



# Creating a necklace from a pile of beads: Crafting impactful library instruction with interpretive communication

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# UTA Libraries

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41,000+ students

Large number of first generation, non-traditional, and international students

Information literacy instruction is almost entirely “one-shot”



Central Library, photo via UTA Libraries



Topsail Hill Preserve State Park, 2010

# About me

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- Undergrad in anthropology/Asian studies
- Graduated from library school in 2008 *oh no!*
- Americorps at Topsail Hill Preserve State Park in Florida
- Ranger at the Houston Zoo
- Interpreter for Arkansas State Parks
- Education Naturalist at the Fort Worth Nature Center
- Returned to libraries in 2018

## Interpretation

is a purposeful approach to communication that facilitates meaningful, relevant, and inclusive experiences that deepen understanding, broaden perspectives, and inspire engagement with the world around us.

Sound familiar?

Image of the NAI homepage <https://www.nai-us.org>



# What I used to say

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I take the things that are special about this place and translate them into meaningful and engaging experiences that create emotional and intellectual connections to this site.

# Interpretation and Information Literacy Instruction

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## Heritage Sites

- 5 – 90 minutes to make my point
- Audience ranges from very interested to “someone forced me to be here today”
- I want my audience to take some sort of positive action after interacting with me

## Academic Classroom

- 30 – 80 minutes to make my point
- Audience ranges from very interested to “I had to take this class to graduate”
- I want my audience to take some sort of positive action after my instruction

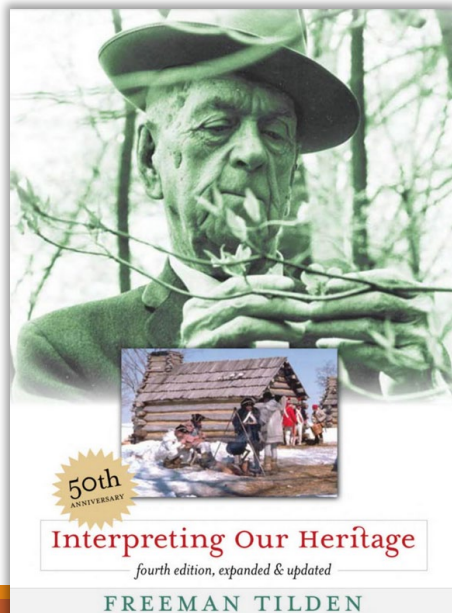
In-person interpretation and in-class instruction are both **social experiences**.

# Foundations of Interpretation

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Much of interpretation theory and training was originally developed by the National Park Service, [https://www.nps.gov/zion/getinvolved/upload/CUA\\_FoundationsCurriculum\\_12\\_21\\_16.pdf](https://www.nps.gov/zion/getinvolved/upload/CUA_FoundationsCurriculum_12_21_16.pdf)

Scholarly literature can be found in the fields of tourism, communications, and museum studies



*“If you vandalize a beautiful thing, you vandalize yourself. And this is what true interpretation can inject into the consciousness. But not with the mere recitation of facts. Not with the names of things, but by exposing the soul of things- those truths that lie behind what you are showing your visitor. Nor yet by sermonizing; nor yet by lecturing; **not by instruction but by provocation.**”*

-Freeman Tilden, *Interpreting Our Heritage* (1957)

# Tilden's 6 Principles

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1. Any interpretation that does not somehow relate what is being displayed or described to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile.
2. Information, as such, is not interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information.
3. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.
4. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.
5. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part, and must address itself to the whole man rather than any phase.
6. Interpretation addressed to children (say, up to the age of twelve) should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach. To be at its best, it will require a separate program.

# The Interpretive Equation

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$$AT(KA + KR) = IO$$

Knowledge of the audience plus knowledge of the resource, multiplied by the appropriate technique yields an interpretive opportunity.

Developed by the National Park Service



DeGray Lake Resort State Park, 2013

# Think, Feel, Do

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Adobe stock image

The goal of interpretation is to **inspire action** through emotional and intellectual engagement.

For some people, the effect may be big and noticeable. Others may need more exposure to a concept before they are moved to action.

