WRITE AND PRODUCE YOUR EXHIBITION LABELS

Labels tell stories. They should be interesting and engaging but short. In an exhibition environment, people don't read more than 100 words or so at a time. It's hard work to cut information down to the bare minimum but it's worth doing.

The most successful labels:

- are appropriate – to the exhibition, its aims and its audience.
- are concise but relevant. They don't leave viewers thinking 'So what?'. They achieve a balance between too much information (overwhelming) and too little information (frustrating).
- anticipate the reader's questions. The writers have asked themselves what's really interesting about the topic... then told the readers.
- relate new, unfamiliar or complex ideas to the reader's own experience to aid their understanding.
- contain accurate information.
- use plain familiar language and a conversational style. If any specialist terms are necessary, they are simply and clearly explained.
- usually use an active voice. For example, 'cars replaced horses and buggies' instead of 'horses and buggies were replaced by cars'.
- make use of questions, quotes or humour.
- are consistent in presentation and the way information is organised. All theme labels look similar, for example, and all subtheme labels look similar.
- contain a clear hierarchy of information.
- are easy to read.

Structure your label

Order your ideas within a label in a similar way to a newspaper story. Start with the most important information. As a general rule, begin with the specific and then move to general statements. If you are writing a label to accompany a particular object or image, it should begin with information about that object or image. There is no need to describe it because people can already see it. Instead say why it is interesting or how it illustrates the point you wish to make. Then after you have written about the specific object or image, you can move on to more general information. Always start your label with a heading.

It's a good idea to include an acknowledgement of the person or organisation who supplied the object or image or gave permission for the image to be reproduced. This usually appears at the bottom of the label in a smaller type size.

Create a label hierarchy

A label hierarchy helps viewers find the information they want quickly and easily, from the most important and general to the most detailed and specific. It makes a clear distinction between different types of labels ie introduction, theme, subtheme and object labels. The introduction and theme labels are at the top of the hierarchy. They need to attract the viewer's attention instantly to give important storyline information. The

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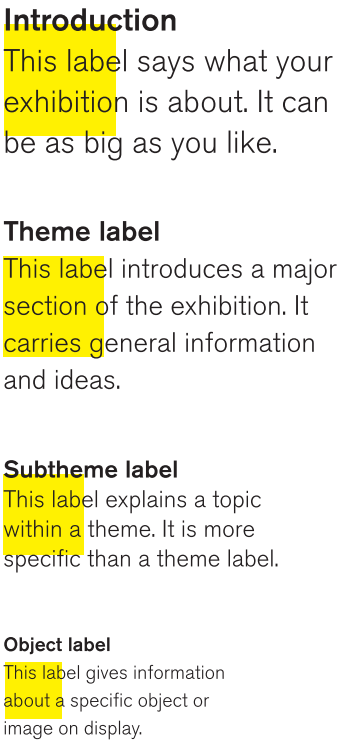
labels towards the bottom of the hierarchy can be smaller and plainer so that they don't overpower the objects and images that you've included. Labels get physically smaller as they move down the hierarchy.



Choose your typeface and font sizes

Choose a typeface that is clear and easy to read. You might like fancy ones but if they're hard to read, you'll lose your audience. Use the same typeface throughout the exhibition to give a feeling of cohesion: you may decide to use one font for headings and another for body text. Follow the general guide below when choosing the font size for your text. These are approximate minimum sizes based on the Powerhouse Museum's labelling system. They may vary depending on the font you choose and the physical dimensions of your labels. If people will be standing more than a metre from your labels, make the font sizes larger.

Label type	Heading font size	Body text font size	Body text word count
Introduction	Bigger than 64pt	Bigger than 56pt	125
Theme	64pt	56pt	105
Subtheme	22pt	19pt	85
Object	20pt	17pt	75

Make your labels easy to read

- Use black text on a white or light-coloured background.
- Avoid brightly coloured and textured backgrounds. Don't put text over drawings.
- Use lowercase text and restrict the use of capital letters. Capitals are hard to read.
- Align body text on the left. Don't justify or centre it.

Construct your labels

Simple labels and text panels can be made using a computer and printer. Once you've printed your label, you can mount it on cardboard or a lightweight foam board known as Fome-Cor. You can do this with glue but it'll stick even better if you use JAC paper, which is similar to double sided sticky tape but comes in sheets. Both Fome-Cor and JAC paper are available from art-supply shops.

Here are the steps:

1. Use a ruler and pencil to lightly mark the outline of your label.
2. Use a craft knife and a ruler to cut around the label, about 5mm outside the pencil mark
3. Cut JAC paper to the same size as the paper above, then peel the protective backing off one side of the JAC paper.
4. Apply the back of the label to the sticky side of the JAC paper, rubbing gently to remove air bubbles.
5. Cut a piece of cardboard or Fome-Cor to the same size.
6. Peel the protective backing off the other side of the JAC paper and apply it to the cardboard or Fome-Cor.
7. Use a craft knife and ruler to trim the label along the pencil marks. You can attach your labels to walls or plinths using velcro, pins or blu-tac. Attach the ones that lie flat too as it will prevent them moving.