

TRAINING FOR INTERPRETATION - FIVE OBJECTIVES

1. Know the Facts.

Give a factual account of the architecture, personalities, events, and preservation activities on the tour. If you are not sure of something, don't say it! There is nothing wrong in saying, "I don't know". State facts without bias—this does not mean that facts should not be interpreted; it simply means that they should be presented objectively within the interpretation.

This document contains elementary facts and interpretive material. To further develop interpretation skills, seek out, read, and learn more detailed information, see the bibliography. Most of the books are available in our shops, the research center, or your local public library. Also, take advantage of the enrichment program of the Preservation Trust, read all volunteer communications, and go on tours given by other interpreters (especially those known to give outstanding tours). Consider training for and leading tours to which you are not regularly assigned.

2. Interpret the Significance of the Facts.

Although we want to give accurate tours, merely dispensing factual material is not enough if our goal is interpretation. The tours outlined here give only the essential meaning of the sites, people, times, and events associated with them. The training you receive, plus other activities such as reading and your attendance at lectures, provides the basis for your own interpretation.

Interpretation is more than pointing out the physical features of a building. Concepts are more important than facts. The idea or reason behind a design feature is more significant than its description. Techniques for arranging and presenting ideas are presented below.

As a member of the interpreter corps, you represent the Frank Lloyd Wright Preservation Trust. Your presentation must communicate its objectives. The public—and our community—assume and deserve that.

3. Use the Principles of Good Interpretation

A. Plan Your Tour.

Follow the tour routes given here unless special circumstances require a change. This is especially true of the walking tours and custom or seasonal tours. The outlines given here provide a structure for your tour by spelling out tour objectives and the ideas we want to communicate. Develop a presentation of these ideas in your own words. Writing out your plan is a good way to clarify your thoughts and fix the ideas in your mind. As you gain experience and greater knowledge, you will find that your tour will evolve into your own creation! Regardless of the plan you adopt for your tour, it is important that you give an introduction, develop the ideas, and reach a conclusion. Experience is the best teacher in helping you plan your tour. When you decide to add information or if you decide to change the point at which you present a certain idea, make sure that the change fits into the overall plan of the tour. And always edit, to ensure that your tour is not just getting longer, but better and more effective.

B. Use a Theme.

The vehicle for presenting our interpretation objectives is the theme. It is the thread that ties your tour together.

As a new interpreter-trainee, your initial theme is given to you during the initial training and certification process:

Home and Studio The core public tour theme is Wright's home laboratory as he worked out his ideas for the innovative use of space. It is like a three-act play, all leading up to the magnificent spaces that provide the emotional highlight of that act (or space).

- Act 1 - Wright's progression from Victorian to modern as you reach the Dining Room

- Act 2 - Family life and the ongoing challenge of domestic architecture as you reach the Playroom.
- Act 3 - The concept of studio and Wright's incredible 72-year career of near-constant innovation, centering on his early career from the drafting room. Everything he learned in this period of his life was synthesized and re-imagined in his career post 1909.

Robie House You will contrast this home with its contemporaries and make the connection between Wright's ideas and the future of architecture, directly affecting the way we live today. Family stories and organizational residents of the home take a back seat and are used to propel guests through the building, but the emphasis is the space.

At The Rookery you will show how Wright's organic design philosophies can transform another great architect's work while still being respectful of the original design.

After you are certified to give tours, and have more experience leading groups, you are encouraged to develop additional themes, such as Wright's specific manipulation of space, Wright's early decorative work, or Wright's use of natural materials.

The facts and ideas presented on the tour should be planned to support the theme. The theme may not apply to each room or house (if leading a walking tour), in which case you should point out the essential idea of that place without dwelling on it.

Try to select and emphasize ideas that relate to the basic tour theme. Drop the others or use them with a different theme at another time. Every room, every building, has more features than you can cover on the tour. Pick the important ones, even if it is just one important idea for each room. Remember your theme: too many unrelated particulars can cause a breakdown in communication—a sensory overload.

