

Exhibitions at Your Place

Exhibitions at your place and Te Papa, 'our place', have many things in common. It's all a matter of scale. This guide suggests ways for you to create exciting exhibitions using kiwi ingenuity and modest, sometimes minuscule, budgets.

Before you **start**

Take care of your objects

You have in your hands many of the treasures of your area. It is your responsibility to care for them, protect them and ensure that future generations will be able to understand and enjoy them. Before you start to prepare for your exhibition, ask yourself whether you can provide a suitable environment for exhibiting the treasures you will be interpreting.

Objects are vulnerable to the effects of light, humidity, dust, and living things (insects, rodents, fungi, bacteria, people ...). Big changes in temperature and humidity can have devastating effects over time and natural and artificial light fade and weaken objects.

Think preventive conservation

An ideal environment is temperature and humidity controlled, has no unfiltered light, and 24-hour security. Work back from there. Ask yourself:

- Are the objects you want to display the only examples?
- How fragile are they?
- How secure will they be?
- Can the objects be rotated with others that are similar - say on a three-monthly cycle?
- How are your handling procedures? Do you use clean white cotton gloves?

For further information on safeguarding your collection, see *Preventive Conservation*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 5.

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Planning an *exhibition*



Planning, planning, planning

Planning is the key to excellence. Your success will depend on the amount of time and effort you spend in preparing for your exhibition.

Planning for a successful display may start two years before opening date. It may involve months of consulting, writing and rewriting, designing, budgeting and obtaining money. Ideas develop and are refined over time.

Remember to build in time for front-end evaluation - evaluating your ideas for exhibitions before you finalise them. Interview and survey potential visitors to check out their response. See *Know Your Visitors*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 3, for guidance on this kind of research.

The final installation may only take a week, or if it is a large display a number of months. Remember however, that it's much more cost effective to make your mistakes on paper!

The money

Budgets

A sensible budget is required to create impact. There are funding options that take time, effort and patience to pursue but will pay off if you're successful.

Investigate national sources of funding but don't forget to check out local possibilities. Prepare an attractive proposal (with pictures and sketches of your design), get supporting letters, offer 'contra deals' to your potential partner, for example, naming rights such as 'The Wonder Wood Ltd History of Timbertown'.

Beg, borrow and cajole

Don't overlook the value of sponsorship 'in kind'. Recycle your resources. Valuable contributions can come in the form of off-cuts in a variety of materials such as custom wood, perspex, timber, even corrugated iron! Volunteer helpers can (and do) contribute time and skill. Also, check out if there is anything you can borrow locally.

For information on funding sources, see *Tapping into Funding Sources*, Te Papa National Services Resources Guide Issue 2.

Recipe for success. Take two parts of inspiration, add a sackful of practicality, a truckload of energy and throw in a large dash of passion Give yourself deadlines. Adrenalin sharpens the senses, and encourages focus and commitment.

Exhibition set-up times - a rough guide

Small art exhibition

Prepare and paint space, prepare labels, hang, publicise

- 2 people, 1 week

Small display

Build, paint, use existing display cases, complete writing, prepare labels, install, publicise

- 2 people, 1 month

Major permanent social history exhibition

Build, install, fit lighting, new display cases, text and image panels, images, plan opening, publicise

- 4-6 people, 3-6 months

How **not** to plan

'Let's do a display - it's the Queen's birthday/Barbie's birthday next week! People will love it! We'll put it up this afternoon - you get some 'blutack' and drawing pins, John, and I'll get the old display case, the one we used for those birds that sort of fell apart. Joan Smith gave us that collection of old Weekly News - I'm sure she won't mind if we cut them. I guess I'd better make a label or something....'

