Design a Label

1999

GUIDELINES ON LABELLING FOR MUSEUMS

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THE CAMPAIGN FOR
MUSEUMS

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Department for Education and Employment

IN PRAISE OF THE HUMBLE LABEL

Foreword by Maurice Davies, Deputy Director, Museums Association

Museums are using ever more sophisticated techniques for interpretation and education. Every issue of Museums Journal or Museum Practice seems to feature a new piece of audio or multimedia technology, a new approach to outreach or events aimed at a previously little-reached audience group, or a clever new approach to design and display.

But surrounded by all this experimentation and innovation, we seem to be neglecting that most ubiquitous communication device - the object label or 'caption', as some prefer to call it. Even in these days of hi-tech digital audio guides, low-tech interactives and very human live interpreters, I reckon it is still reasonable to say that most visitors to most museums get most of their interpretation from written material, much of it in individual-object labels. And museum staff spend much of their time writing labels - or at least arguing about the best way to write them. The conclusions of these debates over labelling are often bizarre.

Show me the label and I will deconstruct the dogma. In other museums the rules will be quite different. 1,700 different approaches to labelling? Maybe - sometimes it feels like it.

This is strange: in other areas museums are keen to sign up to universal standards and conform to what is seen as general good practice. We love our codes of ethics and registration and happily embrace precise lux, humidity and temperature levels for different categories of object. Yet when it comes to the all-important label no one seems to agree what is best.

So, much time is wasted arguing about labelling and, more importantly, visitors are badly served and too often have to endure labels that are badly written, awkwardly positioned or in type too small to read. Some things that museums do with their labels are just plain stupid. Here are some questions for you label writers out there:

Why are introductory text panels for exhibitions so long? And why are they often positioned so that those reading them block the entrance to the gallery?

Why do they have cross references to other labels such as 'see, for example, picture no 49'? Do any visitors actually succeed in following these fruitless trails round the gallery?

What kind of special eyewear is needed to read labels that are placed at the back of showcase, or horizontally, flat on the bottom of the case?

Why is it sometimes so hard to find the label that refers to a particular object?

Why do labels so often tell you esoteric information, rather than concentrating on what you can actually see?

Solving these problems should be pretty basic stuff. After all, when we read a newspaper, we expect the articles to be clearly written; and when we visit a shop we expect prices and sizes to be clearly marked. So why are so many museums, frankly, incompetent when it comes to preparing labels?

There will of course always be people who are good at writing labels (use them!) and those who are not (edit them!). In all cases things can be improved by following a few basic rules. This leaflet aims to set down some guidelines to help you create precise, interesting labels that stimulate thought and curiosity as well as answer visitors' most obvious questions.

Guidelines

'Whatever its content, text must be designed to be quickly and comfortably assimilated if it is to stand a chance of communicating with visitors.'

CONTENT

The text's content will be determined by the target audience. This might be a well defined one, such as schoolchildren of a particular age, or broadly-based, such as family groups ranging from young children to elderly people. Being clear about your audience will influence:

■ What you want to say (taking account of what the audience will want to know).

■ How you say it (style, language and vocabulary).

■ Who should write it (someone with a specialist knowledge of the subject, or with writing or editing skills).

STYLE AND LANGUAGE

Decide on the style and language best suited to the target audience (conversational, formal, factual?)

■ Will you address your audience directly or not (for example: 'If you look closely at **the** fossil, you can see...'; or 'On close inspection, the fossil.......)?

■ Does your organisation have an established house style which you have to follow? If not, how will you ensure consistency?

■ Decide on a reading age. This is a measure of the complexity of word and sentence structure, unrelated to the actual age or reading ability of visitors. For general audiences, it is common practice to aim at a reading age of 12 to 13 for introductory text and up to 15 for subsequent levels. The Fry test is one method of assessing the reading age of text; another more general indicator of the complexity of text is the Fog Index (see box 1). Some word processing software also includes a facility for checking readability.

■ Test out the readability of text on the target audience (including children if appropriate).

■ If you are writing your own text, ask colleagues to read and comment on drafts. Consider using someone with editing skills; editing your own text is notoriously difficult.

DESIGN MATTERS

Even if you are using a professional designer, be prepared to question decisions on typefaces and point sizes; ask for sample text to try out in the gallery.

