

Foundations of Interpretation Competencies for the 21st Century



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Interpretation in the 21st Century

Purpose

The primary purpose of interpretation is to *enrich people's lives through meaningful learning experiences and enjoyable recreation; preserve and protect natural and cultural resources through broad collaboration and shared stewardship; and inspire social and environmental consciousness to build community and sustain the health of the planet.*¹

Philosophy

Interpretation explores the primary reasons for preserving natural and cultural resources. These resources represent who we are as a society, what we value, where we have been, and—most importantly—inform our shared future. Interpretation also fosters active participation in society by building skills for exploring complex questions and issues to create a more sustainable, free, and equitable world. Through interpretation, participants and practitioners alike develop understanding, empathy, and respect for the perspectives of others.

The reach of interpretation stretches beyond physical boundaries and strict reading of enabling legislation, exploring a resource's contemporary significances and the perspectives of diverse audiences, thereby helping people view historical, cultural, and environmental legacies as evolving. It analyzes past actions and considers the essential questions these places pose to society today. Critical access to and exploration of authentic sites and their evolving stories help us to understand ourselves and our world.

Principles and Practice

Design and facilitation of interpretation in the 21st century is resource-based and audience-centered. Interpretation facilitates intellectual and emotional connections to the meanings and value of parks—to help audiences care about these places so audiences will care for them. It is grounded in existing interpretive theories, tenets, and practices, and is responsive to evolving 21st century demands. To meet those needs, interpretation today provides a range of opportunities for connection, contribution, collaboration, and co-creation to continuously learn from and with audiences. Audiences are stakeholders and primary contributors to the meaning-making process.

21st Century Interpretation is:

- *Investigative*: Exploring multiple perspectives and truths ascribed to resources; synthesizing scientific and historical evidence, national significance, and current context
- *Participatory*: Inviting audiences to interact with the resource and each other, enriching experiences through an active exchange of ideas
- *Collaborative*: Directly meeting community needs through strong, mutually-beneficial relationships
- *Skills-Focused*: Building skills for a 21st century civil society, inspiring lifelong learning and active engagement