C. Be a Facilitator.

Remember, architecture must be experienced. In addition to just giving visitors time to look, you can suggest things to look for and even set them up for an experience. You will find suggestions in the tour plan.

D. Develop a Dialogue.

In addition to reacting to the site, visitors will have a richer experience if you let them participate in the interpretation. One method is questions and answers. If you establish contact with visitors at the outset of the tour, you can adeptly engage them so they respond to what they see. This does not mean opening up the floor to random questions, but asking select questions of your guests to get them to see what you want them to see. When you ask the question, you generally want someone to guess the right answer quickly, so you can use the answer to complete your point.

4. Use the Techniques of Good Public Speaking

A. Mechanics.

In addition to knowing the facts and how to interpret them, there are other things to consider as an interpreter: poise, professionalism, and proper delivery of material—all of these things help to project credibility.

Before the tour, establish rapport. Talk to the visitors while you are waiting. Ask them if they are from the area. If not, from where? Ask them how they found out about the tours, what their interests are, and why they came. This is especially important if you hope to relate the significance of the things seen to their knowledge and experience—which is the job of an interpreter.

Dress appropriately. Usually you are the only person with whom the visitors will come in close contact. They are your guests and the initial impression they get is crucial. There are no strict dress codes, but please dress in business casual-type clothing. Do not carry bags or cases since you will need your hands to gesture.

Don't rush into your talk! Pause a few seconds, smile, and look at the group quickly, but eye to eye. This gives them a chance to look at you, lets you relax, and also gives you a psychological advantage. At this point, begin your introduction.

To appear poised, stand straight and distribute your weight evenly on both legs with your feet spaced slightly apart. This will also make it easier for you to move around. You will look more credible than if you were to slouch or lean against a wall.

Keep your arms at your sides. This may seem uncomfortable at first, but it leaves you free to gesture and to be more animated.

Make sure that everyone is in the room or has caught up before you start speaking. Don't talk with your back to the group while walking.

Make use of the graphics and photographs in each room of the Home and Studio and Robie House if they illustrate a point. Allow the visitor time to look at the visual aids. Sometimes, however, you need only refer to the visual aids to answer a question. Remember to practice good museum behavior and only point to the graphic. Please do not pick it up or touch anything, even if you don't think it is an historic artifact.

Sometimes stragglers respond to 'leads'. Prepare the group for the next room so that each visitor wants to see what's next. These transitions are an effective way to propel both your story and the group to the next space. And then lead or follow your group to the next space to effectively keep on track and protect the museum from potential misbehavior.

Pause occasionally to let the visitors look for themselves and ask questions, as they may hesitate to ask unless there is a lull. Let the building speak for itself.

If you find they are asking too many questions, promise to answer them after the tour where you won't hold up other groups. If guests are hijacking your tour with questions, revisit your theme and tour content because you might not be sharing the appropriate material guests want to know.

Avoid technical terms that are not in common use. If you use technical terms such as 'cantilever' or 'clerestory window' be prepared with a simple, understandable definition.

The human element in your interpretation is the most important. Visitors come for a variety of reasons, ranging from the study of architecture to 'just for something to do'. However serious or frivolous their reasons may be, most visitors are interested people. Involve them by presenting issues and asking questions.

When there are children in a mixed group, they can be involved to everyone's benefit by eliciting their reactions and by using them as a height gauge, especially in the playroom, which was scaled for children. Watch for nods, smiles, frowns, fidgeting, etc. Facial expressions and body language are often a commentary on how you are doing. Are the visitors interested or are they bored? Are you talking too much? Too little?

Finally, you must be flexible! Adapting your presentation, even cutting it short, may be necessary on occasion. Visitors who have to catch a plane or who are physically challenged may require adjustments in your tour. If they are with other people, their companion may be able to help; if alone, an individual tour may be the answer. Your tour should always be well planned, but you must be flexible enough to adapt at a moment's notice to special circumstances. You might also be losing track of your time, and if you see another group approaching behind you, move on.

