



Making Meaning: An Introduction to Interpretation

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Today's Agenda

9:00 – 9:30 Introduction and Welcome

- i. Learning Objectives
- ii. Agenda
- iii. Personal Stories

9:30 – 10:30 Introducing Interpretation

- i. Definitions
- ii. Tilden's Original Six Principles
- iii. Tangibles/Intangible
- iv. Universals

10:30 – 10:45 Break

10:45 – 11:15 Maslow's Hierarchy

11:15 – 12:15 Essential Qualities of Interpretation I

- i. Enjoyable
- ii. Relevant

12:15 – 12:45 Lunch

12:45 – 1:45 Essential Qualities of Interpretation II

- i. Thematic
- ii. Purposeful

1:45 – 2:00 Break

2:00 – 3:00 Making Meaning

- i. The NPS Interpretive Equation
- ii. Staircase to Stewardship
- iii. Interpretation in the Field

3:00 – 3:30 Review and Wrap-up

1. Attendees will use principles of interpretation in informal interpretation.
2. Attendees will recognize tangibles, intangibles, and universals concepts.
3. Attendees will identify and create opportunities for interpretation.

- What was the best historic site, museum, or program you attended?
- What made the experience memorable?
- What would you improve about that experience?



Cotton Gin Museum, Burton, TX

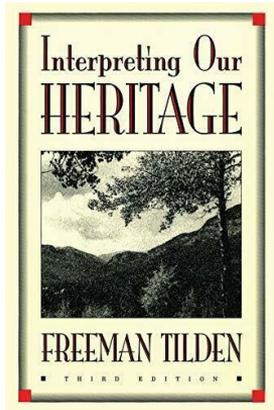
What we'll cover in this section:

- Definitions of Interpretation
- Tilden's Original Six Principles
- Tangibles and Intangibles
- Universals
- Maslow's Hierarchy



Bullock Museum, Austin, TX

- “An educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information.”
(Freeman Tilden, 1957)
- “A mission-based communication process that forges emotional and intellectual connections between the interests of the audience and meanings inherent in the resource.” **(National Association for Interpretation)**



Tilden's Original Six Principles

1. Any Interpretation that does not somehow **relate** to what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is **revelation** based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials are presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree **teachable**.
4. The chief aim of interpretation is not instruction, but **provocation**.
5. Interpretation should aim to **present the whole** rather than the part and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults but should follow a fundamentally **different approach(es)**.

- **Provoke** attention, curiosity and interest.
- **Relate** to the everyday life of your visitors.
- **Reveal** the theme through some creative or unusual viewpoint.
- **Address the Whole:** make sure your program relates to your theme.
- **Message unity:** use supporting elements to illustrate your theme.



Courtesy of the Tasmanian Museum & Art Gallery

Tangibles

- The physical elements of a site or object.
- They are things you experience with your senses.
- Examples: A boat, a tree, a battlefield, a mountain, a zoo specimen, or an ecosystem.



Activity

- Provide a one-word description of the object.
- What are the physical characteristics of the object?

We'll see an example first





Intangibles

- Intangible meanings are abstract concepts.
- They include ideas, feelings, relationships, values or beliefs.
- Examples: Democracy, freedom, death, health, and loss.



Activity

- Provide one-word about what the object signifies.
- What is the meaning of the object?

We'll see an example first

Universals

- Ideas or emotions that can be related to, contain meaning, or appeal to almost everyone.
- Examples: Family, death, prejudice, love, hunger, survival.

Universal Themes

1. Change
2. Conflict
3. Order vs Chaos
4. Patterns
5. Power
6. Structure
7. Systems
8. Relationships

Activity

- Make a list of tangibles and intangibles using the object provided to your table.
- Identify one universal from the list of intangibles.

