

Further reading

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The following Best Practice Guidelines are available to registered members on the AHI website.

Procurement Guidelines**Interpretation Panels Guidelines****Interpretive Leaflets Guidelines****Writing interpretation for children and families****Guided walks and tours: an introduction****Heritage interpretation and tourism: an introduction****Interpretive writing****Introducing a costumed interpretation programme at your heritage site or museum****Inclusive Design: Principles and practice for interpretation projects****Thinking interpretively about colour and type****Creating an Interpretation Plan: an introduction****Demystifying Evaluation: A guide to the evaluation of interpretive activities events and programmes** (Available Summer 2016)**About AHI**

The Association for Heritage Interpretation is a key forum for anyone interested in interpretation – the art of helping people explore and appreciate our world.

AHI believes that interpretation enriches our lives through engaging emotions, enhancing experiences and deepening understanding of places, people, events and objects from the past and present.

AHI aims to promote excellence in the practice and provision of interpretation and to gain wider recognition of interpretation as a professional activity.



Association
for Heritage
Interpretation

The Association for Heritage Interpretation at the Museums and Heritage Show West Hall Olympia London. 18-19th May 2016.

The following is an extract from the AHI Best Practice Guideline on Evaluation. A full version is available to AHI members on the AHI website. Visit us on stand L6 to find out about other Best Practice Guidelines which have been written by experts in interpretation; or to find out more about the benefits that membership of the Association for Heritage Interpretation can bring to you or your organisation.

To find out more about AHI and talk to an Association Member about the benefits of joining visit us on Stand L6, check our website, email, call or connect with us on our social media channels:

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A brief guide to the evaluation of interpretive activities, events and programmes

So, what is 'evaluation'?

A systematic process of determining 'somethings' value, worth or merit. When you evaluate your interpretation programme or project, it will help you develop your interpretation and to understand whether it is meeting its objectives or not.

Evaluation is a systematic process which can be simplified in terms of a number of key questions, including;

Why? When? What? and How? – These questions will be very briefly explored in this leaflet.

Evaluation stage 1: Why?

Evaluation plays a key role in improving the visitors' experience of your interpretation. In the first instance it can be used to help you gain funding and to develop your interpretation/visitor experience. It can be used to test your interpretation and later to determine the effectiveness of the experience and whether it is meeting its objectives. You can also use the results of any evaluation to assess the value of the interpretation to the site as a whole as well as to inform site-based strategy, policy and planning decisions.

Evaluation stage 2: When?

Evaluation should be an on-going process and thus it should encourage the regular review of your interpretation. There are many ways to divide evaluation stages. There are five forms of evaluation that can support your project/programme; **front end, formative, process, outcome and impact.**

Front end evaluation is undertaken at the earliest stage of the interpretive planning process and typically involves market research focusing upon visitor knowledge of the site as well as their potential levels of interest in potentially new interpretive themes or stories. If you are looking to attract new audiences you will need to find them off-site and work with them in their community. The results from your front-end evaluation should help you to tailor your interpretation more effectively to the needs of your visitors.

Formative evaluation typically occurs during the implementation phase to test a 'trial' version of the media or programme being developed. You might test visitor reaction to it, such as their attention or understanding as well as the messages it is trying to communicate.

Process evaluation is the on-going evaluation and monitoring of how your interpretation is going. It is often about building relationships with your communities of interest. It is also good to check that all the elements of the programme work successfully together such as the sound, lighting, graphics etc.

Outcome evaluation is carried out after the interpretive media or programme has been completed and is most often used to assess its success in relation to its original objectives. Visitors are typically encouraged to tell staff what they think about their experience often through a questionnaire, interview or focus group. The direct observation of visitors as they view the programme is another common method of undertaking outcome evaluation.

Impact evaluation is the pot of gold at the end of the rainbow! Many funders and organisations want to know the long term impact, the 'so what?' of your project. Are people's lives better? Are they healthier? Is the heritage better looked after? If you've done good front end evaluation and allow the time/resource to re-evaluate a period of time after implementation then this form of evaluation is very powerful.

Evaluation stage 3: What?

Typically, your evaluation of interpretive media or programmes will explore one or more of the following four categories:

- evaluating the visitors (existing and potential audiences) to examine their interest and reaction to the interpretation on offer;
- evaluating the whole programme to identify which of your interpretive efforts have consistently achieved their objectives and to modify others where greater effectiveness might be achieved;
- evaluating the performance of interpreters and helping them to identify ways in which they could improve their delivery;
- evaluating the overall productivity of the programme and its associated facilities to determine whether money and effort are being managed effectively on the site.

Evaluation stage 4: How?

The range of methods you adopt typically might include questionnaires and interviews, focus groups, the direct participation by an 'experienced' observer, the observational studies of visitors as well as behavioural and mapping exercises. Modern technology is now beginning to support some of these formerly more intrusive methods.

Four broad categories of investigation have traditionally been identified, these include:

- the informal appraisal of a site's interpretation usually by a professional interpreter or other 'expert';
- the observation of visitor behaviour without their knowledge. Such techniques include the noting of routes taken around an exhibition, the amount of time spent looking at individual displays (dwell time) and at which elements of each display;
- techniques involving informal but direct contact with visitors for example, the use of self-completed questionnaires or short interviews, but also using GPS trackers for larger sites.
- more formal contact with visitors often involving the use of a detailed questionnaire or interview or, their participation in a focus group exploring one or more topics in depth.

These methods may be used in isolation but most often are used in conjunction when evaluating a programme or site.