EXHIBIT DEVELOPMENT HANDBOOK

A practical guide

OUTHOUSE
EXHIBIT SERVICES

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INTRO

The exhibit development process is an exciting and collaborative endeavor. Each member of the design development team brings a unique perspective and skill set to round out the process. This guide will outline each step and phase along the way, providing a roadmap to a successful exhibit.

The information contained in this guide is an overview of the process, and is intended to support institutions as they consider future or ongoing projects. The hope is to provide supportive information to use day-to-day, for internally-developed exhibits, and also to provide a basis to know when it's time to call in some outside collaborative partners to help bring your vision to life.

While each project, development team, and organization is unique, following these industry-established project milestones and benchmarks will ensure the long term success of your project. We hope that you find it helpful in your exhibit development journey!

BEFORE YOU START...

While it is tempting to dive headlong into the excitement of exhibit development, it's important to establish a few basic tenets of your unique exhibit.

WHAT IS THE STORY?

This may seem obvious, but simply having a handful of artifacts may not be enough to create an effective exhibit. Additionally, while the experts or deep enthusiasts for a subject matter may be thrilled to see that one-in-a-million object, the appeal to a general audience may not be as strong. The internal team needs to start with some soul-searching and some audience research and asset evaluation before diving headfirst into development work.

WHO IS IT FOR?

Establishing your target audience is vital to setting the tone of the exhibit. Everything from types of interactive experiences to the reading level of the text is informed by knowing exactly who you hope enjoys your new exhibit.

WHAT ARE MY ASSETS?

A stunning collection of artifacts may not be suitable for long-term display. How will your institution manage the care and keeping of them? What do you have in your collections that tells the stories unique to your organization? What more will you need to borrow, acquire, or produce to round out the exhibit?

TEAM

A core exhibit development team consists of:

CONTENT DEVELOPER

This person is responsible for the research and writing of all content documents related to the exhibit. For outside partners, this includes collaborative work with Collections Managers and other Content Specialists within the organization to help inform the stories.

3D DESIGNER

This person designs the physical exhibit components that create the learning environment for the audience.

2D DESIGNER

Graphic design sets the tone of the exhibit, supporting the 3D design and accessibility for visitors.

CURATOR/CONTENT SPECIALIST

The curator or content specialist is the subject matter expert. This individual is the checkpoint for ensuring that each aspect of interpretive development for any given exhibit is accurate and truthful.

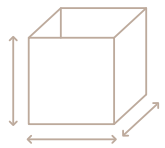
PROJECT COORDINATOR

The coordinator is involved throughout the life cycle of the project. As the person holding the global view of the project, they ensure that other team members collaborate, hit their deliverables, and stay on budget. Coordinators will advocate for other project team members when needed (such as, Guest Services, Education, etc.).

EXHIBIT DESIGN PROCESS

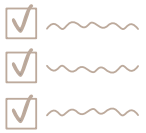
DISCOVERY PHASE

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN



SCHEMATIC DESIGN

PRELIMINARY DESIGN



FINAL DESIGN

FABRICATION & INSTALLATION

1-2 mo.	3-6 months	3-6 months	4-9 months	2-4 months	Variable

DISCOVERY PHASE

Perform research and outreach to inform the project's assets and parameters.

DELIVERABLES

- Introduction of all project stakeholders
- Client shares previously-developed project assets

CONCEPTUAL DESIGN

Establish a basic exhibit narrative and early conceptual designs.

DELIVERABLES

- Early Content Outline as a result of R&D to begin fleshing out the storyline
- Exhibit interpretation tone set by preliminary conceptual design and parameter conversations
- Early graphic design elements started to inform the progress of the whole

SCHEMATIC DESIGN

Continue content and design development; begin identifying interactive opportunities.

If possible, start establishing budgetary parameters.

DELIVERABLES

- Final Content Outline
- Potential resources for content specialists, artifacts, props, multimedia support, etc. identified
- Media narratives and inspiration images compiled
- Leading design elements established
- Preliminary logo & Style Guide

PRELIMINARY DESIGN

With key project parameters firmly in place, we begin to see the formation of real-time designs, text, etc. for the exhibition.

