

## Dumbing down for museum audiences — necessity or myth?

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The kind of museum exhibition that is popular today is a linguistic environment unlike any other. Rather than the cabinet-of-curiosities-type exhibition which simply presents precious and marvellous things for visitors to experience with their own eyes, today's exhibitions are mostly 'theme-based', with objects and a variety of support materials arranged to tell a story (or stories) or to support a particular argument or perspective.

What other situation attempts to convey information in written, narrative form, intermixed with objects, images and often multimedia, in a relatively non-sequential, three-dimensional space, to an audience that is simultaneously negotiating all kinds of obstacles, browsing and often socialising? However, in many ways also exhibitions share characteristics with other texts which are written by experts but intended for non-specialists — brochures, books, educational materials, websites, multimedia and the like.

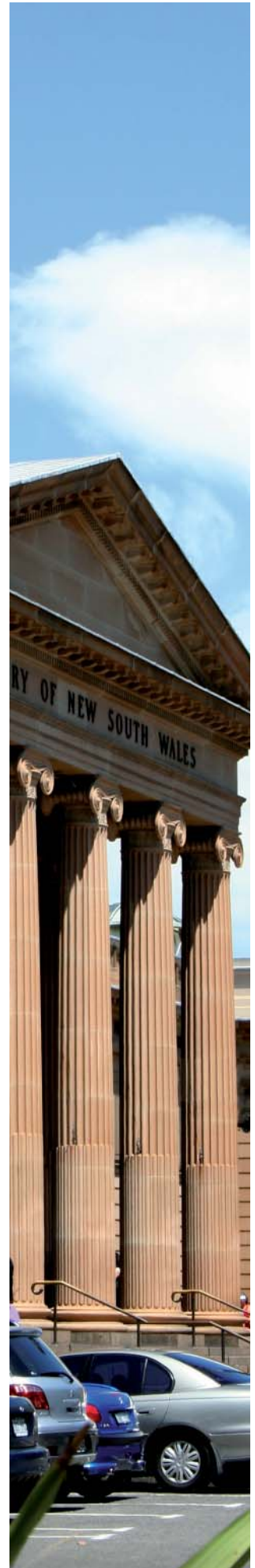
I've used the term 'dumbing down' in the title of this paper because it's an expression that I encounter constantly in my work as an editor of exhibition texts. 'Dumbing down' suggests that you, the expert, in framing a message for the less-informed public, have to simplify the message. It thus becomes something less than it would be, for example, in a professional journal. It of necessity lacks a certain intellectual rigour or integrity — it's 'history without the footnotes', 'scholarship dumbed down'. But do public audiences need 'dumbed down' versions of scholarship? Is this what really happens? And if so, can it be avoided? What are the relative roles of content, language and format in this mix? How important are 'style' choices and issues?

### Audience characteristics

Audiences are often defined in terms of relatively enduring characteristics such as level of education or intelligence — there's 'us' and there's 'them'. While any member of an audience certainly possesses such characteristics, these are not necessarily the most important in determining how he or she engages with a message. Any audience is specific only to a particular moment, so that *momentary* qualities such as situation, familiarity, distractions or ability to focus become critical.

The specificity of audience to moment is highlighted by a study carried out by Paulette McManus at the Natural History Museum, London (1989) which looked at the relationship between social groups and behaviour during museum visits. McManus describes four distinct groups:

**Groups with children** (largest group): this group was characterised by longer visits, longer conversations, talking, discussion, activity



**Singletons:** although their visits were shorter, they read labels in great detail — they were 50 per cent more likely to read labels than any other group

**Couples:** this group was ‘characterised by a lack of conversation’ — nearly 50 per cent of couples did not talk at all, but they did read labels

**Adult social groups:** this group paid least attention to exhibits and labels.

Any one person could be a member of all four groups at different times — characteristics that are critical to the way audiences engage with text are intrinsic not so much to the person but to the moment and situation.