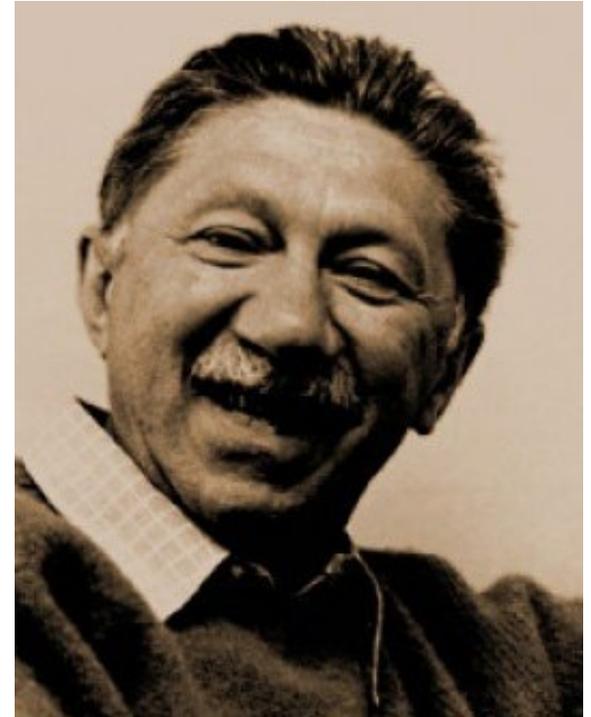
Universal Themes

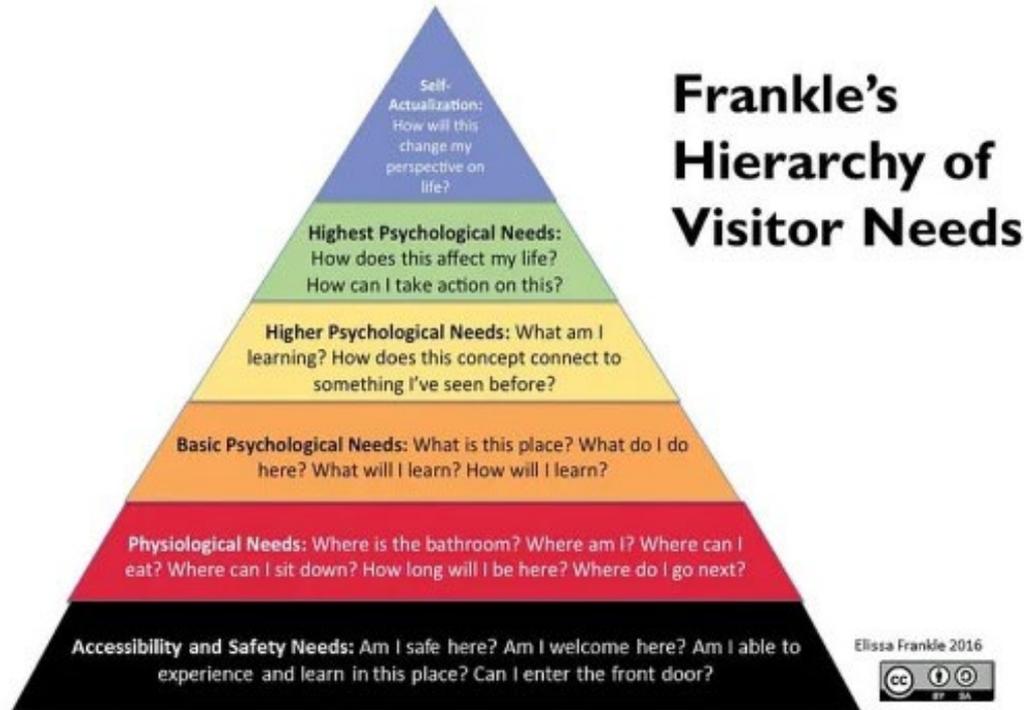
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Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs

- Basic Needs: Physiological, Safety and Security
- Growth Needs: Love and Belonging, Esteem, Self Actualization
- Interpretation can help people spend less time concerned over their basic needs so that there is a better chance to achieve higher-level thinking.





Activity

- Using Frankle's Hierarchy of Visitor Needs, brainstorm ways to meet visitor needs.
- Address:
 1. Accessibility and Safety Needs
 2. Physiological Needs
 3. Basic Psychological Needs
 4. Higher Psychological Needs

What we'll cover in this section:

- Qualities of Interpretive Programming
- Themes
- Goals, Objectives, and Mission Statements
- Falk's Visitor Categories
- Best Practices



Bullock Museum, Austin, TX



"Then Now Wow," Minnesota History Center

What distinguishes interpretation from other forms of communication?

