

Preparing a Three-Minute Talk

Your first formal presentation during training will be a three-minute gallery talk on one object in the museum, with a transition to a second object.

Your principal goal should be to stimulate interest and curiosity, provide insights which will advance the viewers' ability to relate to new objects on their own, and make them want to return again to the museum.

The most effective gallery talks are *object oriented*, which means the docent *focuses the discussion on what can be seen in the artwork*. The essential first step in preparing an object oriented talk is to look carefully at the art. The time you spend analyzing the work visually and noting your reactions will enable you lead visitors in "discovering" the work for themselves.

Ideally, visitors will leave the Museum with an awareness of having succeeded in making some sense out of the art they have seen, gained some insights into the art, learned some new facts, used their imaginations, and enhanced their perception skills.

This training program is designed to help us learn to guide visitors. But before we can provide tours for anyone else, we ourselves must internalize the art works in question.

Looking at Art

The surprising thing about internalizing the art is that the most important step seems extremely obvious: look at the art! Name and describe what you see. The exhaustive looking, describing and naming you do for yourself are the most useful skills you will develop as a docent. The words and images that emerge while you are describing the art to yourself will be there for you to retrieve when you need words to talk about art with visitors.

After, during, or even before all of this intensive looking, naming and describing, other thoughts will inevitably start popping into your head. You will begin to wonder what this piece is all about, what the artist tried to convey, what it reminds you of, what it stirs in your imagination or feelings, or why it "works" as a piece of art. After you have done considerable looking and thinking on your own, it is time to seek elsewhere for further insights. You will want to talk to others and discuss their views. You will want to investigate where this piece fits into art history. Then you will want to go back and look at the art anew. You will realize that something has happened since the first time you saw the piece. You have worked to gain insight. You feel rewarded and satisfied, or maybe frustrated, but this piece is starting to "belong" to you.

Presenting Art to Visitors

When you tour visitors you will lead them through the same steps of looking, thinking, responding, imagining, information gathering and looking anew as you did. When your visitors leave, if they "own" some of the art in their minds, you have succeeded in your docent mission.

Object Worksheet

Always begin your study of an artwork by going into the gallery and taking plenty of time to complete the exercises on the “Object Worksheet” you will find in this section. The Object Worksheet will also be helpful in getting yourself organized for future gallery talks. Keep your completed sheets in your docent notebook, and you will soon build a valuable reference file.

Researching the Artwork

Research provides the information necessary for an historically and factually accurate interpretation of an object. It provides interesting information about the artist, the period in which the work was created, and why it is included in the museum’s collection. Make use of the docent research files, catalogs, the museum library, and the internet. Attend museum lectures and observe other docent talks to broaden your base of information.

There are lectures for each new special exhibition that visits the museum. Attend these lectures even though you are not on the exhibition’s focus team. You might want to include part of a special exhibition in your highlights tour. Special exhibitions often offer wonderful subjects for student gallery talks. Read the exhibition catalog (if available), follow a focus tour, and peruse research material in the Current Exhibits file in the docent office.

In researching a work of art, you may find related quotes, anecdotes, myths, and legends. Use a few to enliven your presentations, adults and students love “behind-the-scenes” human-interest stories.

You will, without a doubt, have much more information than you will ever use. Think of this as your gift to yourself. Visitors hear only a fraction of what you know, but because your research is so thorough your presentation is effective.

Accuracy is paramount. If you are unsure about an answer to a question posed by visitors, say so! Don’t spread misinformation!

A cautionary note: Don’t overwhelm visitors with too much didactic information! Biographical information, historic context and technical information should be used sparingly, to help visitors better understand what they are seeing in the artwork. Concentrate on getting your group to interact with the work itself. Let them come to their own conclusions.

“The secret of being tiresome is to tell everything.”- Voltaire

Pulling the Talk Together

Once you are thoroughly familiar with your chosen work of art, you are ready to prepare your presentation. Your greatest challenge will be paring down all the visual and factual information you have collected into a cohesive, engaging three-minute talk. The cardinal rule is to keep your discussion focused on what can be seen in the artwork. Your presentation should:

- Be object oriented, with a focus on what you can see
- Link visual evidence to historic, cultural, other factors
- Include basic information from the label: title, date, country, artist
- Incorporate art vocabulary and public speaking tips discussed below
- End with a transition to another object

Transitions

Transitions are bridges or links between each art object. They are the skeleton upon which a tour is built and the glue that holds the tour together. Keep them short and simple, but make them interesting.

Purpose of Transitions:

- to get the mind working
- to add interest
- to tie the tour together
- to reinforce a point you've just made
- to add information about an artist or art period
- to link one work to another
- to refer to something they'll see later in the tour
- to add mystery, intrigue, anticipation
- to remind them of the theme of your tour

Example Transitions:

- "This light drenched scene portraying the daily activity on the river Seine makes you almost feel the heat radiating from the limestone wall, now let's go to American and experience light that portrays both a sense of grandeur and serenity."
- "Monet's exploration of the light and atmosphere on a foggy day in London allows the viewer's eye to dance across the canvas and experience light for light's sake; now let's travel to the stars and outer space to see what this next artist has done with light."
- "This painting was done by a 17-year old boy; now let's go explore the differences in one painted by a 73-year-old woman."