■ Select typefaces for their legibility; avoid the use of decorative fonts except possibly for main headings.

■ For display text, the choice between typefaces with or without serifs is largely one of personal preference. Times Roman (with serifs) and sans-serif fonts such as Helvetica or Univers are widely used.

■ Consider providing Braille versions of panels or labels for blind visitors, but only in addition to large-print labels.

■ For maximum legibility use white or off-white background (or other combinations of dark type on pale background) to achieve good contrast. Panels or labels in a different colour or shade to the surface behind them can help partially-sighted people to see them more easily.

■ Avoid materials for text or backgrounds with a gloss finish (such as acrylic plastic, gloss paint or polished metal) which can result in glare or reflection.

■ Check that legibility will not be adversely affected by the addition of protective layers of glass or acrylic sheet over text panels.

LIGHTING

Check position of panels and labels in relation to gallery lighting to ensure that:

■ Lighting levels will be sufficient for text to be read easily.

■ Visitors will not cast shadows over panels and labels by standing between displays and light sources.

■ Visibility will not be affected by glare or reflections from the surface of panels and labels (or from showcases in which they are located).

LOCATION

■ Decide the final location of panels and labels early on, to ensure that text is large enough in relation to viewing distance (See box 2).

■ Locate labels as close as possible to the objects they relate to. When relating individual objects to grouped labels use a clear numbering system, or numbered drawings of the objects adjacent to numbered captions.

■ Position panels and labels at standard heights and in consistent relationship to objects - for example, below or to one side of paintings. (See box 3).

■ Mount labels at 90 degrees to the line of vision (for example by tilting those in low or high positions towards the viewer). Labels laid flat in showcases can be difficult or impossible for children and people in wheelchairs to read.

■ Consider displaying text on 'paddles' or encapsulated cards which can be attached to lengths of wire or chain, or placed in holders beside the objects, and held by visitors to suit their eyesight.

WRITING TECHNIQUES

These techniques can be used to help visitors engage with text:

● Use main headings or titles of text panels to attract people's attention.

● Keep sentences simple, concise and direct. Avoid complicated sentence structures and sub-clauses within commas.

● Use active verbs eg: 'Donald Campbell broke the land speed record in Bluebird ...'; not 'Bluebird is the car in which Donald Campbell broke...').

● Break down lengthy or complicated text into digestible sections. Use bullet points or subheadings.

● Insert short quotations or colloquial expressions if they will add interest or variety to the main text.

● Avoid jargon or technical terms in text for non-specialist audiences (if unavoidable, try to provide a prominent glossary of terms on an introductory panel).

● Ask questions of visitors to help draw them into the display ('What do you think the ... ?' or 'Can you guess what ... ?').

● Refer to specific visible (or other sensory) qualities of objects such as their size, texture and colour, or make comparisons with other objects to encourage visitors to use their powers of observation.

● Try to relate descriptions and information to visitors' everyday experience (for example, comparing the weight or texture of a museum object to a commonplace item)

● Remember that text panels are not books, and cross-references to other panels or to catalogue or object numbers are unlikely to be followed up by visitors.

1. TARGETS FOR LENGTH AND READABILITY OF TEXT

LENGTH

Rule-of-thumb targets (preferred and maximum figures) for text to achieve optimum readability:

Main headings: one to five words (maximum ten)

Subheadings: one to five words (maximum ten)

Main text: Total 150 words (maximum 200) which may consist of:

● Introductory text:
50 words (maximum 100)
● First level text:
up to 100 words
● Words per sentence:
ten to 15 (maximum 20)
● Words per paragraph:
Up to 50
● Captions and labels: 25 to 50 words (maximum 75) as a general target for ease of reading.

READABILITY TEST

The Fog Index provides a rough guide to readability of text for general audiences:

Step 1 : Count 100 words, stopping at the end of the nearest whole sentence.

Step 2 : Count the number of sentences making up the 100 words.

Step 3 : Divide the number of words by number of sentences to find the average number of words per sentence.

READABILITY RATING

Average words per sentence	Rating	Readers reached %
1 to 8	Very easy	90
9 to 11	Fairly easy	86
12 to 17	Standard	75
18 to 21	Fairly difficult	40
22 to 25	Difficult	24
26 or more	Very difficult	5

2. TYPE SIZE AND LAYOUT

TYPE SIZE
Recommended type sizes relative to reading distance are listed to the right.

