label is to explain anything that might be puzzling in the object. Have a look at the label on the next page. The title of the painting is *Landscape with a Terminal Figure*.

- What is a terminal figure? (Most people think a terminal is something to do with a railway station.)
- Will visitors be able to identify the terminal figure in the painting?
- Will they understand its significance?
- Will they know the painting in Tokyo?
- Who was Henry Hill of Brighton? (In fact, he was an important British collector of French painting, but this is not mentioned)
- Could this text have come straight out of CIS?



*Before*

JEAN-FRANÇOIS MILLET

*Landscape with a Terminal Figure*

About 1864

This painting of about 1864 represents the coast near Cherbourg. It is a study for a painting of *Spring* from a series of the *Four Seasons*. The larger, final version of this subject is now in Tokyo. This painting belonged to Henry Hill of Brighton until 1889. [47 words]

V&A, Room 81, *Paintings*, section called *The Ionides Collection*

*After*

This view of the French coast near Cherbourg is a study for a painting of *Spring*, from a series of the *Four Seasons*. The ivy-swathed pedestal supports a male bust. This is a 'terminal', a figure that once represented Terminus, the Roman god of boundaries and landmarks. [46 words]

The second aim of a label is to draw people into the object, to help them understand and appreciate it.



VASE WITH FLOWERS

Turkey, probably Iznik

About 1575

Iznik potters often showed great skill in matching the designs they used to the shapes of vessels. Here tulips, carnations and other flowering plants seem to sway gently in a breeze, following the curved shape of the vase. [38 words]

V&A, Room 42, *Islamic Middle East*

In helping people to appreciate the object, be careful not to rob them of the chance to make their own observations. We do not have to be told that the Comtesse de Tournon has large, round eyes, a bulbous nose and a tight-lipped smile. Anyone can see that.

JEAN-AUGUSTE INGRES

*The Comtesse de Tournon*

1812

...Ingres does not idealise the noblewoman, but rather portrays her as middle-aged, with large, round eyes, a bulbous nose and a tight-lipped smile.

Non-V&A exhibition label

For image, see [Metropolitan Museum of Art website](#)

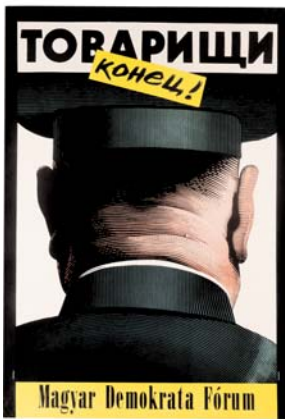
In contrast, the following text from the Metropolitan Museum website refers to the sitter's age and wrinkles but then goes on to show how Ingres is kind to her appearance in a way that people might not immediately notice.

...elsewhere Ingres took pains not to emphasize her age. Any wrinkles she might have had on her forehead are hidden by the curls of her hair (possibly a wig); those on her neck behind a large lace ruff; and those on her chest, under a fine muslin chemisette.

The third aim is to make sure the text fits with what you can actually see. If you write the label without looking closely at the image, you might well get a nasty surprise on installation when you find that the two don't work together.

In the example opposite it is no good to title the poster 'Comrades, it's over' as the slogan is in Hungarian, which no-one can read. Without a display number, visitors could have difficulty in identifying the object.

Also, the poster that we are looking at is not the one that the Russian soldiers queued up to buy, but the one issued by the Hungarian Democratic Forum. Finally, the soldier is not an officer.