DELIVERABLES

- Text and Description Drafts
- Image search begins in earnest
- Artifact and Prop Lists finalized
- Interactive media wire framing
- Formal exhibit designs implement leading design elements
- Section and elevation drawings
- Family of graphic elements compiled & Graphics Schedule created

FINAL DESIGN

Exhibition Design Package Completed. This package includes finalized versions of all components developed to this point.

DELIVERABLES

- Sound and lighting systems specifications
- CAD drawings and final layout
- Final exhibit component & graphic design databases
- Fabrication cost estimate
- Production, Fabrication, and Graphics Schedules
- Final copy, images, ID labels, and interactive media content and static design

FABRICATION & INSTALLATION

Implement the previous phases as tangible exhibit components; Test interactive components and all install all components. Includes a client walk through and on-site staff training.

DELIVERABLES

- Maintenance Manual
- Prototype, final, and installation of interactive media
- Exhibit casework, mounts, etc. fabricated off-site and installed in the gallery space
- Fabrication & installation of all graphic panels

NOTE: The above timeline is based on industry standards and is subject to change based on your unique project.

ACCESSIBILITY GUIDELINES

In all aspects of exhibit design development, accessibility needs to be included as part of the conversation. From word counts to viewing heights, each aspect of exhibit design is important to consider.

ADA guidelines provide essential direction for exhibit developers to create environments that are accessible, inclusive, and engaging for all visitors. These standards cover physical access, such as maneuverable floorspace, appropriate reach ranges, and accessible seating. This extends to communication access such as graphics (readable fonts), audio and visual alternatives, and tactile opportunities.

Considering accessibility from the start leads to more thoughtful, user-centered experiences that serve a broader audience.

FLOORPLAN, CLEARANCE, & GUIDELINES

"Items in exhibitions (e.g. artifacts, graphics, props) must be visually accessible to people. Mount small items (to center line) at no higher than 1015 mm (40 in.) above the floor. A male adult who uses a wheelchair has an average eye level of between 1090 mm (43 in.) and 1295 mm (51 in.) above the finished floor (see Fig. 3). Objects placed above 1015 mm (40 in.) will be seen only from below by most seated and short viewers." — *Excerpt from the Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibit Design*

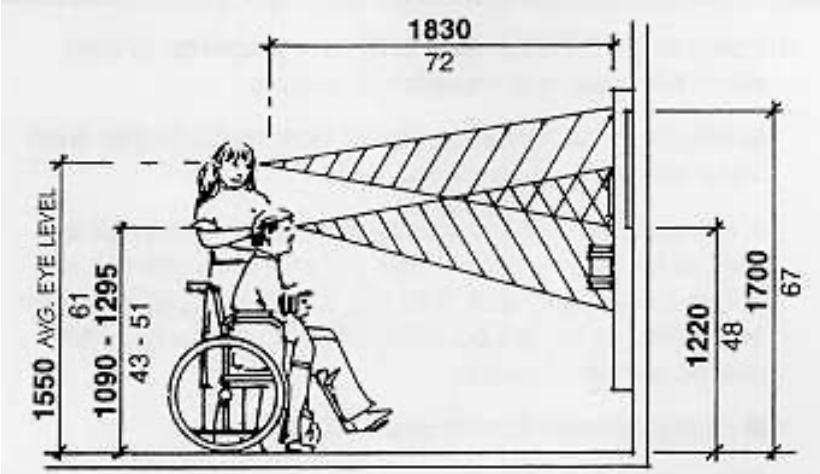
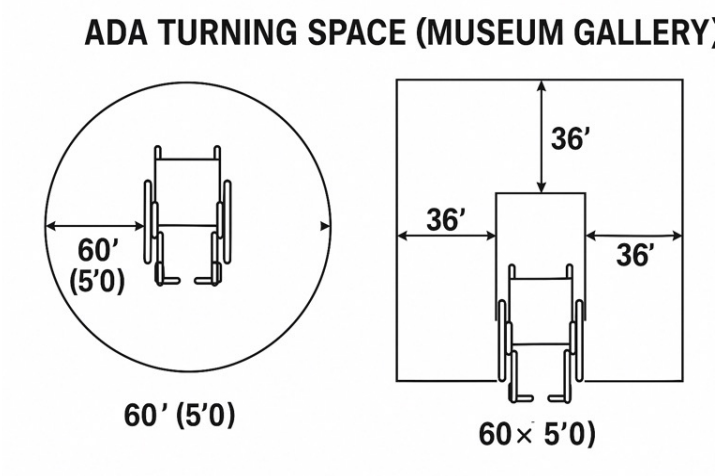


