

Exhibit Label Script Guidelines

National Air and Space Museum

and

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The Exhibit Process

Most National Air and Space Museum exhibitions are conceived by the curatorial departments or Center for Earth and Planetary Studies (CEPS) and designed and produced by the Museum's exhibits divisions. However, even small or temporary exhibitions will typically involve to some extent most departments throughout the Museum.

Exhibit proposals are reviewed by the Museum's Exhibitions and Public Program Initiatives Committee, which recommends to the Museum's Senior Leadership which proposals to accept or reject. The Museum director has final approval. For a summary of the Museum's exhibit development process, see this document:

NASM Exhibit Development Process Summary

An exhibit label script is typically written by a curator, scientist, or team of Museum content experts. The Exhibits writer-editor reviews and edits all label scripts. The final edited version is circulated for review and approval to the design chair, associate directors, chief curator, and director. The writer-editor also reviews and tracks all subsequent changes to the label script. The final graphic layouts are reviewed and approved by the key exhibit team members, Exhibits Design chair, senior graphic designer, Exhibits writer-editor, associate directors, chief curator, and director.

The following documents are used in the review and approval process:

NASM Label Script Approval Cover Sheet

Graphics Approval Signoff Sheet

Label Script Guidelines

Steps in the Label Script Process

- 1. Content Development and Writing:** Curatorial and CEPS staff work with Exhibits, Education, and other Museum staff in developing the exhibit content. The curators and scientists usually write the exhibit label script. The Exhibits writer-editor edits the label script and may also be involved in the writing.
- 2. Editing:** When a first draft is finished, the content team submits the label script with a signed cover sheet to the Exhibits writer-editor. The writer-editor takes charge of the scripting process and edits the script. The level of editing may range from just basic copyediting to major rewriting and reorganization. The writer-editor works with the content team to create a final version, coordinates the script review and approval process, keeps track of subsequent changes to the script, and maintains permanent electronic and paper copies of the finished script and any post-opening changes.
- 3. Review and Approval:** Once a final script is produced, the writer-editor coordinates the review and approval process, which involves the designer, Exhibits Design chair, associate directors, chief curator, and director. The writer-editor answers queries from the script reviewers and consults with the content team as needed to incorporate any requested changes or corrections.
- 4. Design:** Proofs of the exhibit graphics are reviewed by members of the exhibit content, design, and education team members and the Exhibits Design writer-editor, senior graphic designer, and chair. The project manager coordinates the final graphics review, which also includes the associate directors, chief curator, and director.
- 5. Production:** Exhibits Production produces the exhibit graphics. The designer, content team, and writer-editor proof the final printed graphics that will be mounted in the exhibition. Only essential corrections should be made at this point. Once the designer approves the graphics, Production staff mount and install them in the exhibition.

Writing the Labels

An excellent resource every exhibit writer should consult is *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach* by Beverly Serrell (AltaMira Press, 1996). Topics covered in this comprehensive book include the “big idea,” the nature of interpretive labels, types of exhibition labels, audience and learning styles, writing effective exhibit labels, evaluation, typographic design, and much more.

Below are some basic guidelines that writers creating exhibit text for the National Air and Space Museum should follow.

- **Always consider your readers.** Our visitors range from the very young to the very old, from subject experts to those who know little or nothing about aviation, spaceflight, or science. Their learning styles vary. Many do not speak English fluently. They trek through crowded galleries alone or in groups, with children or other family members or friends. They are often trying to cover lot of territory in a limited amount of time. Write with their needs in mind.
- **Write short labels.** Brevity is grace. Trim away nonessential information. Make every word count. Consider what William Zinsser wrote in his book, *Writing to Learn*: “The reader should be given only as much information as he needs and not one word more. Anything else is self-indulgence.”
- **Use active verbs and simple words.** Avoid passive language and choose strong, precise verbs. Substitute short words for needlessly long ones (*about* for *approximately*).
- **Write for non-specialists.** Assume your readers are unfamiliar with the subject. Avoid jargon and unnecessary acronyms. Define technical terms and explain difficult concepts in familiar terms.
- **Write short and simple sentences.** Start most sentences with the subject and verb. Avoid compound sentences and complex sentence structure. Use conversational language. Write so labels are easy for visitors to read aloud.

