

Building a Museum in Your Classroom

Design an Exhibit and Write Labels

A team of students will work together to conceive and create an exhibit for the class museum. This team includes: curators (2–5), an exhibit designer, a production chief, technicians (2–4), preparators (1–2), and educators (1-2).

The curators develop an exhibit proposal. The whole class can act as an exhibition committee to vote on what exhibits to do. Then tasks or roles are assigned to those other than the curators (see “Prepare for Exhibit Opening” activity for additional roles, such as an editor to review text and a graphic designer to help with the design of labels).

MATERIALS:

- objects (see Activities 1–3)
- a place to hold the exhibit (hallway, library, classroom, etc.)
- graph paper (for exhibit layout/drawings)
- notecards
- measuring tape
- heavy-weight paper for signs/labels/text panels
- markers for labels/text panels (or print labels from computer and paste on heavier stock)
- simple exhibit cases/hangers etc. as determined during exercise (homemade or pre-fabricated)

STUDENT ROLES:

Curators:

- 1) meet with each other and discuss topics for exhibit (based on objects in the class museum’s collection).
- 2) create proposals for two or three exhibits to present to the class for a vote.
- 3) make a list of objects that will be in the exhibit, and discuss themes/arrangements with exhibit designer and educators. Work with the educators to determine what the themes of the exhibit should be and what the team wants visitors to learn from the exhibit.
- 4) work together conducting research about the objects and write labels.
- 5) make sure the content presented in the labels is accurate and work with educators to be certain that it is clear and easy to understand.
- 6) review exhibit designer’s proposed exhibit layout and check the exhibit’s progress.

WHAT TO PUT IN YOUR LABELS:

Exhibit Title and Main Label:

The exhibit title should be short and exciting. It should make visitors want to see the exhibit. The Main Label following the title should explain what the exhibit is about and why it is important. It should be up to one paragraph in length.

Object Label Format for Cultural History (decorative arts, anthropological artifacts):

- Name of the object
- Date the object was made
- Name of maker (“Maker Unknown or Artist Unknown” if unknown)
- Place the object came from or was used
- Materials used to make the object

The label can also have additional information that relates an object to its time period, style, or maker, or perhaps compares it with other objects.

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Object Label Format for Fine Art (paintings, prints, sculpture, etc.)

- Artist's name
- Title of artwork date
- Media
- Other information if desired

Object Label Format for Scientific Specimens (animals, plants, rocks, fossils, etc.)

- Type of specimen
- Common and scientific name (for modern or ancient plant or animal)
- Age of specimen
- Location where specimen was found
- Other information on why the specimen is important or what it tells us about the environment, etc.

Additional labels can be written to provide more information on the exhibit. For example they might describe the collector, when and where the collection was made, or provide interesting information about how objects were made. They can be one to two paragraphs long and can be hung on the wall.

Educators*:

- 1) meet with curators to develop and review exhibit content and themes.
- 2) make sure the exhibit labels and design are understandable to visitors.

*for additional tasks of the educator, see "Prepare for the Exhibit Opening" activity. In that activity, the educator prepares a lesson or program about the exhibit and presents it for visitors.

Production Chief:

- 1) meets with exhibit designer to review object list.
- 2) accompanies exhibit designer to exhibit space to test the proposed layout and discuss cases, platforms, etc. that will be needed to display the objects.
- 3) gathers/orders the materials for the display.
- 4) supervises the technicians.

Technicians:

- 1) meet with exhibit designer and production chief to review exhibit design.
- 2) make signs and labels, prepare the bases, mats, and/or cases.

Preparator(s):

- 1) meet with exhibit designer and production chief to review exhibit design.
- 2) install the objects and their labels into the exhibit the day before it opens.

Exhibit Designer:

- 1) meets with curators and educators to review exhibit objects and themes.
- 2) designs the exhibit layout.
- 3) tests the proposed layout to determine if it presents the objects in a safe and informative way and tells the story that the curators and educators want to present.
- 4) oversees the installation of the exhibit.

The exhibit layout (the arrangement of objects in the exhibit) should tell a story. There are many way to arrange an exhibit:

AN ART EXHIBIT could be arranged to show how different artists came up with different ideas about the same topic. If the topic were "family," the art could be grouped with human-family paintings together, animal-family paintings together, etc.

A DECORATIVE ARTS OR HISTORY EXHIBIT could be arranged like a time line, ordering objects from the oldest to the youngest. The objects could also be divided into types—tools, weapons, utensils, documents, etc. Each style tells a different story.

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A NATURAL HISTORY EXHIBIT may be arranged with similar specimens together, so the visitors can compare details. A collection of specimens collected from one environment could be arranged together to show the whole system. Those stories are very different from each other.

The exhibit designer meets with the curators and educators to review ideas for arranging objects in ways that will best explain the theme of the exhibit. The exhibit designer should make a name card for each item. The measurements for each item and can be written on the back of its card. The designer can move the cards around when planning the exhibit layout and then make notes or a drawing of where each item should go.

The exhibit designer and the production chief should go to the place where the exhibit will be held (the hallway, a classroom, the library, etc.). They should use a tape measure to be sure objects will fit where they want them to go. They should put each of the object cards where each piece will be placed to decide if the layout will work. They should adjust the object cards until they feel that the layout works. They will need to decide if they need any special tables, platforms, or wall space. They may be able to order what is needed through the teacher, librarian, or custodian.

The exhibit designer should draw a floor plan or wall plan of the final design. The plan should show the location of each case or table, object, and label. This will help the exhibit team remember where each piece goes and will guide the installation. It also provides a record of the exhibit.

THINGS FOR THE EXHIBIT TEAM TO REMEMBER:

Be sure to arrange for security during the exhibit. A space with glass or plastic cases would protect three-dimensional objects. A "Please Do Not Touch the Objects" sign at the entrance informs visitors of the proper way to behave in your exhibit.