

A Review of:

Exhibit Labels

An Interpretive Approach

Second Edition

Reviewed by Brian H. Peterson

A Journey Worth Taking

I was halfway through the exhibition when it hit me: two parts disappointment and one part impatience, with a dash of resignation and a pinch of embarrassment.

The show was one of those extravaganzas that only big museums can pull off. There's usually a Birth or a Golden Age attached to an easily marketable idea, and the goal is to stuff the place with bona fide masterpieces that look great on membership envelopes and keep those turnstiles turning. It's a reliable formula that doesn't necessarily produce the most reliable scholarship. But the lights stay on and the doors open.

What incredible beasts of the painter's art were in that show: American, European, historic, modern, canvas after canvas, room after room. I felt like I'd never seen a painting before. I was absorbed, exhilarated, eager for more.

Excitement begat curiosity. Words, words, on the walls—a little help, please. Information is nice, but give me guidance, insight, the telling detail. Show me

the power of the written word to remember and reveal. Remind me that when I'm hungry, a museum will always have something nourishing on the menu.

What did these labels offer? Mostly provenance. I say again. PROVENANCE. "This painting was owned by Countess Brunhilde the Fourth, then through the marriage of her son Prince Elvis of Macedonia in 1789 passed to the Duchess of Yorkshire for whom the Yorkshire Terrier was named...."

I wondered if these label writers, in a five-star restaurant, would ignore the filet mignon and gorge themselves on Grey Poupon. I remembered what a friend had said about museums, how they made her feel like the dumbest kid in Sunday school, and the text panels were "sermons."

A ton of bricks fell. *We have a problem.* What we do—we must do it better. And not just curators. The entire museum enterprise has a responsibility not only to preserve and understand but to communicate, to connect.

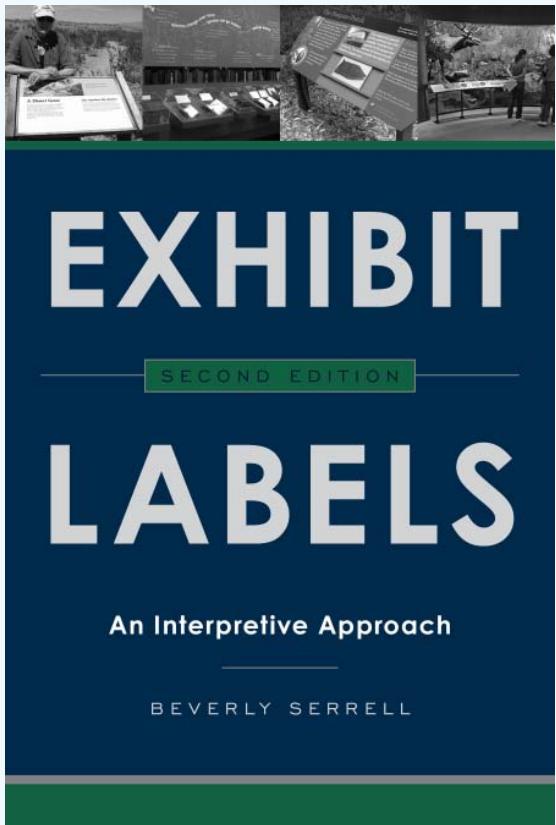


Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach
Second Edition

Beverly Serrell
Published by Rowman & Littlefield,
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376 pages

I've met many fine exhibit writers who've had similar epiphanies. Most are content with knowing the difference and doing good work. Beverly Serrell wrote a book. More like *the* book. For people who want to do it better, the source for practical wisdom has been her 1996 volume *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*.

The museum world owes a great debt to Ms. Serrell for her disciplined, passionate advocacy of excellence in exhibit writing. She was an early voice for humanizing the museum experience, insisting that the anonymous, authoritative tone—what my friend called sermons—was downright unfriendly.

Serrell's core message: we can trust the essential humanity of our visitors, and if we search for common ground we'll probably find it. In the process, we'll form new friendships instead of making people feel stupid because they don't know the difference between a meerkat and a tomcat.