Deadly Sins of Unsuccessful Labels

In *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Beverly Serrell offers a list of “10 deadly sins” that should be avoided in exhibits:

1. Labels that are not related to a big idea, that ramble without focus or objectives.
2. Labels that have too much emphasis on instruction (presenting information) instead of interpretation (offering provocation).
3. Labels that do not address visitors' prior knowledge, interests, and/or misconceptions—that don't know who the audience is.
4. Labels with no apparent system of design and content to organize the messages, codes, or context.
5. Labels written with a vocabulary that is out of reach for the majority of visitors.
6. Labels that are too long and wordy.
7. Labels that ask questions that are not the visitors' questions.
8. Labels for interactives that do not have instructions or interpretations located in integrated, logical ways.
9. Labels that do not begin with concrete, visual references.
10. Labels that are hard to read because of poor typography (bad choice of typeface, design, colors, lighting, materials, or placement).

- **Break up long labels.** Divide long labels into several shorter ones, or use bullets to present information in lists of shorter chunks. Move details from main labels into photo or artifact labels.
- **Keep paragraphs short and well organized.** Visitors may scan rather than read every word. Two or three short paragraphs are easier to read or scan than one long block of text. Begin with the main idea and end on a strong note.
- **Focus on the object at hand.** Encourage visitors to examine an object more closely. Point out interesting features they might overlook. Tell them things that are not obvious from observation alone.
- **Write so each label can stand on its own.** Visitors won't necessarily read labels in the preferred order, and few will read them all. Each label must make sense if read alone, but it also has to fit within the larger matrix of labels that relate the story being told.
- **Write effective titles.** Titles and subtitles can be read at a glance and from a distance. They can serve as guideposts, identify objects or topics, summarize important points, capture attention, and add drama, flair, and fun. Interesting or informative titles can help get main exhibit messages across and entice visitors into reading label text.
- **Write with style.** Good label writing shouldn't be bland. Imagine yourself talking to visitors rather than writing for them. Have a conversation. Convey information in interesting, even fun, ways. Engaging writing will make visitors want to read more.
- **Refer to dictionaries and style guides.** *Webster's Third New International Dictionary* and its chief abridgement, *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*, can resolve many questions of hyphenation, capitalization, and spelling. For other matters of editorial consistency, refer to *The Chicago Manual of Style* and the Museum's *Editorial Style Guidelines for NASM Exhibits*, which focuses on points of style specific to our needs that are not covered in or that supersede *Chicago*. The Exhibits Design writer-editor establishes the Museum's editorial style for exhibits and maintains and updates the *Editorial Style Guidelines*.

Helpful Research and Evaluation Findings

In *Exhibit Labels: An Interpretive Approach*, Beverly Serrell summarizes 14 points supported by research and evaluation that can help exhibit developers produce better exhibits. Those quoted below relate directly to the way labels or label scripts are written:

- More visitors read shorter labels, and read them more thoroughly than longer labels.
- Labels next to dimensional elements in exhibits get read more than flat label panels on the wall, without objects nearby. This includes introductory and orientation information.
- Chunking information into short paragraphs, 25 to 75 words long, increases the likelihood of reading.
- Labels that contain concrete, visually referenced information will increase visitors' tendencies to read-look-read-look, pointing and talking.
- More adults will read label text to children when labels are easy to read out loud without the need to paraphrase or translate unfamiliar vocabulary words (for themselves or their children).
- Labels with images and words working together are meaningful and memorable to more visitors than all-text labels.

Organizing the Labels

Unlike books and magazine articles, which are organized linearly from beginning to end, an exhibition must allow for arbitrary reading. Information must be presented in “chunks” (labels) that can be read randomly and “layered” (organized in a hierarchy), so visitors can navigate through it, pick and choose what they want to read, and follow the main themes without having to read everything.