# Learning and Motivation

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Taking shortcuts and being “lazy” feels good. Our brain interprets this as efficiency, and nature loves efficiency.

It takes energy and stamina to learn. It takes **intrinsic motivation** to keep going when success is not immediate.



This is an alligator snapping turtle. It lays in the mud all day waiting for food to come to it.  
Don't be an alligator snapping turtle.

Photo via Adobe Stock



Fordyce Bathhouse  
Photo by Chris Light via Wikimedia Commons

# Theme vs. Topic

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A strong theme draws a link between a **tangible phenomenon** and an **intangible concept**.

If you don't provide a theme, the audience will spontaneously generate one.

Facts devoid of context are quickly forgotten, themes are remembered.



| <b>Tangible</b><br><b>(observable people, places, things, actions)</b>  | <b>Intangible</b><br><b>(larger concepts, ideas)</b>   | <b>Questions/Themes</b><br><b>(links between tangible and intangible)</b>   |
|---|--|---|
| <b>Security</b><br>TSA officers<br>High tech equipment<br>Rules for passengers<br>ID scanning   | National security as a concept<br>Terrorism<br>Security as a profession<br>Compliance with laws/rules/regulations<br>Feeling safe vs. being safe   | Do the rules and regulations for safety at an airport actually keep us safe?<br>What is it like being a TSA officer? Do they have workplace culture that is different from other kinds of security officers?<br><b>Has passenger compliance changed over time? If so why? Has there been a cultural shift in compliant acceptance of security measures?</b>   |
| <b>Stores</b><br>Merchandise offered- souvenirs, travel accessories, books, magazines, food<br>Services- spa treatments, shoe shine<br>Employees- demographics, observable attitudes towards work | The airport as a unique place of commerce<br>Convenience<br>Speed- both fast and slow (airport as a place of waiting and a place of rushing)<br>Local identity/culture expressed through commerce          | Who decides what merchandise is available in an airport? Do local products sell better? Do passengers care if an airport has local “character”? Why or why not?<br>What is it like to work in an airport store or restaurant? Is it different from other stores and restaurants?<br><b>How does an airport navigate the idea of being both a place of waiting and a place of moving toward the next destination as fast/efficient as possible?</b>                      |
| <b>Design</b><br>Furniture- comfortable? Not comfortable? How close to others?<br>Size and length of pathways to different locations<br>Wayfinding signs  | Design as a way to control the movement/behavior of people<br>The human experience of moving through an environment<br>Passing time (waiting) as an activity to be engaged with                            | Are their culturally specific ways that we signal how to move through an environment?<br>How, specifically, is human behavior controlled or managed through the built environment?<br>Similar to above, airport is a place of waiting and a place of moving on. How is this experienced by passengers, how are these dual needs provided for?<br><b>Do people express culture through waiting? Do different cultures have different ideas about waiting “properly”?</b> |
| <b>Bathrooms</b><br>Number of bathrooms (male, female, family, unisex, handicapped, etc.)<br>Location<br>Cleanliness<br>Visual design<br>Technology   | Built environments for waste elimination<br>Concepts of contamination and “grossness”<br>Design of the built environment and local identity<br>Prosperity or status signaling in design<br>Invisible labor | Who keeps the bathrooms clean?<br><b>Can a bathroom reflect local identity? Why would an airport bother to have “fancy” bathrooms?</b><br>How do people of different identities experience the bathrooms at a given location? Everyone needs to use the bathroom. Is it more or less difficult for some people? Is this situation heightened in a high stress environment like an airport?  |



Fort Worth Nature Center & Refuge, 2017

# Interpretive Don'ts

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- Fact vomiting
- Pat the 'Possum (Fun Facts)
- White Tigers
- Poke a Hole in the Kettle

All of these have the potential to interrupt **flow** and disrupt engagement with an experience

# Agenda

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- My background
- What is interpretation?
- Foundations of interpretive communication
- The Interpretive Equation
- Theme vs Topic
- Scenarios/Examples

