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Combating redundancy - writing texts for exhibitions

Is there really any need for words in a museum? Aren't pictures, exhibits, labels and sets enough? Aren't our modern museums so loaded with messages of various kinds that visitors can learn all they need from the exhibits without the written word?

Far from it. By using written material for other purposes than mere labels and summaries we can put words on a par with the other exhibition material. We can use words to give a new, deeper dimension to our visual experience. Words make us think, and our thoughts conjure up pictures in our minds. Is it not through mental pictures like these that we discover the world around us?

When I was asked to write the texts for the Postal Museum's permanent exhibition "A letter makes all the difference" I was confronted, together with producer Elisabet Olofsson and designer Björn Ed, with a number of questions. Elisabet and Björn knew about these problems, and they were agreed that in this exhibition the texts were to have the same status as the documents and other exhibits, that it was worth devoting time and energy to this written material rather than turn out something slapdash at the last minute.

An exhibition text has to put up with more competition than most other written material. It has to compete for people's attention with all the other material and tends to be the last thing to catch their eye when they stand in front of the exhibits. They have to read the text standing, probably after a tiring walk on hard stone floors. The light is poor compared to their reading lamps at home, and it is impossible to vary the reading angle as with a book or newspaper. We are up against great odds, and the only way to overcome these obstacles is to make the text easy to read.

"Easy reading for adults"

When the Postal Museum approached me I had just finished writing an easy-to-read book for adults. It was therefore natural for me to use the easy-to-read method for this project. I believe this method can be a great help, and also an inspiration, to those who write exhibition texts for museums.

Ever since the 1960s the National Board of Education has given grants for the publication of easy-to-read books for adults. A condition for financial support for the publication of these books is that the writers must write simply and straightforwardly. However, this does not mean simplification either of the language or the subject matter. The sentences are short, normal word order is preferred and the lines are about 45 characters long. In dividing the text into lines the principle is to let the end of a line coincide with the end of a natural phrase. Subordinate clauses, complicated attributive constructions and unnecessary adverbial modifiers are avoided. To take an example of the sort of text you might see in a museum: "Most of the manure was spread during late winter when there was still snow on the ground, but some of it was also spread in the summer." A corresponding easy-to-read text would be phrased as follows:

"The farmers spread manure in late winter and in summer."

Does the reader miss anything essential in the latter version? Not as far as I can see. The information given in both cases refers to the time when the manure is spread. The easy-to-read version favors the active form of the verb, the subject confronting the reader with the natural order of things. Moreover, there is no division into syllables when an easy-to-read text is printed. Museum material, on the other

hand, often contains syllable division, which is neither easy to read nor very attractive to the eye. In the following example it seems the length of the line was the decisive factor:

"The trade from the coastal districts of Northern Sweden and Finland went through the country's capital, Stockholm, which consequently become an important trans-shipment centre."

A step-by-step process

I was asked to write the texts about five months before the exhibition was to be opened. The exhibition concept had already been decided on, and also the arrangement by rooms, but not the final appearance of the rooms. Work had just started on the building of the exhibits. Documentation for each room was in the pipeline. My first task was to read up on the subject so as to be able to make judgments of my own. The factual information was to be provided by others.

The work of writing the texts took a little over two months. My texts were based on the data compiled by various museum officials and on the conversations I had at regular intervals with the producer and the designer in the room where a particular text was to be shown. It was important to relate to the exhibition room in each case.

Thus I began writing the texts long before the rooms themselves were finished. My first efforts were rough drafts. Elisabet and Björn read them and gave their views, which was not so easy since we did not yet have a definite idea of how the rooms would look. To start with I just wrote to get acquainted with my subject, and the reactions I got gave me inspiration and a sense of direction. I went home and rewrote the texts. My collaborators read through the new texts and we again had discussions together. Each new version and discussion resulted in significant changes. The spirit of these dialogues was open and critical, and the texts also provided ideas for the design of the exhibition rooms. This method of writing the material may sound time-consuming, but it worked. Choosing the subject matter, putting it into words, rejecting some parts and altering others is a process that takes time. It was important to try the texts out, and my job was made easier by the fact that Elisabet and Björn had very definite ideas about what the exhibition was to convey.