*Before*

POSTER: 'COMRADES, IT'S OVER'

1990

The fall of communism and of Soviet dominance of Eastern Europe at the end of the 1980s was celebrated by poster artists. Here, a monumental Red Army officer is dismissed from Hungary. Ironically, retreating Russian soldiers actually queued to buy copies of this poster before they left. The image was adapted by the Hungarian Democratic Forum for its election campaign in March 1990. [63 words]

*V&A, Room 70, 20th Century, The 1990s, section called Design with a Conscience*

*After*

HUNGARIAN DEMOCRATIC FORUM POSTER

1990

Poster artists in Eastern Europe were quick to celebrate the fall of Communism. This poster, with the slogan 'Comrades, it's over', shows a Red Army soldier leaving Hungary. It marked an election campaign in March 1990, but was adapted from an earlier image. Ironically, the original poster was so popular with retreating Russian soldiers that they queued to buy it. [60 words]

## FIVE

### ADMIT UNCERTAINTY

However carefully you look at them, some objects remain baffling. Unfortunately some writers are reluctant to admit this, but actually it is better to be transparent. There is no harm in showing the boundaries of our knowledge. To do so dissolves the barrier between the 'expert' and the public, and engages the visitor in the debate that might exist about an object.

In the following label, the first draft was oblique and unsatisfactory. What is the connection between Margaret and the Virgin at Aachen? What exactly is the story of this crown? The answer is that we don't really know.

*Before*

CROWN AND CASE FOR MARGARET OF YORK

About 1461–74

This crown and its case bear the name of Margaret of York, an English princess, and her initials, with those of her husband, Charles the Bold of Burgundy. The crown has long been associated with the 14th-century cult image of the Virgin at Aachen Cathedral, and it was possibly made specifically for this image. [54 words]

V&A exhibition, *Gothic: Art for England*, entrance

Aachen Cathedral Treasury. For image, see V&A microsite

[http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1220\\_gothic/](http://www.vam.ac.uk/vastatic/microsites/1220_gothic/)

*After*

The crown bears the name of Margaret of York, sister of Edward IV and wife of Charles the Bold, Duke of Burgundy. Its history is a puzzle, but it may have been a gift from Margaret to the cult image of the Virgin at Aachen Cathedral, with which it has long been associated. [53 words]

The following label comes from a section entitled *Lifecycle: Childhood*.

*Before*

Probably by Mirabello Cavalori

*Portrait of a Youth*

1572

Vasari described the Florentine artist Cavalori as a successful portrait painter. In this sensitive portrait of a youth the sitter holds a drawing of the three-quarter profile of a man. This may represent his own work, or, with its shadow of a moustache, may represent the imminent onset of puberty. [50 words]

V&A exhibition, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, section called *Lifecycle: Childhood*

Museo Stefano Bardini, Florence. No image available

- Why mention Vasari? Is he relevant here?
- Do we have to be told that the portrait is 'sensitive'?
- Why the reference to puberty? This seems a very modern interpretation of the image. What evidence do we have that people in Renaissance Italy would have wanted to mark the onset of male puberty?

*After*

Drawing was an essential part of a gentleman's education. In this enigmatic painting the boy is holding a drawing of a young adult. Is this simply an example of his fine draughtsmanship? Or could it be the boy's projection of his future self? [43 words]

The rewrite links the painting more closely to the theme of the display (which includes education) and shows that we do not yet fully understand its meaning.

If you ask questions, it is important that they are genuine ones to which there is no obvious answer. Otherwise you risk patronising our visitors.



## SIX

### BRING IN THE HUMAN ELEMENT

*The good historian is like the giant of the fairy tale. He knows that wherever he catches the scent of human flesh, there his quarry lies.*

Marcel Bloch, *The Historian's Craft*

We know from the Getty and other research that people connect with people. This presents a problem in museums, where objects have been divorced from people. But there are ways we can reconnect people and objects. The first, and most obvious, is to include real individuals or to use quotations and humour. This is especially important with periods that have been consigned to history.

#### MARGARET TUDOR'S BOOK OF HOURS

About 1500

Margaret Tudor was Henry VII's eldest daughter. He probably gave her this book in the summer of 1503 when she left England, at the age of 13, to become the bride of James IV of Scotland. In it, he wrote, 'Pray for your loving father that gave you this book and I give you at all times God's blessing and mine. Henry King'. [63 words]

V&A exhibition, *Gothic: Art for England*, section called *Private Devotion*  
Devonshire Collection, Chatsworth. No image available

Quotations can be evocative, thought-provoking or humorous. They take visitors back into the past and bypass the curatorial standpoint.