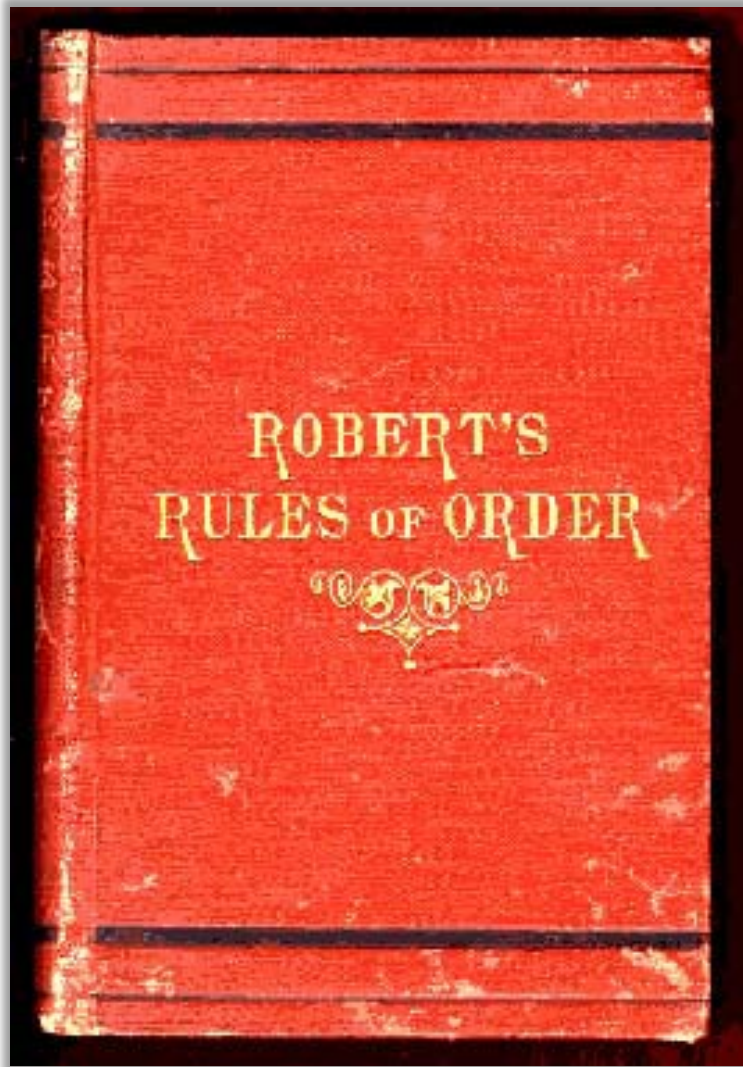
# Agenda

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Adobe stock image



First edition, 1876. Public domain.

# Agendas that serve a purpose

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Why is this slide in my presentation?

Agendas are derived from meetings where they keep the meeting running on time, ensure all topics are covered, and make it clear where discussion is allowed. It may also serve record keeping purposes for organizations governed by boards.

# Asking Why

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- **To center myself when I start my presentation** (nothing to do with the audience) – Try printing your agenda instead and use “agenda time” for something meaningful.
- **So that students can follow along** – That will be difficult if it’s only flashed up on the screen at the beginning. Print copies for students to use. You can even leave space for them to take notes.
- **To make my learning objectives clear** – A timeline or list of topics is not the same as learning objectives. Re-examine and see if you really are conveying learning objectives.
- **I’m required to include it** – See if you can tell a story or convey a theme with your agenda slide. Try to generate interest in what comes next.

# Information Literacy

*You Gotta Have It*

Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective **discovery** of information, the **understanding** of how information is produced and valued, and the **use** of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning.

- Authority is constructed and contextual
- Information creation as a process
- Information has value
- Research as inquiry
- Scholarship as conversation
- Searching as strategic exploration