Over the past 20 years or so, the study of museum audiences has become a burgeoning field. Understanding who the visitor is, why they come (or don't come), how they learn, how they move around exhibitions, what they look at and for how long are a few of the questions that have morphed into research hypotheses. Much of this research dovetails with research on ‘informal learning’ but some also comes from a marketing perspective, and these studies push a very different line: they assign visitors into mutually exclusive groups, which are then treated as enduring market segments — you are a ‘culturally active adult’ or a ‘member of a family group’: you can't be both! They take information provided on a particular occasion, and often particular to that occasion, and use it to create a fixed category. In contrast to the more learning-based studies such as McManus's, this kind of research has had the effect of reinforcing and perpetuating an ‘us and them’ mythology.

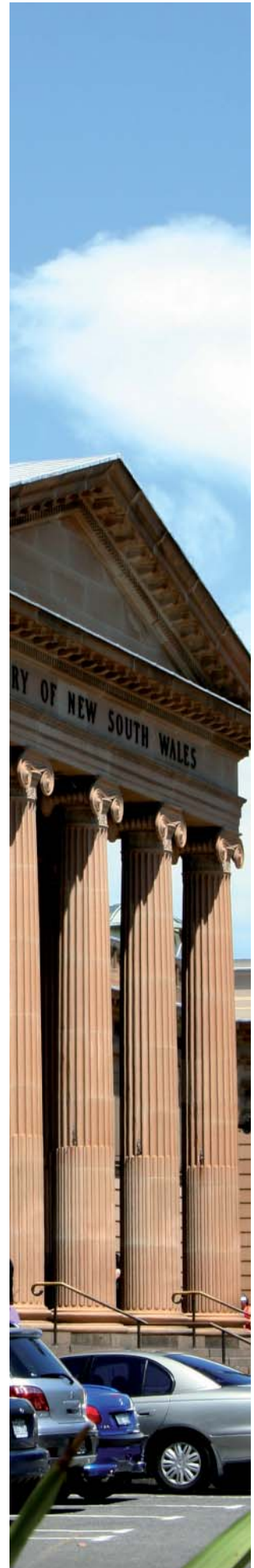
## Messages and meaning

Over the past few decades, we have come to a much better understanding of the workings of the human brain, and so there has been a significant shift in theories of how people create meaning from language and how that leads to learning.

Theories have shifted from ‘behaviourist’ (stimulus/response, transmission/absorption) models, where a message is presented and the meaning is simply absorbed (or not), to ‘social-constructivist’ models, where the receiver is seen to construct their own knowledge. The receiver plays an active role, manipulating the message mediated by language, culture, context and existing knowledge and attitudes. When learning takes place, new concepts compete with mental structures already present in the mind; thus what is understood (or learned) may be quite different from the author's intended message.

A message is a complex entity comprised of three key elements:

- **content** what you are communicating: the ideas or information
- how you are communicating, your ‘language’ — usually spoken or written, but could be visual
- **environment** the physical characteristics of the message and its surroundings.



When the 'density' of any one of these is increased, this puts pressure on the others. For example messages can be:

- **environment dense** good examples of this are street signs and billboards — when you are travelling at speed and controlling a car, the environment of a message is extremely dense
- **language dense** these have fancy language but simple content — often seen in official or bureaucratic texts which try to 'write up' quite plain ideas
- **content dense** content density varies greatly according to the situation because familiarity is such a critical factor. In a journal article, written for a peer audience, the content might be 'difficult' but because it's familiar to that audience, the fit between conceptual space and message stays in balance. Change the situation — for example by presenting the journal article to a non-peer audience — and that same 'message' no longer works.

In a museum, the content and environmental elements are invariably already under pressure (compare wandering through an exhibition to, say, lying in bed alone, reading a book after a good night's sleep, with newly updated prescription glasses and good light). Within an exhibition, the environmental load can be lightened to some degree by creating more physical space, for example by ensuring text is large enough for comfortable reading, increasing the space between lines (leading), using subheads and colour to provide structure, breaking ideas up into bite-sized chunks, having a clear and predictable label hierarchy and locating labels as close as possible to the objects they relate to, and many of these strategies have been well researched and documented. Yet even so, the environment invariably remains under stress, leaving language as a highly critical variable. So how can you 'lighten' language in order to compensate?

