

Introduction to Interpretation, by Tilden, Seavey and Sindelar

Tilden's Principles from **Interpreting Our Heritage** by Freeman Tilden

Interpretation Introduction by Marcy Seavey

Thematic Interpretation by Lori Sindelar

Nonformal & Formal Education by Marcy Seavey



Tilden's Principles

- Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
- Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
- Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical, or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
- The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
- Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
- Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best it will require a separate program.



Interpretation Introduction

Tilden introduced interpretation as a field and gave it early form. His six principles are a starting point for developing a personal or institutional theory of interpretation. Sam Ham and others have added and molded the ideas Tilden introduced giving rise to the profession as it stands today. Interpreters are found around the world and serve a similar role whether working as park educator in a metropolitan area or naturalist for a rural community, if the language being spoken is English, French or Portuguese. The interpreter translates the languages of science, history and the natural world into the language of humanity. "Making the strange familiar and the familiar strange" and giving citizens the power to make informed decisions about environmental and economic issues. This is a daunting task and a heavy responsibility. It is important that the interpreter be informative while allowing the receiver of his or her information to decide "what's important" and "what to do about it".

The Interpreter is a scientist and a nonformal teacher and thus the wearer of two hats. If interpretation is also an art, as Tilden states, then the interpreter is an artist as well, with a style of his or her own. Just as one artist's style may be modern, the next classic; One interpreter may be comfortable only while in character as a ladybird beetle while another may prefer teaching through storytelling and a third may feel at home giving guided tours explaining the relationships of organisms in a saltwater marsh. Although the final products of each interpreter may be very different the tools used are the same. This [website](#) shows some methods and ideas in interpretation from various sources including **Parks Canada** and Cleveland

Metro. Parks Naturalists. At the University of Northern Iowa our style is a thematic one, our tools are a solid background in biology and the sciences, much and varied experience interpreting and a commitment to excellence in our field. The remainder of this page will be dedicated to UNI Interpretation student thoughts and ideas about interpretation as a profession. --Marcy M. Seavey (NHI Graduate, 1995)



Thematic Interpretation

Thematic interpretation is when information presented is all related to a key idea and gives a central message. This type of presentation is easier to follow and people find it more meaningful than non-thematic presentations.

A theme is not the same as a topic. A topic is just a subject matter for a presentation, whereas a theme is a specific message an interpreter wants to communicate to the audience.

Sam Ham has three easy steps for writing theme statements

1. Describe the topic in general terms.
2. State it in more specific terms.
3. The theme is then written in the form of complete sentences.

With a theme information is easy to organize, you know what you want your audience to leave with, so you present the information that allows them to understand your theme. The thematic interpretation formula is 7±2 main ideas. That should be all the information needed to convey the theme. In most situations 5-9 ideas are all that can be absorbed at one time. It is also important to state the theme in the beginning with a "WOW" statement and end with the theme stated in the conclusion. Thematic interpretation is an important skill for interpreters because thematic presentations are easier for people to understand and more interesting than presentations on topics.



Nonformal and Formal Education

Think back to a time when you were in a classroom sitting in a desk. A teacher presents information from the front of the room. A pen or pencil is in your hand... you copy down every word the teacher chalks on the board or inks on the overhead. Twenty-seven other students sit in desks just like yours. One raises her hand and asks "Is this going to be on the test?" You sit a bit straighter when the teacher answers "yes". Then the bell rings and the students shuffle out of the room. You pack up your notebook and writing utensil and follow. Tomorrow you will be back sitting in the desk listening to the teacher in the front of the room.

Now imagine yourself on a prairie. It is late August so the grass is honey yellow and almost as tall as you are. You are wearing a baseball cap to keep the wind from tossing your hair about as it is doing to the grasses. Fifteen people came into the prairie with you, but two lagged a bit behind the rest...don't worry,

they'll catch up. A man in a yellow suit is leading this voyage. He stops at the bottom of a small hill. The wind doesn't really reach this side so you can hear his words.

At first he just chats a bit about the walk and the weather, then as the two stragglers join the group he begins a story. It's the story of this land you stand on. Once it was part of a vast 'sea of grasses' then it was a pasture and a field of corn and 6 years ago it was seeded back into prairie. He explains the management practices that will bring this reconstruction to some assemblage of its former grandeur. In doing so he explains his yellow suit is a material called nomex which is worn for protection when the prairie is burned. He has other items for you to examine... what looks like a car mud flap on a mop handle (a flapper), a pump connected to a metal back pack that holds 5 gallons of water, a gasoline drip torch, and a portable radio. He introduces you to some of the more abundant plant species (and also one snake species that happens to slither by near the end of his talk). When he is done speaking, he answers questions.