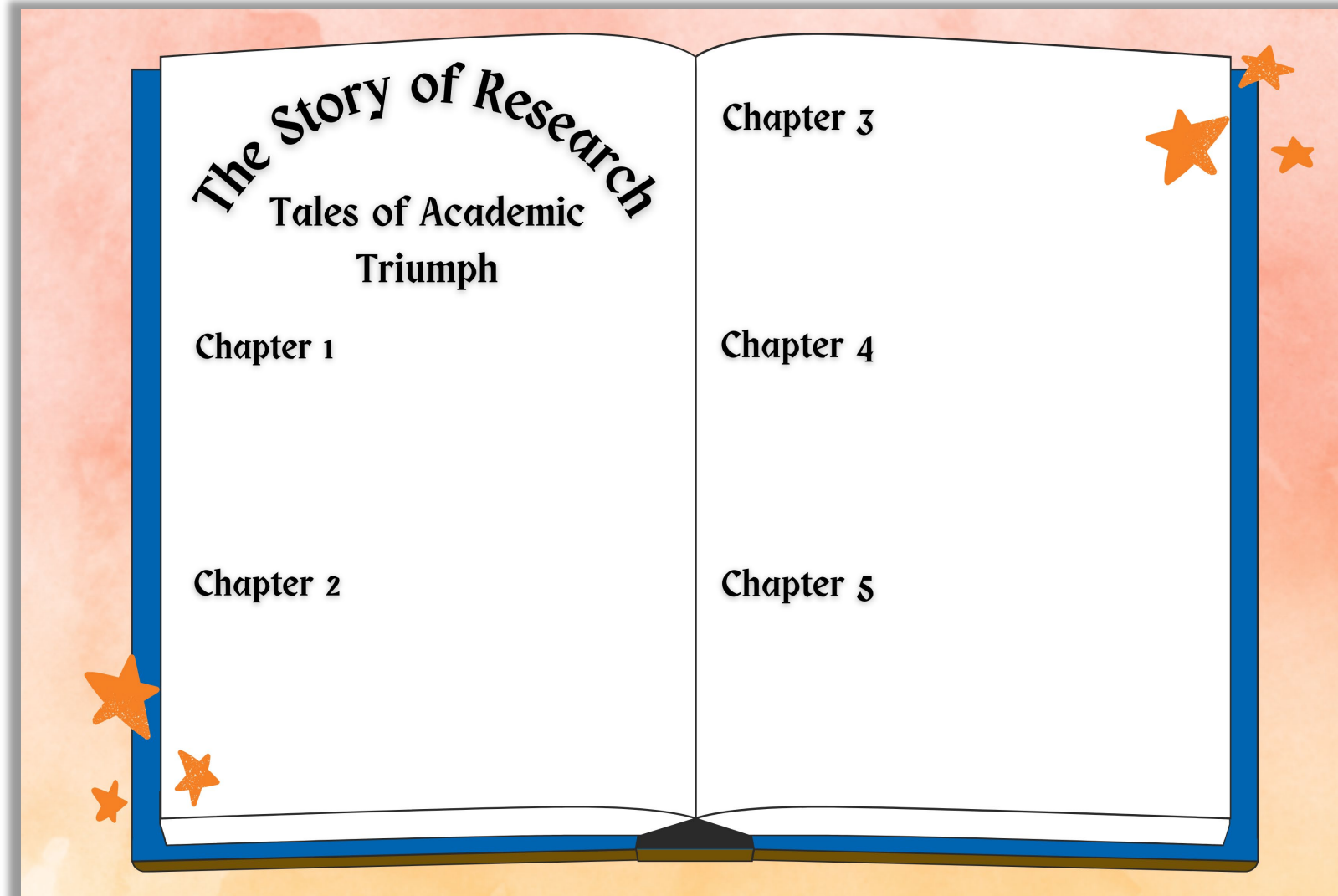
**Information Literacy Framework**  
American Library Association and the  
Association of College & Research Libraries  
<https://www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework>

# Scenario 1: Come & Go

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A classic interpreter challenge is to make your point in an extremely limited amount of time.

What can we say about the library (and librarians) if we're at a come & go event?



**Cards:**

- Develop a Topic
- Find Resources
- Evaluate Resources
- Organize & Write
- Create Bibliography
- Walk Your Goldfish
- Check Your Socials
- Eat a Snack

# Scenario 2: Anthropology Ethics Essay

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This is a large cultural anthropology class that is an elective for most courses of study. There are students from multiple majors including STEM, business, education, etc.

They have a final assignment where they must write an essay about ethics in anthropology what they are and why they are important. They are given the source they should use for this assignment.

