

Preparing Docents

Those who interact with visitors on the museum floor are called docents or interpreters. Your students will play this role on opening night. They will draw visitors to their display, show or explain something about the exhibit, pose questions, or answer questions. To prepare students for this role, you may want to discuss the following modification of Freeman Tilden's principles, or guidelines for interpreters. In the museum profession, Tilden is considered the "father of interpretation". (See *Learning on Display*, chapter 11, for more information.)

- 1) Relate to the **visitor's personal experience**.
- 2) Reveal the **big idea** to the visitor.
- 3) Use **creative art forms** to help to tell the story.
- 4) Encourage **curiosity, interest, and questions** in your visitors.
- 5) Present a **whole story** rather than part of a story.

Ask students to describe what they think these principles mean, giving examples. By discussing these principles, they will discover ways to effectively interact with visitors. You may want to develop a docent or oral communication rubric with students.

Have students complete a Docent Outline to help them prepare to interact with visitors. Students can practice using their Docent Outline with one another, to polish their presentations before Opening Night.

Docent Outline

1. **Welcome** guests and tell them the “**big idea**” of your exhibit
2. **Grab** your guests' **attention** with a hook (*a question, object, picture, activity to initiate conversation related to this message*).
3. **Once they are “hooked”, tell or show** them something that illustrates your exhibit's message.
4. **Transition**—invite your guests to continue to explore your exhibit on their own or to visit other exhibits in the school museum.

Some “Hook” Questions...

- What do you see?
- Why do you think these objects were chosen?
- Can you find.....?
- Have you ever.....?
- What do you think___ obstacles were?
- What is surprising or new to you? Why?

For example...

The example below was developed for Randall Elementary in Waukesha, WI. Students created an exhibition called *Extraordinary Minds* and featured the work of accomplished artists, scientists, inventors, architects and social activists. This example is for an exhibit about the Wright Brothers.

Docent Outline Example

1. Welcome guests and tell them the “big idea” of your exhibit
 - Hello everyone and welcome to our exhibit about the Wright Brothers. In this exhibit we want to show you how the Wright Brothers pursued their interest in flying and how it changed the way we travel.
2. Grab your guests' attention & tell / show them your exhibit messages

Message 1: The Wright Brothers influenced air travel.

Hook: Have any of you been on an airplane?

Information: Explain exhibit components that show what the Wright Brothers accomplished.

Message 2: The impact of this invention is that we can travel anywhere in the world.

Hook: What's one thing that would be different today if we couldn't fly?

Information: Explain exhibit components that show the impact of the Wright Brothers accomplishments.

Message 3: The Wright Brothers were imaginative people.

Hook: What do you think this toy had to do with inventing air travel?

Information: Tell about this object and how it relates to imagination. (This exhibit featured a rubber band toy similar to one that was believed to have inspired the Wright Brothers to explore flying.)
3. Transition—invite your guests to continue to explore your exhibit on their own
 - We have (explain various exhibit components). Please take some time to enjoy our exhibit on your own. We will be glad to answer any of your questions.