Fig. 3 Average viewing sightlines

Fig. 6 Height of table case



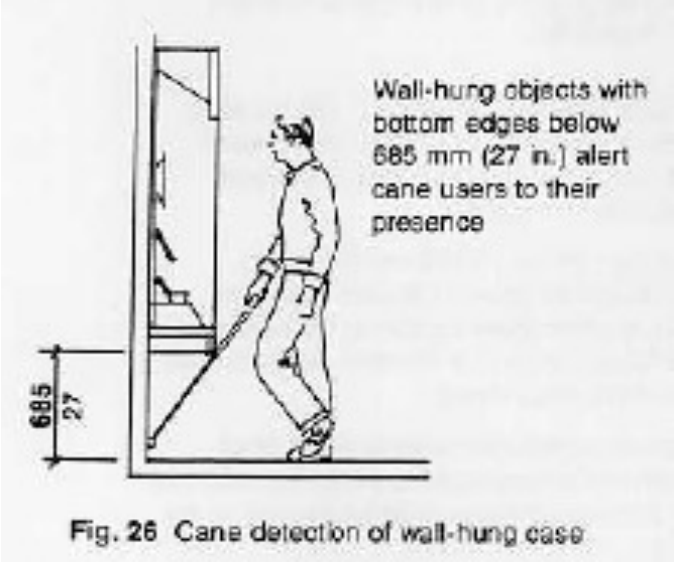


Fig. 26 Cane detection of wall-hung case

Diagrams courtesy of Smithsonian Institution

TEXT

The text should be written with the "3-30-3" rule in mind. You have 3 seconds to hook the visitor, 30 seconds if they are hooked, and 3 minutes if they are very interested. A sign should be designed and written so that it contains three levels of text with each level conveying a feeling of the theme, thus providing all visitors with an interpretive opportunity regardless of how long they stay. For example, a short title at the top of a sign might be the only text some visitors read, so it is important the learning objectives for the site be met to some degree even at the 3-second timeframe.

TITLES

The titles of a sign or brochure should be a statement of a theme.

TYPEFACE

Use a sans, slab, or simple serif typeface, upper and lower case, with a minimum 18-point type size on signs.

- **Titles**: 72–60 point
- **Subtitles**: 48–40 point
- **Body Text**: 24 point
- **Captions**: 18 point

Sans-Serif

Slab-Serif

Simple-Serif

ALL CAPS

SMALL CAPS

Upper & lower case

72 point

48 point

24 point

18 point

EXHIBIT LABEL WORD COUNT GUIDELINES

Strive to provide clarity, engagement and educational information written specifically for the target audience or reading level you have previously identified. Remember to frequently check in on the reading level, as only a word or two can drastically affect its readability.

EDITING TOOLS

- **MS Word**: Fleischman-Kincaid Scale
- **Apps**: Hemingway

WORD COUNTS

It is vital to be concise and avoid the "book on a wall" trap of having too much interpretive information on display. The following word counts will help you in your practice of elegant and accessible label writing.

- **Exhibit Title**: 1-10 words
- **Introductory Text**: 50-150 words (this would be the paragraph or area where you orient the viewer to what the exhibit/panel is all about)
- **Gallery/Section Overview(s)**: 50-150 words (to focus on one particular topic within the gallery/panel)
- **Secondary/Expanded ID Labels**: No more than 100 words (this would be an expanded caption or other, secondary text)
- **Sidebars/Fun Facts**: No more than 75 words
- **Captions/Credits**: No more than 20 words

We hope that these guidelines and project mapping will help guide you on your next exhibit project!

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