Estimates of bottom dollar budgets

- Small display with photocopied labels, existing display case, paint \$100
- Small art show with photocopied labels, no paint, vinyl title \$100
- Small social history display using existing objects, existing display cases, photocopied labels and photocopied mural \$500
- Social history exhibition, curated objects, gallery painted, new display furniture, laser printed labels, digital murals, lighting, sound \$12,000-100,000

The **storytelling**

approach

Stories have a beginning, middle and an end. Creating exhibitions through a storytelling approach offers benefits for both you and your audience. For you, a story provides a focus for structuring your exhibition. For the audience, it stimulates the imagination, prompts questions, reveals hidden meanings, encourages involvement, holds interest, provokes laughter and tears.

ASK, 'WHAT IS THE STORY WE WANT TO TELL?'

The stories of your place

Tell the unique stories of your own area. Ask the people of your community what stories they would like you to tell and involve them in all stages of your project. Illustrate universal themes with the experiences of the people of your district.

Stories that objects tell

Look at objects within your collection in more interesting ways. Don't just see a collection of old sewing machines, think about who used these machines? What were they used for? When? Who gathered food in the well-used kete? Where was the food eaten and by whom? Touch the rough, rusted teeth of old saw blades and ask yourself who worked with them.

Always bear in mind who you are telling your story to. You may put the objects in some kind of context, for example, display a dinner set on a table and tablecloth. If it's a hat, you can display it on a headform.

Ina London's story

Here is an extract from a story used in the display of objects from the depression years: 'Our next shift was to Te Whaiti to another tent and lean-to...Then Bob came along followed by Val, Graeme, Lawrence, Alfred and Desmond. Lawrence died at four months and Desmond at four days. Life was full of interest although not always rosy.' (Rotorua Museum of Art and History)

Reflections on storytelling

Does your story:

- awaken enthusiasm?
- focus attention?
- involve the viewer?
- inspire?
- interweave the physical, intellectual and spiritual?

Pitfalls in the storytelling (and other) approaches include:

- trying to say too much in too complex a manner
- explaining rather than inspiring
- patronising, harassing or preaching
- forgetting your audience
- not having your story checked by the person or persons involved
- giving in to the urge to tell national or global stories.

A safe *environment*



Cultural considerations

When dealing with other people's cultural treasures, ask permission, consult, and be guided by people with wisdom and knowledge on the history of items. Ask yourself the serious questions. For example, 'Should this material be in our possession, and how did it get here? What can be displayed? How should it be displayed? Should these items be displayed together?'

Do the objects require a blessing or ceremony at the time of the exhibition opening? Is it possible to present the labels in Māori or the language of the people involved as well as in English?

For guidance on relationships with iwi, see *A Guide to Guardians of Iwi Treasures*, Te Papa National Services Resources Guide Issue 8.

Security, safety and comfort

Security consciousness

Museum security is a state of mind. The responsibility lies in the hands of all staff and volunteers. A 'security consciousness' needs to be firmly established. Your building may not have state-of-the-art alarms, but serious consideration needs to be given to the installation of sprinkler systems and fire-fighting equipment. (See *Preventive Conservation*, Te Papa National Services Resources Guide Issue 5.)

The lining of your buildings (to minimise changes in temperature, and fluctuations in humidity) is an investment in the care of your collections as is a carefully considered locking system. Objects presented in secure display cases are safer than objects that people can touch.

Remember: There is nothing more chilling than finding an empty display case. There is no compensation for the loss of an object that is rare and special.

Who is observing visitors?

Who is checking on the displays and how many times a day?

Emergency procedures

Do you have emergency procedures in place?

