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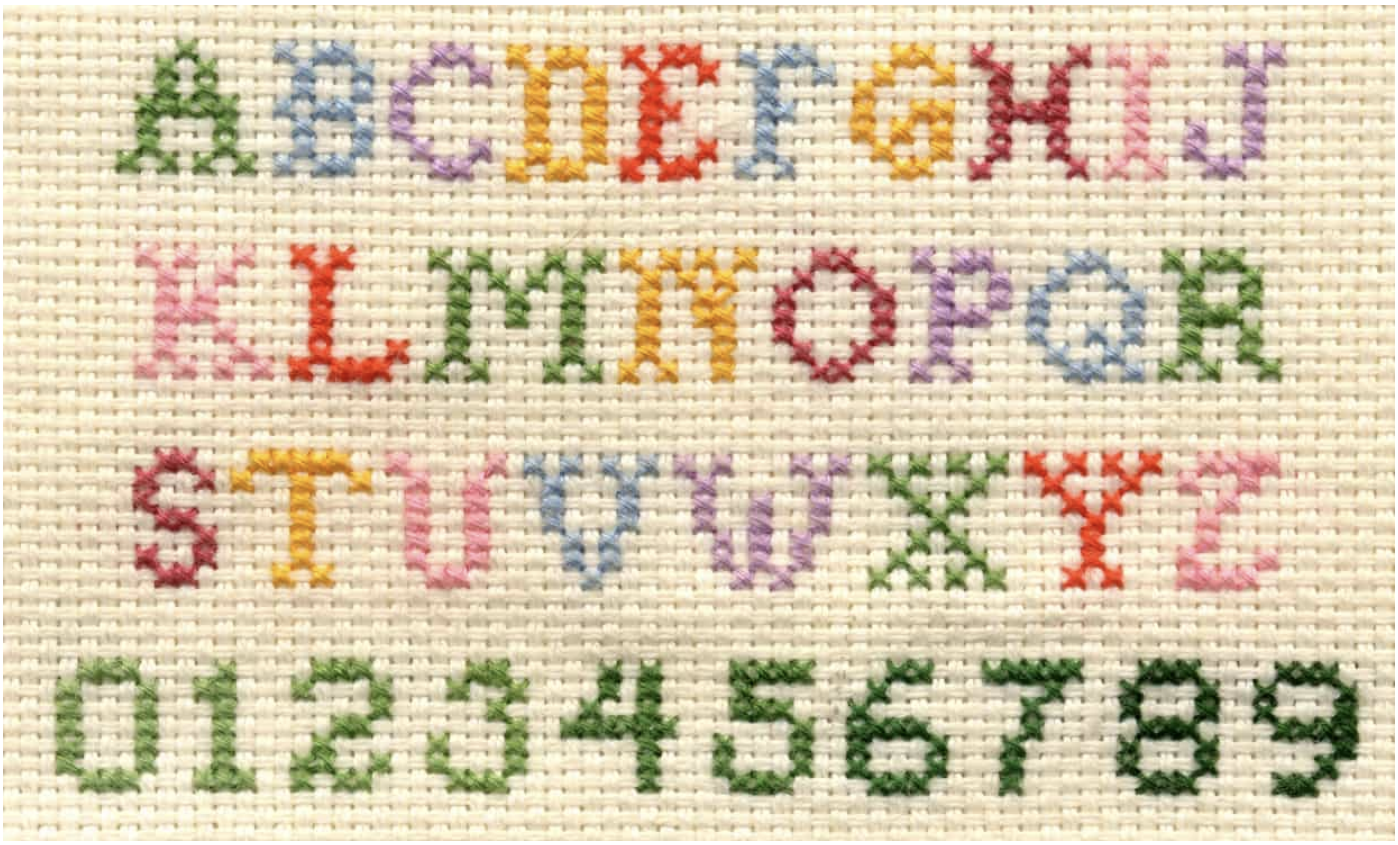
Writing gallery texts and wall panels: common mistakes to avoid

Leave out artspeak and jargon, but don't dumb things down or patronise audiences either, says Dany Louise



Interpretation matters, so choose your words wisely. Photograph: Nancy Nehring/Getty

Dany Louise

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I'm a professional writer. I write about arts and culture for UK national broadsheets, magazines and websites. I undertake research projects that focus on aspects of the arts infrastructure and I've worked in the sector for 20 years. It's fair to say that I know about the arts - and about writing. Over this time, I've read huge numbers of gallery labels and panels, and it seems to me there are some obvious recurring problems.

