

Foundations of 21st Century Interpretation

Version 2016

As a foundation to all our work, interpreters and educators¹ embrace continuous, collaborative learning and application of the following overarching competencies²:

[Evolving Interpretive Theory](#)

[Knowledge of Self](#)

[Knowledge of Audience and Community](#)

[Knowledge of Heritage Resources and Current Context](#)

[Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions](#)

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These revised foundational competency descriptions³ are supported by an evolving suite of learning opportunities and resources. Peer coaching standards, rubrics and examples will also be peer-developed from these descriptions. 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 periodically reviewed and updated.

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 [previous version](#) (2007).*

Evolving Interpretive Theory

Competency Description

Successful interpretation enriches and enhances people's experiences with heritage resources**. It helps them explore personal meanings within a resource, so that they are more apt to care about and *for* it. Interpretation also seeks to extend the meanings of a local site or resource to the broader human and natural context. In this way, interpretation cultivates stewardship for one another and the earth.

[**The term "heritage" in this context refers to both natural and cultural heritage, as originally expressed by Freeman Tilden in *Interpreting Our Heritage*, Chapter 1, Page 1.)]

Three primary goals of interpretation⁴ build upon each other to address the needs/interests of the audience, the site or agency, and society:

- Engage diverse audiences in meaningful, memorable experiences with heritage resources;
- Encourage shared stewardship and broad collaboration in preserving heritage resources; and
- Nurture global citizens who will pursue life-long learning and help to build more just societies and a healthier planet.

Interpretation explores the primary reasons for preserving heritage resources: they represent who we are as a society, what we value, where we have been, and - most importantly - where we can go. It fosters active participation in democracy by building civic skills for exploring the questions and complex issues facing society. Participants develop respect, understanding, and empathy for the diverse perspectives of others while becoming life-long learners.

Interpretation also explores the changing nature of truth and meaning. It analyzes past actions and considers modern relevancies. The reach of interpretation often stretches beyond physical boundaries and strict readings of enabling legislation, helping people view historical, cultural and environmental legacies as ever-evolving over time.

The planning, design and facilitation of interpretation in the 21st century is audience-centered -- providing a range of opportunities for connection, contribution, collaboration and co-creation. 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 diverse opportunities to explore the personal and societal meanings of heritage resources. These opportunities may be ranger-facilitated, or they may be audience-sourced and audience-curated, in which audiences develop meaningful experiences for themselves and/or with each other. And, whenever and wherever possible, audiences are considered as stakeholders and primary contributors to the meaning-making process, rather than passive consumers.

⁴ Adapted from *Vision Paper--21st Century National Park Service Interpreter Skills*, page 9.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Align programs/products with the three-fold evolving goals of interpretation.
- Create and facilitate opportunities to help audiences make their own intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings and current contexts.
- Focus all programs/products around audience-relevant ideas and essential questions.
- Incorporate audience-centered techniques, interaction and contribution into all interpretive products and activities.
- Purposefully reflect on interpretive philosophies and best practices and apply them to all interpretive and educational work

Knowledge of Self

Competency Description

Our diverse natural and cultural resources have the power to raise social consciousness and self-awareness and help people better their own lives. To facilitate this, 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 identifying biases and blind spots and recognizing that emotions affect thoughts and behaviors
- *Management of self* helps interpreters and educators control and express their own thoughts, feelings and behaviors in constructive and professional ways
- *Awareness and management of social interactions* involves understanding and respecting the emotions, needs, and concerns of others, and reading emotional cues to help visitors engage and interact respectfully

It is important to appreciate the diverse 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 we care about.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Model emotional self-awareness and manage emotions in order to adapt to changing perspectives and circumstances.
- Identify and understand personal biases to understand how they affect emotions, beliefs, and actions.
- Develop collaborative and respectful interactions with co-workers and visitors, recognizing and validating differing backgrounds, perspectives, values, and experiences.
- Recognize and understand how their own actions affect their co-workers, other people, and themselves.
- Incorporate a mindset of relevancy, diversity, and inclusion in all work, valuing outcomes that are relevant, diverse, and inclusive of multiple perspectives.

Knowledge of Audience and Community

Competency Description

Interpretation is focused on the meaningful experience of the individual and the benefit to society of parks and heritage resources. To facilitate these outcomes, interpreters and educators pursue and apply an ever-expanding awareness of audiences, communities, and resource meanings.

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

- interests, expectations, and multiple points of view
- psychological, social, cultural, economic, political, religious, historical, and philosophical influences and perspectives.
- differences in culture, race, age, ethnicity, sexual orientation, gender identity, ability and learning style.