*When evening comes, I return home and go into my study. On the threshold, I strip off my muddy, sweaty, workday clothes and put on the robes of court and palace, and in this graver dress I enter the antique courts of the ancients and am welcomed by them. And for the space of four hours I forget the world, remember no vexations, fear poverty no more, tremble no more at death: I pass into their world. [77 words]*

From a letter written by Niccolò Machiavelli in 1513

V&A exhibition, *At Home in Renaissance Italy*, for panel called *Work and Contemplation*

*Any person who has organised his life, his work and himself is a genuine artist.*

Alexander Rodchenko

V&A exhibition, *Modernism: Designing a New World, 1914–1939*, section called *Building Utopia*

Overt humour is more problematic. What is funny to one person is embarrassing or pointless to another. Certainly there should be no jokes in gallery text, but a wry comment or an anecdote can raise a smile.



DISH  
1635

This dish was probably a marriage gift. According to the Church, marriage was 'instituted of God in Paradise' before the Fall of Adam and Eve. It was widely accepted that Eve's sin condemned women to be governed by their husbands. However, the ideal of marriage as a partnership was also celebrated. Writers of marital advice pointed out that Eve was created from Adam's side, not his foot. [67 words]

V&A, Room 58c, *British Galleries*, section called *Marriage 1500–1600*

JACQUES-HENRI LARTIGUE

*On the Deck of the Dahu II*

1926

Lartigue was the world's greatest master of snapshot photography. This work, photographed on board a yacht, particularly appealed to Bruce Bernard. He once discussed it with Lartigue, who told him that one of the females on board was his wife – but he was not sure which. [45 words]

V&A Photography exhibition

Another way to 'humanise' museum objects is to link the past and the present, the familiar and the unfamiliar.

John Henry Foley in the following label is not exactly a household name, but he was an important sculptor in his day. By linking him to a London landmark and the statue of Prince Albert, we show his status and also make him more memorable.



JOHN HENRY FOLEY

*Portrait Bust of John Sheepshanks*

Signed and dated 1866

John Sheepshanks (1784–1863) gave his collection of British paintings to the V&A to found a gallery of British art. Foley, an Irishman, was a leading portrait sculptor in mid-Victorian Britain. He later designed the gilded statue of Prince Albert that presides over the Albert Memorial in Hyde Park. [49 words]

V&A, Room 82, *Paintings*, section called *The Sheepshanks Collection and the Academy*

On other occasions we can make objects relevant to modern viewers by relating to present-day concerns such as disability and ethnicity.

The original label for Lady Morgan (left in the row of busts) suggested that she was hardly more than an upper-class hostess. The reality was very different. In fact, she was a governess, from a modest background, who married well, developed her own career as a writer and had a keen social conscience. She was also very small and slightly deformed. According to the *Dictionary of National Biography*, 'Her whole life was a bravura performance in which she triumphed over these deficiencies through determination, wit, and sustained creativity.' Her disability should be mentioned, partly for her value as a role model, but also because it explains why her bust is the only one in the row that is looking up, not down or straight ahead.



*Before*

DAVID D'ANGERS

*Lady Morgan*

Signed and dated 1830

Lady Morgan (b. about 1778) was an Irish novelist and socialite. This bust was commissioned by the sitter from David d'Angers, the pre-eminent French portrait sculptor of the time. She is depicted as a confident woman who was in her fifties at the time the bust was executed.

[48 words]

V&A, Room 22, *Sculpture in Britain*, section called *Portraits and 'Ideal' Sculpture*

*After*

Lady Morgan (about 1778–1859) was a well known Irish novelist, whose works championed the rights of women and Irish Catholics. She was less than four feet high and had a slight deformity of the spine and face. This bust, commissioned by her from a leading French sculptor, captures her lively and determined personality. [54 words]

It is particularly important today to recognise objects that relate to black and Asian heritage. The original label for the portrait of Alessandro de' Medici ignored his African parentage and described the role of the Medici family in a way that many visitors would have found simplistic. The revision highlights his ancestry and also places the portrait in the Renaissance genre of a scholar in his study.



