

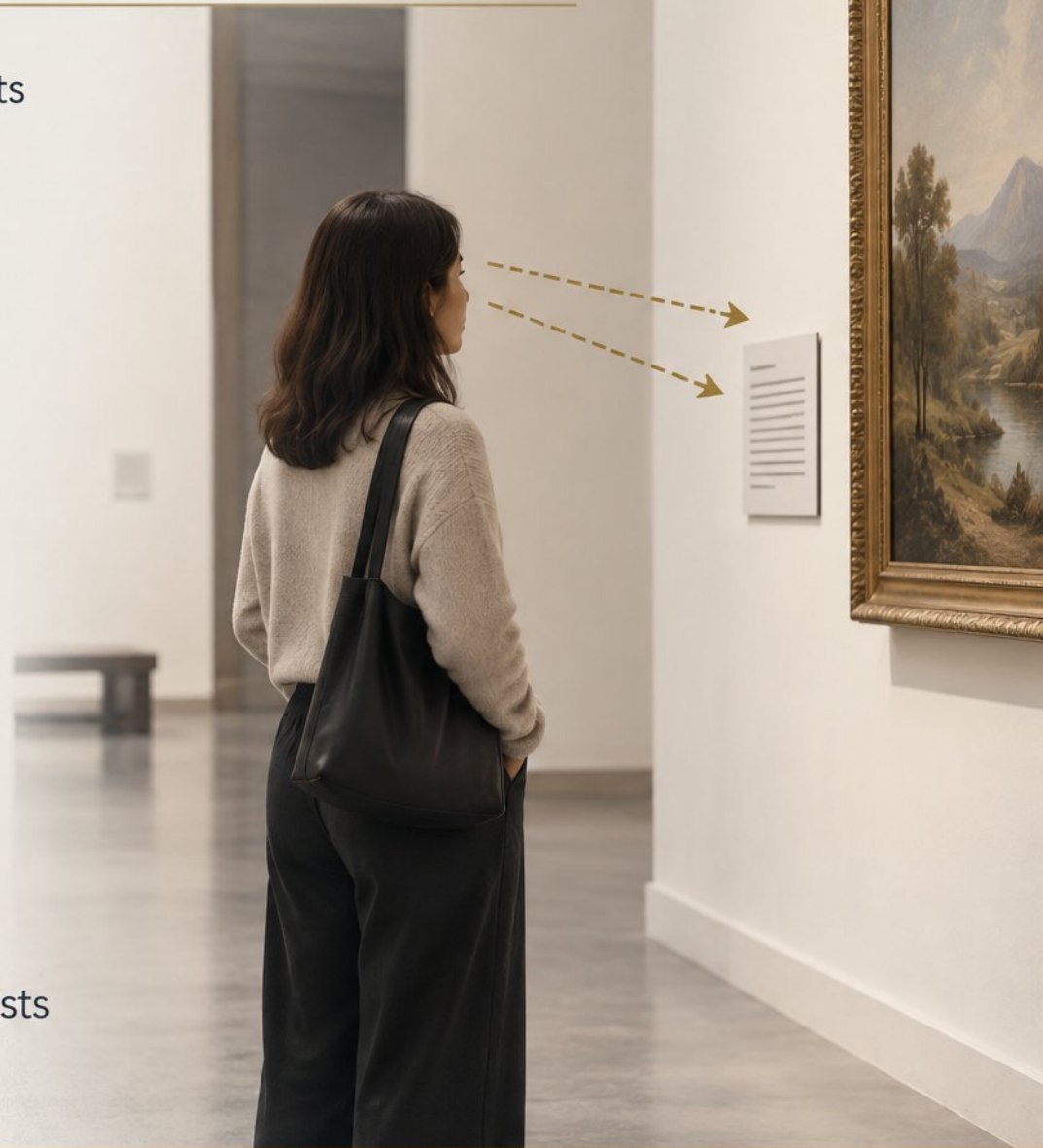
Writing Interpretive Labels for Museum Objects