The faculty member has been dissatisfied with the students' past work and their engagement with the assignment. She wants a one-shot to "help them with the final assignment."

# Toulmin Method

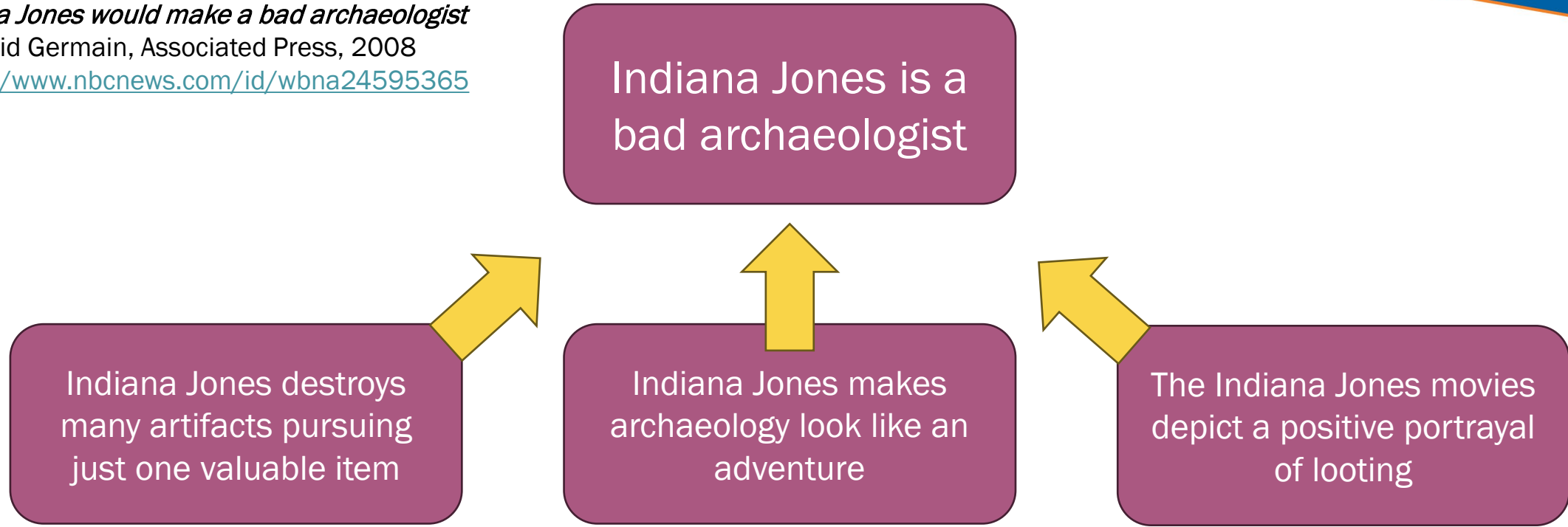
Utilizes a visual chart to diagram the components of an argument and strip out artistic flourishes that may obscure problems.

- **Claim-** A statement of what the writer is arguing
- **Ground (or data/observation)-** Evidence which supports the claim, ideally observable facts
- **Warrant (or theory)-** Explains why a particular observation or piece of data is relevant
- **Backing-** Additional information that expands on the warrant
- **Rebuttal-** Points out flaws in the claim or alternative positions
- **Qualifiers-** Identified limits on a standpoint or methodology

Me recreating an argument I had 6 hours ago with new and better points



*Indiana Jones would make a bad archaeologist*  
By David Germain, Associated Press, 2008  
<https://www.nbcnews.com/id/wbna24595365>



It is astonishingly easy to accidentally write a paper where you only list facts and forget to explain why those facts are relevant.

In academia, theories are created or refined by research. They are also used to establish relevance in other research. A good theory should be predictive.

Indiana Jones is a bad archaeologist

Indiana Jones destroys many artifacts pursuing just one valuable item

Indiana Jones makes archaeology look like an adventure

The Indiana Jones movies depict a positive portrayal of looting

Archaeologists follow a code of ethics to ensure that all artifacts are preserved and documented for the scholarly record

This warrant is missing. In the article, this ground/data acts more like a weak rebuttal.

