OUTDOOR INTERPRETIVE SIGNS
Steps To Design An Interpretive Sign

• Plan It
  ✓ Who, What, Why, Where?
  ✓ Objectives and Theme
  ✓ How Many?
  ✓ What Materials to Use?

• Research, Write Text, Plan the Graphics

• Design The Sign

• Fabricate and Install

• Maintain and Replace
Plan It!  What? Who? Why?

• Goals & Objectives
  – What do visitors need to know/ learn/ feel/ do?

• Who’s your audience?

• What’s your main message (theme)?
  – What’s the point you want visitors to leave with?

• Where will the sign be located?
  – Where’s the best place to tell the story?

• What Kind of Sign and How Many Do You Want?
  – How Will Visitors View the Sign?
Plan It!

- Interpretive sign or information station
- Trail or parking area
- Suitable surface material

16 ft
16 to 24 ft
Create Your Sign

1. Research.

2. Gather graphics, facts, experts.

3. Layout exhibit with draft text.


5. Edit. Review again. Rewrite…

6. Add graphics, captions, fine tune your design.
Write It!

• ONE message (theme) per sign.

• Keep it short
  
  No more than 50 words per text block.
  Divide longer text into columns or paragraphs.

• Say it with graphics.
  
  Visitors remember 30% of what they read and 50% of what they see.

• Proof-read!
  
  Make sure your spelling and grammar are correct.
Write It! *(Remember.. It’s an *Interpretive* Sign!)*

- Use active verbs, encourage involvement
  
  *Be specific to place, speak to the reader:*

- Avoid jargon and technical language.

- Interpretive Writing:
  
  *Relevant, provocative, meaningful, creative, fun!*

- Connect visitors to the story & the landscape.
Design It!  *(Remember.. It’s an Interpretive Sign!)*

- Titles and Subtitles Catch the Eye!

- Graphics Support the Text

- Balance White Space, Text, and Graphics
Design Tips

Less is best

Less is More
Less text appears more manageable.

Giving All the Story You Can Find
Don’t leave anything out because you may miss something important.

Strive for 2/3 graphics & blank space, 1/3 text.

Note that text is flush left, ragged right.
Design Tip

Easy to Read

Left to Right, Top to Bottom

English speakers traditionally like to read from left to right and from top to bottom. It is best to stick to this tradition.

We quickly group this order in a way that we have learned from childhood. It's easier and more comfortable.

Reading in Reverse

Your eye isn't sure where to go first in this unusual layout.

The reader first has to figure out the order of the information before she or he can start to get the meaning.

English speaking people expect to read from left to right and from top to bottom.
Design Tip

Balance

Everything on the page—text, color blocks, graphics, even blank space—has “weight.”
3-30-3 Rule

When a page is off balance, it feels wrong and distracts from the message and overall effect.

It’s about making the panel attractive and easy to read.

The 3-30-3 rule:

3 seconds to hook the visitor
30 seconds to review if hooked
3 minutes if very interested.
Design Summary

• Make it uncluttered, attractive, balanced, readable.

• Use good graphics. *A picture is worth 1,000 words.*

• Use contrasts for text and background for readability.

Design

• Use no more than two typefaces: One for titles and the other for text. Pick simple styles. Use CAPS only for titles.

• Maintain consistent style for signs in a series.

• Seek to spark the visitor’s interest and let them move on to explore this special place.
Waysides

Best for more intimate experiences, trail side, smaller spaces, slower pace places
Bulletin Boards and Kiosks

Best for trailheads, orientation, highway pull offs.
Accessibility

- Use large, easy-to-read type; no smaller than 18 pt.

- Use high contrast colors and matte or low gloss finish, especially for text.

- Comfortable viewing is 48” to 67” above the floor. Wayside height should be 32”-36” at front edge.

- Create unobstructed, smooth walkway and viewing area.
Outdoor Materials

Fiberglass embedded digital image

**Advantages:** No constraint on color or design. Vandal resistant. Most have 10-year guarantee. Proven in the field for over 30 years.

**Disadvantages:** Best if cleaned & waxed annually. Must be framed or supported.

High pressure laminate

**Advantages:** No constraint on color or design. Vandal resistant. Can be cut to shapes. Panels ½-inch thick or more need no frame. 10-20-year guarantee.

**Disadvantages:** Less proven.

Digital image in composite

**Advantages:** No constraint on color or design. Fast production time.

**Disadvantages:** Less durable (more prone to fading & vandalism.) Best for short term exhibits needed quickly.
Other Outdoor Materials

Porcelain Enamel Gorgeous color, but expensive. Long lasting unless chipped. Best in permanent, supervised location.

Screen Printed Embedment High initial cost, low replacement cost. Every color increases cost. Best when identical signs needed.

Polystyrene, Aluminum, & Reverse-printed Lexan. Many copies of identical signs can be cheaply done with screen printing. Less vandal resistant. Not as durable as fiberglass embedment or HPL. Plastic can get brittle over time.
Common Pitfalls

Too much text or too many messages

“Book On a Stick!”

Difficult to read, poor contrast.
Outdoor Sign Maintenance

They all need periodic cleaning: Soap & water!

• Fiberglass: Marine wax or clear, satin finish, lacquer aerosol spray.

• For spray paint: Wash with mild soap and water or alcohol; apply paint thinner (mineral spirits) or lacquer thinner. If you use acetone, use it quickly. Rinse with soap and water.

• For permanent ink or markers: Apply alcohol or scrub with pencil eraser.

If necessary, replace the panel!
It is enough to open minds; do not overload them. Put there just a spark. If there is some good inflammable stuff, it will catch fire.

- Anatole France
Credit

This Overview of Interpretive Sign Design was adapted by LCTHF member Margaret Gorski from reference materials supplied by the Center for Design and Interpretation Rocky Mountain Region of the US Forest Service.