Every exhibition must have a title and a main or introductory label, which introduces the exhibition and presents the main theme. The content is subdivided into units and sometimes subunits, each focusing on a particular subject or theme and usually introduced by a main label. Labels that accompany artifacts, photographs, and graphics fall within those units and subunits. Small exhibits will have few units and no subunits. Large exhibits may have many units and subunits.

How a label script is organized will depend on the amount and kinds information and objects being presented. The general structure should resemble that of an outline, with the outline levels corresponding to the hierarchy of units and subunits. The structure should be consistent, easy to follow, and not overly complex.

Types of Labels

- **Exhibition main label**—States the main theme and sets the tone for the exhibition. One to three paragraphs long, preferably no more than about 150 words long.
- **Unit and subunit main labels**—Introduce the various units and subunits. Lengths will vary, but brevity is grace. Visitors should be able to follow the exhibition story line by reading these labels. The label titles help guides readers through the content and can act as a level of information in themselves by conveying key points. A title can also serve to “hook” a visitor into reading the rest of the label.
- **Object labels**—Provide information about the artifacts, models, photos, graphics, or groupings of objects on display. Label lengths will vary from a few words identifying a small artifact or a photograph to several paragraphs on a major artifact.
- **Text labels**—Free-standing blocks of text other than main labels. They often result from trying to cram too much information into an exhibition. Use them sparingly. Most labels should relate directly to objects or graphics or introduce units or subunits.
- **Technical specifications**—A list of technical data for a major artifact, typically an airplane, spacecraft, rocket, or engine. The information included should be fairly consistent among artifacts of a particular class.
- **Recognition label**—Acknowledges the contributions of donors and other contributors to an exhibition. NASM’s Advancement Office provides the appropriate wording and reviews the final text.

Formatting the Label Script

The Exhibits Design writer-editor can provide label script templates and guidance on how to use them, and will fix any formatting problems or format the script as part of the editing process. Exhibit writers need not spend too much time and energy struggling with formatting details that the editor can easily fix.

Using the format can be tricky if you are unfamiliar with working in with Word tables. If you find using tables difficult, you can write your labels in unformatted text and then copy them into the table format. Again, the writer-editor is happy to help.

- **Use Microsoft Word**—Microsoft Excel or any program is not acceptable.
- **Use the table format**—The writer-editor can provide two different templates depending on your needs: one, a simple two-column format using 12-point Times Roman; the other a modified two-column format with different levels of labels set in different type sizes. This second template is useful for major gallery scripts.
- **Right column**—Contains the label text only, one label to a cell.
- **Left column**—Contains the label ID number and any notes or identifying information about the artifact or photograph that goes with the label, such as the accession number or negative number. Include wherever possible a low-resolution (100 dpi or so) thumbnail image of the object. Do not embed high-resolution images in the script. Those should be given to the exhibit designer.
- **Footer**—Contains the page number and date of the script version.

Typographical Tips

- **Spacing**—Single space between sentences.
- **Indents**—Do not indent paragraphs.
- **Justification**—Right-hand margins should be “ragged” (left justified).
- **Line ends**—Let lines of text wrap. Don’t insert hard returns at the end of each line.
- **Hyphens**—Turn auto-hyphenation off.

Label Numbering

Labels usually have a unique ID codes that indicate the unit or subunit the label belongs to and the type of object it is associated with. Again, exhibit writers should not agonize over the numbering; the exhibit writer-editor can do the final numbering. Consider the following example.

PF:311-L3-P3

PF: Gallery abbreviation for *Pioneers of Flight*. This is no longer essential.

311 Unit or subunit number.

-L3 Label number, identifying the label as the third in that subunit. Labels within each unit are numbered consecutively, beginning with L1, which is usually a main label for a unit or subunit.

-P3 Object number, indicating that a photo accompanies the label. The object number has the same numeral as the label number. **P3-A3** would indicate that the label goes with both a photo and an artifact.

The following abbreviations are used in label IDs to designate different types of objects.