Helpful Hints:

- Don't walk while giving a transition. Be sure to finish the transition before you move to the next piece. Be sure to finish what you're saying *before* you move or gesture or indicate the direction in which you're going. There is a danger that you will lose the group's attention.
- What if you get to your next piece and someone is already there? Punt! "This is a good opportunity to see this work from a distance. What do you notice about the color from

across the room?” or “Why do you think this piece is so popular?” Make a positive from a negative situation. Hopefully, your fellow docent will notice you waiting your turn and shorten her/his presentation. If all else fails, tell them you’ll come back to it and go to another piece or have a backup piece in the same gallery prepared to fill in the time.

- Refer to the transition as soon as you arrive at the next piece.
- Variety is the spice of life! Vary your transitions. Don’t use the same ones all the time (i.e. “we have just seen this, now we will look at that.”)
- Transitions offer a great opportunity to add zest. Using words such as “surprise,” “tallest,” “oldest,” “special,” “amazing,” can capture the imagination, increase anticipation and add to the fun.
- Use your transitions to weave your tour theme together. This helps to explain why you are taking the viewer to the selected art pieces.
- Remember: a transition addresses only one discussion point.

Tips on Public Speaking

Now that you are thoroughly familiar with your material and have it organized, you should be relaxed and ready to face your audience!

Physical Presence

Position yourself next to but not blocking the work of art and face your audience. People tend to look at the speaker, so this position enables the group to look at you and the work of art simultaneously. It also allows your voice to project well. Tip: stand by the wall "signage" when possible. This allows you to quickly review dates, etc. as your group assembles.

Make sure everyone can see the work in question. Encourage your audience to walk around sculpture when possible, to view it from all sides.

Maintain eye contact with the group. It is a normal tendency to turn your head and look at the work when you are speaking. Resist this tendency! You’ve seen the piece many times and don’t need to look at it to know what is there and the points you want to make.

Be aware of your own body language and speech mannerisms. Do they convey nervousness, a lack of enthusiasm or too much enthusiasm? These non-verbal clues will be picked up by your audience, consciously or unconsciously, and will color their reaction to you and your presentation.

It is desirable to keep your group closely circled around you, but remember everyone has a different need for their own “space”, and touching can mean very different things to people from different cultures.

You and Your Vocabulary

Your words are going to bring these works of art to life for your audience. Finding the right word to describe an object or detail assists visitors to really SEE. Is a red more accurately an orange-red? A violet red? A warm red? A washed-out red?

Your choice of words can create excitement or interest: *secret, special, youngest, oldest, amazing*. Your words can set a mood: *somber, lyrical, scary, sad, joyous, icy, empty, relaxing, static, action-filled, and so forth*.

In the course of your talk, you may decide to introduce two or three technical or art terms. Be sure to explain their meaning the first time you use them, never assume that your public is familiar with an art term. Your definition can be subtly worked into the discussion: "Here Monet has used heavy *impasto*, or thick application of paint, to represent sunlight shimmering on water."

Be specific, don't generalize. For example: "Trompe l'oeil fools the eye into seeing 3-D. See how the artist skillfully uses shadow and detail to create this illusion of reality?"

For non-representational works, you will need to develop a vocabulary that relates to:

- Color (*harmonious, juxtaposed, vibrating*),
- Brushstrokes (*dynamic, broken, agitated, rhythmic, commanding*),
- Quality of paint (*sensual, thick, thin, tacky, textured*).

Let your imagination soar! Let your group provide some descriptive words of their own!

Also, avoid talking about works of art that aren't in front of you. You might be tempted to describe a magnificent Chagall you saw in Paris, but your audience will be bored. Do not allude to other artists, periods, styles, or works on the assumption your audience will be familiar with them. Include a brief description.

You and Your Voice

It goes without saying that you should project your voice so everyone can hear you. There will be times when the gallery is crowded and the noise level high, so be aware and adjust your volume accordingly. However, also be aware whether or not you are very close to another group so you do not interfere with their tour.

The acoustics are sometimes a problem in the Santa Barbara Museum of Art. For example, you can speak loudly and be heard in Ludington Court, but you might not be understood because it is open and voices drift up to the balcony, you can hear the traffic on State Street, and the echoing voices from outside of the tour group. It can be an acoustical disaster. But there are some tricks which help. Try to wedge yourself into a corner when possible, and use the walls on either side for a megaphone effect. Also, in Ludington Court, always have your back to the street traffic with your voice projecting into the Museum and your group maneuvered in front of you.

Final Tips of the Trade:

1. When you are speaking to an audience, your main objective is to keep their attention. You want not merely to be audible, but to be understood. So, the use of your voice involves more than projection and volume. Shouting does not necessarily maintain attention.

2. Don't over-project. You may lose the attention of the people in front. Think only in terms of reaching the outer limits of the group. If you can physically move them into the desired position, your job is easier.
3. If attention wanders, shorten the focus. Force the audience to lean closer to catch what you are saying, but not too low or for too long (they'll give up). We've all heard that if you want to get a child's attention, lower your voice.
4. If someone asks a question, repeat it for the whole group to hear before you answer. That way, you dispel the impression that you are talking to one person; losing the others.
5. Do not talk while moving. Wait until everyone is situated in front of the work before you begin.
6. Do not be afraid of silences. Trying to speak when you have nothing to say results in fillers like "um" and "ah." Do not get stuck looking at one person or one side of the group. The others will get bored.
7. If your group includes a variety of ages, choose a representative of each group and direct your comments to each of these so as not to exclude one segment.
8. Do not keep the group still for too long. They will need physical change. Have them turn, walk, or sit when possible. Do not stand in front of one painting for too long.

During your tour let your enthusiasm, friendliness and warmth shine through. Pull your group in and send them home on a high note!