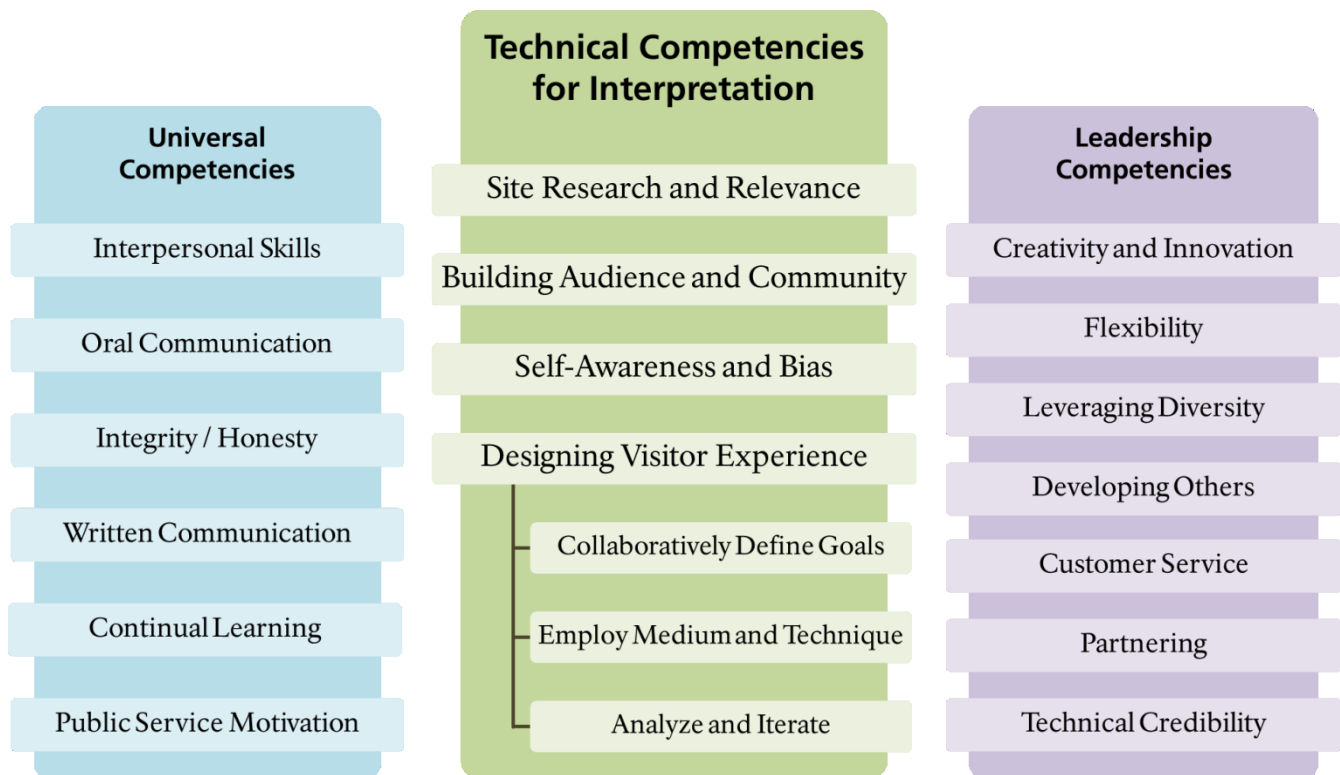
To achieve mutual learning, build new skills and create collaborative relationships, practitioners must adopt an audience centered ethic and practice. The audience-centered ethic is the belief that audiences' perspectives and contributions add critical richness to the evolving legacy and values of the nation. The practice is to elicit participation and contribution from an audience and community to build skills and mutual learning.

¹ Purpose of Interpretation in the 21st Century was collaboratively derived from the *Advancing the National Park Idea: National Parks Second Century Commission Report*; the *Interpretive Skills Vision Paper—21st Century National Park Service* and the standard Position Description for the full-performance Interpretive Park Ranger. See reference page for details.

Technical Competencies for Interpretation

How to Use these Competencies²

The competency descriptions that follow provide guideposts for implementing 21st century interpretation. They describe the broad categories of knowledge, skills, abilities and behaviors needed by interpreters and educators to accomplish the critical work described above. These competencies focus on technical interpretive skills, and are supported by the NPS Universal and key Leadership competencies.



Competencies are just one tool to help meet professional standards in serving the American public and fulfilling the mission of the National Park Service. Competencies outline the skillsets employees need to acquire and demonstrate in order to meet the work expectations and yearly milestones described in Standard Position Descriptions and Employee Performance Appraisal Plans. Standards-based training curriculum and learning plans support the employee in acquiring new skills and honing their confidence and effectiveness to do their job.

The Foundations of Interpretation Competencies for the 21st Century are supported by an expanding suite of learning opportunities and resources which can be located in the Common Learning Portal (CLP). Interpreters and educators are encouraged to add to this collection of learning resources as they develop additional tools and ideas for training and coaching in parks.

² These technical competencies apply to all interpretive and educational work in the National Park Service and are grounded in previous interpretive philosophy. These competency descriptions will be reviewed and updated periodically with peer input and participation. Educational practitioners may have additional technical competencies.

Site Research and Relevance

Competency Description

In-depth knowledge of park resources underpins the role of the interpreter and educator. Seen as trusted sources of balanced information, interpreters and educators convey complex historical and scientific content to diverse audiences. But beyond conveying complex concepts, interpreters and educators also help reveal the evolving relevance of park resources. By collaboratively exploring the current lessons of our national heritage, interpreters and educators help people make sense of their world and connect to nature and the past. Therefore, in-depth knowledge requires two interdependent areas of investigation:

Researching resources refers to compiling the scientific or historical consensus, or tangible evidence of a site, also known as the forensic truth. It also refers to researching the stories of a site, or the collective narratives that give the place its national significance. Both require actively pursuing, evaluating, and collaboratively synthesizing resource knowledge from a variety of sources.