*Before*

AFTER JACOPO DA PONTORMO

*Alessandro de' Medici*

1535 or later

Alessandro de' Medici was an illegitimate offspring of the Medici family who exerted power and influence in Italy from about the 13th–17th century. He became ruler of Florence in 1530 and was assassinated by Lorenzo de' Medici seven years later. [41 words]

V&A, 2006

*After*

Known as The Moor, Alessandro de' Medici was probably the son of Giulio de' Medici (later Pope Clement VII) and a black African serving woman. He became the first hereditary duke of Florence in 1530 and was assassinated seven years later. This picture is a version of a larger portrait showing Alessandro as a scholar in his study. [53 words]



Another way of linking objects to our own lives and experiences is to evoke the senses of touch, taste, sound and smell. In museums, sight is usually our only sense, but in life we experience the world through all our five senses. Through an imaginative use of language, we can capture some of the sensory responses that enrich our understanding of the world.

The slip is so soft that the silk glides through your fingers.

Silver was used in the preparation of food and drink as well as for serving. Cookery books advised soaking delicate foods such as apricots in silver vessels. Unlike pewter, it was pure and would not spoil the flavour. Some recipes recommended silver dishes for stewing foods 'on soft fire'. Oysters were both cooked and served in a silver scallop dish. [60 words]

V&A, Room 65, *Silver*, section called *Dining before 1700*



### INCENSE BOAT AND SPOON

1400–50

Incense formed an important part of the Catholic ritual. Burnt during services, ceremonies and processions, it produced a perfumed smoke that symbolised the prayers of the faithful rising to heaven. The incense was often stored in a boat-shaped container, then spooned into a censer and swung from chains so that the smoke would waft to and fro. [57 words]

V&A, not on display, caption from Room 19, *Renaissance 1400–1600*, section called *The Liturgy of the Catholic Church*

## SEVEN

### SKETCH IN THE BACKGROUND

Remember to place objects in their historical and cultural context. Labels sometimes give a very narrow view, focusing on art historical concerns such as provenance and assuming that the visitor understands the background. Yet people often have a weak knowledge of history and know nothing about material culture. Most visitors would recognise that the Medici were the 'rulers of Florence', but beyond that their knowledge might be hazy.

#### MEDAL OF COSIMO DE' MEDICI

About 1480–1500

The Medici were bankers, and their company was one of the most powerful in Europe. But the head of the family, Cosimo de' Medici (1389–1464), was also the unofficial ruler of the Florentine Republic. Here he is shown with the letters PPP for 'Primus Pater Patriae' (First Father of the Fatherland). This title, taken from classical Rome, was given to him after his death. [64 words]

V&A, Room 19, *Renaissance 1400–1600*, section called *The Scholar's Study*.  
No image available

Similarly in the label for the mirror frame on page 5, we took care to show that mirrors were then an 'expensive novelty', which many visitors may not realise.

## EIGHT

### WRITE AS YOU WOULD SPEAK

*The duck-billed platypus is one of only three living species of monotreme, meaning that it is a mammal that lays eggs rather than giving birth to live young. But this is not their only extraordinary feature. Platypuses are also venomous, with males having a hollow spur full of poison that can cause agonising pain in humans and kill a dog.*

BBC website, David Attenborough: *The Life of Mammals*

A test of good writing is that it should sound easy, spontaneous and convincing. This is especially true of gallery text, which should have a more friendly tone than the formal or scholarly language used in V&A books and catalogues, but still speak with authority. The duck-billed platypus text comes from a BBC website and so was written for a wide audience but it would make perfect gallery text.

