

INTERPRETIVE TECHNIQUES

The job you do as a volunteer interpreter at Ardenwood Historic Farm is vital to the success of the program here. This is because "how" we interpret information is just as important as "what" we interpret. Freeman Tilden defines interpretation as "an educational activity which aims to reveal meaning and relationships through the use of original objects, by firsthand experience, and by illustrative media, rather than simply to communicate factual information." Interpretation is not just giving information - it is much more! Our visitors' experiences at Ardenwood will be greatly enhanced by good professional interpretation.

Our purpose at Ardenwood is not to glamorize history - but rather to relate it as it was. We must avoid building on misconceptions people have, and get them to realize that, for the most part, that folks living in this area 100 years ago were just plain, ordinary people. Increasingly, visitors to historic sites are finding programs which are professionally managed and interpreted. At most of these site standards for authenticity are high. The Ardenwood staff has the responsibility to maintain these standards. We must avoid becoming too theatrical - and therefore less accurate.

Telling every visitor to the farm all that you know about it is both impossible and impractical. Both time and the visitors' interest are limited, and people cannot absorb too much information at one time. Listening is a skill few people possess. Russell Grater, in his book *The Interpreters Handbook*, says that a normal person retains only 10% of what you tell him, if he or she is listening. It follows that it is better to present a limited amount of information and be sure it is understood than to present too much information and have none of it remembered. We want the individual visitor to have an educational, yet relaxing visit, with the hopes that they will want to return and learn more! This is not to say that as interpreters you need only to know the information you present. You must have a wealth of knowledge about your subject to interpret it professionally and successfully. Besides being able to answer questions that arise, a good "store house" of knowledge about your topic is essential for the establishment of self-confidence. This is a vital trait for an interpreter to have. By all means, if you don't know the answer to a question, say that you don't know; but if they would like, you can find out. The visitor will respect you for this. (Sometimes you can turn a question like this back to the group, and get some good answers.)

Friendliness is without a doubt the key to all good interpretation, and you are the primary determining factor of the mood of your group. A smile, positive approach, and making people feel you appreciate their taking time to stop, go far in setting this mood. If you are sluggish and distracted, there is a good chance the members of your group will be too. Put yourself in their shoes! Show some energy and enthusiasm; it will pay off in terms of group participation. Have fun with your job!

Always position yourself so everyone in your group can see and hear you. This is best done from the front of the group. It is usually best to stand when talking. Remember little things like whether your group has to face the sun to see you. If you lose the attention of some people, this can spread to others. Try to establish eye contact with as many individuals as you can. This holds their attention and adds a personal touch which is very important to good interpretation. As you talk, learn to read the people's faces and actions to evaluate whether they are with you. Use a lot of questions in your talk, and try to end with a basic "point" for them to think about.

Stay away from rote recitation of your material. This indicates a lack of professionalism and boredom with your topic. Think of every group as your first for the day.

Your interpretation at the end of the day needs to be as fresh and interesting as the first. You may notice that many people revisit the farm several times throughout the season. None will enjoy hearing the same "speech" on every visit.

Freeman Tilden, in *Interpreting our Heritage*, says that "any interpretation that does not somehow relate to what is being described or displayed to something within the personality or experience of the visitor will be sterile." If you tell someone that what they are looking at is a spinning wheel, it doesn't necessarily mean much. But if you show them (or even better, help them to discover) how it works and what it is used for, then it acquires more meaning. Our goal at Ardenwood is to create as much of the total environment at the time in which the object was used. In this way, we are better able to show the social history that is pertinent to the particular object. To do this, it is necessary for people to become involved with the various activities taking place throughout the farm. These activities also aid in holding the visitor's interest and in making their experience on the farm a personally rewarding one.

Getting your group "to think" and not just be entertained is important. If visitors are only told and shown things, they will tend to do little thinking (except maybe of where they are going to eat dinner, buy gas, or how to get rid of this boring interpreter). As an interpreter, you must draw them out. Kipling said, "I have six faithful working men who help in all I do. Their names are why, what, when, where, how, and who." The key is to get your tour group to interact with you and ask these kinds of questions. When you do this, each person will enjoy getting involved, especially when they think they have something to contribute. You, as an interpreter, become a "facilitator", you encourage people to participate on both a physical and intellectual level, ask leading questions when needed, and "guide" the quality of the experience a group will have. Use questions that cause people to think, such as:

Why would George Patterson want to buy this land?

Which of these irrigation methods would work best?

What was the best method of plowing in 1889.

With a little stimulation, your group will start asking questions you didn't even think of. With this type of thought, no tour will become "routine".

Try to involve as many of the five senses as possible during your interpretation (especially with children). For instance, have your group try to identify the sounds of the farmyard area or feel the coolness of the inside of the milk house. These sensory experiences may last the longest in the visitor's memories. They are also prerequisites for a well rounded, educational experience.

Below is a list of some important Do's and Don't's of interpretation:

1. Remember that the visitor comes first.
2. Make your talk short and to the point.

3. Change your interpretation a bit each time you speak to visitors. Don't memorize what you are going to say. Strive to be flexible, spontaneous, and fresh in your approach, but always accurate.
4. If you **make a mistake, say so and continue**. Just try not to make the same mistake twice. Don't be afraid to answer a question by saying, "I don't know."
5. Do all you can to gain self-confidence. Look the visitor directly in the eye. Strive for professionalism.
6. Try to talk in a conversational natural tone, loud enough to be heard.
7. Leave yourself and your personal opinions on controversial subjects out of your interpretation.
8. **Keep some information for questions rather than telling all you know**. One visitor's question may interest the entire group.
9. If visitors appear bored, evaluate what you are saying and how you are saying it. Cut your talk short and use a few extra, interesting facts.
10. Remember that you represent Ardenwood Historical Farm as far as the visitor is concerned. You can either make or break his visit. Therefore, always be tasteful and pleasant in what you say and how you say it. Also, be sure your costume fits our standards of authenticity.

Being an Ardenwood volunteer carries with it a large amount of responsibility. Your job may require that you be on your feet for extended periods of time. It also requires that you deal with large numbers of people; some happy, some not so happy. In addition, your position may require that you learn a considerable amount of historical information. Not only must you share it with the public, but you should do so in such a way that even those who say, "I never liked history", will find it interesting and intriguing. This is a pretty tall order. With practice and a lot of dedication, our objectives can be fulfilled.

When the key work is to promote participation, it can take quite a bit of energy to get people involved. For some it will be hard to relax. After all, for years they have probably been told to "be quiet and M.Y.O.B.!" In this respect, their visit to Ardenwood can truly be a unique experience. In addition to what our jobs require of us, we are presented with great opportunity for personal growth and satisfaction. You will feel it has been well worth your effort when a visitor tells you their visit to Ardenwood has been the highlight of their entire vacation.