

Knowledge of the Audience – Informal Audience Research

Excerpted/adapted from *Interpreting Climate Change: Knowledge of the Audience – Module 3 Learning Companion*. National Park Service, Interpretive Development Program and Climate Change Response Program; 2014.

Gaining audience knowledge relies on identifying what information is needed, choosing appropriate research techniques, conducting the research, and applying it to an interpretive product. Interpreters should be able to apply their findings to identify the interpretive strategies and techniques most appropriate for the intended audience, and to strengthen connections between that audience, the park, and the resources.

Within the NPS, formal research requires a peer-review process to ensure that DOI and NPS policies are followed and neither park resources nor humans are negatively impacted. Interpreters generally do not conduct formal research themselves but may benefit from data and assessments from academic, private, or other circles. On the other hand, interpreters may conduct audience research in a more informal way that still provides useful information and utilizes techniques from the social sciences or humanistic fields. Informal research includes techniques used by interpreters as part of their everyday activities to learn about audiences and can be both quantitative and qualitative in nature.

Informal Research

Before beginning an informal research project, interpreters should determine what they want to learn from visitors, their intended goals and outcomes, and who they will engage. They should define specific audiences: what are their common interests, needs, and behaviors?

Opportunities to conduct informal research exist with each visitor contact and everywhere the public interacts with a park's resources. Interpreters can gather information by using the informal research methods listed below:

A **conversation** provides interpreters with an opportunity to ask questions of the audience, be it in-person or over the phone. Interpreters may start an interpretive talk with casual conversation about where the audience is from, what they know (or think they know) about the site or topic, and their degree of involvement in park stewardship.

Observation is a technique to understand visitor-use patterns of behavior and movement. An interpreter watches audiences move through a park or an exhibit, or interact amongst themselves. It may help, for example, in answering questions about audience interest in exhibits or about the kind of discussions generated among families after a ranger talk.

Participant-observation involves joining an event as both audience and observer. (Because the NPS uniform calls attention to an individual, the interpreter might be able to wear street clothes with permission.)

Responses from interpretive or educational programs might also provide interpreters with information about their audience. Interpreters might gather generalized information from materials submitted for a student art project, or from feedback in visitor comment books, etc.

Local newspapers may include journalistic articles or opinion pieces about the park or interpretive topics of interest within the community.

Engage with local communities to gather a greater understanding of local perspectives on climate change and park issues. Engaging with the local community shows that the park is invested in the health of the region and does not stand apart.

Social media provide another opportunity for qualitative research: Blogs: Search blogs or write a blog to gain a variety of perceptions in a public journal format. Check out the comments, as well, to see how people respond.

Collecting information about audiences using these methods may involve:

- Taking field notes
- Recording audiences' answers to questions
- Photographing visitor usage of spaces
- Drawing maps
- Reviewing visitor logs and response cards

Interpreters might apply informal research to a range of audiences, from one-time visitors to park website visitors to community residents who have had long-term engagement with the park.