

ALLYSON MATHIS

According to Freeman Tilden's classic 1957 definition, interpretation is "an educational activity which aims to reveal meanings and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." As the profession evolved, definitions of interpretation also changed to highlight the purpose of interpretation and describe its outcome. The NAI Definitions Project defines interpretation as "a mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource."

Regardless of the definitions they use for interpretation, most interpreters agree that facilitating connections between people and parks (or resources) is at the very heart of successful interpretation. Interpreters facilitate these connections through a variety of media, ranging from informal contacts through exhibits or guided walks to multimedia presentations. Interpreters must use effective presentation techniques, have awareness of audience characteristics, use interpretive methods, and incorporate resource information. These four components can be put together to make up the acronym PAIR:

Presentation Techniques/Style
Audience Characteristics
Interpretive Methods
Resource Information

Successful interpretation can be described as PAIRing people with parks, using the definition of pair: "to become associated with one another." Visitors who become associated with

park resources and significances to develop stronger stewardship ethics. Interpretive activities and media build those associations and make park resources more accessible and meaningful to the public.

The PAIR model utilizes the characteristics of a chain to illustrate the outcome of successful interpretation: strong, durable, and long-lasting connections between visitors and resources. In addition to being strong, chains are versatile and flexible. Chains are used with anchors, and an ultimate goal of interpretation is to anchor people and their parks together.

Another important characteristic of a chain with implications for this model is that a chain is only as strong as its weakest link. Therefore, all links or components in the PAIR model have equal value. A weakness, or lack of knowledge or skill, in any of the links is enough to break the interpretive chain and prevent the facilitation of meaningful relationships between people and parks.

P: Presentation Techniques/Style

Presentation techniques or style are essential in any interpretive program or product. Presentation techniques include choosing the appropriate technique to present the interpretive product in the first place, and then effectively using that method. The presentation techniques link is applicable to both personal and nonpersonal services.

Effective presentation techniques vary depending on the type of interpretive service. In the case of an interpretive talk, presentation techniques should include good communication skills and effective delivery techniques. To be effectively presented, a piece of interpretive writing must be written at an



Parks

The PAIR Model

LISA CORDON

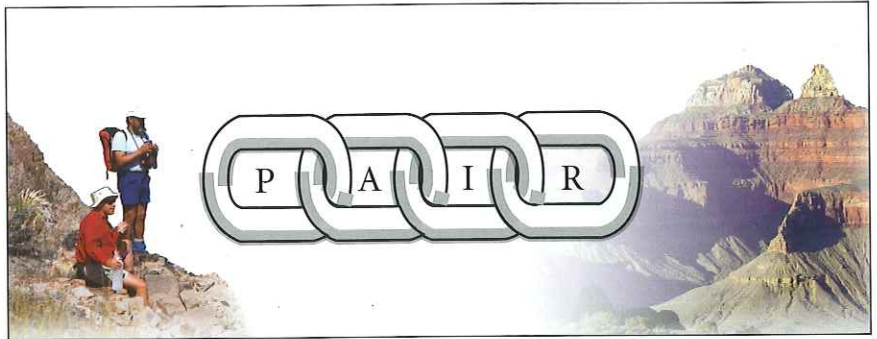
appropriate comprehension level, use attractive and engaging design and good grammar, and not have any typographical errors. Exhibits must be visually engaging, easy to read, universally accessible to all audiences, and replaced when worn or damaged.

Even if all other links in the PAIR model are present, poor presentation can prevent the facilitation of connections between people and parks. With ineffective presentation, the audience will not receive the message(s) that the interpreter is trying to communicate.

A: Audience Characteristics

Knowledge of audience characteristics is necessary for an interpreter to focus an interpretive service toward a particular audience or audiences. Different audiences have different needs and characteristics and will establish connections to park resources through different channels. For example, children are different from adults and an interpretive activity that may be successful with adults may completely fail with children. Understanding audience characteristics enables an interpreter to choose from the range of interpretive methods available and to determine what aspects of the resource information to incorporate into an interpretive activity for particular audiences.

Knowledge of audience characteristics includes an awareness of potential visitor groups and an understanding of what significances they may or may not already ascribe to park resources.



The PAIR model: P (Presentation Techniques/Style), A (Audience Characteristics), I (Interpretive Methods), R (Resource Information). Photo illustration by Maddie Tighe.

It includes an insight to various demographic visitor groups, including those who may visit only electronically or through mass media.

I: Interpretive Methods

Interpretive methods are used to link the interests of the visitors to resource information. The use of interpretive methods is the revelation step in the PAIR model. As Tilden wrote in his principles, interpretation is "revelation based on information." Interpretive methods include the use of thematic interpretation, tangible/intangible links, compelling stories, and other tools and techniques.

The skilled interpreter uses knowledge of audience characteristics and chooses what resource information to relate in an interpretive activity or product. Interpretive methods

help make that information meaningful, relevant, and significant to the audience. An interpreter should also attempt to expand the range of relevance for the visitor and to promote new relationships between the visitor and the resource.

R: Resource Information

Accurate resource information is essential in interpretation. A program product lacking in accurate resource information will not facilitate meaningful connections between visitors and resources. In other words, resource information must be accurate in order for visitors to form a true bond with park resources. Accurately interpreted resource information also promotes public understanding of scientific, natural, and historical resources of park areas.

