

## Types of Visitor Service -- Orientation, Information and Interpretation

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Understanding the difference between orientation, information and interpretation – and when and why to provide these services – is a core understanding for all interpreters in order to:

- address visitor needs for a safe and enriching experience
- support the needs of the park/site to protect resources and meet the public service mission of the NPS.

Through interpretive planning, a park attempts to meet a range of visitor needs and expectations through orientation, information and interpretation services. Individually, each interpreter provides an appropriate level of service “in the moment” during each visitor encounter.

### Orientation

Orientation refers to such things as direction, location, proximity, wayfinding, etc. These elements help visitors understand where they are and how to get where they need to go.

Cues that a visitor needs orientation assistance include:

- "Where" questions: Where can I go to see or do...?
- Extended viewing of a facility map.
- Acting hesitant while looking around.

### Information

Information about the resource provides an important context for the visitor's experience. The information provided can be basic or in-depth, depending on the level of visitor interest and engagement.

Cues that a visitor needs information include:

- "What" questions: What kind of flower is that?
- "When" questions: When in the artist's life did he paint this?
- "How" questions: How did this valley form?
- Making eye contact and approaching an interpreter.

### Interpretation

Interpretation uses information about the site as both context and catalyst to facilitate interpretive opportunities and experiences. However, interpretation goes *beyond* providing facts by applying interpretive techniques and dialogic questions to invite the audience to explore the evolving personal and social relevance of park resources.

*“Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.” --Freeman Tilden*

Cues that a visitor wants interpretation include:

- "Why" questions: Why are all those trees dying? Why is this place so important?
- Head nodding and other body language such as leaning forward and maintaining eye contact.
- Follow-up questions that prompt you to provide deeper insights or invite visitors to share their own thoughts and ideas for the purpose of mutual learning.

### ***Meeting Visitor Needs***

Visitors come to our sites – in person or virtually -- seeking certain experiences. They have a wide range of motivations, needs and expectations. Their basic level needs for security and orientation must be met before higher level needs such as understanding can be addressed successfully (Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs – watch a [quick video](#) or read an [in-depth pdf](#)).

**The role of basic orientation and information** is to address the basic physiological and security needs of the visitor. Where's the bathroom? Where can I get food, water, and lodging? Is it safe here? Where am I? What accessibility services do you have? What foreign language options are available?

**The role of in-depth orientation and information** is to address mid-level needs such as belonging, esteem, and knowledge. Some visitors are already emotionally connected to a place and really just want more details. A good example may be a civil war buff that understands the meaning and significance of a particular site, but wants to know the details of every troop movement. Many visitors simply want to gain more knowledge of the resource to satisfy their curiosity or increase their personal knowledge. Interpreters should also recognize when visitors want to share *their* knowledge, and recognize that sometimes the best type of service is to provide is a willing ear and reciprocal curiosity.

**The role of interpretation** is to address the higher level needs for understanding, connection, and self-actualization. Interpretation provides opportunities for visitors to explore and discover meaningful connections to the site's resources and stories. These connections can be intellectual (a visitor might experience insight or understanding), emotional (a visitor might experience empathy or surprise), or both. It's important for interpreters to recognize when visitors are receptive to interpretation, and to never force interpretation on visitors who may be seeking a different type of service.

### ***Supporting site and agency needs and objectives***

**The role of basic orientation and information** in meeting the park mission is to provide for safety and security of both park visitors and park resources. Proper orientation to parking and trails, for example, keeps resource impacts to a minimum and provides for visitor safety and quality customer service.

**The role of in-depth orientation and information** in meeting the park mission is to provide for increased knowledge of park policies and laws related to resource protection. It also can provide for greater visitor appreciation through increased knowledge of information about the resource. In-depth orientation might include such things as detailed trip planning or explaining the reasoning for complex backcountry regulations. In-depth information might include detailed factual information about troop movements on a battlefield, or in-depth information on specific bird species.

**The role of interpretation** in meeting the park mission is to engage and inspire visitors to care about and care for park resources. Effective interpretation is critical to achieving stewardship goals and meeting the overall NPS mission of providing for visitor enjoyment while preserving resources for the future. In addition, interpretation plays a pivotal role in the agency's public service mission to encourage life-long learning and promote civic dialogue, leveraging the powerful national significance and evolving social relevance of national parks.

### ***Providing the Right Level of Service***

The level of service you provide will help shape your guests' experience and will help define overall opinions about your organization.

Knowing how much orientation, information, or interpretation to provide to visitors is an important skill. Not every visitor requires an "intensive" interpretive experience. Proper reading of visitor cues will help you decide what level of detail is needed. Sometimes visitor cues are non-verbal. The interpreter may see a quizzical look at a map, or they may see someone damaging resources by collecting something or feeding wildlife.

It is important to note that there can be a significant difference between an actual visitor need, and what the interpreter feels the visitor needs. When a visitor is feeding wildlife, their needs may be such things as getting a better photograph, getting closer to wildlife, having fun, or wanting to "help" the animal survive. The interpreter's need for the audience is more likely to be education, information, compliance, or understanding. This is NOT the same thing as the visitor need. Be sure to try and understand why a visitor is acting a certain way and acknowledge their need while also meeting the agencies need for that visitor.

*"In order to provide an exceptional service experience, the organization must understand each customer's needs and wants, and be able to respond accordingly in the service moment."*

Disney Institute Blog, June 09, 2015 by Bruce Jones

In addition to gauging the right type of service to provide for visitors, an interpreter must be able to match the type of service to the appropriate interpretive medium. See [Interpretive Product Types—Strengths and Limitations](#).