Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation

Version 2017

This evolving document has been crafted through collaboration
between dozens of field interpreters
from across the National Park Service and beyond.

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Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation

As a foundation to all our work, interpreters and educators[1] embrace continuous, collaborative learning and application of the following overarching competencies[2]:

- **Evolving Interpretive Principles**
- **Fostering Self-Awareness and Overcoming Bias**
- **Building Relationships with Audience and Community**
- **Investigating Site Resources and Evolving Context**
- **Exploring Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions**
- **Integrating Engagement Techniques**
- **Planning and Designing Effective Experiences**
- **Implementing Effective Experiences**

These revised foundational competency descriptions[3] are supported by an evolving suite of learning opportunities and resources. However, the increasingly dynamic nature of the world around us indicates the need for on-going evolution of our professional standards and best practices. *Therefore these competency descriptions will continue to evolve with peer input and participation, and will be annually reviewed and updated.*

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[1] These foundational principles apply to all interpretive and educational work in the National Park Service. The professions of interpretation and education overlap more than they differ. Interpretation, by nature, always provides avenues for learning; and education programming, while also addressing learning objectives and curriculum standards, is most effective when it is interpretive. NPS competencies have been developed to describe the specialized core skills for park education professionals beyond these interpretive foundations.

[2] In the past, the Foundations competencies were often viewed as introductory learning for new employees. Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation (this document) should be viewed as foundational for all practitioners, regardless of experience or job title, with an expectation for on-going learning, practice, feedback and accountability.

[3] Many threads and ideas from earlier Foundations competencies are carried through in this revision. To see how they are evolving, read the legacy version from 2007.

Evolving Interpretive Principles

Competency Description

Effective interpretation enriches and enhances people's lives through interactions with natural and cultural resources. It invites them to explore personal meanings within a resource so they are more apt to care about and *for* it. Interpretation also seeks to extend the meanings of a local site or resource to broader human and natural contexts. In this way, interpretation cultivates stewardship for each other and the earth.

The threefold goals of interpretation build upon each other to address the needs/interests of the audience, the site or agency, and society:

- Engage diverse audiences in developing meaningful, memorable and provocative experiences with natural and cultural resources;
- Encourage shared stewardship and broad collaboration in preserving natural and cultural resources; and
- Nurture globally responsible citizens who pursue lifelong learning and help build a more just society.

Interpretation explores the primary reasons for preserving natural and cultural resources. These resources represent who we are as a society, what we value, where we have been, and—most importantly—where we can go. Interpretation fosters active participation in society by building skills for respectfully exploring complex questions and issues. As lifelong learners, participants develop understanding, empathy, and respect for the perspectives of others.

Interpretation also explores the changing nature of truth and meaning. It analyzes past actions and considers modern relevancies. The reach of interpretation stretches beyond physical boundaries and strict reading of enabling legislation, exploring a resource's contemporary significance and the perspectives of diverse audiences, thereby helping people view historical, cultural and environmental legacies as ever-evolving.

The planning, design and facilitation of interpretation in the 21st century is audience-centered. It provides a range of opportunities for connection, contribution, collaboration and co-creation building on interpretive theories, tenets and best practices. As a key element of audience-centered experiences, interpreters and educators meet audiences wherever they are: on-site, off-site or virtually. They give audiences a variety of opportunities to explore and discover the personal and societal meanings of natural and cultural resources. These opportunities may be interpreter-facilitated. They may also be audience-sourced and audience-curated. In both instance, audiences develop meaningful experiences for themselves and/or with each other. Whenever and wherever possible, audiences are considered stakeholders and primary contributors to the meaning-making process, rather than as passive consumers.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Align programs/products with the threefold goals of interpretation
- Create, facilitate, and support opportunities for audiences to make their own intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings and current contexts
- Focus programs/products around resource-based, audience-relevant ideas and essential questions
- Incorporate audience-centered techniques into all types of interpretive products and activities which invite and encourage interaction, collaboration, and contribution
- Purposefully reflect on interpretive theories, tenets and best practices and continuously strive to apply them