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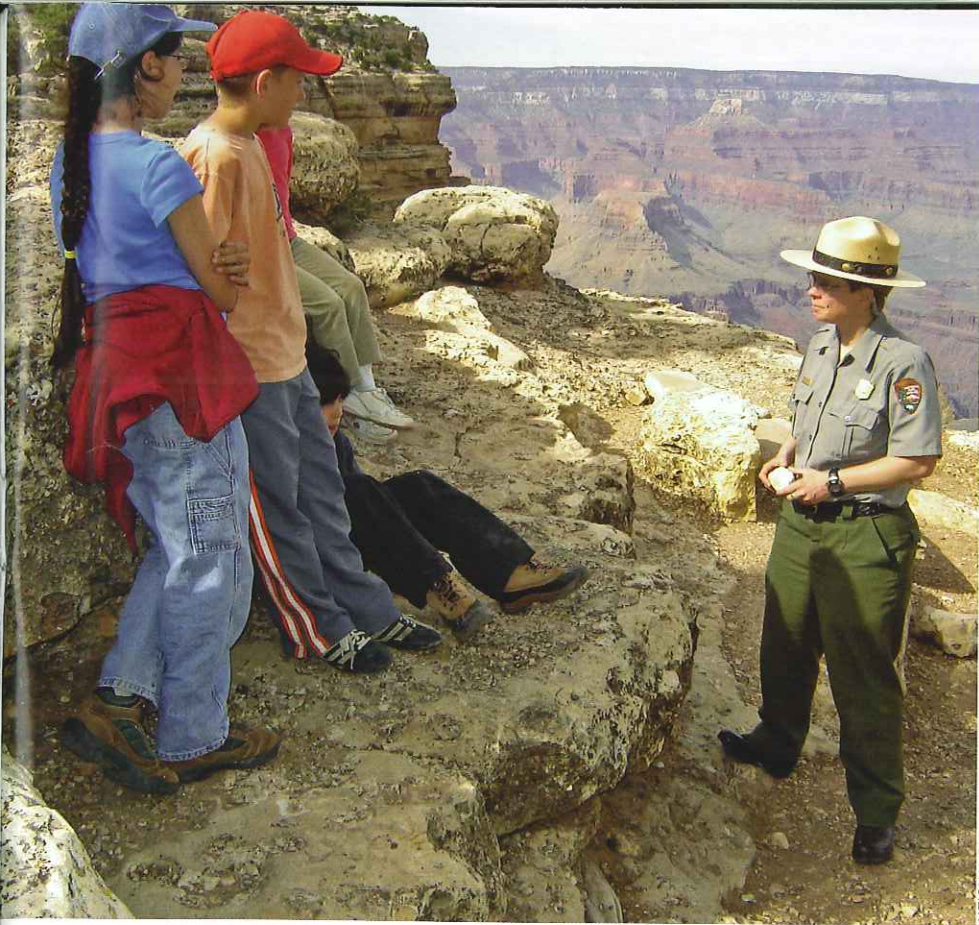
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Author Allyson Mathis interprets geology at Grand Canyon National Park using the PAIR model.

Since interpretive programs and media have the potential to reach large audiences, incorporating accurate resource information in interpretation may increase the public's scientific and historic literacy.

Resource information includes a vast array of information about park resources at a variety of technical levels that can relate to a wide spectrum of visitors. Resource information includes knowledge of a site's significance as identified in enabling legislation, administrative history, current management plan, and the ecologic, geologic, historic, and/or ethnographic context of the park.

Using the PAIR Model

The PAIR model can be used to present interpretive concepts in training situations and as a tool to evaluate interpretive programs and media. One of the strengths of the PAIR model as a training tool is that it identifies the four necessary components of an interpretive product,

demonstrates that the components are equally important, and illustrates the outcome of successful interpretation—a connection between people and parks.

Evaluations of interpretive programs and media can also incorporate the PAIR model. It can be used to identify the strong and weak components, or links, in an interpretive program or product. Identifying the weak link can help evaluators and interpreters determine components that most need improvement.

While the PAIR model contains the same elements of interpretive programs and products as other models, including the National Park Service's Interpretive Equation, it separates the "appropriate technique" component into two distinct ones: presentation techniques/style and interpretive methods. These two components are, in fact, independent. A program can use effective presentation techniques, yet not include interpretive methods, and vice versa.

Separating these two components allows further insight into what ingredients an interpretive program or product must incorporate in order to promote the interpretive outcome of increased resource stewardship.

Each component in the PAIR model is essential in the interpretive process. In a good interpretive program, all four links will be strong. Learning resource information, utilizing interpretive methods, recognizing and relating to different audiences, and presenting effective interpretive products all are difficult to learn and master. It takes a great deal of effort to make the chain illustrated in the PAIR model strong. The PAIR model is presented as a tool that interpreters can use in their efforts to protect park and heritage area resources, promote resource stewardship, and anchor people and parks.

For More Information

Tilden, Freeman. (1957). *Interpreting Our Heritage*. Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press.

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Allyson Mathis is the science and education outreach coordinator for the Division of Science and Resource Management at Grand Canyon National Park. Her background is in geology and prior to her current position, she worked as a field interpreter for a total of 15 years in four national park sites. With her expertise in the interpretation of geology, she has presented many sessions on interpreting geology to interpreters and scientists. She may be reached at allyson_mathis@nps.gov.