



Thematic Tours: Creating Narratives to Engage Visitors

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What is a Thematic Tour?

Thematic tours are a way to structure the important themes and information of your site into a narrative that guides visitors to better analysis and understanding of your site's history.

BIG IDEA(S)

MAIN THEME

Context, info,
artifacts,
environment

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Why a Thematic Tour?



- **Educational Theory: People have many different learning styles and experiences, but it has been shown that most people learn more effectively when they have a few big ideas to focus on**
- **A tour does not need to include everything we know about the history—rather focus a tour on the information that you really want your visitor to walk away remembering.**
- **Defined themes help visitors follow the information and remember the key points AND they help your guides give consistent tours for your site**
- **Defined big ideas and themes help your site define the main story/information that fits with your overall mission**
- **Thematic tours are more enjoyable for visitors!**

What Makes a Thematic Tour?

Important Components of a Thematic Tour:

- **A descriptive storyline that summarizes the most historically significant information about the site**
- **Three to five themes that illustrate the storyline**
- **Physical evidence, specifically the site's material culture: architecture, collections, and landscape**
- **Well-researched short biographies of significant people association with the site. Like the physical evidence, the *real people* who lived and worked at the site make its story distinctive and human.**
- **Historical context, or background information, that visitors need to know to understand the site's themes and storyline**
- **A thematic tour outline organized around the site's storyline, themes, physical evidence, biographies, and historical context. This outline creates a structure that links information, ideas, and physical evidence of the site in a coherent way.**

How to Write a Thematic Tour



Figure out your Main Storyline & Themes

Storyline: Summary of the main story and significance of the site; has a logical or chronological sequence, identifies the main ideas that make the site important

~base this on your site's history, mission, and historical research

Main Themes: these are the few main ideas that emerge from your storyline that you want to interpret in your tour

~Of all the information you can use, what are the main points that you want your visitor to remember from their visit?

Keep logistics in mind—what spaces will you be giving this tour in? How are visitors moving through the site, and thus the history?

How to Write a Thematic Tour



Match Your Information to the Main Themes and Storyline

Now that you have your main ideas, tailor the information you give on tour to support those points

- **Historical Context:** what information can you give to connect your site's history to larger history and themes? What context will help your visitor understand the site's history and significance?
- **Research about your site:**
- **Biographical Research:** Highlight the stories of people connected to your site, this makes your tour more relatable to visitors and humanizes the history
- **Physical Evidence:** what can your visitor see in that space that illustrates this history or main point?

You want your information to reinforce your main themes!

How to Write a Thematic Tour



As a site, decide what structure you want for writing tours

Scripted Tour

Give Outline

Guides Write Tour

No Structure

How to Write a Thematic Tour

Other Important Interpretation Notes!

Tilden's Principles of Interpretation

- 1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate 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 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 a whole rather than a 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. To be at its best it will require a separate program.**

How to Write a Thematic Tour

Other Important Interpretation Notes!

- 1. Don't interpret things your visitors cannot see, unless you absolutely have to**
- 2. Don't throw in every piece of information you know**
- 3. Engage your visitors in the tour (people remember more of what they do rather than what they hear): VTS, "open ended" questions, activities**
- 4. Unless it is specifically a material culture or architecture tour, focus on the human stories**
- 5. Take tours as a visitor and analyze what you liked and did not like**