Visually impaired people: The minimum size for printed material recommended by the RNIB is 14 point; for display text, a minimum size of 16 point. (Ref: See it Right. Clear Print guidelines, RNIB Factsheet, May 1966)

LAYOUT
Recommended layout for optimum readability of printed text:

● Words per line: eight to 12
● Characters per line: 50 to 60 (65 maximum)
● Words per paragraph: 50

Maximum viewing distance, mm	Type size Points
450	12
700	18
900	24
1,150	30
1,400	36

3. MOUNTING HEIGHTS

Type of text	Height from floor, mm
TEXT PANELS Comfortable viewing zone for standing or seated visitors	1,200 - 1,700
Suggested mounting height	Centred at 1,400
LABELS Case or freestanding labels	900 - 1,200 level

ACCESS IN MIND

The book ACCESS IN MIND, written by Ann Rayner and published by INTACT, The Intellectual Access Trust (1998) brings together information and advice about labelling and text panels from a wide range of sources. These extracts give some food for thought:

Despite the general perception that access for disabled people is about providing ramps for wheelchairs, the reality is that there is a far greater problem in providing access for people with learning disabilities, poor literacy or visual impairment. In other words, legible signs are more important, and will help more people, than is generally realised.

While an estimated 1 million people in the UK have learning disabilities, there are over 7 million adults with literacy problems (one survey by the Basic Skills Agency suggests that as many as 11 % of the population have poor or below average literacy skills). There are also 1.7 million people with visual impairments which prevent them reading standard print easily. Visual deterioration is intrinsically linked to the ageing process and older readers see less contrast between colours and need higher light levels. Moreover, 1 in 12 of men have some degree of colour blindness (predominantly red/green).

Museums must also attract visitors of different nationalities and varying educational standards. This means that, ideally, information on labels should be comprehensible by people for whom English is not the first language as well as by people with below average literacy. The Plain English Campaign has led the way in the field of communication. This is about writing clearly without being patronising or over-simple.

Labels should be at a height, distance and angle which enables them to be read by people in wheelchairs and by people wearing bi-focals. The Metropolitan Museum of Art base their minimum standards of type size on a viewing distance of not more than 46 cm from the label or sign, installed at the optimal height. It follows that people with bi-focals will have difficulty in reading a label at the back or foot of a display case.

Curators should have the last word on accuracy of content, and educators the last word on legibility, readability and comprehension.

'Increasing the number of words decreases the number of readers'
Sandra Bicknell and Peter Mann
A Picture of Visitors for Exhibition Developers.

'Information overload causes distortion and fatigue'
John Veverka Interpretative Master Planning (Veverka believes that if a label is more than 50 words long, it probably will not be read.)

For people with learning disabilities, simple, jargon-free language is essential. The use of active verbs, personal language ('you', 'we') and ways of relating information to things people

Case Studies

CASE STUDY 1

The Whitworth Art Gallery,
Manchester, launched a display called
Plain Answers to Plain Questions,
containing a broad cross-section of
works from their modern collection.
Rather than hanging them thematically or
chronologically, the curator (Michael
Simpson) attempted an entertaining mix
of approaches.

Labels, instead of listing biographical
details of the artist, asked the kind of
simple questions often asked by visitors.
'What does this mean?', or 'Why has the
artist painted a tree blue?', for example.
The answers were written in equally
plain and forthright language. Reaction
from the general public was enthusiastic
though there were some dissenting
voices. Those who liked the display
appreciated the plain language and
attention to what they considered their
concerns. Those who did not found the
answers patronising.

The labels were 150mm by 220 mm -
larger than usual - and printed in 16
point rather than the usual 14 point.
They were produced without
information such as the accession
number of the work and were placed, as
were the paintings, slightly lower on the
wall to make them seem more
accessible.