- The language is direct yet accurate and evocative
- It uses specialist terms such as ‘monotreme’ but instantly explains them
- It combines elementary information (i.e. that the platypus is a mammal that lays eggs) with more recondite information (i.e. that it is poisonous). In doing so, it informs the beginner and maintains the interest of the more knowledgeable reader
- It is warm and enthusiastic

Enthusiasm matters. If our text is to be friendly, and if we would like visitors to respond positively to our displays, we have to show our own love for the collections. Recent surveys show that V&A visitors sometimes feel that the authors of our text are remote and stand-offish. Comments include: ‘The person was just interested in getting his information across’ and ‘The individual didn’t come across as interested or enthusiastic about the subject’.

The way to show enthusiasm is in your choice of words and your reaction to the objects, not in trite value judgements or gushing epithets. Phrases like ‘this painting leaves a lasting impression’ and words such as ‘delightful’ or ‘stunning’ add nothing to our appreciation of an object. They also assume that visitors will share the writer’s view.

The following text, however, is full of the writer’s passion for his subject and admiration for Wedgwood himself. The secret of its success lies in the vocabulary, which is rich, dynamic and precise.

## MARKETING

Wedgwood was a bold and, at times, innovative businessman. After winning a royal appointment, he vigorously promoted his pottery at home and abroad, and built up a vast export market. He had the vision to support the Grand Trunk Canal, which connected the Staffordshire potteries to its markets and its sources of clay. His factory in Etruria, one of the industrial marvels of the day, was built on its banks. [70 words]

V&A, Room 118, *British Galleries*, section called *Josiah Wedgwood and Matthew Boulton, Entrepreneurs*

And talking of vocabulary, avoid Latinate words. They are the language of bureaucracy, dry and dead. Anglo-Saxon words, on the other hand, are lively and expressive.

Compare

- Purchase, procure, acquire, obtain, request, observe

With

- Buy, get, grab, snatch, ask for, see

Also, use adjectives and adverbs with care. Do they help what you are trying to say? Adverbs especially are often redundant and irritating, as in ‘The mouse scampered hurriedly back to its hole’. A well chosen noun or verb does not need qualification.

There is sometimes a fear in the V&A that access means ‘dumbing down’. This can indeed happen, but when it does the fault often lies in the content not in the language itself. To appeal to a broad audience while maintaining the confidence of our many well educated visitors we have to be convincing. The following text is not.

Unfortunately in 1900 Sir Roger developed ‘musth’ – this is when male elephants are in heat, and can make them very dangerous. His owner, Mr Bostock, decided he had to be put down.

Some soldiers and a man with an elephant gun shot Sir Roger one morning as he ate his breakfast. [51 words]

Non-V&A label

This was written for family audiences, but doesn’t work even on those terms.

- Male elephants don’t come in heat
- Would a child know what ‘in heat’ or ‘put down’ means?
- Why didn’t the writer include the origin of the word ‘musth’. It is an Urdu or Persian word meaning ‘raving mad’ or ‘drunk’. This would have been of interest to visitors from ethnic backgrounds
- Is the bathos – of Sir Roger being shot as he ate his breakfast – intended?

## NINE

### CONSTRUCT YOUR TEXT WITH CARE

*Grammar is the logic of speech, even as logic is the grammar of reason.*

Clear writing depends on clear thinking. You should have one idea per sentence and one subject per paragraph. Paragraphs are essential if readers are to navigate the text with ease. The following text illustrates these principles by default.

SIR THOMAS LAWRENCE

*Pope Pius VII*

1819

As a staunch opponent of France's expansionist ambitions, Pope Pius VII (1742–1823) was one of the European leaders associated with the defeat of Napoleon who were commemorated in a series of portraits commissioned by the Prince Regent (later George IV). The frail pontiff was renowned for promoting peace and for his protection of Rome's great collections of antiquities, which were pillaged by Napoleon. *The Apollo Belvedere*, the *Laocoön* and the *Torso Belvedere* can be seen behind him. Lawrence gained nine sittings with the Pope, an unprecedented privilege for a Protestant painter, and created an imposing yet naturalistic portrait in which he captured, 'as he observed', an 'expression of unaffected benevolence and worth'. [114 words]

Non-V&A exhibition label

For image, see the Royal Collection website

The grammar should be immaculate. Correct grammar is not a matter of old-fashioned pedantry. It forms the building blocks of sound, clear writing. Sometimes text is inaccessible simply because it is so badly written.