My view is that writing technique matters (*really* matters) and that regardless of professional and academic debates, many gallery texts could be improved by avoiding some very common mistakes.

Here are two examples of interpretative writing from two different exhibitions in the UK:

Example one

All the works in this section have one core formal concern in common: the idea of 'time' (and space). X's creative act of dissolution combines stillness and the intimation of motion, leading us to the very edge of identifiable form and playfully subverting minimalist concerns.

Example two

There has been much debate about what exactly is Englishness. We struggle to define it. I wanted to make something that looked like an ethnographic artefact that was about England. At once mystical and banal, this is the skull of a decaying maritime superpower.

What do you think of these? The top quote is an example of writing for the public by an institution funded by Arts Council England (ACE). It's not selectively quoted; it's a whole information panel in an exhibition. To an initiated insider with a degree or two in fine art, it described the work on show well.

Even so, I had to read it twice and think about what it meant. It seemed unnecessarily complicated, with a dense sentence structure that had to be broken into its component parts. I wondered how it would come across to a visitor who hasn't done a degree in fine art, or who isn't a curator or an arts professional? They would probably find it opaque and unlikely to genuinely help them engage with the work.

In writing terms, it suffers from two distinct problems:

1. Forcing too much information into too short a space: the result is dense sentences that the reader must spend time unpicking to understand.

2. Artspeak and jargon: it uses a lot of language particular to the discipline of art and therefore contains words and ideas that might not be understood by readers who don't know art world language and concepts.

The problem is in the use of language and structure, but also with the use of concepts that are not explained. "Space" - for example - is a very common word when talking about art, but it's gone from a simple word to an art term loaded with actual and metaphorical meaning. A casual reader might not pick up on this.

Similarly, a short sentence explaining minimalism might be a useful reminder for those who are already familiar with it, and a helpful summary for visitors who have never heard of it.

The second example quote was written by Grayson Perry for his 2011-12 show, the Tomb of the Unknown Craftsman. How much clearer is this? Even without visual information, it seems more direct, informative and engaging (and therefore more effective). His British

Museum show had many wall panels and labels with explanations and stories distributed throughout the show. They were an absolute delight. Reading them greatly enhanced the experience for me. They were written in a clear, friendly and intelligent way, without succumbing to two more common writing mistakes:

3. "Dumbing down" or patronising the audience: by over-simplifying the language and omitting central concerns or concepts.

4. Unfinished narratives: beginning a story and not finishing it, ie stories hinted at but not told, unexplained gaps in timelines, leaps from an artist's controversial status to sudden acceptance as establishment figure and so on.

Tate's 2012 Damien Hirst retrospective suffered from number four. There was no explanation of why his work is controversial, or summary of the critical discussion surrounding it in the information booklet or the panels on the wall. Given Hirst's debated artistic status, and his knowing exploitation of this, surely it should have been a central part of any information written about him.

The fifth basic writing error is what writer and artist Alistair Gentry calls "aphasic writing" and what I call:

5. Nonsense writing: in which all the words exist and could be found in a dictionary, but they're put together in an order that simply doesn't make sense. Conceptual ideas that simply don't belong together often appear in the same sentence. Sometimes it's used deliberately to attach status to an artwork or exhibition. However it's used, it's always bad writing.

To these errors, I would add a final one:

6. Dead white male syndrome: this appears in exhibitions of more historical works, usually by men (who are dead, white, male and privileged in life). There will often be details about famous friends, affairs and obscure dinner party guests. Does the average visitor care? No; it's boring information about people we've never heard of and have no interest in.

There are many reasons why information panels and booklets look as they do. Interpretation has its own internal professional, curatorial and academic practices and logic, all of which present valid cases for how it is written.

But from a writer's perspective, identifying these technical writing issues gives the opportunity to look and understand in a different way. Flaws can be addressed, improved or removed, leading to better writing.

Good interpretation matters because there's such a huge range of artistic practices and concerns being shown in galleries. No one can hope to know and understand everything they see and experience, however well educated they are and however much art they've seen. Wall panels, labels and information sheets give viewers an instant way in to greater understanding of the work and its context, theoretically, without them having to go to a great deal of effort. At its best, it enriches perception and enjoyment, without obscuring,

excluding or patronising audiences.

For me, good writing really is the key to good interpretation.

This is an edited extract from Dany Louise's Interpretation Matters Handbook, which is available directly from the author by emailing talk@interpretationmatters.com

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