Fostering Self-Awareness and Overcoming Bias

Competency Description

Interpretation can help people enhance their own lives and the health of their ecological and cultural communities. At its best, interpretation raises social consciousness, leveraging and questioning power to create a more equitable world. This begins with self-awareness. Interpreters and educators must first uncover their own expectations, obstacles and biases in order to help others find and confront theirs. This knowledge of self or "emotional intelligence" has several distinct and increasingly important aspects:

- *Awareness of self* involves ongoing self-examination to identify conscious and unconscious bias which results from personal experience and perspectives.
- *Self-monitoring* helps interpreters and educators be aware of and express their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors in constructive and professional ways
- *Facilitating social interactions* involves understanding and respecting the thoughts, emotions, needs and concerns of others, and reading emotional, behavioral and social cues to help people engage and interact respectfully, even when they disagree.

It is important to appreciate the resources we interpret, as well as the diversity of our colleagues and our audiences. Self-aware interpreters and educators strive to value the experiences and perspectives of all people. Only then can interpretation help move people to better understanding and appreciation of each other and the issues raised by the places and resources in our care.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Identify and investigate personal perspectives, experiences and biases to understand how they affect emotions, beliefs, attitudes and actions
- Seek to identify, understand and address how their own actions affect co-workers, other people, and themselves
- Model self-awareness and composure in order to adapt to changing perspectives and circumstances.
- Seek and initiate collaborative and respectful interactions with co-workers, visitors and communities, recognizing and valuing differing backgrounds, identities, perspectives and experiences
- Amplify marginalized voices and perspectives to facilitate deeper understanding, inclusivity, and equity

Building Relationships with Audience and Community

Competency Description

Interpretation facilitates meaningful personal experiences which advance the larger social benefit of parks and park resources. To reach these outcomes, interpreters and educators pursue and apply an ever-expanding awareness of current and potential audiences, communities, and resource meanings.

The planning process for all programs/products should include thoughtful and purposeful consideration of potential audiences and integration of their evolving:

- interests, expectations, motivations and values
- perspectives and influences, including psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, religious, historical, and philosophical
- differences in culture, race, age, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability, education, and learning preferences

Interpretation must be relevant to the audience's lives in order to foster meaningful experiences and explore new perspectives. Active engagement *with* audiences allows their input to guide meaning-making experiences, through both personal interaction and observation of their use of the resource. Audiences and local communities are the primary stakeholders and contributors, whose interests and perspectives continuously inform and enrich the interpretive process. Interpreters and educators also use a wide variety of social science data and other resources to continue learning about audience demographics, needs, expectations and trends.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Interact and collaborate with diverse audiences, stakeholders, communities and cultures to broaden awareness of the evolving meanings and relevance of park resources.
- Meet Audiences "where they are," respecting the changing viewpoints, traditions, values, needs, interests, and cultural practices of diverse audiences, particularly how they interact with the environment, natural, and cultural resources, and with other people
- Consider and respectfully integrate multiple perspectives allowing for a diversity of opinion to be expressed through the creation of a safe space
- Invite collaborate learning about, with, and among audiences through a range of opportunities for audience contribution, co-creation, and with regard for a variety of learning styles
- Use input from informal and formal audience evaluation, social science and other audience data to plan, revise, and continually improve relationships with audience and community

Investigating Site Resources and Evolving Context

Competency Description

Interpreters and educators embrace and demonstrate a spirit of collaborative learning and curiosity about their sites. They actively pursue resource knowledge from a variety of sources, including personal exploration, site immersion, artifacts, primary documents, resource experts, researchers, community partners, the internet, social media and park audiences. They continuously explore the depth and breadth of evolving meanings within a site. They investigate the many facets of resource knowledge, including the associated relationships, systems, processes, human values, historical and modern perspectives, and alternate intangible meanings. An interpreter's knowledge of the resource is not limited by time period, enabling legislation, or geographic scope. It is enriched by a site's evolving historical, scientific and social contexts, including how preservation and resource management may have changed it. This knowledge must necessarily be gathered from a broad community of differing perspectives.