- Establish a shared, repeatable standard for object labels
 - Labels should inform, orient, and invite looking, not just describe
 - For museum and gallery staff, educators, and publishers
 - Interpretive means translating research into visitor-facing meaning
 - Covers tombstones, standard, extended, group, and digital labels
 - Core outcome: a draft-and-review process to format-ready text
 - Visitors sample non-sequentially — every label must stand alone
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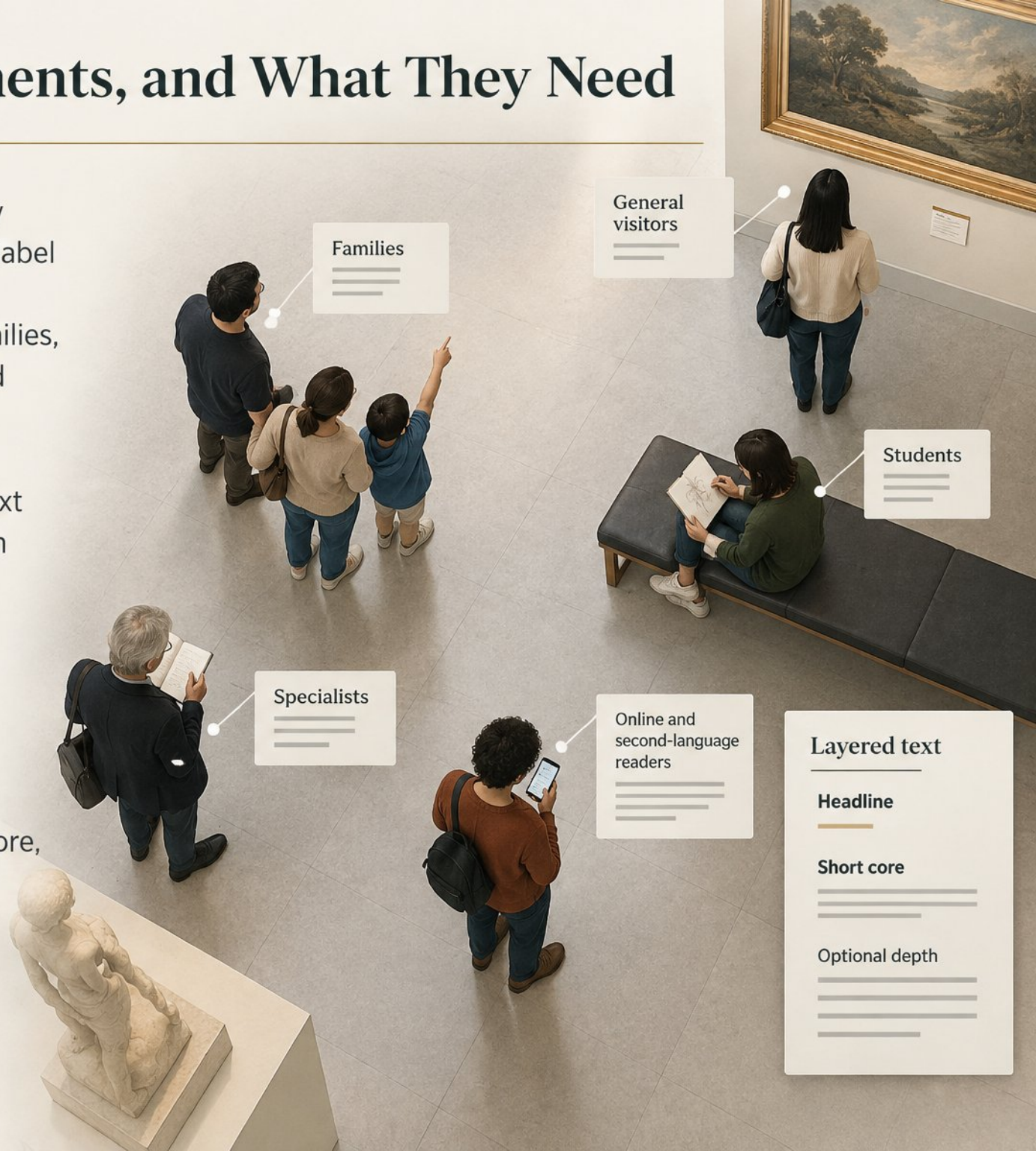
What Interpretation Does for Visitors