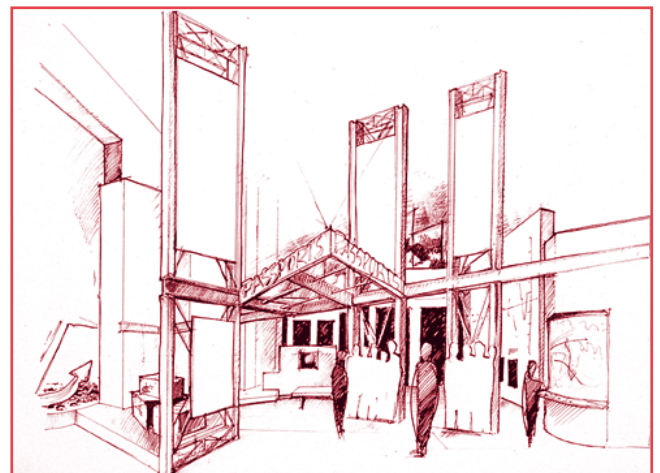
- What is your safety plan?
- Where are your fire extinguishers?
- Where are your exits? Are they marked?

For further information, see *Minimising Disaster*, Te Papa National Services Resources Guide Issue 6, and *Emergency Procedures*, Te Papa National Services Resources Guide Issue 7.

Visitor comfort

Consider visitor comfort.

- Can your public move around your displays safely?
- Is there wheelchair access to your building?
- Can your display area handle large groups of people, for example, busloads of school children or elderly people?
- Do you have sufficient numbers of toilets?
- How high are your displays off the ground? How big is your text?
- People have a finite amount of energy to expend - is there anywhere for them to sit?
- Where will they park their cars?
- Can they get something to eat and drink?



Designing the *exhibition*



GOOD DESIGN UTILISES SPACE, SHAPE, COLOUR, LIGHT AND TEXTURE, AND MAY INTEGRATE SOUND, TOUCH AND EVEN SMELL INTO THE FINISHED PRODUCT.

Dealing with design

Exhibition design has come a long way since the mid-nineteenth century 'cabinet of curiosities' approach. Well-conceived and visually attractive design enhances the objects, excites interest, and helps tell the story in an enjoyable way. At its best, exhibition design becomes an art form, eliciting an emotional response from its viewers.

Well-designed exhibitions are effective communicators of ideas. They are an opportunity for your visitors to see real objects (a museum's marketing edge in a highly competitive environment for people's leisure time and money). They can be exciting, multi-sensory experiences giving pleasure, information and entertainment.

Select your objects carefully

Gather more objects than you need, and make sure they are the best, the strongest, and the most varied, textural, and appropriate. Consider additional material that may enhance your storyline.

Do you have to borrow material from private sources? This could make a difference to the length of time your exhibition can be on display. Complete your loan forms in duplicate.

Illustrate with images

Include photographs, paintings, documents, and newspaper articles. Large images set the scene for your story very effectively. Investigate ways of making murals by the photocopy process (see the instructions on page 9). Take extracts from old newspapers, and images such as engravings and enlarge them too.

An exhibition may be seen as a form of sculpture - a three-dimensional composition with solids, voids, and spatial relationships.

Visit other museums whenever you can. Observe what works, what excites, what bores you. This can be an avenue to excellence in your own museum.

Be aware of copyright issues in using images. See *Copyright and Museums*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 9, for further information.

Be bold with colour. Use deep rich shades.

Consider painting the ceilings of social history exhibitions black.

Have you had your lighting checked by a registered electrician?

Perspex scratches easily. Clean with an anti-static cleaner. Remove serious scratches with brass cleaner.

Envisage a mood

Mood will be enhanced by colour, texture, text style, display case style. What colours best reflect the story? Are they hot or cold? What enhances the objects and images? What finishes can you use on the walls and in display cases: paint, timber (old and new), wallpaper, hessian, fabric, weaving, corrugated iron?

Lighting sets the scene

Lighting is an effective way to create drama. The time and money you spend on your lighting requirements during your planning process will serve you well.

Have you consulted a lighting expert? Excellent lighting is not cheap. Appropriate lighting is affordable. Can you recycle or reuse lighting tracks and fittings?

Have you set aside money for maintaining your lighting system, for replacement bulbs and fittings? Will the lights create glare? Watch those naked bulbs! What kind of damage are they doing? How close are they to your objects? Do not place lights inside display cases unless they are fibre optics. Can your lights be turned off when there are no visitors in the area?

