

A Guide to Exhibit Development

From curators planning their first exhibit to seasoned developers and designers — this guide offers an overview of the exhibit development process, with tips and recommendations based on Smithsonian Exhibits' experience.

SMITHSONIAN EXHIBITS



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The Exhibit Development Team

Exhibit development is a **team sport**. Each member brings unique skills and perspectives, strengthening the exhibit through varied points of view. Keep the core team small for manageable meetings and streamlined decisions.

Client

Advocates for the organization; oversees budget

Curator

Advocates for subject matter; ensures accuracy

Project Manager

Advocates for the team; keeps project on schedule

Exhibit Developer

Advocates for visitor experience and story

Designer

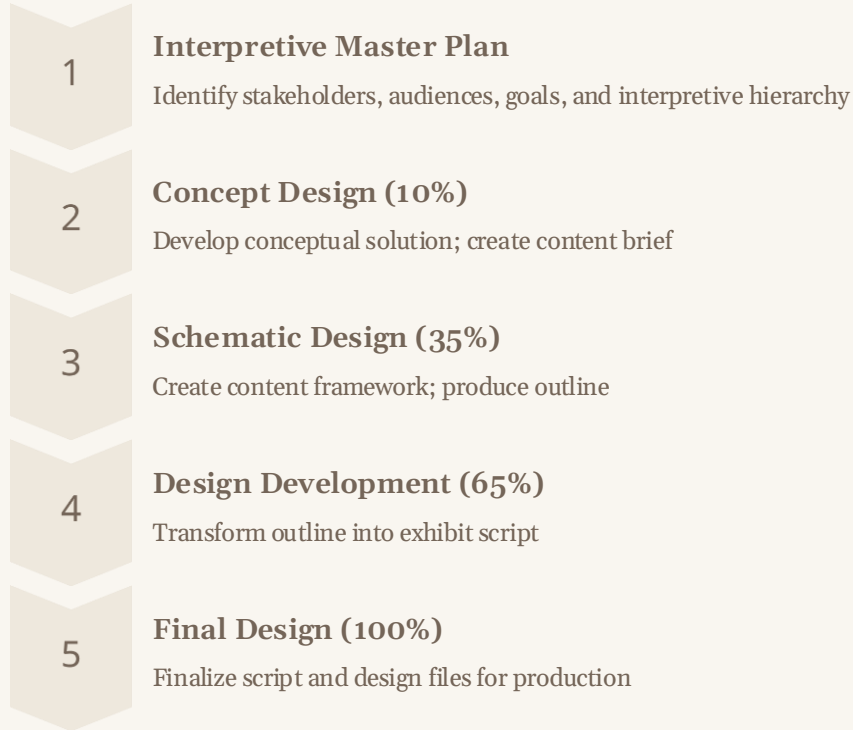
Advocates for physical and sensory design

Additional Members

Educators, media developers, specialists

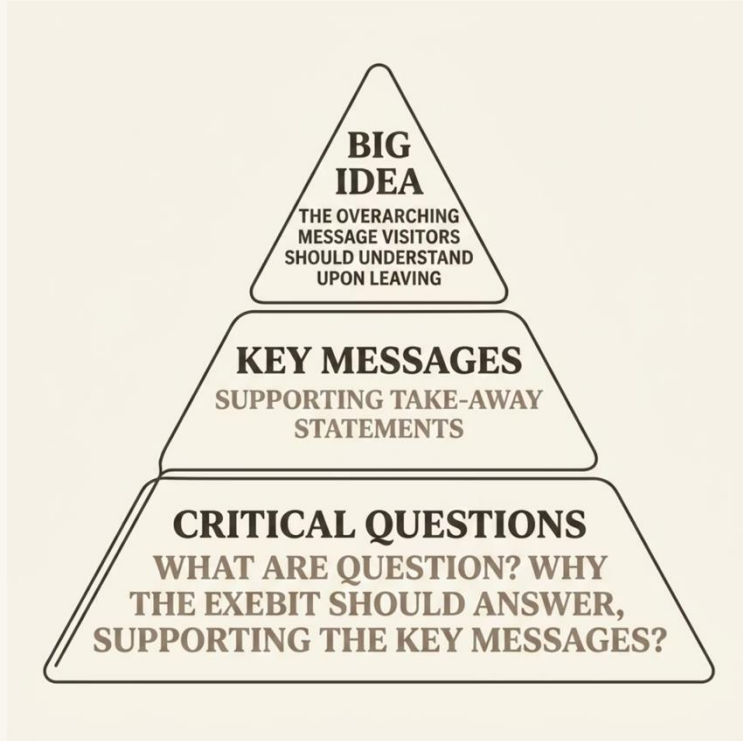
The Exhibit Development Process

Each phase has distinct content deliverables. Not every project includes every phase. This guide focuses on stages leading up to final design, at which point the exhibit enters fabrication.



