

Tips for Leading Interpretive Walks

Planning and Preparation

1. On an interpretive walk, *flexibility is a key ingredient*. Some people want lots of information, some just want to take pictures or just want a nice stroll with a park staffer. Some will enjoy activities, games and presentations while others may find them dull or condescending. Groups may also change in their desire over the course of a walk. Don't be crushed if an activity or talk flops, or if some visitors choose to leave your walk while it is in progress. Take cues from things like how many of your group ask questions, if their attention seems to wander, if people sit down whenever there is a stop, if people complain about the heat more than usual, etc. Don't demand that people listen to you unless it's very important (i.e., safety and rules)
2. A typical walk consists of:
 - a. A number of stops in which the guide speaks to the entire group, giving planned presentations which develop and support the theme.
 - b. Many spontaneous visitor questions, often asked between stops, about the surroundings *which may not relate to the theme*. Make sure that the entire group hears the planned parts of the thematic presentation, but you may answer the spontaneous questions one on one as you walk. Nobody should feel like they are missing anything.
3. Remember that people are on your walk *to relax and have fun*. Don't overburden them with information or cause tension. Keep your interpretive walk relaxed, loose and flexible. Those who want lots of information will show themselves by asking a lot of questions. With experience you'll develop a sense of how much information to give them.
4. Don't memorize scripts for your programs. It sounds terrible! Rather, work from an outline which is based around the stops you intend to make. Find your own spontaneous words each time you do the walk. This keeps the program from sounding too canned or artificial.
5. Maintain a clean, neat, professional appearance. Consider wearing a staff uniform since it may add to your credibility and the respect visitors will show you.
6. Know the site before you take people there, and plan your walk and stops based on what there is to experience.

7. Be aware of potential dangers such as obstructions or slick spots on the trail, and warn people ahead of time.
8. Emphasize good rules of visitor conduct to protect resources. But never say, “Hey! You can’t do that!” without explaining why. And don’t ever say, “Because it’s against the law” and leave it at that. Interpret why the law exists.
9. Discourage collecting of natural materials. Be sure to explain why. In many protected areas, collecting and foraging isn’t allowed in any case.
10. It may take many repetitions before you’re truly satisfied with your interpretive walks. Hopefully, you’ll never be totally satisfied but rather will look for ways to make your hikes even better.
11. Always eat a good breakfast before going off to deal with the public. It really helps.

Starting your Interpretive Walk



1. Get to know early arrivals before the walk starts. What interests them? What did they come here to see? You can also get to know people by listening to the type of questions they ask throughout the walk. If interpretation doesn’t relate to people personally, then it falls flat.
2. Start on time!
3. Establish your authority as the leader from the beginning by taking charge of the group and directing it. This is especially true with school groups.
4. Give people an idea of what they will see on the walk (but don’t tell them too much or you will spoil the surprise and the joy of discovery). Draw a map in the sand or snow if it seems appropriate, or start your walk next to a posted trail map where you can share the route.
5. State the theme of your talk in the introduction.
6. Let people know how long and strenuous the walk will be.
7. Ask for their help in protecting the resource: staying on the trail, packing out garbage, not collecting forest materials, etc.

8. Try to keep your introduction brief, then move the group to second spot even if it's not very far, to communicate that it won't be a static activity.
9. If you're leading a large group, start off walking quickly to get the whole group moving, then slow down.

The Main Part of the Walk

1. *Avoid scientific names and jargon unless you define the terms as new vocabulary, or unless there is a good reason.* People always ask me what this plant or that bird is called, but beyond just a name I try to add some other information, such as a story about that plant, or a human use, or the derivation of its name, etc. Names by themselves aren't that interesting.
2. *Never falsify information.* If you can't answer a question, be honest and say, "I don't know." Learning to say, "I don't know" takes practice! I often respond to questions outside my knowledge with speculation or educated guesses, but always preface them with "I'm not sure, but here's a possible hypothetical explanation...."
3. When addressing the group as a whole (for important pieces of a thematic or sequential presentation) wait until the everyone has assembled. It may help to stand above and up wind from the crowd so everyone can see and hear you. Another trick with a large group is to walk past the place you want to stop (people will follow you), then stop the group and walk back halfway so you can easily see and address everyone. If people in the group ask you questions, repeat the question in a loud voice so everyone can hear before answering it. Another pro tip: face into the sun when talking to the group, so they don't have to.
4. *Talk to people at the back of the crowd* (an old trick for making sure your voice carries). Make eye contact with everyone and hold it for a few seconds.
5. Don't try to talk to the whole group while walking unless the group is very small.
6. Be patient with a hike participant, even if you are tired or hungry or their question seems obvious. Don't speak to them condescendingly. Give them credit for wanting to learn. There are no stupid questions, only brave people who have the courage to ask.
7. Our parks and protected areas receive so many visits they are suffering impacts on the land due to the sheer number of visitors. Generally, keep your group on the trail. Explain that this reduces impact to a heavily visited area. If you leave the trail, have a good reason and do so with extreme care not to crush plants or erode soil. You are setting an example.
8. Encourage people to use all their senses--not just sight--and to discover things for themselves. For example, give puzzles or mysteries to solve or questions to answer which

relate to the theme of the walk. Encourage them to touch, feel textures, smell, listen.

9. Take advantage of spontaneous occurrences as “teachable moments” even if they don’t fit your theme.
10. Keep the lead (or at least stay close to the front) at all times, but do not lose sight of the slowest.

Choose your Stops Carefully

1. Frequent short stops give a sense of movement, rather than a few long stops.
2. Make your stops purposeful, to see something (especially something related to your theme). *Don't stop just to make a speech.*
3. Stop for photo opportunities. If a better photo opportunity exists farther along the walk, let visitors know and keep moving.
4. If you stand in a hazardous place while addressing a group, they’ll worry about you and won’t hear a thing you say.
5. If it’s hot, stop in the shade; if cold, stop in the sun. *Children, being smaller, are much more susceptible to temperature extremes than adults.* By the time you start feeling uncomfortably hot or cold, the kids in the group may be really miserable.

Concluding your Walk

1. Your final stop on the walk should present your conclusion, *and restate your theme.*
2. This is best done *before they see the final destination/parking lot.* As soon as they see their car, they will quit thinking about your program and start thinking about their next activity: lunch, back to school, whatever.
3. This is especially true with school groups. The instant the kids see the parking lot or the school bus, they’re gone. Sometimes they will all joyfully run down the trail, already anticipating lunch. Make sure to give your conclusion before they know the hike is almost done. And take care: almost all the injuries that have occurred on my hikes happen when kids sprint down the hill to the bus and slip on gravel. I ask the teacher or chaperone to help me keep the kids under control at a safe speed.
4. Make a point of thanking people for coming on your walk and say how much you enjoyed having them. I try to stick around to wave good bye to the kids on the departing school bus.