A Artifact, artwork, model (when an artifact)

G Graphic that needs to be created

P Photograph, image, existing graphic

V Video

MI Mechanical interactive

CI Computer interactive

Organization of Units

Corresponding Label IDs

Main unit

PF:100-L1

Subunit

PF:110-L1

Artifact

PF:110-L2-A2

Photo

PF:110-L3-P3

Photo

PF:110-L4-P4

Sub-Subunit

PF:111-L1

Model

PF:111-L2-M2

Photo

PF:111-L3-P3

Photo

PF:211-L4-P4

Submitting the Label Script

The curator or lead curator submits a final draft of the script to the writer-editor in two forms: electronically via e-mail or posted on an accessible network drive, and a hard copy along with the current version of the *NASM Label Script Approval Cover Sheet*, signed by the exhibit writer, curator or lead curator, and curatorial department chair. (Names should also be printed or typed below signatures to ensure they can be read.)

The writer-editor logs the script into a tracking document, tracks it through the review and approval process, updates it as needed, and maintains the label script archives.

The submitted script should be as close to a final draft as possible and include the label contributions of Education—“family” or “directed-looking” labels—and those of Web and New Media. Family labels in particular should be included in the edited draft circulated for review and approval. It is the curator’s or lead curator’s responsibility to see that the submitted script is as complete as possible.

Label Script Review and Approval Process

Once the label script has been edited by the writer-editor and approved by the curator or content team, the writer-editor signs the cover sheet and submits the script for review and approval. A printout of the label script is put in a red folder, with the cover sheet stapled to the front, and circulated for signoff to the designer (for major exhibitions) Exhibit Design chair, associate directors, chief curator, and Museum director. Minor changes or additions to existing exhibits need only be approved by the Exhibits Design chair.

This new label script review and approval procedure was adopted in 2015:

- 1. Review by Associate Directors.** The writer-editor emails a copy of the script to the Exhibits Design chair and the associate directors for their simultaneous review. The writer-editor briefly explains the nature of the label script (whether it’s an update or a new exhibit and where it will go) and suggests a deadline for review. The writer-editor addresses any comments or questions that arise. Once the deadline is reached—unless a reviewer requests more time or brings up issues that need addressing—the writer-editor will assume the reviewers have approved the script. The writer-editor obtains the Exhibits Design chair’s signature on the cover sheet.
- 2. Review by Chief Curator.** The writer-editor forwards the printed copy of the script and coversheet to the chief curator. The chief curator reviews the script and works out any further issues with the writer-editor and, if necessary, the exhibit writers. The writer-editor makes any requested changes and reprints and replaces any changed pages. The chief curator signs the coversheet.
- 3. Review by Museum Director.** The chief curator forwards the script and coversheet to the Museum director’s office. The director’s assistant obtains the signatures of the associate directors who reviewed the script via email and forwards the printed script to the director for his review. Any further changes, questions, or comments are referred to the chief curator and/or the writer-editor for resolution. The director signs the coversheet, and the exhibit script is considered approved.

The script is returned to the writer-editor, who updates it as needed as exhibit development proceeds. Before the final exhibit graphics review, the writer-editor provides the director with a printout of the updated script to peruse before the review.

Udvar-Hazy Center Labels

Exhibit Stations

A Few Considerations

- Each exhibit station contains 10 panels.
- The first panel usual contains only a single introductory label in large type.
- At least one of the 10 panels must be a clear window panel without labels or photos.
- Photos and text cannot occupy the entire surface of the other 8 panels, but only about the lower half or so. A background image usually covers the upper part. This is both a matter of design and accessibility—we can't place small text above a certain height.
- Thus, you have no more than 8 panels on which to display most of your labels and photos, and fewer if the exhibit station will include second window panel or a “shadowbox” case displaying small artifacts.

Guidelines

Main introductory label: About 150 words (200 maximum). It will occupy its own panel along with a background image.

Subsection labels: About 50 to 100 words or so each. No more than one per panel. Avoid multiple levels of labels on a single panel.

Photos and photo captions: Don't crowd panels with too many images; the exhibit designer can provide guidance on what how many you should include. Keep captions short, from just a few words to about 50.