Creating an Interpretive Hierarchy

Created during the Interpretive Master Plan phase, the hierarchy focuses the exhibit's main messages and structures content development.



Big Idea

The overarching message visitors should understand upon leaving. It is the basis for all content presented.

Key Messages

A small number of take-away statements that directly support the big idea, providing a conceptual framework for content development.

Critical Questions

Questions the exhibit should answer for visitors, supporting the key messages and shaping content goals.



Visitor Preferences: The IPOP Model

The Smithsonian's **IPOP model** categorizes visitors by experience preference. Successful exhibits incorporate all four categories.



Ideas

Visitors seeking conceptual and abstract thinking



People

Visitors seeking emotional connections



Objects

Visitors seeking visual language and aesthetics



Physical

Visitors seeking multi-sensory experiences

Interpretive Tools

Content can be expressed in many ways — not just with words. Leave room for visitor reflection; exhibits can become overwhelming with too much content.



Objects

Lend authenticity and presence — what makes exhibits unique.



Media Elements

Video and audio add senses and bring content to life.



Models & Tactile Elements

Scale models make large or tiny objects accessible.



Images

Photos, maps, illustrations, charts, and diagrams that visualize ideas.



Interactives

Electromechanical and digital interactives for hands-on learning.



Text

One of many tools — most effective when used strategically and graphically.

Structuring Exhibit Text

Layering or "chunking" text breaks big concepts into manageable pieces. Research shows people are more likely to read short paragraphs, **25 to 75 words long**.

Titles & Headlines	Entice visitors to read on
Intro Text	Introduces the exhibit's main messages <i>(150 words max)</i>
Primary Text	Introduces section themes <i>(100 words max)</i>
Secondary Text	Supports primary text, explores subthemes <i>(100 words max)</i>
Sidebars	Fun facts and trivia <i>(50–100 words)</i>
Object Labels	Identify or interpret objects <i>(50 words max)</i>
Image Captions	Identify or interpret images <i>(25–35 words)</i>
Quotes	First-person perspective; human scale <i>(1–2 sentences)</i>
Credit Lines	Credit for objects and images
Talkback Labels	Invite visitors to share opinions
Wayfinding	Help visitors navigate the space
Additional Text	Acknowledgements, video info, instructions, warnings

Exhibit Writing Tips

→ **Find the right slice of the story**

Exhibits can't provide comprehensive knowledge — focus on what matters most.

→ **Make it relevant**

Give visitors a reason to care. Connect to contemporary life and ask thought-provoking questions.

→ **Make it accessible**

Use short sentences, concrete nouns, and strong active verbs. Avoid unnecessarily scholarly language.

→ **Let each text stand on its own**

Don't assume visitors read prior labels. Give them the context they need.

→ **Focus the text**

One idea per sentence, one main point per paragraph. Use titles and headlines to focus content.

→ **Get a fresh perspective**

Ask someone unfamiliar with the subject to act as a test visitor.

→ **Read the words aloud**

Establish a rhythm between short and moderate-length sentences. Remember visitors are also looking at objects and interacting with others.

Script Formatting & Glossary

Script Formatting

Use multiple columns to track all exhibit text plus accession numbers, dimensions, word counts, and notes. Organize by element type (title, intro, object labels, etc.).

Key Terms

- **IMP:** Identifies stakeholders, goals, and interpretive hierarchy
- **Content Brief:** Overview of exhibit messages and interpretive strategies
- **Outline:** Breaks content into sections with key objects and elements
- **Exhibit Script:** Complete narrative with all labels, captions, and credits
- **Design Package:** Files for each phase — plans, renderings, graphic layouts
- **Copyediting:** Corrects spelling, grammar, and ensures consistent style
- **Proofreading:** Final review reconciling design files against approved script