Guests tell us that they don't feel rushed when they have one empty room between them and the tour ahead and behind. When tours collide, guests notice and can become irritated. If another tour catches up from behind, they are never going too fast. Drop content and move on. And don't mention that you are cutting. Guests won't notice unless you tell them.

You can abbreviate your tour without your visitors feeling rushed or cheated by spending sufficient time at the main points and cutting the secondary ones all together.

B. Update Your Information.

Research is being done constantly on Wright's houses in Oak Park and Hyde Park. As new facts are discovered, they may change our understanding of the buildings we are interpreting. Read *Wright Angles* and the various email communications for the latest on restoration as well as other news.

Preservation is an ongoing program. There is no need to make excuses about the state of the walls, floors, or woodwork. Turn visitors' reactions into positive interest by explaining restoration methods and plans. Help them to understand that restoration and preservation take a long time (and a lot of money). It is exciting to have an opportunity to see work in progress. Try to make them feel some of the excitement. Make the point that now that we own this property outright, we depend totally on tour receipts, membership fees, income from special events, and donations for restoration projects. Invite the visitors to become part of the process by joining the Preservation Trust or making a contribution.

Maintenance and preservation of the Home and Studio and Robie House call for protection from the heavy traffic generated by our tours. The 'no touching' and 'no sitting' rules apply to everyone in the museums—including volunteers and staff.

Always use good taste. Use humor, if appropriate, but don't overdo it. Anecdotes often help to instill life into a room or building. Off-color stories and allusions are always inappropriate. Avoid vulgarity. Practice political correctness.

Questions are often asked about Wright's marital life. Respond with care. Although we are living in a liberal era, there are many visitors who consider Wright's conduct scandalous and unforgivable. Antagonizing a visitor with a careless remark can destroy the effects of the best interpretation. Treat the subject objectively, but don't dwell on it; the visitors will respect your impartiality.

Obtain the answers to visitors' questions. If you do not know an answer, say so. They will respect you for your truthfulness. Offer to find the answer before the visitor leaves. Or refer the guest to research@gowright.org.

Occasionally a question is asked that refers to a story or a legend that we know to be false. Again, respond carefully. The visitor may be a believer. Let the person down gently, perhaps hinting that we, too, may have believed the story, but we now know that it is not true. If a visitor argues the point, don't let yourself become involved. Agree with him. Say, "You may be right, but we believe...." Then restate the fact as we believe it, and go on to your next point. Another technique is to say, "I've never heard that before. I'll have to look into that. Thank you." And move on.

If someone takes too long or asks too many questions, causing others on the tour to become bored or impatient, ask the visitor to speak with you afterwards. You have no more than 55 minutes to complete the tour.

Finally, show your own enthusiasm. You need not say things you don't honestly feel. Although you shouldn't present someone else's point of view, it can be expressed if you have made it your own.

Smile and be cheerful in spite of any problems. Don't air your gripes. Visitors are not interested in your troubles.

5. Tour Mechanics

A. Arrive 15 Minutes Early.

Review specific tour instructions with the Guest Relations staff or day leader. Pick up the appropriate key and wakie-talkie. Sign in. Wear your badge.

B. Only use approved stops.

Stop only at designated tour stops and stand in the locations indicated in the script. You may stop at other locations in the building only if you have to wait for a group ahead of you.

C. Keep Your Tour to 45-55 Minutes.

Think about timing the tour in three segments — 15 minutes to complete the first floor of the home; 15 minutes for the upstairs; 15 minutes for the studio.

The core tour is organized in outline form, beginning with the objectives of the tour. The tour is divided into stops. For each tour stop an idea is presented. This may be followed by points of interest that provide additional information. Not all points of interest should be included in a tour—they should be selected according to your theme. When abbreviating your tour, eliminate the points of interest.

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