Some of the other participants wander off studying the mostly flowers that are out this time of the year. A boy who came with his father and sister is teasing the sister with the water pump while the father grills your presenter with questions about the difference between reconstruction and restoration. You close your eyes and imagine what it would be like to help burn this prairie. To hold the drip torch in your hand, hot gasoline flames falling from its mouth, landing onto dry partially matted spring grasses...the smoke... A person behind you with the flapper, making sure the flames go only where you want them to. You decide you'd feel proud at having helped to restore this small piece of land by burning out non-native species and woody invaders. You interrupt the father to ask your guide for more information about helping with next spring's burn. After a while everyone comes together as a group again. The speaker leads the group back to the parking lot. There will be no test on what you learned today and you do not have to come back tomorrow at 8:00am. As you drive off, you do know that come spring, you will be back.

You have just read the differences between formal and non-formal education. Formal education nearly always takes place in a classroom (laboratory, lecture hall or some other room with four walls). Classrooms generally have many of the same features: desks, bulletin boards, chalk or white boards, overheads and pull down screens, few windows and doors, aisles/columns/rows. The students come for 50 minutes (or 45 or 60 or 75) a day on five (or three or two) days a week for 16 (or 12 or 10 or 32) weeks in a row (except on holidays or when they are sick or pretending to be sick). The same students share the same class each day (unless someone is sick or pretending to be sick). The teacher lectures from the front of the class for most of the class time (although he or she may give the students time to work in class or to work in small groups). The students do very little of the talking. When a student has an answer he or she raises a hand and is 'called on' to speak. Raising a hand also works for questions and comments (it really does! Try it some time, teachers love questions and comments, it means they don't have to do as much of the talking). The students take notes (they expect to have to take notes) and the teacher makes a point of which items are most important to take notes on (the items that will be on the test). And there WILL be a test (for which all 'good' students will review their notes).

The benefit of this system is that both the teacher and the student know what to expect from each other. The student expects the teacher to tell the class what is important and then quiz the class on how well they took in that information. The teacher expects the students to listen and study the material to do well on the test. Each student is exposed to the same information, so at least on this grounds the classroom is fair (I'm not going to go into the special needs of each individual student). The four walls of the classroom create a stable environment, one without distraction. Non-formal education is something completely different (or is it)?.

The non-formal classroom can be a classroom, a museum, a forest, a beach, the steps in front of a library, a prairie, even a parking lot. Non-formal education can and does happen almost everywhere. That does not mean that where it happens is not important, it is! The non-formal teacher (from here on out I will call this person the interpreter) chooses the location best suited to the topic and theme of the presentation. I wouldn't take my group to the steps of a library to teach about marsh birds if I had a marsh full of birds available to me. This can be a bit scary, because you never know for sure what might happen outside the four wall classroom (Once during a camp out I woke up at 5am to the sound of a camper asking in a shaky voice "wwwhhhhat isss tthhat?" It was an adult turkey vulture perched on an oak limb not 10 ft above us). The 'good' interpreter can take those surprises and make them part of the presentation (We presented a play for the parent's ceremony untitled "Vulture Adventures"). So location is one way formal and non-formal education differ. Very rarely do the participants in a non-formal education experience sit in desks, look at overheads, or take notes (unless they are freaks like me, I can take notes off my morning cereal box and be happy about it). Very few participants in non-formal education consider themselves students at all. Students take tests, turn in assignments, and receive grades/diplomas. Participants in museum tours, community historical field trips, and Earth Day festivals have none of these expectations. If you ask them why they attend non-formal presentations the answer is usually:

"Because I wanted to."

"It sounded interesting."

"I thought it would be fun."

These participants expect to be given information in a way that is interesting to them. In return, they will continue to participate. If the presentation becomes boring these learners have the option to walk away. This means they are not a captive audience (classroom students are). To keep his or her students the interpreter must make a connection between them and whatever is being taught in a way that will stick with the participant despite the absence of any test incentive. At least part of most non-formal presentations include some 'lecture' time (interpreters generally call this a 'talk' but that is semantics). The majority of time in non-formal learning is spent on participation. This can be through walks, participatory demonstrations, activities, discussion, games, experiments, etc. This type of hands-on learning can and often does happen in traditional classroom settings but it is a defining characteristic of the non-formal. Not all participants in a non-formal presentation always get the same information. Sometimes the participant chooses (perhaps there are 25 stations at an Earth Day celebration but only time to visit ten). Sometimes an event that happens during the 'lesson' steers the interpreter in a different direction (and that's ok, the interpreter doesn't have to worry about covering all the material that will be on a test).

In this writing I have mostly been contrasting formal and non-formal education. However, they are more alike than different. Both strive to communicate knowledge. Both involve people together in a place. Usually there is an 'expert' (the instructor) and the learners have some motivation for learning (internal or external). It is important to recognize the similarities and differences of each approach. A choice of which best suits the needs of both learner and educator must be made for each situation. We must acknowledge that both are important and an indispensable part of our society.

