



## Section for Archives and Museums

### Exhibition Tips

Suggestions for your next exhibition of archival documents

These tips are divided into five sections.

#### Planning tips

1. Develop a timetable – give yourself plenty of time – and a budget (if you have one).
2. Think about the size and scope of the venue, whether you need to hire space and buy showcases.
3. When lending (to someone else's exhibition), seek permission from the depositor (if relevant). Loan agreements should acknowledge receipt and detail responsibilities for security and conversation. Include a condition report.
4. When borrowing, build in time to get approval and temporarily deposit within your repository.

#### Technical tips

5. Temperature should be between 13 and 16 degrees centigrade.
6. Humidity should be between 45 and 60 per cent.
7. Light levels should be between 50 and 80 lux in cases, 300 lux or less elsewhere in the gallery, use UV filters, UV proof glass or window film, and avoid direct sunlight.
8. Cover cases when the exhibition is closed to protect documents on display.
9. During the exhibition planning, consider rotating or changing documents on display as well as turning pages in volumes – don't forget to have flexible/changeable captions! Different formats will have different display durations.
10. Consider the stability of the items and how suitable they are for display – seek conservation advice wherever possible to benefit the collection and visitor experience.
11. Factor in post-display 'resting' periods and how they may impact other access demands, e.g., will a document be resting when it's needed for a significant anniversary event?
12. Use lockable showcases. Venues should be stewarded when open and locked when closed to prevent the possibility of theft, vandalism, fire etc.
13. Do a risk assessment.
14. Use mounts, cradles and stands to support volumes and documents on display.

#### Writing tips

15. Focus on an individual person, place or event that is described within the document – make it personal and relatable.
16. Relate the topic to a contemporary event so that visitors can associate a historical situation with their own experiences today.
17. Consider including a transcript of handwritten documents in the interpretation or case notes – visitors can be pretty nosy about this sort of thing and love reading old letters! This is particularly important if the document is hard to read due to the writing, or difficult to see properly because of its size.
18. Really think about the positioning of text – both labels and lengthier interpretive pieces. Some people will just want to know what something is at a glance – a short, to-the-point label here is helpful – but others will appreciate more insight, and often there is no room in the case for

lengthy statements. Try numbering the documents and relating that back to the text, or using digital tools such as QR codes.

19. Consider having someone read an excerpt of a document to add another dimension to your interpretation – recorded snippets can really bring a document to life. There are multiple ways of giving access to the recordings, including creating a listening station next to the display using headphones and a hidden MP3 player or similar, or embedding the recording on a website and providing a QR code next to the document to allow people to listen via phones.
20. Use your interpretation to pose questions and encourage visitors to draw on their own experiences and knowledge.
21. Ask visitors to contribute their own ideas and experiences about the topic and then include these in the exhibition, enabling it to grow over time.
22. Think about the gaps or silences in the collection. Draw visitors' attention to these and encourage them to consider why this might be, and how these gaps could be addressed. Could their perspectives and personal experiences help fill the gaps?
23. Use different sets of labels written for different ages and placed at different heights to encourage children as well as adults to enjoy the exhibition.

### **Display tips**

24. Archive documents are often flat. To give them some perspective, use stands of different heights to create a 'layered' effect and suspend (copy) documents.
25. Take a photo or scan of a feature within a document, such as a handwritten letter or an example of marginalia, and include an enlarged copy beside the original.
26. Consider including a copy of the back of a two-sided document in the interpretation – people like to know they have seen 'the whole thing'.
27. Encourage movement by placing exhibits in drawers or using free-standing captions that should be picked up to be read.
28. If you have objects in your collections as well as documents, display them together to give the exhibition a three-dimensional effect.

### **Digital tips**

29. Online exhibitions can recreate existing physical ones, but redesign allows you to harness the online environment. Layer content across pages to provide varying degrees of information (broad to specific) for different audiences.
30. Link across collections and repositories to create dynamic levels of interpretation.
31. Add different media such as film and music.
32. Change and update your content by adding new exhibits over time and writing blog posts.
33. Consider including interactive opportunities ranging from comments to page turning technology.
34. Keep pages short and break up material. Make sure the exhibition is easy to navigate, intuitive and attractive to use.