The factual information in the texts was checked by those who had written the documentation. After altering and making clean copies of the texts we had them enlarged and taped them in place in the exhibition itself. Although I tried to keep in touch with each exhibition room while work was in progress, I was aware of the risk of producing armchair material. The texts must be an integral part of the exhibition environment, and we had to delete and change parts that we had already approved when we saw that reading the texts in the exhibition room gave a different impression from that intended. We typeset the texts with the typography we had decided on, we tested different sizes for readability and mounted the texts in frames to get as clear an idea as possible of what the finished results would look like. We were, however, aware that the finished result always has one or two surprises in store, since the overall impression depends on a combination of so many elements.

In the exhibition "A letter makes all the difference" the historical process is illustrated in fragments, by the lives and work of certain people. Some of these people are represented by full-scale wax figures. These figures were made at the same time as the texts were being written, and when their faces were being completed the texts were already in the typesetting state. If I had seen these faces first I would have been able to make some of the texts more authentic. This is just one example of the fact that the writer should always keep in touch with what is going on in the exhibition room, and of course the problem becomes increasingly acute in the final stages when everyone is pressed for time.

Concentrating the text

When writing texts for exhibitions we constantly have to condense the material and delete everything superfluous until there remains a bare minimum necessary to convey the essential content. This situation makes great demands on style. The words must be well chosen and precise and each phrase must be concrete and clear to enable the reader to absorb it rapidly. This does not mean that a factual text must be dry as dust; the language can be full of associations and provide food for thought. I believe that you can concentrate such texts to an almost poetic level, though the object is

not to write poetry. But you should be attentive to the sounds and rhythm. Even in a factual text you should bear in mind that the language depends on interaction between the different sounds of the language, especially the vowels. The melody produced by this interaction can be turned to account for rhythmical purposes, and a suitable rhythm makes a text easier to read.

We know from studies that have been carried out that few visitors, if any, read all the texts accompanying an exhibition. My goal in writing the exhibition texts was that if a visitor starts reading one of the texts, it should be so easy to read and interesting that he or she reads to the end of the paragraph. This is one of the reasons why the texts are divided into independent paragraphs, the other being that this division is made necessary by the content. I also hope of course that a visitor who reads one such paragraph with appreciation will go on to the next one.

Definite ideas about what, in my view, the language of these texts should match the subject, according to the time-honoured principle of harmony between form and content. So if I am writing for a historical exhibition I might use some words with an archaic ring. We should not forget our linguistic heritage: words like *betide*, *regal* and *chattels* help to create an atmosphere, and if the meaning of a word is not immediately apparent the context may offer a solution. At the same time, the text should also be addressed to the reader. There may seem to be a contradiction here, but in fact this is quite natural. A visitor reading a text in a museum should have the feeling that a knowledgeable guide is standing right beside him and talking to him. The tone and conversational expressions will help him to understand. I also think that these texts should be stimulating, conjure up pictures and make the reader feel "this is really terribly interesting," as the Swedish writer Bengt Anderberg has said about just about everything in life and literature. It is true that the museum repertoire is "classical," but as in the theatre it is the performance and the production that still bring the old truths home to us. The selection of historical facts, real life in fact, can be produced in a museum in such a way as to make us sit up and think. An important part is played in the production by the written material.

Captions, catalogue?

This exhibition had no captions in the rooms. This was not because we had forgotten them, we simply could not find a satisfactory solution to the problem. It is difficult to produce captions which do not limit your scope or oversimplify. Perhaps we will find a solution when we evaluate the exhibition and make additions. No exhibition should be so permanent that it remains completely unchanged year after year.

What about a catalogue? How should it be written and what should be the relationship between catalogue and exhibition texts? The texts for the exhibition "A letter makes all the difference" are intended as a brief introduction, an inspiration to the visitor to find out more about the subject somewhere else, in a comprehensive catalogue for example. Such a catalogue would give us a chance to fill in the details, such as the material we had to exclude from the documentation provided by the museum officials. There is no reason why we should not write the catalogue in an easy-to-read style too. We have not yet started on this task, however. Words certainly have an important function in a museum. Let us give them the chance to fulfil this function by broadening the visitors' experience while stimulating their interest. Don't we owe this to the museum visitor?

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