

# Taking the Bilingual Leap

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You've made the decision to go bilingual. You've considered all the good reasons why, and how it relates to your mission and audience, and you've realized that bilingual labels alone do not suffice as an audience development plan. You've talked about the benefits of accessibility, cultural awareness, and opportunities for learning. Now, the reality check—what will it cost in time and money? What media will be used? How will you accomplish the task?

In the last issue of *Exhibitionist*, "The Bilingual Dilemma: Should We or Shouldn't We?" discussed questions related to **why** and **for whom**. Clarification of goals, expectations, and audience informs decision making about what media to use and how to implement a plan. This article focuses on the **what** and **how** of bilingual exhibitions.

A few words of caution: not all speakers of other languages want, require, or demand bilingual exhibits. Ask the community you seek to serve what they will use. Use advisory boards, focus groups, and interviews to engage the community. Observe visitors to see what they actually use. Making good exhibits is difficult. Making good bilingual exhibits is even harder. We should ensure that our efforts are worthwhile!

Like most things, bilingual exhibits take more time than we think they should. Adding a second language does not just add one more step, it doubles the text writing process and adds complexity to decisions about content, word choice, humor, cultural connections, design, and space constraints. Words are not simply translated into a second language, meanings are interpreted and sentences must be crafted. A good guideline — if you're taking the bilingual leap, listen to your audience and start small with a pilot project. There is not one "right" way down the bilingual path. A framework is offered here to help chart a course. With a little forethought and planning, pitfalls can be avoided.

**Not all speakers demand bilingual exhibits. Use advisory boards, focus groups, and interviews to engage the community.**



## 1. What interpretive methods will be used?

### **Make a list of available media.**

Brainstorm every possibility. Don't limit your ideas by your current resources. Now is the time to explore; later is the time to judge. Here is an initial list to get you started:

- Bilingual labels: all or a selected set
- Audio guide: wand or headset
- Video with narration and/or captions
- Printed gallery guide
- Multi-lingual docents
- In-gallery computers

When thinking broadly, other questions arise. Will bilingual text be restricted to the exhibition? What about wayfinding signage? Museum programs and events? Return to why and for whom you are presenting bilingual information to help grapple with these issues. Collaborate with other departments, institutions, and community organizations to find solutions.

### **Assess your interpretive options.**

Few museums have unlimited resources. We make tough decisions every day to optimize our investment of time and money. Determine which media will best serve your audience's needs with available resources. Use visitor studies to inform this process.

### **Some things to consider:**

**Accessibility.** Is equal access to information a priority? How easily can visitors access second-language information?

**Customer Satisfaction and Comfort.** Does the chosen media make second-language visitors feel like second-class citizens? Have you asked them?

**Audience Interest.** What media do visitors prefer? For example, you've planned a second-language gallery guide...will visitors use it?

**Social Interaction.** Does second language media (like an audio headset) cut visitors off from their social group?

**Audience Development.** Can the community contribute to the interpretive process? Will marketing bilingual exhibits draw more visitors? Can you meet their expectations? Will they leave satisfied?

**Will bilingual text be restricted to the exhibition? What about wayfinding signage? Museum programs and events?**



**Flexibility.** How easy is it to modify the information? Is that a priority?

**Design Issues.** Content must be focused and limited to accommodate a second language. How will the exhibit team reconcile this challenge?

**Expense.** Are some media more expensive to produce than others? Is it worth the expense?

**Production Schedule.** Will some media take more time to produce?

## 2. How will bilingual interpretation be implemented?

### **Establish clear goals.**

After setting goals, accept that as knowledge and experience increase, you may modify them. Remember that any bilingual effort will require significant time, energy, and money. Take stock of the institutional commitment. Are your media and message goals realistic? Do you need to change your goals, or try to rally greater support? Self-assessment is ongoing. Implementation may take place in phases.

### **Identify needs and assemble a team.**

Think carefully about all the steps required to produce text in one language: research content, write, evaluate, edit text, check for content accuracy. These functions are necessary for the second-language text as well. In an ideal world, two exhibit developers/writers would work side-by-side in the two different languages. Most commonly, English text is adapted to the second language. Avoid the literal translation pitfall! Find a bilingual writer who can negotiate the subtleties of language and meaning. Seek a writer who understands the unique demands of exhibit text and has knowledge of the exhibit content to avoid misinterpretations. Request writing samples and solicit opinions from multiple readers. Don't assume that any foreign language speaker is also a good writer, or that any writer can write well for exhibits. To fill gaps in your in-house team, explore opportunities for collaboration and involvement with your community. Local colleges, universities, and community centers are a resource for people and talent.

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### **Write bilingual text.**

Lay the foundation with a clear content outline. Allow for feedback loops in the writing process. If you write in two languages simultaneously, this is a natural occurrence. If English text is composed first and then adapted to a second language, allow time for changes to the English text in response to new ideas from the translator.

Determine a word count based on readability, available space, and visitor research. (See Beverly Serrell's *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*.) Bilingual interpretation forces stricter limits on the amount of content in order to avoid a “wallpaper of words”. Keep cutting until the text is readable and fits the graphic design format. Remember that the second language version may be longer than the English.

Regardless, starting with good English labels will result in better and shorter translations.

- Establish a clear information hierarchy with a logical progression of ideas.
- Create concise, digestible chunks of information.
- Use simple sentence structure and active voice.
- Link text to objects and illustrations.
- Ask carefully worded questions, and guide interactions (look for, compare, describe...).
- Above all, avoid literal translations!

Ensure consistency of voice in both languages and determine the flavor of your second language. Idioms, regionalisms, and dialects can present challenges. Consult your audience and advisors to inform decisions about language use. Your audience and advisors can also evaluate the content for interest, understandability, relevance, and cultural connections.

### **Design bilingual media.**

A primary challenge is to devise a plan to differentiate the two languages. Establish a pattern and remain consistent. You may choose to treat the two languages equally or make one dominant, present the text integrated on one panel or separated on two. Spatial relationships between images, objects, and bilingual text may shape your plan.

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Test your design with a diversity of users and modify as necessary. Effective strategies include:

- Use different background colors to differentiate two languages on the same panel, with consistent placement, e.g., English always on the left.
- Use distinctly different type treatments for the two languages, e.g., bold and normal weight, two different type colors, and/or two different type sizes.
- Put different languages on different panels, but use background color and/or type treatment to help distinguish them.

**Test your design with a diversity of users and modify as necessary.**

Importing text files with accents (é), tildes (ñ), and umlauts (ü) is no longer that problem it once was. But don't forget to proofread the second language as carefully as the first!

### **Manage the project.**

What will it cost? How much time is needed? Some translators charge by the word. (Another good reason for short labels!) Interpret a text sample to estimate expense and time requirement. Involving second-language community members in planning and development will save time in revisions later and yield greater dividends in relevance to the audience.

### **Build a bilingual infrastructure.**

Aside from completing a project, you are building a structure to smooth the way for future projects. Reaching out to the community, hiring diverse staff, connecting with advisors, providing language classes to staff—these broad-based sustained efforts support the team to accomplish the bilingual mission.

If it seems overwhelming, don't despair or expect to do it perfectly the first time. Try something small, evaluate your efforts, and keep going. You can make a difference by reaching out to a broader community. The benefits of bilingual interpretation are manifold: greater accessibility of content; a warmer welcome to "second language" visitors; increased sensitivity to cultural diversity; enhanced opportunities for language learning; and more effective interaction in social groups with varying language abilities. With community input and a thoughtful plan, you can rise to the challenge and take the bilingual leap.



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