- Interpretation is not description: it connects object to context, question, relevance
- Three visitor needs: orientation, meaning, invitation to notice
- Visitors look first, then seek nearest information; readers view objects about twice as long
- Reading is short, scanning, selective, with repeated shifts between object and label
- Descriptive labels increase viewing time, reduce perceived complexity, raise comprehension
- Distinguish evidence from interpretation; respect source communities and living artists



Audiences, Segments, and What They Need

- Identify primary and secondary audiences before drafting any label
- Segments: general visitors, families, students, specialists, online and second-language readers
- 'Pleasure seekers' read more text and need more scaffolding than 'art lovers'
- Aim for an 8th- to 9th-grade reading level unless there's compelling reason
- Layered text (headline, short core, optional depth) beats one compromise text



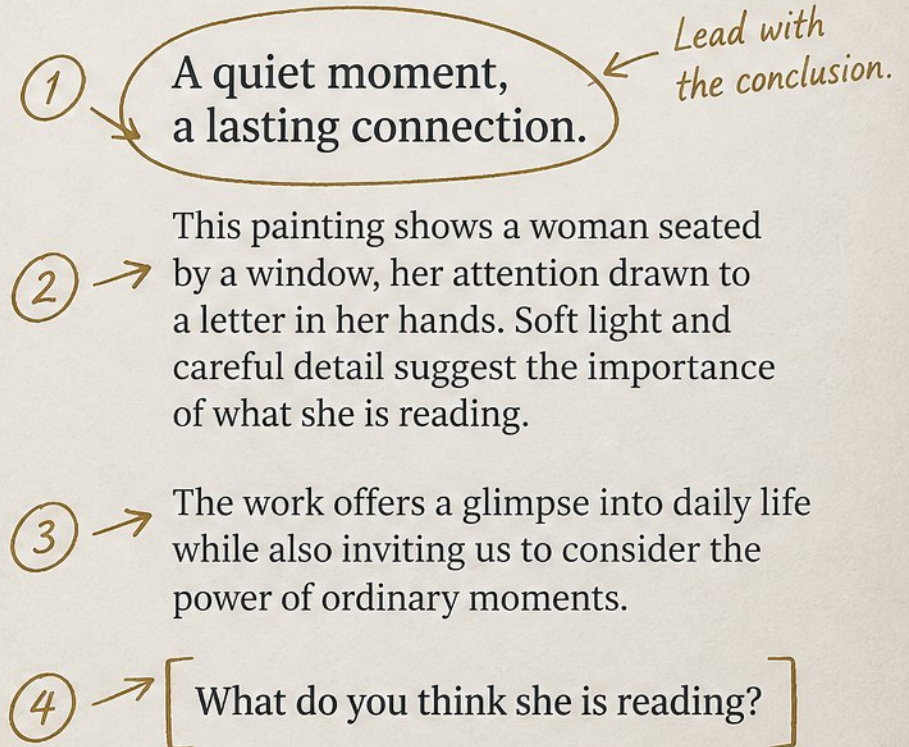
Choosing the Object and the Interpretive Angle

- Start from the object, not the theme
- Identify what is visually or materially distinctive first
- Define one interpretive angle — one to three ideas maximum
- Prioritize what visitors can verify by looking
- Set word budgets before drafting: single ~60, group ~80, extended 100–150
- Fewer words is usually better — set your own standard



Structuring the Label: From First Line to Close

- Opening line carries the claim — lead with the conclusion
- Start with concrete visual cues, then add context
- Order text to follow the eye across the work
- Close by returning to the object or posing a question
- Tombstone identifies; narrative interprets — each must stand alone
- Credit line and accession number placement stay consistent



Unknown artist
A Woman Reading, c. 1650
Oil on canvas

Acc. no. 12345

Language That Works: Clarity, Tone, and Vocabulary

CLEARER
WORDS
STRONGER
IDEAS



Plain language simplifies syntax, not ideas — never patronize



Define specialist terms in-line; unexplained words stop readers



Active voice, conversational tone, but still speak with authority



One idea per sentence: target 15–20 words, never past 25



Cut jargon, Latinate verbs, and vague praise like 'stunning'



Inclusive choices: person-first phrasing, singular 'they', deliberate 'we'/'you'

Inflated / Less Clear

We are ~~endeavoring to~~ facilitate a solution.

