
The 6 Principles of Interpretation

When you take a group of students on the trail, what is the role that we best try to play? Are you a teacher? A guide? An entertainer? We call ourselves “interpreters” but few of us have anything more than a vague understanding of what that label really means. While the topic of a program may vary widely from day to day and site to site, there is an established list of “principles” that our field generally recognizes as the basis for what we do, and how we should strive to interact with students and visitors. Freeman Tilden first laid them down in his book *Interpreting our Heritage* back in 1957, and they are still amongst the first topics of study for any new interpretive naturalist learning the craft today.

I. 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.

On the trail: This is arguably the single most important guideline for interpretation. When something is discovered on the trail, don’t think “what do I know” but instead “what do they know” and proceed from there. Unless the discovery is so grand as to etch itself indelibly in their minds on its own, most students will forget much of what they learn quickly if it doesn’t relate to their world and their lives, allowing them to make the connections again and again down the road.

II. Information, as such, is not Interpretation. Interpretation is revelation based upon information. But they are entirely different things. However, all interpretation includes information

On the trail: This is how interpretation differs from classroom teaching. We wish to have the students take away information, but preferably at the beginning or end of a phase of discovery.

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III. Interpretation is an art, which combines many arts, whether the materials presented are scientific, historical or architectural. Any art is in some degree teachable.

On the trail: Your own background, experiences, education, and personality play an important role in your own personal style of interpretation. River Bend can teach you many things and help you grow in your talent, but in the end the best of what you do will be uniquely your own.

IV. The chief aim of Interpretation is not instruction, but provocation.

On the trail: This is the “wow” factor. Don’t just tell students what to think, but challenge their current views and comfort levels and empower them to draw their own conclusions. If you’re raising their eyebrows, you know you’re on the right track.

V. Interpretation should aim to present a whole rather than a part.

On the trail: This is why we try not to just study flowers, bugs, or birds, but how those organisms interact and exist in their habitats. As the students get older, we try to connect habitats to the greater environment around us, as well as their role in it.

VI. Interpretation addressed to children should not be a dilution of the presentation to adults, but should follow a fundamentally different approach.

On the trail: Age-appropriate interpretation is important, which is why we spent time on that topic before reaching this point. The more experience you have with each age group, the better you’ll be able to reach their minds and tap their interests.