LESS IS MORE.
AND MORE IS LESS.

Judy Rand

Visitors have only so much attention to give. Putting more in front of them doesn't mean they can devote more attention to it.

When it comes to exhibition text, less IS more. As media designer John Maeda tells us, "When there is less, we appreciate everything much more."[1]

Less means "less clutter." It's called the "Aesthetic-Usability Effect." People believe a design that's more attractive will be easier to use.[2]

Why is **ease** so important? Humans instantly weigh the effort something takes. Instinct makes us choose ease, not effort.

"We live in a world in which time is in a state of acceleration," says environmental psychologist Paco Underhill. "And therefore the perception of ease is as important as the reality of ease." We feel pressured for **time**, so the appearance of ease really attracts us.[3]

Visitors instinctively weigh perceived costs vs. benefits. Faced with a choice—take this path? read this label? people gauge effort—the cost—against potential benefits.

Testing this principle, visitor researcher Stephen Bitgood found that the perceived "cost" of long text discouraged people from reading. (Even if they're deeply interested in the topic. Interest isn't as strong a factor in predicting reading behavior as the length of the label.)[4]

Bitgood also discovered that "more people will read three separate 50-word labels than one 150-word label."[5]

For label writers trying to reach readers, this was big.

1 John Maeda, *The Laws of Simplicity* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 2006), 56.
2 William Lidwell, Kritina Holden, and Jill Butler, "The Aesthetic/Usability Effect," in *Universal Principles of Design* (Beverly, MA: Rockport Publishers, 2010), 20.
3 Liz Danzico, "*From Data to Wisdom: An Interview with Paco Underhill*," http://boxesandarrows.com/from-data-to-wisdom-an-interview-with-paco-underhill/.
4 Stephen Bitgood, Stephany Dukes, and Layla Abbey, "Interest and Effort as Predictors of Reading," *Current Trends in Audience Research* 19 (2006), 1-6.
5 Bitgood and Donald Patterson, "The effects of gallery changes on visitor reading and object viewing time," *Environment and Behavior* 25 (1993), 761-781.

Less is More

"More people read short labels than long labels," confirms label guru Beverly Serrell in the new, 2015 edition of *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*. "Think of a tweet as a benchmark: 26 words," she advises. "The length of a tweet is a new standard of what people read readily and quickly, in two to five seconds."[6]

More is Less

More clutter makes it hard to focus. While less is more, it's also true that "more is less." The more clutter, the more competition, the less visitors can engage with individual elements like label texts.

More choices make it hard to choose. "People can't ignore options—they have to pay attention to them," says psychologist Barry Schwartz.[7] That's because choices demand our attention.

Three Principles of Attention Visitors have only so much attention to give. Putting more in front of them doesn't mean they can devote more attention to it. In "The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels," Stephen Bitgood shares three principles:

- *Attention is selective.*
  When we focus attention on one thing, we tend to ignore others. (Visitors can't look at an object *and* read its label at the same time.)

- *Attention has focusing power.*
  Visitors must be motivated to focus their attention on exhibits. That's a function of interest level, the amount of perceived work, and number and intensity

6 Beverly Serrell, *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, 2nd ed. (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 2015), 98.
7 "Interview: Barry Schwartz, author, *The Paradox of Choice*," http://goodexperience.com/blog/2005/01/interview-barry-schwartz-autho.php.

