



# Creating an Exhibit

## #3- Education & Interactives

Exhibits are inherently about sharing information. Good exhibits promote active learning and engagement that meet the audience where they are. One way to do that is through the use of interactive elements. Interactives are not the “bells and whistles” of exhibits, but rather a dedicated and intentional expansion of the information.

### #1— Identifying the Interactive Station

Interactives are essential tools in a museum, they help encourage visitors to look deeper into museum exhibits and relate life in the past to their own lived experiences. Interactives can also make the museum more accessible to a variety of ages and learning preferences. They can be any number of things. At their most basic, they should encourage a “participatory” response in visitors. Interactives do not have to be costly or overly complex.

Choosing or creating interactive elements can take a number of things into consideration. This can include:

- *Audience:* Who are your visitors? What knowledge, experience, and learning abilities might they bring with them? Many people may visit museums as a social experience with friends or relatives, interactives can prompt dialogue between visitors and encourage them to stay longer in an exhibit.
- *Learning Goals:* What do you want the visitor to learn from the exhibit? Sensory cues, such as smell or sound, in an interactive can help create memory pathways for visitors. Tactile experiences, such as historic toys and tools, help a visitor physically place themselves in a historic moment.
- *Available Resources:* What tools, materials, or funds do you have available to create interactives? Interactives do not have to be costly or hard to create, but certain types of interactives may require specific technology.
- *Inherent Interactivity:* What type of interactive does an item lend itself to? Listening and close looking stations allow visitors to experience archival materials that they might otherwise not have access to in a museum setting.

*Activity:* Brainstorm the ways in which you can include interactives in an exhibit space. To start off, identify what your learning goals are for the interactive station. (You can practice interactive planning and these activities using the guide included with this worksheet.)

### #2—Visitor Response Activities

An interactive is an additive component to your exhibit design. To make impactful interactives, consider what skills visitors will use in their response to the station. In *Purposeful Museum Programming Using Visitor Response Pedagogies* Ames Morton-Winter identifies the following transferable skills that visitors use in museums:

- **Active Listening** allows visitors to connect emotionally to audio clips, such as oral histories or radio recording.
- **Close Looking/Observation** asks visitors to consider multiple perspectives when examining an object, provide guided prompts to direct visitors to respond to the object.
- **Collaboration** allows visitors to work together towards a common goal in an activity, this often includes tactile experiences with historic tools/replicas
- **Communication** allows visitors to engage in meaningful dialogue about their responses to certain objects or spaces within the museum. Provide questions within the interactive space as prompts for discussion.

*Activity:* Identify which of the four skills above would apply the most to your learning goals for your interactive station. Build them into your design for the activity.

### #3—Integrate Accessibility

Visitors come to exhibits with a variety of experiences, abilities, and expectations of what they will take away from your exhibit. Universal design is, “the design and composition of an environment so that it can be accessed, understood and used to the greatest extent possible by all people regardless of their age, size, ability or disability” ([Center for Excellence in Universal Design](#)). In museum interactives, universal design should be considered in the following:

- How is the interactive visually distinguished from object displays?
- Could a visitor use the station and have a fulfilling experience without guidance?
- What kind of sensory cues are in the exhibit?
- What height is the signage/ station at—would it be accessible to a person in a wheelchair?

Making interactives accessible is not an extra effort, but does take intention. Choices such as having open captions on videos, using large print text for instructions, and creating interactions that require low physical effort or motor skills help ensure that most visitors can participate.

*Activity:* After you've come up with a draft for your interactive, have a different person test it out without any verbal directions from you. Check if the other person had any difficulty with the activity, or if they found it intuitive.

### **Additional Resources**

[Inclusive Design and Accessibility: A methodology of perpetual evolution and innovation](#) in *The Museum Accessibility Spectrum* (2025) by Corey Timpson, edited by Alison F. Eardley and Vanessa E. Jones

[Developing Interactive Exhibits at the Smithsonian](#) (2002) by Pekarik, Andrew J. and Smithsonian Institution Office of Policy and Analysis

*Purposeful Museum Programming Using Visitor Response Pedagogies* (2024) by Ames Morton-Winter

*Exhibit Makeovers: A Do-It-Yourself Workbook for Small Museums, 2nd ed.* (2017) by Parman, Alice; Ann Craig, Lyle Murphy, Liz White, and Lauren Willis.

## Interactive Practice

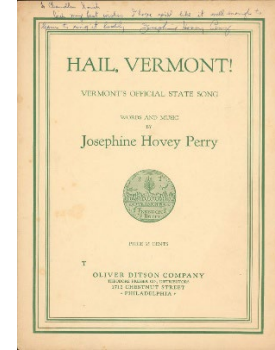
Let's plan an interactive! Select one of the objects below, then work on an interactive that will help visitors learn more about the object. You can also substitute with an object in your collection.



[Alfred Randall Profile Portrait](#)



[Wooden Skis: Austine School for the Deaf](#)



[Hail Vermont Song Book](#)

### Interactive Planning:

<p><b>What are three things you would like visitors to learn at the station?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> <li>•</li> </ul>
<p><b>What skills will visitors practice at the station?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Active Listening</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Close Looking/ Observation</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Collaboration</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Communication</li> </ul>
<p><b>How are you communicating information to visitors?</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Visually</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Auditory</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Tactile</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Other</li> </ul>
<p><b>Is this a multistep activity? If so, does the visitor need guidance?</b></p>	
<p><b>Accessibility checklist:</b></p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Signage is on a high contrast background</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> Captioning provided for audio</li> <li><input type="checkbox"/> The interactive meets ADA recommended height</li> </ul>