What audiences love to hear, see, and experience:

- [Quality stories](#)
- [Unusual facts](#)
- [Inspiring quotes or thoughts](#)
- [Information in terms they understand](#)
- Things that evoke emotional or physiological responses



Texas City Museum (Courtesy of Texas City Museum)

What audiences don't care about:

- Ordinary data
- Gloomy predictions or rehashing of catastrophes
- The same information they've heard at every other site



Group Discussion

What are some ways you make interpretation enjoyable?

Ways to make interpretation enjoyable:

- Use [active verbs](#)
- Involve the [senses](#)
- Show [cause and effect](#)
- Link [science to history](#)
- Use [visual metaphors](#)
- Use [personification](#)



Frisco Heritage Museum; Courtesy of Erin McClelland Museum Services

How to make interpretation relevant:

- Personalize
- Use 'labeling'
- Relate to universal concepts
- Connect to the audience's frame of reference
- Bridge gaps with metaphors, similes, analogies, and comparisons



First World War Galleries, Imperial War Museum; Courtesy of Imperial War Museum

Interpretation is **Relevant**



Experience Seekers

Want to see the most renowned pieces and make memories.



Explorers

Want to learn new information and understand new concepts.



Facilitators

Want to ensure that their companions meet their visit goals.



Hobbyists & Professionals

Want to see and study specific pieces or exhibits.



Rechargers

Want to relax in a peaceful atmosphere.



Arkansas State University Museum (Courtesy of MuseWork)

Group Discussion

- What reasons do visitors have for coming to your site?
- What are frequently asked questions by your visitors?
- What can that tell us about their motivations?



*Workers take a break and enjoy lunch during a rice field harvest.
Photo courtesy of UNT Portal to Texas History*

Themes:

- Complete ideas that express a message
- The critical points you want to express
- Connects tangibles to intangibles
- Helps keep your audience (and you) on track

Topics:

- A broad, general category
- Not a complete sentence
- Can be an encyclopedia entry
- Do not place limits on your program

Activity: Theme versus Topic

- Bluebonnets exemplify the character of Texas.
- Endangered Texas animals
- Modern agriculture has roots in the not-so-distant past.
- Planes, trains, and automobiles
- This old house
- Historic houses reflect the life and times of their owners.
- The old west wasn't so wild after all.
- Famous cowboys and their horses

Why bother to develop a theme?

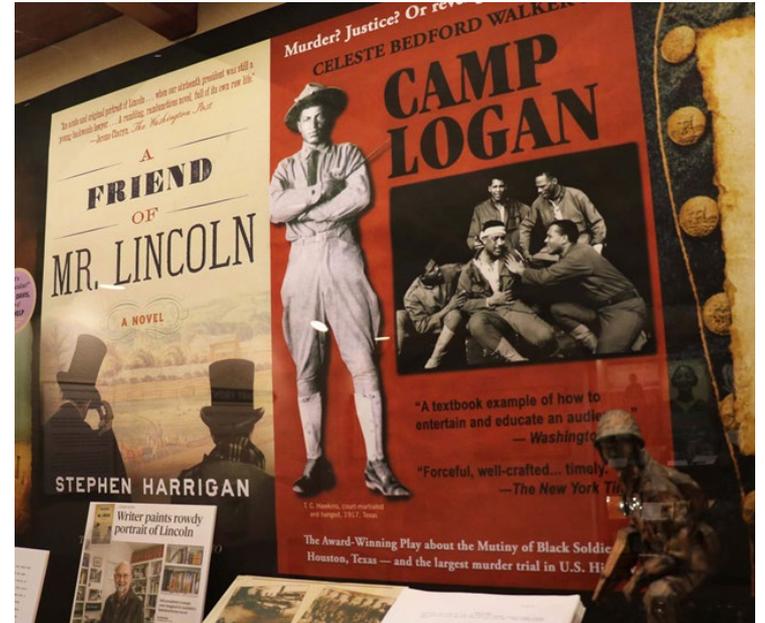
- Reach a larger audience
- Connect your audience to a resource
- Be effective with your audience's time

“People remember themes. They forget facts.” – Sam Ham

Developing a theme

- What's the big idea?
- Why does this matter?
- Why should I care?