Looting of artifacts is a problem in the real-world field of archaeology

A better warrant would include backing to show that there is a relationship between what people see in movies and their actual behavior.

# Scenario 3: Annotated Bibliography

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An anthropology professor has asked me to give a one-shot session about annotated bibliographies for her cultural anthropology research methods class. This is a small class.

I asked if there were any specific challenges the students had with this assignment or if there were specifics she would like me to cover.

“No, just whatever you think is useful.”

# When is an antelope information

## *What is a “document”?*

Michael K. Buckland

First published: 07 December 1998

[https://doi.org/10.1002/\(SICI\)1097-4571\(199709\)48:9<804::AID-ASI5>3.0.CO;2-V](https://doi.org/10.1002/(SICI)1097-4571(199709)48:9<804::AID-ASI5>3.0.CO;2-V)

Citations: 239

What should be considered a “document” is important for any definition of the scope of Information Science. Paul Otlet and others developed a functional view of “document” and discussed whether, for example, sculpture, museum objects, and live animals, could be considered “documents.” In 1951, Suzanne Briet equated “document” with organized physical evidence. These ideas appear to resemble notions of “material culture” in cultural anthropology and “object-as-sign” in semiotics. New digital technology renews old questions and also old confusions between medium, message, and meaning.

# And we're still talking about it

The Canadian journal of information and library science - La Revue canadienne des sciences de l'information et de bibliothéconomie (CJILS-RCSIB)

Vol. 47, No. 3 (2024)

<https://doi.org/10.5206/cjils-rcsib.v47i3.17431>

## ***Mounting the Antelope: How the Early American Wild Became a Document***

Melissa Adler, Faculty of Information and Media Studies, Western University

This paper troubles and historicizes the symbolic use of the antelope in the field of library and information science by examining correspondence during the Lewis and Clark expedition in the nineteenth century. It shows how taking the antelope from the wild, naming and classifying the animal, and mounting it for display in a museum were part of a national education program in the early United States. This moment is instructive for understanding the relationship between natural history and documentation in processes of settler colonialism, statecraft, and empire expansion.

# Practice, Practice, Practice

Writing down what we think about sources helps us to practice information literacy. Instead of passively reading we are actively engaging with the source.

An annotation is also a way to turn our invisible thinking into a visible process for our instructor.

Why is this a good source? Who wrote it, why, and what standards were they using? What role could this source play in my research?

# Scenario 4: Criminology Signature Assignment

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This is an assignment in a core course that every Criminology and Criminal Justice student must take. It's an elective for others. It's a large class.

Students must identify the sources of various kinds of crime data and statistics, think about how they are used, and compare crime data from at least two different cities or college campuses. They must state which city or campus is safer and why.

The faculty member teaching this class changes frequently. I have created an extensive LibGuide to guide students through this assignment. I'm usually only given 15-30 minutes in class to "help" with this assignment.

**I have a cat and a dog. I want to know if my cat and dog are friends.**

**Their names are Buddy and Stinker.**

**I watch Buddy and Stinker every day.  
Here is what I see:**

The dog tries to play with the cat

The cat grooms the dog

The dog looks for the cat when the cat is  
not in the room

The cat sleeps next to the dog

**I make a claim that my cat and dog are friends. Is my claim well supported?**

Can I make a further claim that cats and dogs in general can be friends?

# How can I make my research more credible?

**First, I need to define some terms and give some background:**

What do I mean by “friends”?

What do the experts say about how cats and dogs express social bonding?

What qualifications do I bring to the table to answer this question?

What biases might prevent me from making accurate observations or coming to accurate conclusions?

**Which animal is Buddy and which is Stinker?**

One of my animals has a “friendly” name and one sounds like...well...a stinker. Have I biased myself by giving them these names?

They are my animals. Am I too close to the situation to accurately perceive it? I would like for my animals to be friends.

**I need a systematic way to gather data. I need a *method*, supported by *theory* that tells me I will get good data using this method for this kind of research (a methodology).**

What time of day am I making my observations?

How many hours/days/months am I observing? How long is required for me to reach a valid conclusion?

Am I recording video? Just taking notes? Using a survey instrument?