Discovering relevance refers to the continuous exploration of evolving meanings within a site. This requires investigating the associated relationships, systems, processes, human values, and alternate intangible meanings of a site. It requires uncovering personal truths, or how a person lives through and remembers an event or experience; as well as the current social truths that represent a group's communal understanding of concepts or events.

Researching a site's resources and relevance is not limited by time period, enabling legislation, or geographic scope. It is enriched by a site's evolving historical, scientific, and social contexts, including how preservation and resource management may have changed it. This knowledge must be gathered from a broad community of differing perspectives. Agency investigation, community collaboration, and visitor input all contribute to the rich body of content.

Competency Standard

Interpreters and Educators:

- Compile scientific and/or historical research from a variety of sources
- Critically evaluate sources for their relevance, validity, and bias
- Collaborate with others (colleagues, partners, academics, community members, and audiences) to synthesize and interpret evidence-based content, site stories, and current social context
- Represent current NPS perspectives, as well as scientific and historical consensus, about site resources and issues
- Reveal a variety of personal and social truths pertaining to park resources (through research or techniques)
- Continuously incorporate and amplify new and historically excluded perspectives to broaden the inclusivity of a place and its meanings

Building Audience and Community

Competency Description

Interpreters and educators continuously improve services for current visitors and communities through observation, reflection, interaction, and research. Additionally, interpreters and educators work to extend the benefits of National Park Service resources beyond current visitors and communities. National Parks are supported and owned by all of the American public, not just current park visitors, therefore parks should benefit all of the American public. While hundreds of millions of people visit each year, there are still many individuals and communities who do not directly benefit from national parks, either through visits or other services.

Interpreters and educators extend direct services to the public through intentional outreach and partnership. They recognize and leverage the value communities contribute to and through park resources. Interpreters and educators also extend indirect benefits to society by introducing new narratives and inspiring social and environmental consciousness in the broader public. Interpreters and educators improve experiences for all by continuously learning from and about current and potential audiences and communities.

Competency Standard

Interpreters and Educators:

- Apply formal and informal audience research, demographic data, motivation and cognitive learning theory to better understand current and potential audiences
- Engage with communities, audiences, management, and peers to listen deeply and define user-based challenges
- Serve current audiences and attract new audiences by offering a variety of products and services
- Nurture relationships with current audiences and communities by seeking opportunities for mutual learning
- Identify and extend genuine invitations to engage and partner with new audiences and communities
- Build opportunities for audience connection, contribution, collaboration, and co-creation to continuously learn from and with audiences
- Recognize and integrate valuable contributions of new and existing community groups

Self-Awareness and Bias

Competency Description

Interpreters and educators do not practice in a vacuum. They bring to their work personal experiences, values, and biases. Interpreters and educators also work for an agency and a public with their own values and biases. By becoming more critically self-aware, interpreters and educators can develop a range of more inclusive, inviting, and accurate interpretive opportunities through personal services and media products.

Any external change begins with self-consciousness and awareness. Therefore, interpreters and educators must confront and uncover their own assumptions and biases. In doing so, interpreters and educators build a foundation of self-knowledge to help others examine the role and impact of biases.

Becoming self-aware requires commitment to the practices of self-examination, self-monitoring, and challenging assumptions. Self-awareness is not attained but rather is aspired to and can be demonstrated through improved actions, attitudes, and relationships with others.