~~Utilize~~ the framework to ~~optimize~~ outcomes.

The implementation was ~~stunning~~.

Due to the ~~aforementioned~~ reasons, we are unable to proceed.



Plain-Language Revision

We are working to find a solution.

Use the framework to improve outcomes.

The rollout went well.

We can't proceed for these reasons.

SAME IDEAS.
A CLEARER WAY FORWARD.

BETTER LANGUAGE

BRIGHTER UNDERSTANDING

Tombstones, Credit Lines, and Caption Conventions

- Tombstones answer who, what, when, how: title, artist, date, medium, dimensions
- Field order varies by institution and object type — art, archaeology, documents
- Credit lines are contractual: gift, purchase, bequest, loan — match registrar records
- Publications add nationality, life dates, centimeters alongside inches, accession numbers
- Not every object needs narrative text; tombstone alone is often the right call
- Consistency within a display matters more than any single field order

Bowl with Lotus Motif

Unknown artist

Late Classical period

Ceramic

H. 12 × W. 18 × D. 18 cm

Gift of a private collector

Title

Artist

Date

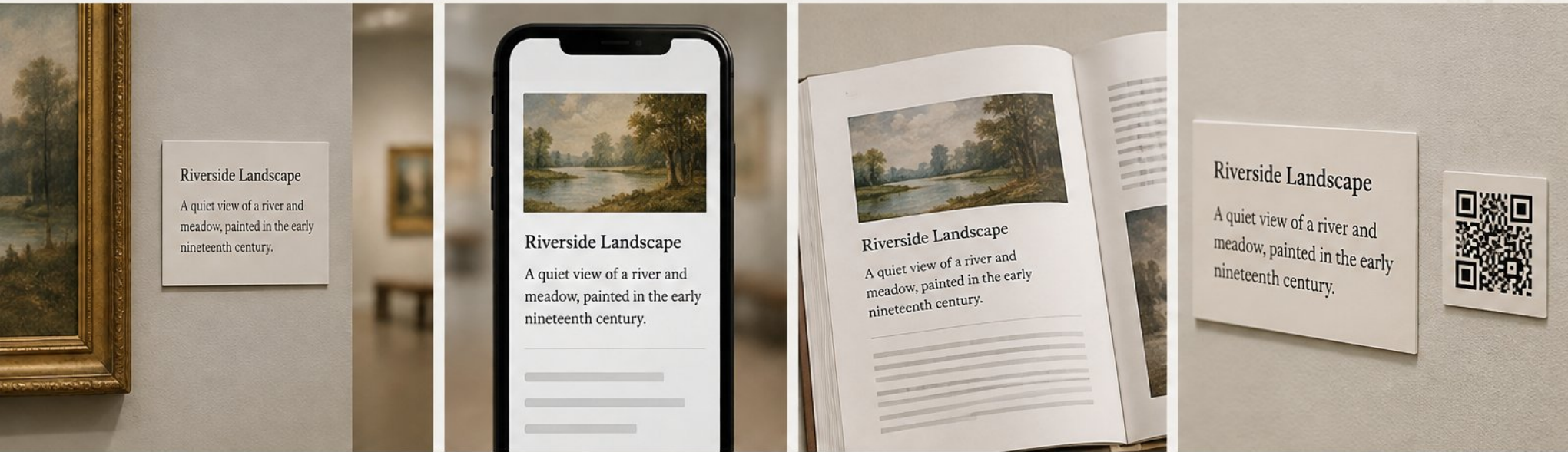
Medium

Dimensions

Credit line



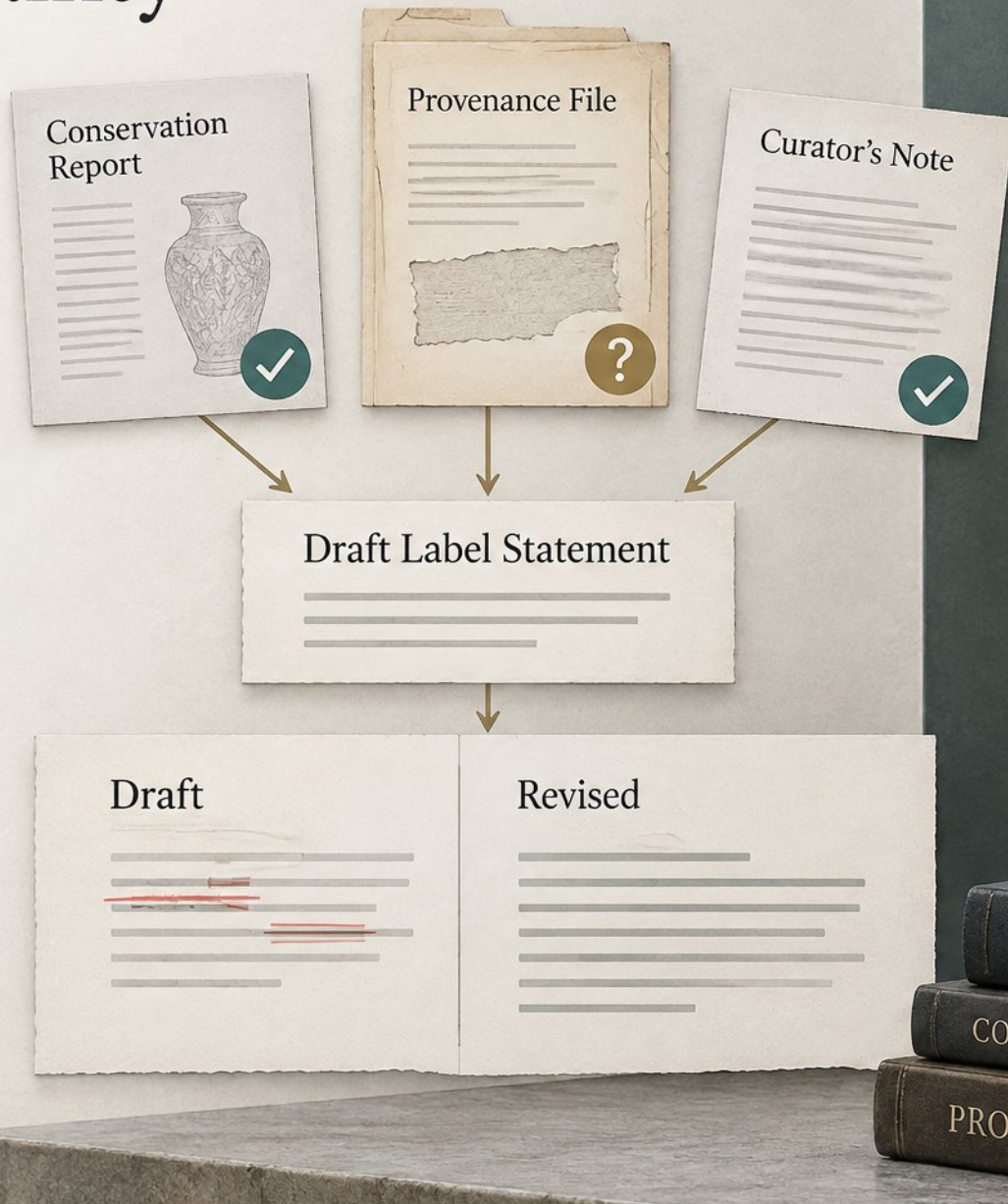
Writing for Physical, Digital, and Published Formats



- Wall labels: tight line length (45–55 characters), size, viewing distance, lighting
- Digital labels: mobile-first lead, layered depth, inherits visitor accessibility settings
- BYOD is dominant: QR is normalized, apps have collapsed as a channel
- QR placement: 2–4 inches from label text, 48–60 inches high, dynamic redirects
- Publication copy: longer form, fuller citation, figure refs, rights checks before layout
- Write one core text, then make format-specific edits