As Serrell puts it, "We must keep in mind the visitors' emotions, their yearning for continuity, love

of a good story, ability to see and seek patterns, and natural spirituality."

Serrell addresses questions that every writer wrestles with: who's reading this, how long should it be, how complicated, how should it be structured? Her focus is on bringing the novice label writer to a level of basic literacy, as well as giving the complacent veteran a push in the right direction. She has found logical ways to divide her complex subject into its essential components, and has a gift for readable prose.

The revised edition retains the basic elements of the original, while incorporating fresh material, including the advantages and pitfalls of the latest digital technologies. Serrell's window into the mind of the typical museum visitor is fleshed out with 20 years of new research, supplemented by numerous new case studies from museums of all shapes and sizes.

The book is about words in a visual environment and thus includes many illustrations, but the reproductions are often small and of poor quality. It's easy for a

reviewer to say, but such an authoritative text deserves a more generous printing budget.

As a teacher, Serrell's style is reductionist and her tone, emphatic—*here's what the research says, these are the guidelines*. Lists, rules, and bullet points are common. She has the purposefulness of a crusader, and with all that data to back her up, who would argue with the rightness of her cause?

Exhibit writing lives in an environment not unlike a modern factory farm, where words are born and grow in a cruel box of restrictive parameters and “group think,” then are processed and served as bland, generic McNuggets. Somehow, miraculously, good exhibit writers keep churning out good stuff, doing the impossible so smoothly that their virtuosity goes unnoticed.

Such skillful wordsmiths can be difficult to find, expensive, and a challenge to work with. Academically trained curators tend to write for each other, while educators and “hired gun” consultants have the creativity and basic language skills, but may lack the nuanced mastery of word and content that a fine-tuned label requires. And in smaller institutions, a label writer might also be docent, registrar, and occasional janitor.

Thus the need for Beverly Serrell's book. But in her relentless drive to raise standards lurks the danger of a new orthodoxy almost as worrisome as the lifeless, authoritative voice it replaces.

The prevailing ethos of Serrell's universe is Utilitarian, that is, the greatest good for the greatest number. Labels must be written at a 12th-grade level and no longer than 60 words because research proves that more visitors will read them. Yes, we *must* reach out to our visitors and the more the merrier. But is that the end or the beginning of the journey?

Exhibit writing is an art form as surely as Shakespeare's sonnets or Basho's haiku. If we strive for excellence, then let us not fear the truly excellent or delude ourselves into thinking we can get there in a few easy steps. One might follow every rule and incorporate every bit of wisdom that research provides, and the results could easily be formulaic and miss the mark by a mile.

Serrell's book will always have an honored place on my bookshelf. Like all technical manuals—and this is one of the best I've seen—it must be studied and digested, added to the internal toolkit, then forgotten in the joy of crafting sentences that sing, and in the deep satisfaction of finding the right word in the right place, for the right reasons.

It's possible to make memorable, life-affirming, even life-changing exhibitions that put words to work creatively. Many people will follow where we lead if we treat them with generosity and respect.

A more humanistic ethos has begun to flow through the museum community, thanks to dedicated, caring people like Beverly Serrell. My “provenance” experience is increasingly rare. Old school, autocratic curators who insist on what Serrell calls the “curatorial agenda” may soon find themselves in another line of work.

Yet one person's agenda is another's article of faith. Museums are educational institutions, and also seekers and bearers of truth, however that may be defined. Instead of seeing people as hostile “agendas,” are we not better off looking for innovative ways to bring those competing voices together?

Mexican poet and essayist Octavio Paz points the way to a new—and ageless—definition of excellence in an essay on the “staying power” of poetry: “Rejecting the marketplace, costing almost nothing at all, it goes from mouth to mouth, like air and water.”¹

Sixty words, a hundred sixty, even, God forbid, sixteen hundred—the goal of pleasing the multitude always ends up at the one. You. Me. What moves us and connects us, what transforms our lives.

Words do that. The right ones, for the right reasons. Finding them is a journey worth taking. ■

¹ Octavio Paz, “Poetry and the Free Market,” *New York Times Book Review*, December 8, 1991.

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