Light cautions

Remember that all light causes damage and will harm your objects. Daylight is more damaging than artificial light.

A lux is a unit of illumination and exposure time is measured in lux hours. As a general rule 50 lux is a suitable light level for works on paper, photographs and textiles. A level of 200 lux is likely to be safe for robust objects such as ceramics or stone. It would be safest to get lux levels checked by a specialist.

Sleeves to protect against UV are readily available for fluorescent lights and easy to install, as is UV film for applying to windows.

Factor in display furniture

Include furniture construction costs when planning your exhibition. Fancy furniture is not likely to be necessary. Sealed custom wood constructions cost little, and represent good value for money. Perspex covers can be made to measure, and if cared for can be used over a long period. Toughened glass has greater strength and can be used for added support in large cases.

A simple and effective display case can be made with four sheets of 3mm perspex screwed to a top and base. The case is then sealed with black insulation tape at the corners. Your lighting can be installed behind a light diffuser.

Become a 'buddy' to a big museum - they may have old furniture which needs a good home. There may be old-style shop fittings around your town. They can make fine display furniture.

How to make a **photocopy mural**

Try out your technique on plain paper strips first! Dexterity is called for, and it may take practice to master a 'Rotorua developed' masterpiece! Don't panic when you see the crinkles appear - just be ready with your hot old iron and brown paper.

Simple murals may also be made out of A3 laser copies carefully cut and pasted to form an A1 size. These are remarkably successful, low cost, and have the advantage of being able to be produced in colour

Preparing the image

- Your original image needs to be sharp and clear.
- Your copy image also needs to be of a high quality.
- A bromide has to be produced by scanning the image at 600 dpi (dots per inch) or '100% screen' (from a graphics specialist).
- The maximum size that a bromide can be produced in one piece is 600mm x 900mm - a bigger bromide needs to be produced in strips.
- You need to first produce your mural at half the desired size. The bromide, which can be pasted up with text, is then photocopied at 200% enlargement.

Mounting process for the photocopied enlargement

- Prepare custom board.
- Trim all butting joints of photocopy.
- Lay out mural on board and place to form complete image. Cut to make a clean butting joint.
- Heat heavy (preferably pre-1950) iron and prepare large 'chunks' of brown paper.
- Using a clean roller, coat custom wood with a very thin layer of PVA glue.
- The next step requires three people, one holding up the 'tail', the second aligning the joints, and the third person quickly smoothing the paper as it is lowered.
- The paper may well crinkle alarmingly at this stage! Using the brown paper and hot iron, press all areas. Keep working on them until they are as smooth as possible. Don't leave the brown paper in place too long as it may stick. Discard any paper that gets glue on it.
- When the paper is dry apply a clear acrylic gloss glaze. The paper may well crinkle again but will smooth out when it's dry. Cut off excess custom wood.



Display is an art

Think three-dimensionally when you place your objects and text in prepared display cases. Create interesting textural contrasts and changes in levels. Objects laid flat in tall display cases do not inspire or excite. Organise a focal point to your assemblage. Sketch your display before you start to assemble it.

Supports for your objects will give height and stability. Choose from a variety of materials including perspex, wire, timber, cardboard and glass. Consider materials such as bricks, old tea boxes or small cupboards. Make sure your support does not dominate your display.

Cautions about display supports

Make sure your support will not damage your object. Delicate objects will need to be cradled - earthquakes do occur! Use eversote or other inert materials to protect items from the surface of the support.

Fumigate natural materials used for support. Make sure paint has time to cure before you position your object and always place an inert material between your object and a painted surface. Never make use of existing holes in objects when you support them.

Technology should be a bonus

You can add value to your visitor's experience by introducing simple sound stations. Videos give your viewer a familiar source of information and entertainment. Have you considered making your own video? It's an excellent way to tell a story.

Music enhances the mood. Choose carefully, check out any copyright issues, and keep the audio levels appropriate. Keep originals of tapes and videos - and a spare.