After fifteen years in a convent, the king took Madame d'Etiales as his mistress in 1742...

Non-V&A label

Did Louis XVI really spend fifteen years in a convent? This is a construction known as a dangling participle, in that the subject of the subordinate clause is not the same as the subject of the main clause. It is a common mistake, and one that most readers can deal with without difficulty. The following label, however, makes no sense at all, even though it was written with the best of intentions for family audiences.

STILL LIFE WITH JAPANESE PRINT

Pringle showed an enduring interest in Japanese and Chinese art. In common with the Impressionists and Whistler, Japanese prints sometimes inspired him to paint in a different way. [28 words]

Non-V&A label

- What does this mean? That Japanese prints, along with the Impressionists and Whistler, sometimes inspired Pringle to paint in a different way? Or, that like the Impressionists and Whistler, he was inspired by Japanese prints to paint in a different way?
- Would visitors know what Whistler's work looks like?
- In what way did Pringle paint differently?



## TEN

### REMEMBER ORWELL'S SIX RULES

1. *Never use a metaphor, simile or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print*
2. *Never use a long word where a short word will do*
3. *If it is possible to cut a word, always cut it out*
4. *Never use the passive when you can use the active*
5. *Never use a foreign phrase, a scientific word or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday equivalent*
6. *Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous*

George Orwell, *Politics and the English Language*, 1946

Orwell's six rules, written over 60 years ago, are as necessary today as they were then. Perhaps more so.

Rule Four is particularly relevant in museums, where curators often favour remote, agent-less constructions. Why say 'Tea and porridge were taken at breakfast' when you could say 'People had tea and porridge for breakfast'? The active is more human, real and dynamic. If you look in newspapers – any newspaper, from the *Daily Mail* to the *Financial Times* – you will find paragraph after paragraph with no passives.

But this does not mean there should a blanket rule against passive constructions. They are often necessary to signal the theme of the text. 'Men drank brandy' suggests that the theme is the different drinking habits of men and women. 'Brandy was drunk by men' suggests that the theme is different beverages.

Rule Five is another one that is particularly relevant. We shouldn't altogether avoid specialist vocabulary. Words like 'pyx' and 'pax' are essential to our understanding of objects, and we have a responsibility to introduce visitors to the terminology that frames our knowledge. But we must show very clearly what these words mean. Research has shown that if visitors encounter an unfamiliar word that is not explained they are likely to stop reading.

Sometimes, as with the chair label below, the object itself helps clarify the meaning of specialist terms. Without the object, words such as 'cresting rail', 'fretwork' and 'splat' might prove too great a challenge, but if the reader examines the chair they will soon become clear.

Words that belong to the abstract and specialised language of art criticism have no place in gallery text. The majority of visitors have no idea what 'trope' or 'iconography' mean.



## CHAIR

About 1760

During the 1750s, British furniture makers often combined Chinese, Gothic and Rococo motifs. In this chair, the clustered columns of the legs are Gothic, but the pagoda-shaped cresting rail and the geometric fretwork of the central splat are Chinese. [39 words]

V&A, Room 52, *British Galleries*, section called *Chinoiserie 1745–1765*

Rule Six is where rules end and your ear and judgement take over. A classic way of assessing a text is to read it aloud. If you stumble or lose your way, there is probably something wrong with the writing.

What Orwell also means here is that good writing is an art not a science, and it doesn't happen by following rules. If it is an art, it follows that our response to it is subjective. Readers respond to the same text in different ways, and critics – maddeningly – offer different solutions to the same problem. There may well be things in these guidelines that you won't agree with or like, but we hope that at least they will sharpen your interest in writing gallery text and help you to continue the good work that has been done in the V&A in the last few years.