Museum Label Copy
Rough Guidelines for City Science Content Advisors

Introduction:
In an exhibit, the signs, banners, identification tags, and even text on computer interactive screens, are all called “labels” by museum professionals.

The Role of the Content Advisor:
During the process of label copy writing scientific concepts must be distilled so that explanations can fit in the space provided by the medium. Labels are read in a multi-sensory environment, requiring that text be presented in very short blocks. Sometimes the act of shortening and distilling can, by omission, create inaccuracies in the science, or promote misconceptions. The role of the Content Advisor is to identify as many of those inaccuracies as possible and provide comment clarifying where the simplification runs astray. It is important to note that the Content Advisor is not expected to write or rewrite the label copy, simply help the museum staff understand the relevant science. The museum staff will edit and reedit the label copy to ensure consistent tone, structural layering, and subject matter consistency across the entire exhibit.

Background on How Copy is Written

Our Visitors:
Our visitors include ages 2 to 102 and range in science background from novice to professor. We target our interactives for very specific age ranges, in an attempt to provide something for everyone in a family group during a visit. Except in the directional text on interactives, we do not try to make label-copy for everyone and by necessity do not target the text for non-verbal, ESL, early learners, those with cognitive disabilities, and/or school groups. We instead select a specific target reading level and all label copy conforms to the same reading level and tone regardless of whether the interactive accompanying the label copy focuses on a specific age group. In City Science we are focusing on a late elementary to high school reading level. We assume previous science knowledge equivalent to late elementary school.

Tone/Content:
Many individuals visiting our museum have science backgrounds, we work very hard when writing copy to avoid making these individuals feel like we are talking down to them, a difficult task at the reading level we are targeting. Although we avoid jargon that would exclude those without science backgrounds, we do not shy away from including “essential” science vocabulary. For example, when talking about an exhibit with the main message “land cover change affects species survival” we would include essential scientific words like habitat, but avoid scientific words that are not directly
related to the exhibit’s main messages. Another way we avoid talking down is that when we include scientific words we always avoid direct definition in text. This is also accomplished stylistically through avoiding words that cater to a specific age range (ex. “awesome”) or overuse of aggressive punctuation (ex !!!)

Writing Structure:
Label copy is a medium of presentation. When in a science museum, visitors will be reading this text generally from a standing position and while being distracted by animals, presentations, interactives, and the people around them. Grammatical style, headings, line length, color contrast, etc. are all chosen to reflect this presentation environment. Unlike books which are read in less distracting environments and can be moved and adjusted for individual eyesight – exhibit text must allow for easy scanning and partial reads, and help to reduce the discomforts of reading in a standing position.

For City Science we have chosen the following parameters to meet these needs:
- Total label is roughly 150-200 words
- Each label contains 3-4 paragraphs of 3-5 sentences each
- Each paragraph is roughly 50 words
- Sentence length is kept short, avoiding the use of hyphens and excessive commas.
- Each paragraph focuses on delivering one main message
- Each paragraph has a topic header for easy scanning

Copy must also take into account that a visitor may have visited every other interactive in the exhibit, or that this may be their first introduction to the exhibit. The exhibit floor is a free choice environment and in our museum in particular there is little that can be done to direct visitors through the exhibit in a specific order. For this reason we never “build” on a specific content, assuming that a visitor has learned a vocabulary word or concept from a previous interactive. We can also not assume that a visitor hasn’t viewed all of our other interactives so although their may be some overlap in concepts, we try to avoid repeating content wherever possible.

Concept vs. Fact
Years of informal education studies have shown us that museum visitors rarely retain specific facts after a museum visit, but are more likely to remember/be influenced by overarching ideas. For this reason each piece of exhibit text is fashioned around overarching concepts, which we call main messages. We define these messages for each piece of label copy, and although we may include facts to help support a main message, we leave out specific facts wherever they may distract from retention of a main message.