Technology has a down side! Videos can break down, television sets wear out, and cassette players can begin to 'eat' your tapes. Make sure you have a budget for replacements if you venture into this method of getting a message across.

Interactives are winners

Interactives or 'objects that get the visitor doing things' can be an excellent continuation of your storyline. They can be as simple as an album of laminated copies of photographs with captions.

Use auto-rewind cassette players.

Is your audio-visual system (stereo, video, television) placed out of the reach of prying hands? Have you masked the controls?

Some examples of interactives

A ring-bound and laminated A3 book

This can be an effective way to present large amounts of text illustrated by laser copied photographs or line drawings. Remember to provide a table and chairs, and people will spend a great deal of time with these simple interactives.

Flip-cards

A set of flip-cards presented in a question and answer format is an effective way to add layers of information to your exhibition.

Drawers

Cheap ideas to consider include old sets of plan drawers used to display small items (covered with perspex) and old sets of drawers to hold extra information or objects.

Listening post

Install a CD player into an old telephone and let your visitors listen to recorded stories. (It is very easy to copy personal stories on to a CD, video or cassette.)

Magnifiers

Small magnifying glasses (firmly attached by string or wire) presented with a tray of rock samples become an exercise for budding geologists. Also try this with exhibits of bugs, medals and other objects where it is difficult to see the detail.

Feedback opportunities

Create opportunities for visitors to provide feedback such as a comments book, whiteboard, blackboard or pinboard.

Interactive cautions

Interactives must be robust and safe. Think simple and solid.

- Are the drawers finger friendly? Are they at the right height for kids?
- Are the albums protected from picky fingers?

The *words*



'PEOPLE ARE SEEKING MAINLY ENJOYMENT, NOT INSTRUCTION.' - FREEMAN TILDEN

Heard in an exhibition space:

'I hate labels. They're going to wreck my design, great white blobs everywhere.'

'But there's no room to tell Joe Brown's story and it's really important! I can't cut the story down to three lines'

Writing for people who are walking

People who take up the challenging task of writing text for exhibitions could be said to write for people who are walking. Your audience could be on their way elsewhere, and your task is to stop them long enough to communicate the essence of your story.

To be effective you must inform quickly and dramatically. Your visitors must feel that reading your labels and text panels is worth the effort. People tire easily - too much effort for no apparent reward means the message will be ignored.

Work closely with your designer during the time that you are preparing text for an exhibition. Neither of you will work in isolation - the designer will be cued and inspired by ideas and 'chapters', and you will need to work within the space available.

Doing it

Sit down and write. Don't edit your first draft - chances are it will change in the revising process.

- Take cues from the five Rs of writing - ruminant, rapid-write, retreat, revise, rewrite.
- Remember the five 'W's and an 'H' of journalism - who, what, why, where, when and how.

3-30-3

Use a message pyramid. Develop your text in a descending order of importance. This technique has been dubbed the 3-30-3 rule. Visitors can receive a message in three seconds, 30 seconds or three minutes, so you really need them to get the main point in three seconds.

Ruthlessly edit wordy phrases and long sentences. Read widely and know your subject thoroughly. This is the best way to write short, clear and informative text.

Up close and personal

Remember that people see things through the grid of their own experience. Relate to your visitor's experience. Use personal pronouns and familiar terms. Illustrate your text with metaphors, analogies, quotes and examples. Strike a balance between information and entertainment.

Grammar rules - okay!

Your writing will be ruthlessly inspected by all who read your labels and text panels. Obtain the best editing reference book you can find and use it religiously.

Never rely on yourself to edit your own work. Familiarity breeds blindness. Always get a second pair of eyes to check your writing, preferably the most meticulous and informed person you know.

Visitor (with triumphant but pitying look on face) to humiliated museum writer: 'There is a mistake in the text panel by the door - I just thought I should tell you about it.'

