

Writing Effective Wall Labels



Still from Jean-Luc Godard's *Band Of Outsiders* (1964)

Research suggests that museum-goers spend very little time examining artworks or reading wall labels. Viewers spend about ten seconds looking at each artwork—about seven of those seconds are spent reading the label. An effective label can help to direct close looking and sustain viewer attention.

In Gail Greg's *ARTNews* piece, "Your Labels Make me Feel Stupid," she suggests that viewers stand in front of artwork with a few VERY basic questions in mind:

- I don't know where to start.
- I don't know what to look at first.
- Have I looked at this long enough?
- What does circa mean?
- Your labels make me feel stupid.
- How did the artist make this?
- Why would a museum put this on display?
- Is this really art?

Your task will be find a balance between addressing these basic questions and presenting interesting and well-substantiated information to the viewer.

Sources:

- <http://www.artnews.com/2010/07/01/your-labels-make-me-feel-stupid/>
- <http://www.slideshare.net/HelenHales/writing-effective-museum-text-8243677>
- <https://apps.carleton.edu/campus/viz/assets/Labels.pdf>
- https://www.si.edu/Accessibility/SGAED#page_21
- <http://www.museum-ed.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/09/If-You-Cant-See-It.pdf>

- Determine your target audience. What kind of information will best reach that particular audience?
- The label should tell a story about the object on display. Write in a narrative style accessible to a wide audience. Be aware that parents often read wall labels to children. When you read your label out loud, does it sound like a story worth hearing?
- Have a clear but accessible thesis statement (in other words, make a point), and make it at the beginning of your label.
- Present the most crucial information at the beginning of your label. This crucial information might hook the viewer into reading the entire text.
- Provide content and context that is supported by research.
- Make sure that the individual label somehow relates to the larger exhibition. What are some of the main themes expressed throughout the larger exhibition?
- At the same time, each label must be independently accessible because there is no way to guarantee that any one viewer will read all of the labels (and let's be honest, it's very likely that a viewer will not read all of the labels!).
- You may include relevant—but brief—quotes from the artist.
- Be as concise as possible throughout your text—you only have 150 words with which to make your point.
- Write as you would speak, but keep your text professional—don't use exclamation points.
- Have at least one peer read and comment on your wall label.