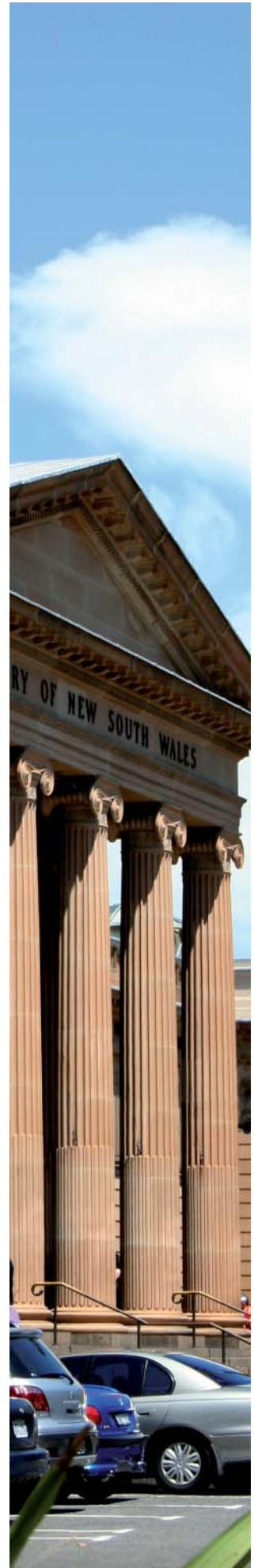
There is a lot of misinformation on this question, such as 'keep sentences short' and 'use the active voice'. While these strategies may be helpful in some situations, it is more useful to look to the structure of language:

- the **grammatical /syntactical** (sentences)
- the **lexical** (words, vocabulary)
- the **modal** (spoken versus written)
- **style**, which acts as a kind of umbrella over these.

This suggests four mechanisms for lightening language density.

Firstly, you can lighten the grammatical load by reducing grammatical complexity. Secondly, you can lighten the morphological load by using familiar words and removing or explaining jargon. But it's the third tool, the modal, that is especially significant and powerful — the differences between spoken and written language.

Spoken language is language in its original form. Like walking, it doesn't require formal learning. Spoken sentences are much longer, more tangled and grammatically more complex than written ones, yet we produce and



understand them largely without effort — even while engaged in various other physical and/or cognitive activities.

Written language, on the other hand, is lexically dense. It is characterised by the packing together of lexical content but in relatively simple grammatical frames.

Such differences highlight the inadequacy of ‘rules’ such as ‘keep sentences short because short sentences are easier to understand’. Again referring to the study done by Paulette McManus at the Natural History Museum, a large part of the study was reliant on analysing recorded conversations between visitors in exhibitions. She draws two highly relevant conclusions:

- **labels ‘stand in for the presence of the person who prepared the exhibition** ‘‘label text’, she says, ‘can be thought of as rather like a speech bubble in a cartoon which happens to hold the words of the person who prepared the exhibit ... and in a very real sense they are a substitute for their speaking presence’.
- **visitors interact with label text in a conversation-like manner** her recordings showed that visitors speak as if someone is talking to them through the labels. In their conversations all visitors kept to the text topic established by the labels, making the labels act as a partner in the conversation.

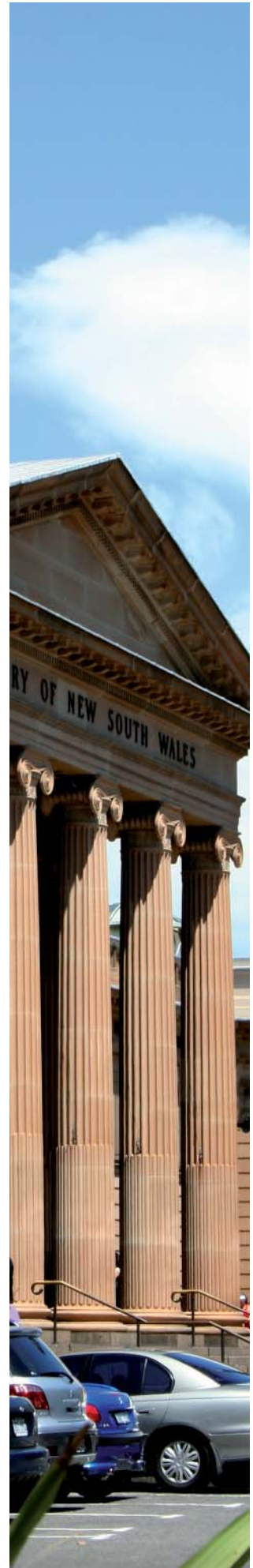
‘Throughout the transcripts’, she says, ‘it was a curious state of affairs to find that the words of the label writer ... became part of the conversations between visitors’. McManus talks about the phenomenon of ‘text echo’, where visitors repeated the exact phrasing of segments of label text in their conversations.