Interpretation must be relevant to the audience's lives to help them build new experiences. Active engagement *with* audiences allows their input to guide meaningful experiences, through both personal interaction and observation of their use of the resource. Audiences and local communities are considered as 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 to continue learning about audience demographics, needs, expectations and trends.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Continuously seek opportunities to learn about diverse audiences, communities, and cultures.
- Use audience knowledge, input and evaluation to plan and hone interpretive opportunities.
- Meet the needs of different audience learning styles.
- Consider and integrate personal motivations and multiple perspectives, allowing for a diversity of opinion to be expressed.
- Facilitate a range of ways for audience contribution, collaboration and co-creation.
- Use informal and formal audience evaluation and other types of social science and audience data to continually revise and improve audience experiences.

Knowledge of Heritage Resources and Current 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 resource experts, researchers, and visitors themselves. They continuously explore the depth and breadth of meanings within a site. What happens/happened within a resource is only one form of knowledge. Multi-faceted resource knowledge also investigates associated relationships, systems, processes, human values, historical and modern perspectives, and other intangible meanings. An interpreter's knowledge of the resource is not limited by time period, enabling legislation, or geographic scope, but is enriched by a site's evolving historical, scientific and social context, including how preservation may have changed it. This knowledge must be gathered from a broad community of different perspectives contributing to an evolving understanding of the resource.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Seek out and collaborate with others (peers, supervisors, partners, academics, community members, audiences, etc.) to gain knowledge of the resource and its relevance in current events/social context.
- Seek knowledge from new and different perspectives to continually deepen and broaden understanding of a place.
- Use the tenets of multiple truths to explore not only forensic meanings of a place, but its social, personal and reconciliatory meanings as well.
- Use the philosophies, methodologies, and assumptions of multiple professional disciplines to conduct research and evaluate sources for their relevance and validity.
- Value and learn from community voices and local ways of knowing about a place.

Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions

Competency Description

Effective interpretation explores personal relevance and encourages resource preservation, but also drives toward the broader outcome of a just and healthy planet. Natural and cultural heritage sites provide ideal forums for exploring relevant ideas and essential questions facing today's society.

In a world of complex challenges, interpretation invites meaningful dialogue in which audiences express and experience multiple perspectives. The goal is not to change minds, but to consider new points of view. Effective interpretation honors and incorporates different types of truth – forensic/academic, personal, societal, and reconciliatory [forensic]– and uses thoughtful questions to invite dialogue, foster awareness and encourage collaborative solutions.

Audience-centered programs and media must be dynamic and flexible, yet should also demonstrate intentionality in design and purpose. A cohesive experience for the audience is achieved by allowing exploration of an essential question or relevant idea to unfold around or within a purposeful interpretive focus or framework.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Apply their understanding of the resource, audience and the broader social context to develop relevant ideas and essential questions.
- Use heritage resources as catalysts to explore and investigate questions and ideas essential to today's society.
- Develop goal-driven programs and products to address the needs/interests of the audience, the site/agency, and the broader needs of society⁵.
- Design interpretive experiences with purposeful focus and structure that can be tailored to audience interests and input.
- Embrace flexibility, allowing audiences to cooperatively shape interpretive experiences while in progress through contribution of content and meanings.

⁵ Adapted from *Vision Paper--21st Century National Park Service Interpreter Skills*, page 9. Also see the competency description above for *Evolving Interpretive Theory*.

Embracing Multiple Engagement Techniques

Competency Description

Interpretation integrates a wide variety of engagement techniques and strategies. The primary purpose of engagement techniques is to facilitate audience exploration and interaction with the resource and each other, not to instruct or preach. Interpretive and facilitative techniques provide opportunities for audience co-creation of content and meanings, and the exploration of multiple perspectives. By using facilitative techniques, interpreters and educators provide opportunities for reflection, expression, immersion and participation in safe and encouraging ways.

Interpreters and educators learn how to apply techniques appropriately in all types of audience experiences. They design programs and media that may be ranger-facilitated, co-created and/or self-curated by the audience. The design of an interpretive experience includes purposeful selection and integration of techniques in order to: 1) facilitate opportunities for both intellectual and emotional connections to resource meanings, and 2) support the exploration of relevant ideas and essential questions, 3) build capacity for civic skills. Whether on-site, off-site or virtual, the resource is central to the interpretive experience. Interpreters integrate techniques to help the audience use the resource to explore its broader implications on their lives today.

For programs, informal contacts and social media (personal services), interpreters and educators learn how to 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.