Interpreters accept that understanding of any resource is multi-faceted. Multiple perspectives and experiences result in multiple truths for interpreters and audiences alike:

- Forensic or Factual Truth relays the scientific or tangible truth of who did what, where, when, and how
- Individual or Narrative Truth captures how a person lives through, perceives, and/or remembers an event or experience
- Social or Collective Truth is filtered through the lens of social groups and communal understanding, and may grow to encompass individual truths as it is constructed
- Reconciliatory Truth is a process which seeks to find common ground between truths by recognizing the needs of the individual and group to feel heard and accepted

Recognizing these multiple truths provides opportunities for transparency, discussion, relevancy, diversity, and inclusion in interpretive products.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Seek and collaborate with others through multiple sources (colleagues, partners, academics, community members, local ways of knowing, audiences) to gain knowledge of the resource and its relevance in current events and evolving social context
- Use an interdisciplinary approach to conduct research and critically evaluate sources for their relevance, validity, and limits
- Continuously pursue new and different perspectives to develop a deep and broad understanding of a place and its meanings
- Use the principles of four truths to explore not only forensic facts of a place, but also its social and personal meanings, and reconciliatory potential

Exploring Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions

Competency Description

In a world of complex challenges, interpretation invites meaningful and productive dialogue in which audiences express and experience multiple perspectives. The goal is not to convince, but to create space for visitors to discuss, define, and collaborate in developing ideas for a just and healthy planet. Effective interpretation explores controversial and complex issues as a means of finding natural and cultural resources' evolving relevance in today's community. Interpretation honors and incorporates different types of truth – forensic/academic, personal, societal, and reconciliatory – and uses essential questions to invite dialogue, foster awareness, probe truths, and encourage collaborative solutions.

Audience-centered programs and media must be dynamic and flexible, with intentional design and clear purpose. A cohesive experience for the audience is achieved by exploring an essential question or relevant idea supported by a purposeful interpretive framework.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Develop products which help translate the three-fold goals of interpretation (see Evolving Interpretive Theory) into visitor action
- Develop relevant ideas and essential questions based on understanding of the resource, audience and the broader social context
- Design interpretive experiences with purposeful focus and cohesion which address product goals
- Use site resources as catalysts to explore and investigate questions and ideas essential to today's society
- Embrace flexibility, allowing audiences to cooperatively shape interpretive experiences through contribution of content and meanings

Integrating Engagement Techniques

Competency Description

Interpretive techniques facilitate audience interaction with each other and the resource. The primary purpose of engagement techniques is to provide opportunities for audience co-creation of content and discovery of meanings, and prompts exploration of multiple perspectives. By focusing on techniques which create space for discussion, interpreters provide opportunities for reflection, expression, immersion and collaboration in safe spaces.

Whether on-site, off-site or virtual, the resource is central to the interpretive experience. Interpreters integrate techniques which help the audience engage with the resource. These techniques explore a resource's broader implications in their lives today. The design of an interpretive experience includes purposeful selection and integration of techniques in order to:

- facilitate opportunities for both intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings
- support the exploration of relevant ideas and essential questions
- build civic skills

For personal services, interpreters design flexibility and responsiveness into all interactions. They prepare a range of techniques and approaches that allow audience interests and input to guide the direction of the encounter. For non-personal services, interpreters work within the bounds of their selected medium while striving to incorporate appropriate interactive techniques which encourage visitors to contribute to their experience.