This is very strong support for the notion of writing label text — and I think here you can generalise to other kinds of informational texts as I mentioned earlier — as if it were part of a conversation, of trying to incorporate elements of spoken language within the written text to both encourage and facilitate this ‘conversational’ interaction and to compensate for content density.

In spoken language, the words and sentences are only part of the system; they gain a large part of their communicative power from a host of features such as speed, volume, pitch, rhythm, repetition, stress, gesture and eye contact.

On the other hand ‘style’, in the sense that I am using it here, does not exist in spoken language; it’s an artifact of written language. There are no capital letters, full stops, semi-colons, commas, italics or spelling in speech. Yet these style elements can play a real role in creating a conversational tone. In doing so, they help add meaning to written texts: bold, italics and colour can give a sense of stress or ‘volume’, ellipsis (in moderation) a sense of pause, font size and spacing a sense of pace and rhythm.

I’ve also found that fewer capitals and an open (or minimal) punctuation style help create an informal and conversational tone. This presentational style also has the effect of clearing clutter from the written message by



getting rid of full stops after initials and abbreviations, excess capital letters and other punctuation that doesn't carry meaning. By removing 'idle' punctuation, you give prominence to essential or 'working' punctuation, which carries meaning and clarifies your sentence structures — commas that mark out digressions from a principal clause, full stops that mark the end of a sentence and capitals that herald the start of a new one.

Other useful strategies include:

- using the second person 'you' pronoun to draw the reader into the conversation
- introducing your characters, or players (for example, American minimalist painter Barnett Newman, convict architect Francis Greenway)
- using familiar words
- using familiar imagery
- framing text as questions
- using direct speech, quotations, oral history
- even starting sentences with 'and' or 'but'.

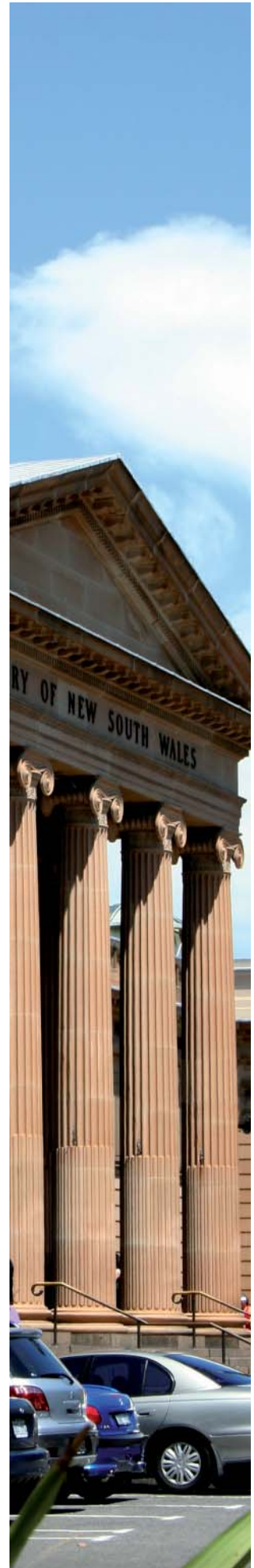
To use McManus's words, 'Exhibition teams — in other words, expert writers — should think of themselves as talking to someone when they write.'

