

Exhibit Label Gallery Exercise

Overview

Prior to completing this activity, students will have analyzed primary sources extensively in class and turned in an exhibit label that compellingly describes a physical or digital primary source for the audience of their choice.

In this activity, students will discuss their innate curatorial and writing choices in selecting and writing about the item they chose and consider the impact of physical proximity and framing of contextual information in understanding an item.

Materials

- Completed [exhibit label assignment](#)
- The item or image of the item the exhibit label is about—for digital items, consider projecting them or displaying them on a tablet or phone

Preparatory Notes

- If possible, have students turn in their exhibit labels a few days in advance of the session where you are conducting the exercise so that you have time to make meaningful connections and groupings.
- Group completed labels into broad categories or form a narrative. For instance, if I asked students to write about an item relevant to the state of West Virginia, I would perhaps group items based on time period, format, or create an arbitrary narrative depending on what was submitted. Optionally, include labels with headings or text describing the object groupings you have selected.

Instructions

- Ask students to bring to class a copy of their exhibit label text and the item or an image of the item they wrote about.
- Place items in the predetermined groupings you identified. Have students observe the exhibit and form small groups composed of individuals where each group corresponds to a grouping of items you identified. The groups can be the writers of the labels or may be assigned to ensure students are analyzing a grouping of materials that they did not write originally.
- Present students with the following questions for discussion:
 - What approach did the author use in writing their label? Why do you think the author chose the approach they did? Did you find the approach effectively made you want to learn more about the item?
 - Does the meaning of the item and the accompanying exhibit label change now that the item is surrounded by other objects and groups of objects? How so?
 - What are the connections between the groups of items?

- How does placing multiple groups of items together in a particular order add meaning to the larger exhibit in comparison to items placed in a random order?
- Have groups share observations as a class and begin to collectively crowdsource new groupings or narratives to add meaning to their materials.
- Physically rearrange the exhibit to reflect this new order. Have students observe the new exhibit and return to their original groups to discuss the following:
 - Does the meaning of the items you originally discussed, as well as the accompanying exhibit label, change given the new context of the item? How so?
 - Is the new way better? Worse?
 - Will some methods of display emphasize certain objects over others, or are all methods of display the same?
- Have groups share their updated observations as a class. Pose the final question of:
 - Does this exercise change how you understand museums, art exhibits, and other seemingly arbitrary collections of objects?
 - What other implicit narratives might you encounter on a daily basis?