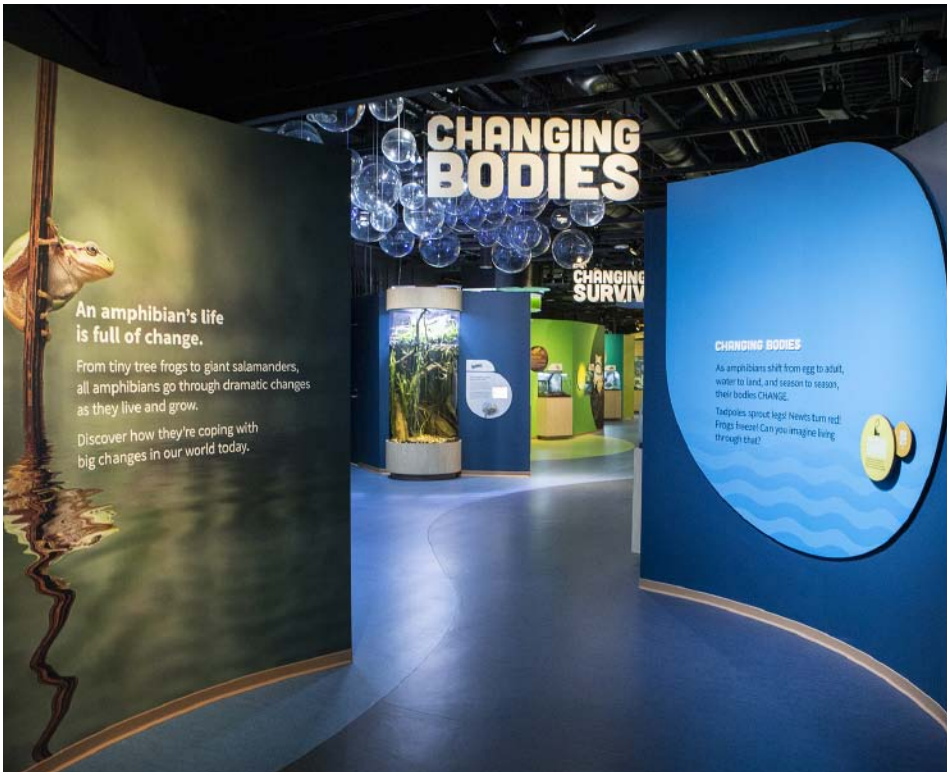


fig. 1. As a label editor, I cut, choose, and organize text in ways that encourage people to read. Short words and sentences increase reading—as the Shedd Aquarium knows.

As a label editor, I help visitors find what they need with *ease* so they can pay *attention* to what interests them in the *time* they have.

of distractions. (A museum is jam-packed with distractions.)

- *The capacity of attention is limited.* People have only so much of this resource available, and it dissipates with time and effort.[8]

Visitors Have Only So Much Time

Putting more stuff in front of visitors doesn't mean they can spend more time to compensate. As visitor researcher Chan Screven observed, "The more time visitors perceive an exhibition or text to require, the less likely they'll attend to it without compelling reasons to do so."[9]

When the average visit to a 2,000-square-foot exhibition lasts just five to seven minutes, there's not much time for reading, Serrell tells us. With so little time, long labels look daunting. Short labels look doable.

Want Proof? One Museum, Two Exhibitions

At the USS Constitution Museum (USSCM) near Boston, the exhibition team tracked and timed family visitors through two exhibitions.[10]

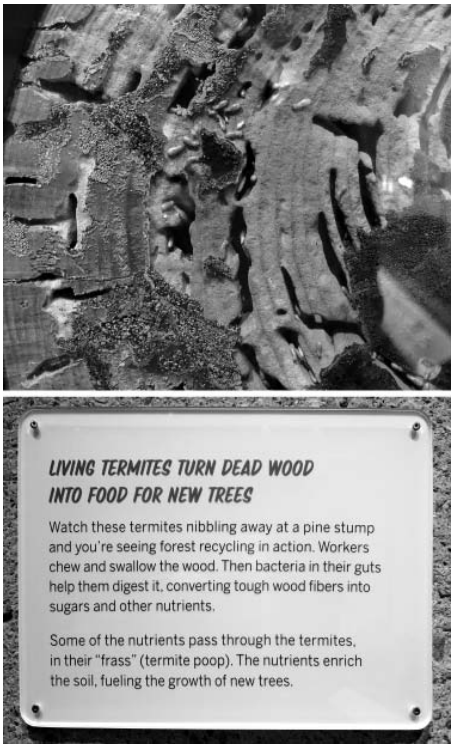
- In *Old Ironsides in War and Peace*, a traditional history exhibition with many long text panels (more than 4,500 words total) families spent seven minutes on average.

- A *Sailor's Life for Me?* has just 1,500 words in all its activity cards and labels combined. Families spent nearly 22 minutes in the exhibition—and talked to each other significantly more.

8 Bitgood, "The Role of Attention in Designing Effective Interpretive Labels," *Journal of Interpretation Research*, 5:2 (2003), 31-45.