Interpreters and educators embrace experimentation and seek continuous improvement in their use of engagement techniques. They proactively seek opportunities to receive feedback from peers, partners and audiences. They participate in professional communities of practice to maintain awareness of emerging strategies and techniques.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Skillfully and purposefully select and integrate engagement techniques to facilitate opportunities for connection, contribution, collaboration and co-creation.
- Recognize when/how to use techniques to facilitate opportunities for audiences to create meaningful experiences on their own.
- Apply facilitation techniques as tools to guide interactive experiences and address controversy.
- Craft appropriate, strategic and responsive techniques for each audience, setting, venue, social climate and resource.
- Continuously improve audience experiences through collaboration, experimentation, feedback and evaluation.

Planning Effective Experiences

Competency Description

Effective planning is an essential key to effective audience-centered experiences. Good planning takes a proactive investment of time and collaborative effort. The planning process for all programs/products involves a thoughtful and purposeful consideration of the following foundational elements:

- *Potential audiences* -- Beyond the notion of the “general audience,” interpreters and educators will plan for specific audience types who are likely to participate, as well as consideration of reaching new or underserved audiences.
- *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 (see *Evolving Interpretive Theory*). Educators will work closely with education partners to establish purposeful program goals and learning objectives of mutual benefit (see additional competencies for NPS educators).

After determining audience and purpose, planning can proceed to selecting the appropriate program or product type and interpretive focus (see *Relevant Ideas and Essential Questions*). As planning moves into interpretive design and content development, interpreters and educators apply an ever-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 and implementation into every planning process, rather than as afterthoughts. In addition, the most effective planning and development does not occur in a vacuum, but involves seeking feedback and honing ideas throughout the process. An evaluation and feedback strategy is a critical component of every plan and product. Planning and facilitating engaging experiences is most effective with on-going collaboration and feedback. Interpreters embrace evaluation and seek continuous improvement in their use of engagement techniques. They proactively seek opportunities to receive feedback from peers, partners and audiences.

Competency Standard

All Interpreters and Educators:

- Identify and address foundational planning elements for all programs and products.
- Plan purposefully for interpretive effectiveness, accessibility, and implementation.
- Apply design skills appropriate for the presentation method or product type.
- Provide flexible structure and focus that allows for audience contribution and co-creation.
- Plan collaboratively, seeking input and involvement from colleagues, supervisors, audiences and other stakeholders throughout the planning and development process.
- Develop an evaluation and feedback strategy at the outset of the planning process.
- Embrace experimentation, flexibility, and the willingness to “go back to the drawing board” based on audience needs, interests and cues.

Implementing Effective Experiences

Competency Description

A well-planned interpretive or educational experience will not be successful without effective implementation. Knowledge and skills for implementation vary by program or product type and delivery mode. They include the basic mechanics for technical design and production, organization, logistics, group dynamics, safety, accessibility and facilitative communication (verbal and written). The abilities to plan for and adapt to audience input and changing situations are also critical. The development and honing of these skills will be a career-long endeavor. Self-assessment and continuous feedback are essential.

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 verbal and written communication skills.
- Plan strategies and practice communication skills to manage group dynamics, facilitate audience participation, ensure safety, and manage conflict.
- Plan and practice flexibility and adaptability as important aspects of audience-centered experiences.
- Meet NPS standards for accessibility of all programs and products.
- Meet NPS standards for technical design and production of media products.
- Seek out evaluation and feedback to identify areas for improvement.
- Maintain an on-going feedback and revision/refinement loop for the entire life of the program or product.

References and Acknowledgements

Primary References

There are many contributing sources of influence and inspiration for describing the evolving nature of interpretation and education and the skills needed to address the needs and expectations of a changing society. The following sources provided the primary mandates and inspiration for the current revision of NPS foundational interpretive competencies.

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Acknowledgements

The following colleagues participated in various workgroups for drafting, reviewing and editing this revision document between August, 2015 and January, 2016.

Project Facilitators: Becky Lacome and John Rudy

Contributors and Reviewers: Melanie Armstrong, Scott Babinowich, Denise Bausch, Elizabeth Barrie, Katie Bliss, Janis Buckreus, Brandon Cadwell, Linda Chandler, Christian Davis, Jake Dinkelaker, Corinne Fenner, Karen Garthwait, Kristin Gibbs, Jenna Giddens, Phillip Greenwalt, Joey Herron, Emily Jacobs, Rick Jenkins, Stephanie Kyriazis, Becky Lacome, Sue Langdon, Emily Levine, Pam Machuga, Justin Monetti, Lisa Murphy, Pete Peterson, Katie Phillips, John Rudy, Tess Shatzer, Carol Shively, Murray Shoemaker, Kristy Sholly, Vanessa Smiley, Robert Stewart, Laura Sturtz, Kimble Talley, Ahmad Toure, Mandi Toy, Karen Weaver, Cidney Webster, Brendan Wilson, Abby Wines, Jeff Wolin