Answer the “so what?” question



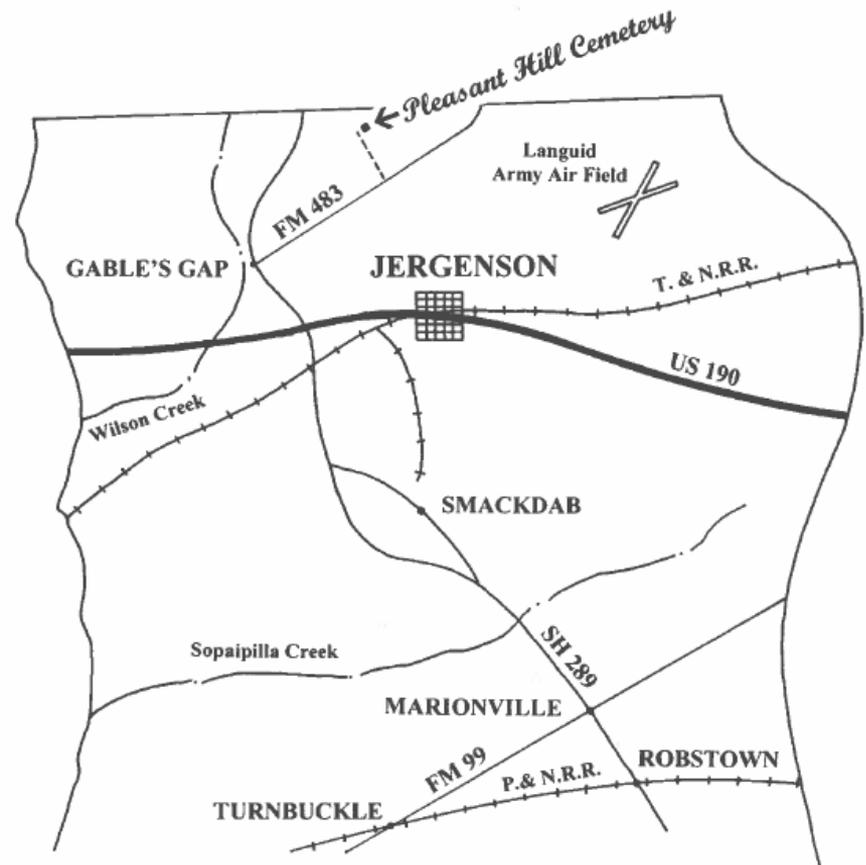
Wittliff Collections, San Marcos, TX

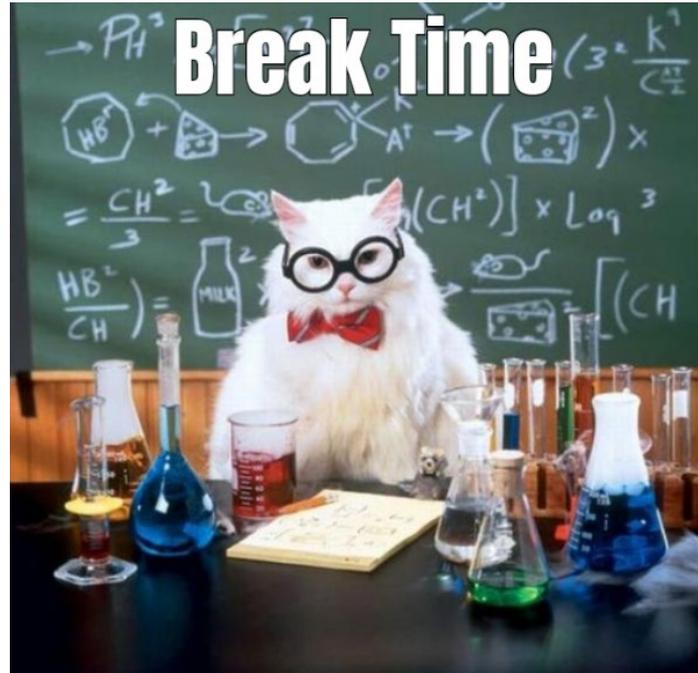
Activity: Write a Theme

- Use your topic to complete the following sentence:
 - “**generally, my presentation is about...**”
 - Express your theme by completing the following sentence:
 - “**After hearing my presentation, I want my audience to understand that...**”
- **Tacos**
 - **Telephones**
 - **Pottery**
 - **Mechanised Agriculture**
 - **Furniture**
 - **Photographs**
 - **Cookbooks**
 - **Pets**

Post Oak County Museum Mission Statement

The Post Oak County Museum preserves and interprets the history, culture, and stories of Post Oak County. This is for the enrichment of all residents, descendants and any with an interest in this esoteric Texas county.





$$\mathbf{KR + KA \times AT = IO}$$

Knowledge of the resource (KR), combined with knowledge of the audience (KA), can be shared through an appropriate technique (AT) to provide an interpretive opportunity (IO).