9 Chan Screven, "Museums and Informal Education," *CMS Bulletin* 1:1 (1993), reprinted online at http://www.infed.org/archives/e-texts/screven-museums.htm.

10 Anne Grimes Rand, Robert Kiihne, and Sarah Watkins, "Families First! Rethinking Exhibits to Engage All Ages," *Technical Leaflet* #245, American Association for State and Local History (2009), 1-8.



BEVERLY SERRELL

fig. 2. Writer/editor Michael Rigsby chooses words to catch attention, and hold it–focusing here on living termites at the Oakland Museum of California.

As the USSCM team developed *A Sailor's Life*, they would ask themselves, "Can we convey this idea without a paragraph of text?"

They decided to limit each text panel to 50 words.

50 Words!

"Fifty words is brutally short, but it forced us to focus. For each panel, we asked ourselves, what is the main point we want to convey?" says USSCM president Anne Grimes Rand. "Writing 50-word labels is a great exercise in getting to the point," adds curator Sarah Watkins.[11]

50 words! Children's museums had found success with shorter labels.[12]

But could a *history* museum do it? Yes, indeed. As Sarah Watkins says, "50-word labels that people read are better than longer labels that visitors ignore."

From Chicago's Shedd Aquarium (fig. 1) to the Oakland Museum of California (fig. 2), label creators have taken up the "*Shorter is better!*" charge.

The trick? Don't just write text. EDIT it.

Writing and Editing Take Two Different Skill Sets

- **Writers, curators, and developers generate content.** Their job is to generate lots of great ideas. (*More, more, more!*) "Lots of ideas" often leads to "lots and lots of words."
- **Editors focus content: we cut, choose, organize.** An editor's job is to side with the reader. To make text look "doable." To focus ideas. Make sure they're clear.

"Editing means being tough enough to make sure someone will actually read it," says writing expert Peter Elbow.[13]

Editors are tough enough to turn more into less. (Cutting a good 80-word label about "life on Mars" to 48 words, if need be.)

As a label editor, I help visitors find what they need with *ease* so they can pay *attention* to what interests them in the *time* they have.

I cut, choose, and organize the text—words, sentences, and paragraphs—for clarity, coherence, and character.

Editors CUT Label editors CUT words, sentences, and paragraphs to encourage more people to read. We CUT words, sentences, and paragraphs so people find what they need.

When you cut, you help readers find something interesting—and focus on it (fig. 3).

Editors CHOOSE Label editors CHOOSE words, sentences, and paragraphs to connect with readers, and make the meaning clear. We take care to choose words that are in character: consistent with the exhibition's personality.

When you choose words that are clear and in character (*gnashing, growling, guarding, scarce, fierce; who will win?*) readers can feel you talking with them through the label (fig. 4).

Editors ORGANIZE Label editors ORGANIZE words, sentences, and paragraphs so they all hang together; so they link and flow. We organize sentences and paragraphs in a coherent whole.

When you organize, you help visitors who read a bit here and a bit there make sense of the story—and the big idea (fig. 5).

11 Watkins, "Writing for a Family Audience," USS Constitution Museum Family Learning Forum website, http://www.familylearningforum.org/engaging-text/writing-for-families/writing-for-families.htm.
12 Judy Rand, "Write and Design with the Family in Mind," in *Connecting Kids to History with Museum Exhibitions*, ed. D. Lynn McRainey and John Russick (Walnut Creek, CA: Left Coast Press, 2010), 257-284.

13 Peter Elbow, *Writing Without Teachers* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1998), 40.

Editing in Action

fig. 3.
CUT.

Will we find life on Mars?

The fourth planet from our Sun, Mars is more like Earth than anyplace else in our solar system. Exploration has confirmed that this cold, very dry world has an atmosphere and seasons, and in its past had active volcanoes.

Scientists have discovered evidence that liquid water once flowed on the surface of Mars. In fact, water might still be flowing in underground springs. Is there life lurking beneath Mars' surface? On Earth, we find life almost everywhere we find water…

Writer's Draft: 80 words

Will we find life on Mars?

On Earth, we find life
almost everywhere we find water.
And Mars is more like Earth
than any planet we know.
Volcanoes erupted there long ago.