Words on display

The look of your labels matters. People are drawn to attractively presented text with plenty of white space surrounding it. Choose suitable images which illustrate a point to integrate into your text where possible. Plan carefully when placing labels and text panels and be sure that they are adequately lit. Experiment with margin settings, and do not exceed 60 characters in a line.

Use 'you' where you can.

Use active verbs, for example, 'Tracy reads the book' rather than 'the book was read by Tracy'.

If people are crouching on the floor or peering upwards, your labels are badly placed.

If your visitors are spending time on your text panels, congratulate yourself! They are observing the three-minute rule. Many will read fleetingly as they walk by.

The **fundamentals** of the writing task

- Whose story are you telling and why?
- Who will your audience be?
- Avoid the 'book-on-the-wall' effect, the result of too much text.
- When writing, ask, What are the key points? What is the main idea you want to get across?
- If you can't decide on what to write, try WIRMI - What I Really Mean Is.... The answer will often be quite simple
- Remember the best writing comes from rewriting - and rewriting and rewriting
- Try reading your writing aloud.

Text style

Text style can add to overall feel and mood - and what you're trying to convey.

A quick reference to basic text style:

Serif: **Exhibit**

Sans Serif: Exhibit

Italics: *Exhibit*

Informal: **Exhibit**

Bold: **Exhibit**

There are two basic types of label styles: small labels that often accompany individual objects, and text panels that need to be presented in an arresting manner. The point size for the object labels will be smaller than the large text panels.

As a general rule, people who are walking can comfortably read text that is 20 to 40 points in size. People who are sitting can comfortably read text from 12 to 20 points.

Exhibition materials and where to find them

Graphic/office materials supplier

Gatter Board

Foam Core: 3mm, 2400 x 1200 5mm, 12mm, 18mm

Window dressing pins: 50mm black, 50mm chrome

Museum board: 2 ply, 30 x 40; 4 ply, 40 x 60

Barrier paper

Tissue paper

Other conservation supplies

Local signwriter

Computer-cut vinyl lettering

Model shops

Chrome collars

Paint retailer

Coatings and finishes

Photographic laboratory

Colour photography

Photograph duplication, digital imaging, laminating

Glass/window film specialist

Perspex 3mm - 25mm Glass 2mm - 19mm Adhesive film

Photocopy outlet

Large photocopies

Inkjet and laser prints

Rasta

General copying

Image/typesetter

Bromides

Lighting specialist

Display lighting

Lamps

Copyright, evaluation and **media**

opportunities



Copyright

Be aware of copyright issues in developing your exhibition. You will need to obtain permission to reproduce other people's material and also to copy illustrations or photographs. You may have to pay a fee.

You will also need to get clearances for certain uses of copyright items and provide accurate credits and acknowledgments for images and objects from private individuals, museums and in some cases donors.

For further information, refer to *Copyright and Museums*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 9.

Evaluation

Constant evaluation is the best method of refining skill in designing exhibitions. Find out as much as you can about your visitors. Get into the habit of evaluating your exhibitions both before and during their showing.

Informal evaluation includes such things as providing a visitor's book, observing reactions as people move through your gallery. Talk to the visitors in the gallery. Take time to sit down and discuss what went well and what was less successful. Make notes for things to remember next time.

For evaluation that has greater reliability, conduct properly set up surveys with your visitors and potential visitors. For further information on this invaluable area, refer to *Know Your Visitors*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 3, and *Introduction to Visitor Surveys*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 4.

Media opportunities

Write a press release about your exhibition and send it to your local media. It may surprise you to learn how often newspapers and radio stations are looking for stories.

Take every opportunity to use the media to share the stories of your collections with a much wider audience - and to attract them to your museum to see the real thing!

For further information on writing press releases and the role of the media in the work of your museum, refer to *Working with the Media*, Te Papa National Services Resource Guides Issue 1.

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For further information or to discuss training opportunities related to this topic, please contact:

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