In other words, what do interpreters need to know?

What to know about the resource:

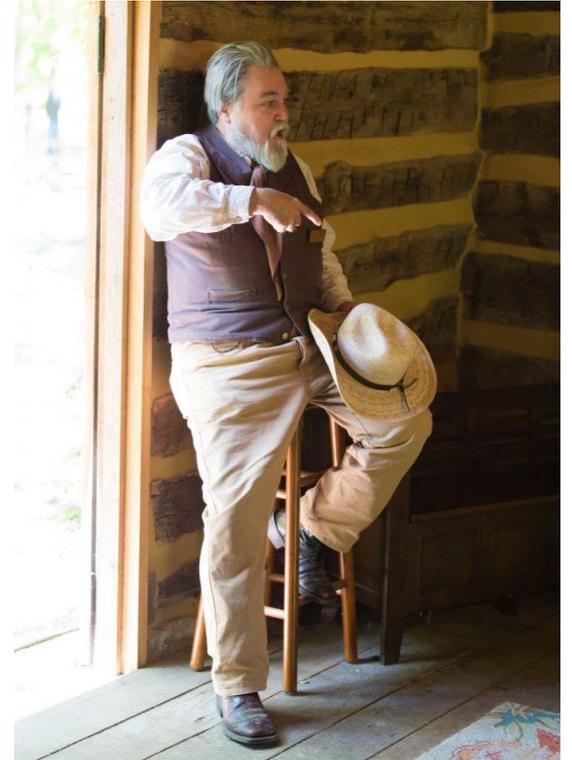
- Honest, accurate, and current information
- Intangible meanings associated with the resource
- Universal concepts and their different meanings
- References and Sources



Varner-Hogg Plantation State Historic Site (Courtesy of MuseWork)

What to know about the audience:

- Familiarity with visitor backgrounds and needs
- What visitors want to know most
- Meanings that visitors associate with the resource