Mars is colder, and drier.
But new evidence shows that water
once flowed on Mars.

Does microscopic life lurk
beneath the surface?

Editor's Final: 48 words

fig. 4.
CHOOSE.

When predators meet, looking fierce is half the game.

When survival in the Alpine zone depends on food, competition between carnivores can be deadly. Here, a Coyote with a recently-killed Yellow Belly marmot is confronted by a Wolverine. The Coyote is more agile and swift, yet it is matched by the strength and tenacity of the Wolverine. Although this scene depicts the intensity of this standoff for food, most often these matches are more of a bluff than a battle. Each animal makes itself more fearsome than it may really be, while also summing up the determination and aggressiveness of its opponent.
(NOTE: This exhibit has been popular with visitors because it is a moment frozen in time that offers a "who will win?" question that leads to visitor discussion.)

Curator's Draft: 94 words, 54% reading ease

Coyote vs. Wolverine: who will win?

With gnashing teeth, a **wolverine** confronts a growling **coyote** guarding its prey of freshly killed **marmot**. Food is scarce here in the Alpine zone—and competition is deadly.

Wolverines are fierce and incredibly strong for their size, but coyotes are quick and cunning enough to snatch the prey and escape.

Who will win this intense standoff?

Editor's Final: 56 words, 70% reading ease

fig. 5.
ORGANIZE.

Amphibians go with the flow of changing seasons

Some amphibians start up in spring with noisy mating calls. Others shut down when winter turns frigid. Hot or cold, wet or dry—seasons trigger change in an amphibian's life cycle.

An amphibian's body temperature changes with the temperature of its surroundings. But no matter the season, amphibians respond in amazing ways.

Writer's Draft: 52 words

They respond to changing seasons in amazing ways

Changing seasons trigger changes in every amphibian's life cycle. **Frogs** and **toads** start spring with loud mating calls—then shut down when winter turns frigid. When summer shrinks ponds, **salamanders** dig in.

Even though their body temperature changes with temperatures around them, amphibians manage to survive weather that's hot, cold, wet and dry. ***How do they do it?***

Editor's Final: 58 words

Every Writer Needs an Editor

What's the problem? It's hard to do. Curators and content developers who draft label text find that it's **hard** to write less. (Yes: it takes longer to write something shorter. Yes: it's hard work to make something easier to read.)

Label editing is a professional, specialized skill. It requires enormous self-restraint and discipline: honing, paring and polishing, all in the service of clarity for readers.

Every writer needs an editor. You can revise your own work—every professional writer must—and if you're alone, using a checklist will help you edit yourself (fig. 6). But when you work with an experienced editor, you'll learn more, and your own writing will improve.

Learning what to keep and what to cut helps you write shorter labels—and shorter text for mobile and online readers, a growing need.

Less is More. More is Less.
(**More or Less.**)

"Less is more" is a good rule to remember for exhibitions, exhibit labels—and onscreen text.
So what's this "more or less" stuff? Every rule has an exception. And there ARE times you'll find visitors will be drawn to read more than 50-60 words while standing on their feet.

When it's something extraordinary.
A mummy. (But if you write a tome about *every* tomb, you make it daunting, and people won't read.)

People *will* read a long label about a **Great White Shark**. (But not every fish in the sea.)

Or the *Enola Gay*. (The plane that dropped the bomb on Hiroshima: more than just an airplane.)

But most of the time in museums, let's face it; it's not the *Enola Gay*. It's more like the World's Oldest Ship's Biscuit.

Fascinating, yes! But 50 words of text should do it.

Think more.

Write less.

Edit.

Acknowledgements
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Judy's 10-Step Edit

1. Clear your head before you edit.
2. Have someone read it aloud. Is the main idea clear? Listen for stumbles, long sentences.
3. Shorten words. Shorten sentences.
4. Cut underbrush (qualifiers, digressions, unclear phrases, secondary ideas jammed into sentences).
5. Simplify vocabulary.
6. Replace passive verbs with active verbs.
7. Fix links from sentence to sentence.
8. Does it all hang together? Make sure it's cohesive.
9. Read aloud again for character: voice, tone and style. Tune your diction (word choice).
10. Test it on visitors. Repeat.

fig. 6. Judy's 10-Step Edit.