Typical label

Interior at Oakwood Court
painted in 1983
by **Howard Hodgkin** born 1932

Q. Why can't I make out what's
happening in this picture when the title
is so specific?

A. Howard Hodgkin has described this
work simply as 'two people sitting in
an apartment in Oakwood court'. His
work evokes this scene rather than
trying to accurately capture it. If you
close your eyes and picture your
bedroom at home you are unlikely to
have a perfect image of it in your
mind. Instead you might remember
the colours on your duvet, the
patterns on your wallpaper, or the light
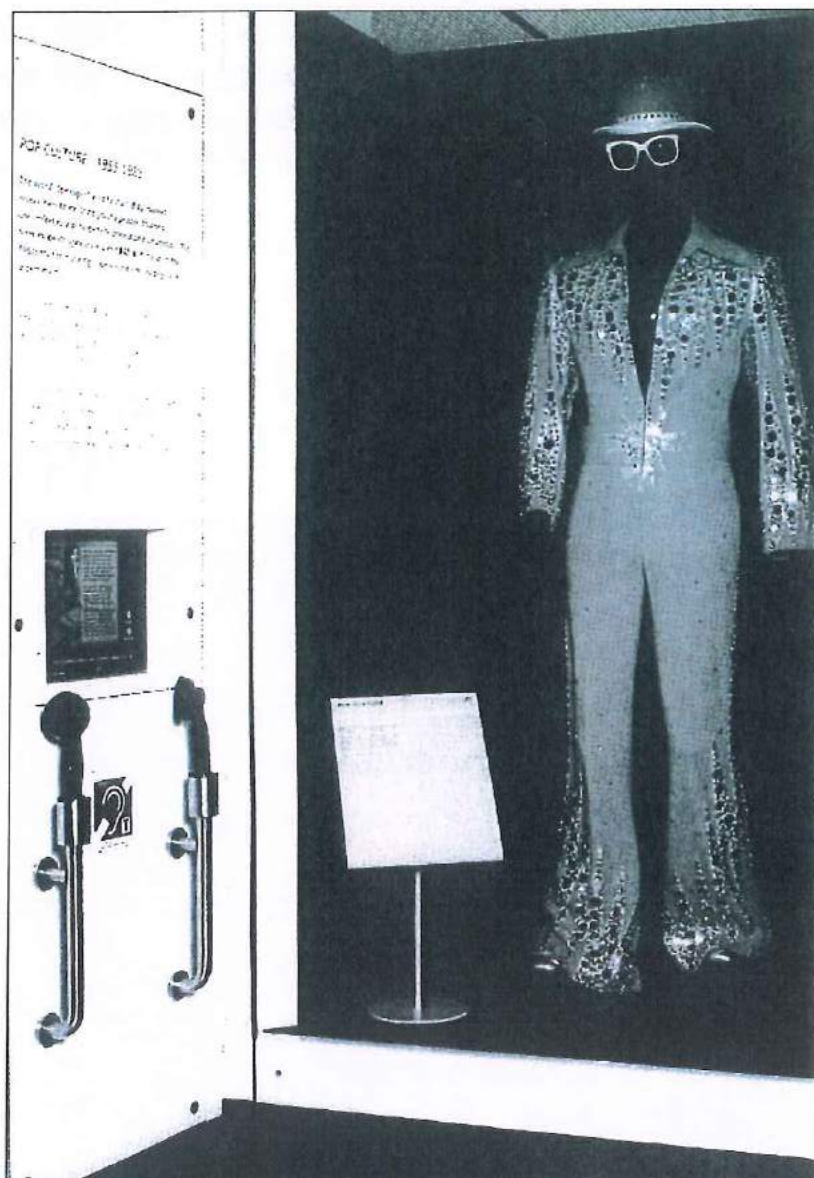that comes through the window.

Here, Hodgkin is painting a memory of
those two people sitting in a London
apartment. Hodgkin is interested in the
work of Edouard Vuillard, a French artist
who was also fascinated by the colours
and patterns inside people's homes.

If you would like to see more works by
Hodgkin or Vuillard, you can make an
appointment with the Curator (Modern
Art) to see them in our stores.

Oil on wood
purchased by the Whitworth Art
Gallery in 1983

CASE STUDY 2

**The National Museums
of Scotland** set up a *Junior Board* to
advise on how to make the new
Museum of Scotland an exciting and
interesting place for children. Its
members, twelve pupils, aged 9-14,
selected from schools all over
Scotland, have written labels for
some Royal Museum and Museum of
Scotland objects. These are enjoyed
by many visitors who like the personal
approach.

know about, such as expressing a height in terms of doubledecker buses, are all good ways of engaging peoples' interest.