Log Cabin Village, Fort Worth, TX

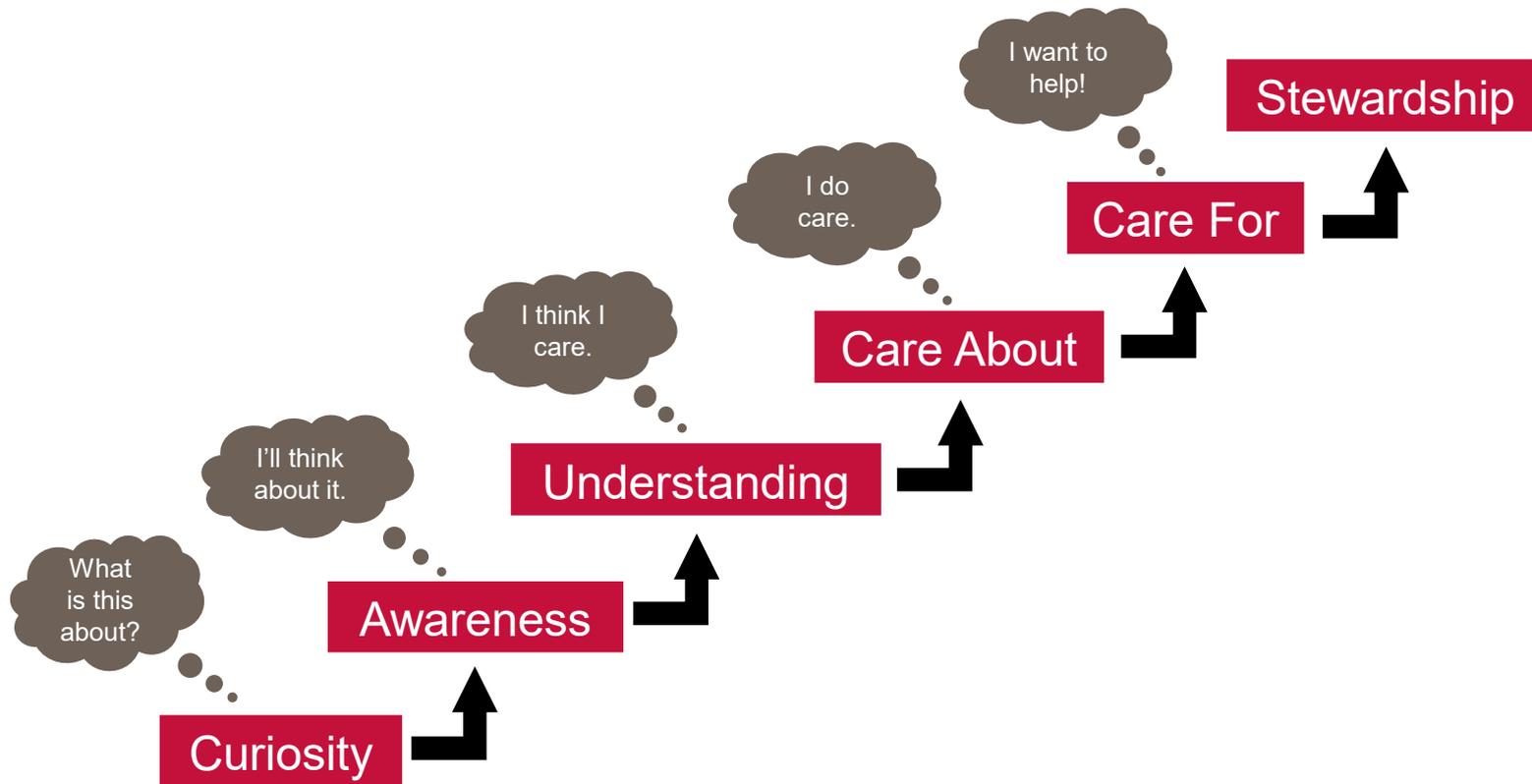
What to know about techniques:

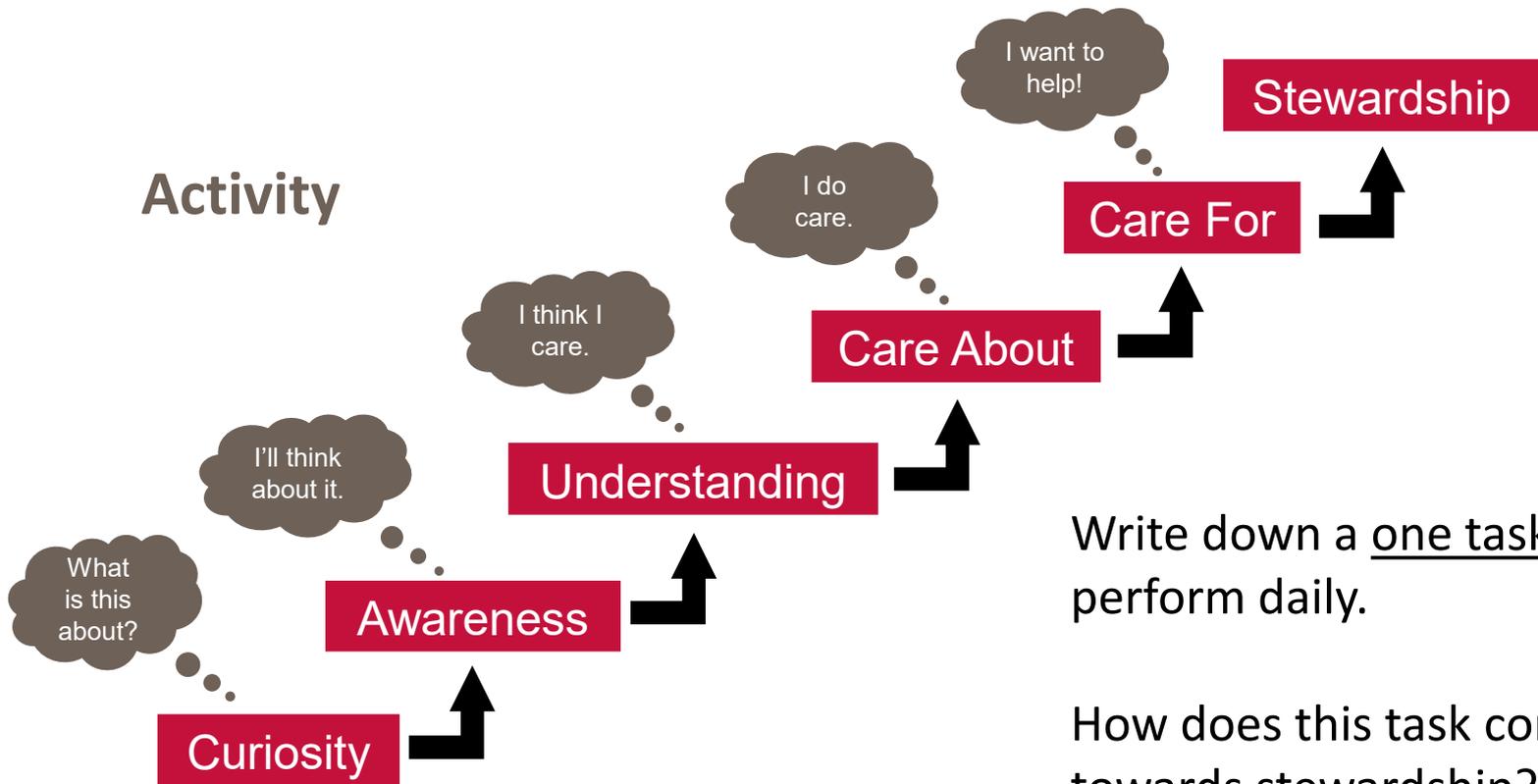
- Involve/engage the audience
- Provide access to the resource
- Introductory and follow-up questions
- Props or aides