Overall balance of text: Some exhibit writers write long introductory labels and short captions. Others write short introductory labels and long photo captions. Either approach can work, but avoid consistently long labels throughout. As always, the shorter, the better.

Ideally, you might aim for this:

1	main intro label (about 150 words)
6	subsection labels (averaging about 100 words each)
<u>24</u>	photos and captions (averaging about 50 words each and three per panel)
~2,000	words total, a good round number to shoot for

Images

Curators are responsible for obtaining and submitting images used in exhibit stations. If there are multiple options for an image format, these are the preferred options, from most preferred to least:

1. High-resolution digital, TIFF (preferred) or JPEG
2. 8 x 10 photograph
3. 4 x 5 transparency
4. Slide

Exhibit Cases

Types of labels: Most exhibit cases contain only a single main label and artifact labels. Some also have subunit labels, but room for these is usually limited. These cases are meant to showcase artifacts; they are not meant to be fully conceived exhibits like exhibit stations.

Main label panel, storefront case: Storefront cases each have a separate backlit panel containing a main label (about 150 words or so) and a large background photo.

Main label, other cases: Mannequin and medium cases usually have only a main label (about 150 words or so) describing the artifact or collection displayed. Additional text labels if needed should be shorter.

Object labels: The label title will always be the name or type of object. The label text, if included, should usually be short—one paragraph up to about 50 words or so. Some types of object labels may have subtitles, which can serve to shorten the descriptive text. For example, subtitles for machine gun labels include nationality and era, and subtitles for astronaut equipment labels denote the space program name. Object labels should include credit lines and artifact numbers but not technical specifications.

Photographs: Except for the background image on the storefront case main label panels, exhibit cases include few or no photos or graphics.

Aircraft Specifications

Specifications should refer to the aircraft on display, not the aircraft type in general. The categories included will vary depending on the particular object.

- Wingspan:** Round off to nearest 0.1 meter and inch. (“Rotor diameter” for vertical flight aircraft.)
- Length:** Round off to nearest 0.1 meter and inch.
- Height:** Round off to nearest 0.1 meter and inch (omit for hang gliders).
- Weight, empty:** Round off to nearest kg and lb. (Just use “Weight” if both empty and gross are not included.)
- Weight, gross:** Round off to nearest kg and lb.
- Top speed:** Round off to nearest km/mi per hour.
- Engine(s):** Number (if more than one), name, and horsepower or thrust.
Sometimes included: inline, rotary, # cylinders, overhead V, etc.
- Crew:** Include only if the airplane had a crew of two or more.
- Armament:** Include only if the airplane carried it. Keep as brief as possible.
- Ordnance:** Use metric/English equivalents only for total bomb load; otherwise use 100-lb or 500-kg bomb without equivalent.
- Manufacturer:** Company, location, year. If any of these are unknown, it’s okay to leave out. Drop Inc. and Ltd. (“Builder” if aircraft was built by one or more people rather than built in quantity.)

Space Artifact Specifications

Include specifications blocks for rockets, missiles, and launch vehicles (but not scale models), and for manned and unmanned spacecraft (including training versions), but not instruments or components from them.

Length:	Or “Height.” Round off to near nearest 0.1 meter and inch.
Width:	Only included for a few relevant objects.
Weight:	Rounded off to nearest kg and lb. Sometimes “Weight, loaded” or “Weight, operational.”
Weight, warhead:	Or “Weight, payload.” Round off to nearest kg and lb.
Range:	For missiles.
Thrust:	In newtons and pounds. These figures should refer to total thrust.
Propellants:	Include where provided.
Manufacturer:	Company, location if important, year of manufacture if known. Drop Inc. and Ltd.

Categories

Rockets, Missiles, and Launch Vehicles

Length
Weight
Weight, warhead or payload
Range (missiles)
Thrust
Propellants
Manufacturer

Rocket Engines

Length
Weight
Thrust
Propellants
Manufacturer

Others

Length or height
Width, when appropriate
Weight
Manufacturer