Research, Verification, and Handling Uncertainty

- Translate curatorial and provenance records into label-ready statements, not catalogue prose
- Verify claims: sourced, reasonably inferred, or omitted entirely
- Provenance gaps are common—results of past collecting practices, not anomalies
- Uncertainty markers—'probably,' 'possibly,' 'attributed to'—clarify knowledge; they do not weaken authority
- Make provenance gaps visible, including unresolved acquisition histories
- Confirm accuracy with registrars, conservators, curators, artists, and community advisors
- Meet public demands for transparency and accountability, especially with looted or expropriated art



Rights, Permissions, and Image Credits

- Three rights layers: the object, its photograph, third-party rights
- Credit lines are set by the rights holder — reproduce exactly, word for word
- CC0 needs no credit; CC BY and CC BY-NC require attribution
- Placement: adjacent to image, facing page, or credits section
- Exhibition, publication, and digital uses license separately; proofs may need approval
- Where the museum lacks copyright, the writer or publisher clears permission



The object

Credit line as supplied by the rights holder

Its photograph

Credit line as supplied by the rights holder

Third-party rights

Credit line as supplied by the rights holder

Accessibility and Inclusive Design for Label Text

- Essential information available in Braille, audio, and large print
- Sans serif fonts, upper and lower case, leading 20% above font size
- High contrast, dark on light, matte surfaces, never overprint on images
- Wall labels centered near 54 inches, lit at 100–300 lux, no shadows
- Plain language serves low-vision and second-language readers alike
- WCAG 2.1 AA sets the digital floor—physical gallery text still matters most

54 inches
(centerline)

100–300 lux



Review, Testing, and Revision in Practice

CLEARER WORDS
RICHER EXPERIENCES

FROM DRAFT TO A STRONGER LABEL



- Five review stages: accuracy, clarity, editorial polish, accessibility, design proof
- Checklist: does the label assert without visible evidence, or carry too many ideas?
- Test with visitors: talk-alouds, comprehension questions, gallery intercepts, label-overlay comparisons
- Route approvals across curatorial, interpretation, education, editorial, and design
- Name one owner of the text; keep version control
- Build a house style guide, a "words that work" list, and a reusable checklist

Draft

This object shows the skill and creativity of the people who made it. It was important in their daily life and tells us a lot about their culture and beliefs.

Revised

Made for daily life, this object shows the skill of its makers and offers clues to their culture and beliefs.

Rewriting Difficult Labels and Contested Objects

PEOPLE · CONTEXT · MORE COMPLETE STORIES

- Before rewriting, ask together: what do we mean by harm?
- Reframe the interpretive lens, not just trim words
- Name whose voice speaks and whose is missing
- A myth once called "romantic" becomes a story of attempted rape
- Be honest about reconstruction, restoration, and afterlives
- Share authority: co-write labels and quote community voices
- Aim for progress, not perfection: this work never ends



THEN

A Nymph and a Satyr

Marble

A romantic scene from classical mythology, showing a nymph and a satyr in an embrace.

NOW

A Nymph and a Satyr

Marble

This scene shows an attempted rape, not a romantic encounter. We use this label, co-written with community members, to reflect a broader range of voices and to confront harm in the past and its afterlives today.

"For too long, only the powerful were heard. Our stories are part of this history too."

— A Community Voice

DIFFERENT PERSPECTIVES
A RICHER TOMORROW

SAME OBJECT. A BROADER STORY.

Putting It to Work: Practice and Next Steps



Draft a short interpretive label from a supplied record and image



Peer critique using the checklist: angle, structure, language, accuracy, accessibility, rights



Rewrite one weak label from your institution, including contested content



Build a second format: short mobile text plus tombstone with credit line



Action plan: assess one collection area, name reviewers, set a review cycle



Leave with a personal checklist and a house style starting point



PersonWise.

PersonWise • AI digital-human course platform



Scan the code or click anywhere to watch this course live, with voice Q&A

personwise.ai/t/2befceaf/public