Interpreters embrace experimentation and seek continuous improvement in their use of engagement techniques. They are open to risk and experimentation, using failure as an opportunity to learn and adjust for the future.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Integrate engagement techniques to facilitate opportunities for connection, contribution, collaboration and co-creation
- Apply facilitation techniques as tools to guide interactive experiences and explore controversial and complex issues
- Craft appropriate, strategic and responsive techniques based on audience, medium, resource, and setting
- Improve audience experiences through collaboration, experimentation, feedback, and evaluation

Planning and Designing Effective Experiences

Competency Description

Effective planning is key when designing audience-centered experiences. Effective planning requires a proactive investment of time and collaborative effort. The planning and design process for all programs/products involves a thoughtful and purposeful consideration of:

- *Potential audiences* -- Reaching beyond people already served by the park, interpreters consider visitors who are likely to participate and specifically target audiences that are new or underserved.
- *Purpose, goals and objectives* -- Individual programs/products should integrate effectively into the site's overall programming strategy and will address the three-fold goals of interpretation. Interpreters and educators will work closely with education partners to establish program goals and learning objectives of mutual benefit (see additional competencies for NPS educators).

After determining audience and purpose, planning proceeds to selecting the appropriate program or product type and interpretive focus. As planning moves into interpretive design and content development, interpreters and educators apply an expanding knowledge of resource and techniques. Interpretive standards and best practices for audience-centered experiences are used as benchmarks.

Interpreters and educators incorporate key needs for accessibility, logistics, situational awareness, and implementation into all stages of the planning and design process. In addition, the most effective planning and design does not occur in a vacuum, but involves feedback throughout the process. Interpreters embrace evaluation and seek continuous improvement in their use of interpretive techniques, including engagement strategies. They proactively seek opportunities to give and receive feedback from peers, partners and audiences.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Identify and use foundational planning elements from diverse perspectives for all programs and products
- Plan purposefully for interpretive effectiveness, accessibility, safety, and implementation.
- Apply design skills and select interpretive techniques appropriate for the presentation method or product type
- Provide flexible structure and focus that allows for audience contribution and co-creation.
- Plan collaboratively across divisions, parks, and organizations, seeking input and involvement from colleagues, supervisors, audiences (current and potential) and other stakeholders throughout the planning and development process
- Develop an iterative evaluation and feedback strategy at the outset of the planning process

- Cultivate an environment of exploration, experimentation, flexibility, and the willingness to revise based on audience needs, interests and cues, and evolving needs of site/agency and society.
- Contribute to a culture of collaboration and evaluation at their site and with their peers

Implementing Effective Experiences

Competency Description

A well-planned interpretive or educational experience requires thoughtful and effective implementation. Knowledge and skills for implementation vary by program or product type. They include the basic mechanics of technical design and production, organization, logistics, group dynamics, safety, accessibility and facilitative communication (verbal and written). The ability to plan for and adapt to audience input and changing situations is also critical. The development and honing of these skills will be a career-long endeavor. Self-assessment and continuous feedback are essential, as is capturing and integrating that input and reflection as the interpreter grows and their program evolves. Interpretation thrives in a culture of assessment, where all stakeholders including the interpreter, their peers, management, and the audience feel comfortable observing and offering feedback on interpretive products.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Proactively plan for and monitor situational and logistics needs, including site dynamics, supplies and materials, audience safety and accessibility, and resource protection
- Continuously hone inclusive communication skills within all interpretive mediums
- Plan strategies and practice skills to manage group dynamics, facilitate audience collaboration, ensure safety, maximize accessibility, and manage conflict
- Plan and practice flexibility and adaptability as important aspects of audience-centered experiences, acknowledging that the audience ultimately owns their experience
- Meet and strive to exceed NPS standards for accessibility of all programs and products through both proactive and responsive adaptation
- Meet NPS standards for technical design and production of media products and innovate in new ways to exceed the standards
- Solicit and welcome evaluation and feedback to identify areas for improvement
- Solicit and maintain an on-going feedback and revision loop with staff, stakeholders and visitors to capture and integrate lessons-learned during the life of the program or product