Hirschi and Screven, in Effects of Questions on Visitor Reading Behaviour, suggest that the use of questions can support label reading and motivate visitors to read more or to look at an adjacent label and to study the objects more closely to work out the answer. The results of their research, which consisted of observing family groups, were that the areas with questions got more visitor attention than those without.

How not to do it!

Clear contrast between type and background is fundamental. Pastel shades or yellow ink must never be used, and lettering should not be superimposed on a background graphic. Some argue that a background graphic can be acceptable provided the contrast between text and background is at least 70%, but even then the text should be confined to a brief heading in very bold type and should not extend to a detailed description.

Pale colours on a coloured background (e.g. grey on blue or light green on grey) should be avoided.

Right justification should not be used. Text justified on the left margin only is easier to read because it allows more even spacing of words. Hyphenation of words at the end of lines reduces legibility and reading speed. Fitting text into an unusual shape, such as a shield outline, is not recommended.

Fancy type faces should not be used. That includes italics, except to distinguish quotations, for a brief title or for emphasis.

Extra bold type can be counter-productive because it can run letters too close for clarity.

A MIXTURE OF UPPER AND LOWER CASE IS EASIER TO READ THAN A PANEL OF ALL UPPER CASE, BECAUSE PEOPLE GET THEIR READING CUES FROM THE PEAKS AND TROUGHS OF THE LETTERS.

(adapted from an illustration in 'Access in Mind')

CASE STUDY 3

The Ekarv Method

Swedish writer Margareta Ekarv believes it is possible to write museum texts which are so easy and attractive that readers will both enjoy and learn from them. Recent evaluations of her method have endorsed most of her claims and shown a positive response from museum visitors.

For example, her style of texts has proved successful in Swansea Museum's Egyptology gallery, where visitors were asked to compare a text written according to Ekarv with more traditional text; in each case the Ekarv style text proved the most popular. Observation of visitors' behaviour using the museum's CCTV monitors showed that 75% of visitors read some of the texts, an unexpectedly high proportion. Of these, almost all referred back to the texts while looking at the objects. In general, readers liked their informal and rhythmic quality. The simple wording was not considered to be patronising and many visitors liked being able to read the short lines and paragraphs without much effort - this was particularly true of older people. 'I could read without my glasses' was a frequent comment.

GUIDELINES FOR THE EKARV TEXT METHOD

■ Use simple language to express complex ideas

■ Use normal spoken word order

■ One main idea per line coinciding with natural end of phrase

■ Lines of about 45 letters, text broken into short paragraphs of four or five lines

■ Use the active form of verbs and state the subject early in the sentence

■ Read texts aloud and note natural pauses

■ Adjust wording and punctuation to reflect the rhythm of speech

■ Concentrate the meaning to 'an almost poetic level'

EXAMPLES OF TEXT USED FOR EVALUATION

TRADITIONAL TEXT

BISHOPSTON BURCH BARROW

At Fairwood Common, Gower.
Excavated by Mrs. Audrey Williams in 1941
A.942.1.1

Ref: Arch. Camb. 1944, pp.52-63

The primary burial was found in a pit which had been cut two feet deep into the subsoil. This contained the cremated remains of a child (a) of 10-14 years of age, covered by an inverted urn (b). Over the base of the urn a thin slab of limestone, roughly 22 ins. Square, had been placed. A cairn 40ft. in diameter covered the pit. This cairn was concealed by a mound of mixed clay and turf. It contained traces of secondary burials. Fragments of four cinerary urns (c) , all of 'overhanging rim' type, were found towards the centre of the cairn.

EKARV TEXT

BISHOPSTON
BURCH BARROW

This barrow is on Fairwood Common in Gower
It was excavated in 1941 when the Fairwood Aerodrome was being built.

The first body buried on the site was a child about 10 to 14 years old.
It was placed in a small pit under a cinerary urn.

Over the urn was a slab of limestone covered by a circular mound of stones.
At a later date this was covered by a larger mound of clay and turf.

When the barrow was excavated, the archaeologist found traces of other burials and pieces of four cinerary urns.

Comments from leading consultants...

Giles Velarde, Design Consultant

There is an illusion, fostered I think among the less secure academics in our museum world, that designers do not like words. This is not true; the real truth is that exhibition designers in all spheres work essentially with objects. We use objects wherever possible to convey information, which is the kind of reality that exhibitions are about.