Courtesy of Erin McClelland Museum Services

Staircase to Stewardship





Write down a one task you perform daily.

How does this task contribute towards stewardship?

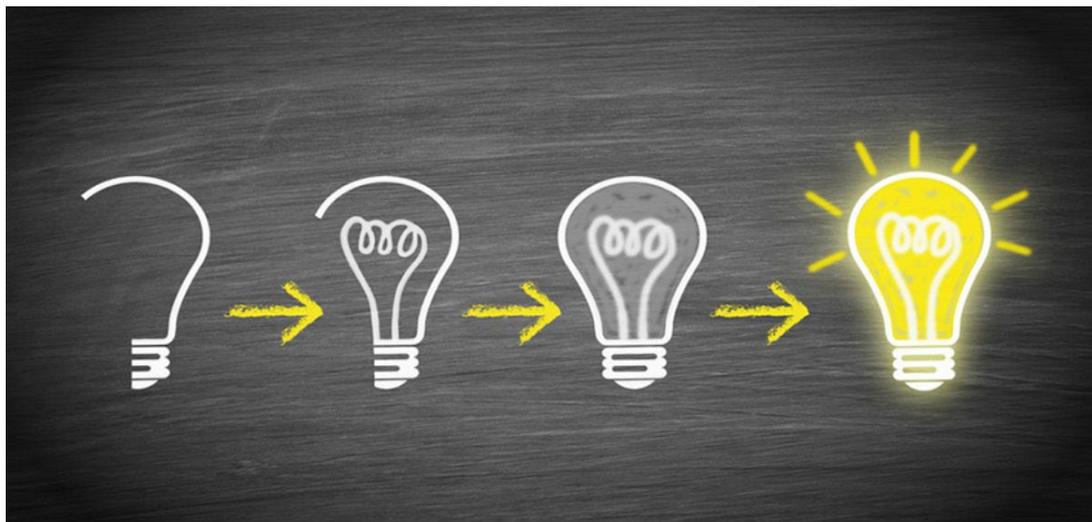


World War I exhibit, Arlington National Cemetery; Courtesy of Rachel Larue

Group Discussion

- What topics are typically discussed by visitors?
- What are some strategies we can use to turn these topics into interpretive opportunities or programs?

Write one thing you've learned during this workshop.



For additional resources and this slideshow presentation, visit the THC's Museum Services webpage at:

<http://www.thc.texas.gov/museumworkshops>