Do I know enough about animal behavior to accurately describe what I am seeing?

**I need more *theory* to interpret the observations I have made to show that they mean what I say they mean. This will come from existing credible research.**

The dog tries to play with the cat (*Dogs socialize by playing, but may also show dominance through play*)

The cat grooms the dog (*With cats, grooming can be a dominance behavior, an anxious behavior, or a friendly behavior*)

The dog looks for the cat when the cat is not in the room (*Dogs like their “pack” to stay together, but the dog could also be afraid of the cat and wants to know where “danger” is*)

The cat sleeps next to the dog (*Animals only sleep in places where they feel safe*)

# Are Buddy and Stinker friends?

It's complicated.



Adobe stock image

# Scenario 5: AI and Academic Integrity

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Multiple faculty members have asked me to talk to their classes about AI and why students shouldn't use it to write their essays, forum posts, etc.

When faculty say AI in this context, they are almost always talking about ChatGPT and similar tools. Faculty are frustrated/angry/sad that students are using it for writing assignments.

Simply saying “don't use AI to write your assignments” probably won't accomplish much. They've already tried that.



# Start Small

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- Remove/replace/refine agenda slides
- Add one slide that explains the “why” or the theme
- Give your presentation to a co-worker (or student worker) and ask them what they remember the next time you see them
- Try to write a theme statement for your presentation- what fits and what doesn't?
- What do *you* find interesting about this topic? Is that conveyed in your presentation?



# Be an Information Literacy Poet

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“The interpreter must use art, and at best he will be somewhat of a poet. This sounds frightening, I allow. I can see some of my readers shuddering at the thought and wondering where it leaves them. ‘But I never wrote a line of poetry in my life. You cannot expect me to be an artist.’

**I reply: you do not know yourself. You have been so frustrated by the curatorship of unimportant details that you have forgotten your inborn talent. We are all in some degree, poets and artists.”**

Freeman Tilden ca. 1960s. (NPS History Collection photo by M. Woodbridge Williams, HFCA 1607)

# Additional Suggested Resources

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Campbell, E., Patzer, S., Beall, L., Gallagher, A., & Maibach, E. (2020). Using social science in National Park Service climate communications: A case study in the National Capital Region. *Parks Stewardship Forum*, 36(1), 122–127. <https://doi.org/10.5070/P536146377>

Hammons, J. (2025). *Why do we cite? Helping students understand the value of citations* [webinar]. The Ohio State University Libraries. <https://youtu.be/6GUsTiPHgiQ?si=ztZQHyGzHkOnXvnK>

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Schumacher, S. (2021). Ethical decision-making and visual literacy instruction in architecture. *Portal : Libraries and the Academy*, 21(2), 317–338. <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2021.0018>

Tilt Higher Ed. (n.d.). Transparency in Learning and Teaching. <https://www.tilthighered.com/>

# Famous Names in Interpretation

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**Anna Botsford Comstock** (1854-1882) – Nature educator who worked for Cornell University and championed immersive, engaging nature education for children

- Significant work: *The Handbook of Nature Study* (1911)

**Enos Mills** (1870-1922) – Founded the first nature guide school, friend of John Muir

- Significant work: *Adventures of a Nature Guide* (1920)

**E. O. Wilson** (1929-2021) – Pioneer in the field of sociobiology, promoted the idea that humans have a natural desire to connect with living things

- Significant works: *On Human Nature* (1976) and *Biophilia* (1984)

**Sam Ham** – Professor emeritus of communication psychology and conservation social sciences at the University of Idaho

- Significant works: *Environmental Interpretation* (1992) and *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose* (2016)

**Larry Beck & Ted Cable** – Based on the work of Tilden and Mills they created 15 principles of interpretation to meet the needs of the modern interpreter

- Significant work: *The Gifts of Interpretation: Fifteen guiding principles for interpreting nature and culture* (2011)

**Tim Merriman & Lisa Brochu** – Both authors have held leadership roles in the National Association for Interpretation, Brochu was instrumental in starting NAI's certification program for interpreters

- Significant work: *Personal Interpretation: Connecting your audience to heritage resources* (2015)