Words, of course, are only an interpretation of reality. Sadly the interpretation expressed by the writer of words is - to varying degrees - subjective. I have worked with curators whose main intention has been to demonstrate to their peers that they know their subject. I have also worked with curators desperate to communicate but unable to translate their knowledge into accessible language. Happily too, there are academics who are both experts in their subject and able to communicate it in easily understandable language.

I have had clients who are only concerned with getting as much information into their galleries as they can. This of course is stupid. There is no point in peppering a display with incomprehensible jargon and poorly drawn diagrams, but these clients are constrained by a number of things. Firstly the cost of hiring a professional scriptwriter and illustrator; secondly their vanity in assuming that they do not need to; thirdly their wish not to offend the original writers of the information; and fourthly their desire to show off their erudition.

As a designer, therefore, I am always very circumspect when it comes to words in exhibitions. I have to be sure of the motives of the exhibitor. This will sound almost moralistic but I have to be: I am an intermediary between our cultural heritage and the general public. My sole aim is to make the fascinating, but inaccessible, accessible. That is what I am trained and paid to do. Unfortunately it is often impossible to persuade the client that I can help in this regard, or even that I am necessary.

None of these factors is of the least concern to the visitor, who only requires interesting objects and understandable facts. One in ten thousand visitors might want all the information the client I have described is intent on parading - and it is that visitor he cares about. Sadly it is such curators, largely at the amateur end of our highly-professional museum world, that force us designers into the position of being seen not to like words. We do like them - we like them to be used carefully and well, as complements to the objects. We like them to be readable both in content and style, and it is up to us then to present and place them well.

After 25 years of writing and saying this, it almost reduces me to tears when I still cannot deliver what most sensible curators and designers regard as a good exhibition, simply because my client has no idea what I am talking about.

Helen Coxall, Museums Language Consultant, University of Westminster

WRITING ACCESSIBLE, INCLUSIVE INTERPRETATIVE TEXT

'No one reads the text panels in museums and curators write for their peers, not for their audiences, anyway'. I would like to question both of these common assertions. Enough research has been done to prove that people DO leave exhibitions with knowledge that could only have been gained from written or spoken information in the exhibition. Whether people read it themselves or have it relayed to them by others is irrelevant. Interpretative information IS used and valued by visitors.

It is true that there are some writers who are so close to their specialist subject and so unaware of ways of 'translating' their knowledge for a non-specialist audience that they appear to write only for their peers.

But few of them actually intend to do this. It tends to be old inherited texts that cause the most difficulty: both because of their inaccessibility and their monocentric perspective.

While working as a museum language consultant, I have found that it is precisely because staff know that they find it difficult to communicate accessibly that they ask for editing assistance and guidance. Many exhibition teams write excellent accessible text and require only minimum guidance to ensure that it is appropriate for their intended audiences. Awareness of certain language features aids accessibility. For example, the register - is it academic and formal/everyday and informal; personal/impersonal? The word choice - is it abstract/concrete; passive/active; evaluative/descriptive; evasive/clear; generalised/specific?

However, if the object is to write inclusive rather than exclusive text, there are other issues to be considered as well. Text is not something that can be tacked on at the end - it must be integral to the aims of the exhibition - after all, it is communicating the intentions of the team itself. At the brief stage all members of the team - curators, education officers, designers, scriptwriters, advisers, etc. must be clear about the answers to these apparently simple, but nevertheless vital, questions:

WHAT exactly is the exhibition about?
WHY are we doing it anyway?
HOW are we doing it and is this the most appropriate way to do it?
WHO is it for?

If these issues are clear in everyone's mind they can be used to assess the exhibition's progress in all areas, including the appropriateness of the interpretative text.

Basically an exhibition team that is aware of its target audiences and who includes them as advisers from the outset is far more likely to produce an accessible exhibition. It is particularly important to use advisers if the exhibition is about objects or histories of a culture not shared by the exhibition team. It is often what is NOT said that identifies monocentric lack of awareness which can be embarrassing for the team and offensive to some visitors.

There is a widespread misunderstanding of the power of language to include or exclude. If we are careful with both WHAT we say and HOW we say it, our texts will be both accessible AND inclusive.