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I consider the idea that you need to dumb down content a myth, based on misconceptions about both the audience and the message. It is based on the misconception that the audience is inferior in its ability to take in ideas and information. It also rests on the assumption that such characteristics are intrinsic and enduring. Further, it's based on the misconception that content and language are inextricably bound together. Also embedded is the misconception that both language and information are difficult or easy — again enduring qualities — rather than familiar and unfamiliar.

We all know that you can have very fancy language that means absolutely nothing. As editors, we need to remind ourselves, and our authors, that complex and unfamiliar ideas *can* be communicated using familiar language. This may take more space (and this is a real tension within museum exhibitions) and probably more imagination and creativity. If time and space are limited, you may have to prioritise ideas (settle for making three points well rather than six badly), but you don't have to dumb them down.

In other words, you don't have to write down for a general audience but you may have to write differently.



## Checklist for creating accessible, scholarly texts

The following checklist summarises strategies that can help create texts which succeed in engaging a broad public audience without sacrificing scholarship:

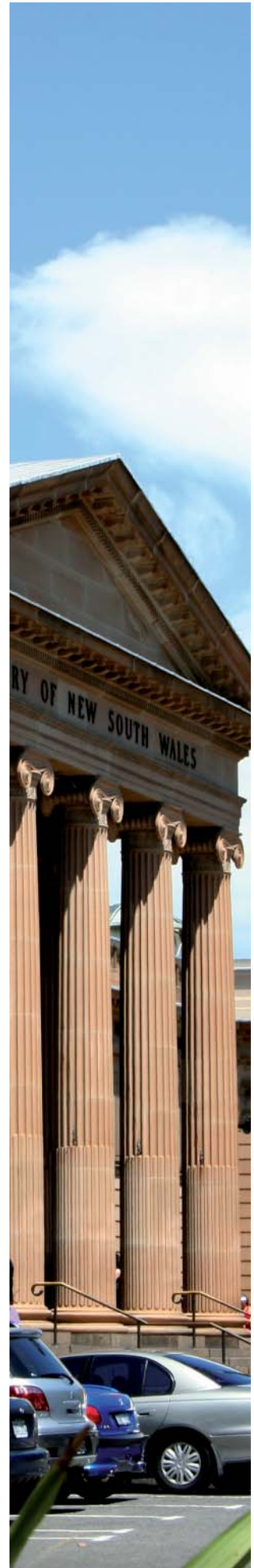
- if the content is unfamiliar, **use everyday language** and **take the space** to explain your ideas properly. When a text has dense content you need to lighten its physical and linguistic density so the reader's conceptual space is not overloaded
- **simulate the elements of spoken language** Use pauses, questions and variations in speed, volume, stress and rhythm to create a conversational style, echo the text and enhance meaning
- **use familiar words** If less familiar or technical terms are important, take the time and space to define them properly. Use the more familiar term first, and then assist learning by repeating the new term in context, for example, 'smell (olfactory) receptors' and 'cocoa butter has to be specially cooled and reheated (tempered) during the process. Tempering maintains a high fat content ...'
- **introduce your characters** A few extra words can include rather than exclude your readers: , for example, 'convict architect Francis Greenway', 'critic and writer Robert Hughes' and 'American minimalist painter Barnett Newman'
- **relate unfamiliar/complex ideas** to the experience of the reader. This may require stretching your imagination, for example, 'Like people at parties, galaxies are found in groups ...'
- **maintain a clear thematic structure** in your paragraphs, even if this means using the passive voice. In English, the theme is always located at the start of the sentence or its principal clause
- **use descriptive adjectives and adverbs** to help make information/people more memorable and multi-dimensional, for example, 'the peppery Frederick McCoy' and 'clubs were enthusiastically established across Australia.'
- **keep your principal clauses intact** Don't fragment the main idea with subordinate ideas/clauses, for example,

born in Scotland in 1826, Marion Smith made this quilt from fabrics given to her by family and friends. After decades of loving use, she gave the quilt to her eldest granddaughter.

*not*

Marion Smith, who was born in Scotland in 1826, made this quilt, which she gave to her eldest granddaughter after decades of loving use, from fabrics given to her by family and friends.

- **include the footnotes** You don't need to leave them out. You can also use footnotes as a way of layering information for 'mixed' audiences.



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