Competency Standard

Interpreters and Educators:

- Identify how personal biases and assumptions impact emotions, beliefs, attitudes, and actions
- Acknowledge the ways in which agency bias influences one's own perspective
- Address how one's own words and actions affect co-workers, other people, and themselves
- Model self-reflection and composure when adapting to changing perspectives and circumstances
- Seek and initiate collaborative and respectful interactions with co-workers, visitors, and communities with differing identities, perspectives and experiences
- Continuously learn about perspectives, beliefs, and experiences different from one's own
- Demonstrate a respect for a diversity of opinions and perspectives

Designing Visitor Experience

Competency Description

Design is a human-centered, collaborative, iterative, and dynamic process. Designing for visitor experience requires on-going investigation into site research and relevance; audience and community; and awareness of self and bias. Grounded in knowledge and guided by shared authority, the interpreter facilitates an investigation into user-defined needs. An essential question, connecting the site's stories to personally relevant and socially significant issues, guides the investigation and focus of visitor experience. The size and scope of designed experiences ranges from an exhibit panel or short talk, to an entire year's interpretive offerings in a variety of formats and mediums.

The interpreter or educator also develops a robust understanding and application of interpretive medium and technique based on audience, resource, circumstances, and needs. Their ability to match medium and technique to audience and outcome underpins their value as strategic communicators. Core to effective communication strategy is collaboration. Design is collaborative at all phases of the process. This collaboration helps explore the full range of human diversity (ability, gender, age, vocation, identity, experience, etc.) for purpose of defining and creating meaning. To do this, interpreters and educators must draw on multiple literacies, intelligences, and engagement preferences, offering a suite of experiences that help broader audiences interact.

Good design creates opportunities for the product, service, or experience to adapt to and meet the needs of audiences and communities. Well-designed experiences have feedback mechanisms built in that allow for immediate and on-going iteration to meet changing needs and circumstances. Interpreters and educators solicit, analyze, and apply data and feedback to collaboratively improve experiences and professional skills.

Competency Standard

Interpreters and Educators:

Collaboratively Define Need

- Establish collective goals, outcomes, and shared authority among and between different stakeholders
- Define specific needs by listening deeply and engaging with communities, audiences, management and peers
- Design experiences where personal identity and expression, community perspectives, lived experience, and authentic practice provide integral input to the design

Employ Medium and Technique

- Understand strengths and limitations of the various methods for delivery of interpretation content (media, technology, visual information, and personal services)
- Weigh options to make optimal and effective matches for medium given the audience, message and circumstance, and identified audience needs
- Intentionally choose experiences to allow for multiple visitor uses and outcomes such as learning, engagement, enjoyment, and recreation

- Focus and structure interpretive experiences around relevant current issues using essential questions or other organizing tools
- Understand the difference between information, orientation, and interpretation and when, why and how to move from one to the other
- Integrate agency perspectives with visitor contribution and community voices
- Analyze and select techniques to enrich experience and enhance multi-directional communication
- Skillfully integrate audience engagement, interpretive narration, and resource immersion to facilitate interactive experiences, explore complex issues, and connect to resource meanings
- Understand and address audience accessibility, learning preferences, developmental, and mobility needs
- Meet NPS standards for technical design and production of media products (style, format, branding, accessibility, and copyright)
- Proactively prepare for and monitor situational and logistics needs, including site dynamics, supplies and materials, audience safety and accessibility, and resource protection

Analyze and Iterate

- Build in opportunities during development and implementation for feedback, workshopping, and prototyping to iteratively improve on interpretive experience
- Ensure design of interpretive products, services, and experiences addresses audience and management needs
- Explore and test creative solutions to solve challenges
- Observe visitor cues and responses, assess needs, and evaluate options to guide the progression of each experience
- Apply insights gained through evaluation and analysis to adjust and modify techniques, topics, and interpretive approaches
- Allow flexibility for collaborative redesign in products, services, or experiences

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Previous Versions

Hundreds of colleagues contributed to previous versions of our core competencies – 1996-2017 – your good work continues to live in this current revision.