I AM A

HISTORIAN

I MAKE EXHIBITS

B. ERIN COLE
Hi! I make exhibits for history museums. I also have a Ph.D. in history.

Having a doctorate has opened doors for me, and I use my research + writing skills a lot...

Reading! Archive work!

Writing exhibit text! And more!

But! Most of the things I do I learned on the job. Making exhibits takes a lot of other skills.

Leading exhibit teams! Collaboration!

Sharing authority with outside communities! Budgeting + scheduling!

I am often the only content person on a team. Thinking about what visitors want!

This is the most important!
WE MAKE EXHIBITS FOR VISITORS.
(not historians, our museum peers, or ourselves.)

my teams ask questions like:

what do these visitors want and need?

how can we engage them and meet them where they are?

SO, WHO ARE VISITORS?
(and what is an exhibit, anyway?)

I'm an exhibit, and I'm glad you asked!

I'm a three-dimensional narrative environment! A story or argument you move through and interact with!

That makes me very different from a book or a movie or a website!

But I also wonder who comes to see me!
There's a few ways museums think about the people that come through their doors. An obvious one is **demographics**.

**Race**... (Museum audiences are often very white)

**Age**....

**Gender**....

**Zip code**....

(1 work in museums that attract kids + older adults)

(Women are more likely to visit)

(1 local visitors = repeat visitors)

And **more**!

Demographics help us:

- Market exhibits
- Know who is + who isn't coming
- Report data to funders, board members, + more

But they don't tell us **why** visitors are here!
Since I make exhibits, I need that **why?** What draws people here, and what do they want out of their visit?

Enter... **Visitor Types**!

People come to museums for lots of reasons. The five main visitor types are...

- **Explorers**
  - Curious, into learning new things
  - I love learning new things!

- **Facilitators**
  - Wants a meaningful social experience
  - I love things my family and friends can do together!

- **Experience Seekers**
  - Checking things off of their list
  - I heard this place was awesome!

- **Enthusiasts**
  - Likes history a lot
  - I am so into this topic!

- **Rechargers**
  - Looking to unwind (often avoid history museums)
  - Museums help me feel calmer!

See the work of John Falk for more information.
Whoever they are, visitors do whatever they want in exhibits. You have to earn their attention. Sadly, a lot of exhibits aren't trying to engage visitors much at all, unless they're enthusiasts.

A typical exhibit experience:

- A very long label
- Hmm
- Shiny thing
- Content dump
- Corner of awkward exhibit - team compromises
- Important thing - no one notices
- Boring interactive
- Seating, sort of
- Pain in the ass artifact
- A donor insisted
- I'll post this picture
- Ok
- Whew!
- To cafe + restrooms
Engaging different types of visitors is easier if you have one big idea that ties the exhibit together.

Deciding on the big idea is hard! We want to share lots of things with visitors! But focus makes our work more visitor friendly. We can reach more people if we use different techniques to reinforce the big idea.
TELLING THE STORY IN MULTIPLE WAYS LETS VISITORS APPROACH AND ENGAGE WITH THE BIG IDEA IN THEIR OWN WAY, TO FIT THEIR NEEDS.

- 1910s BAD YEARS FOR THE BIG IDEA
- doing activities together!
- asking each other questions!
- Sitting down?
- contemplation!
- taking photos!
- kids, you want to do this puzzle?
- watching media!
- leaving after a few minutes!

THERE IS NO WRONG WAY TO SEE AN EXHIBIT.
IF VISITORS AREN'T ENGAGING WITH WHAT WE MADE, IT'S PROBABLY OUR FAULT

☐ ARE WE MEETING VISITORS' NEEDS?
☐ IS THE EXHIBIT FOCUSED ON ONE BIG IDEA?
☐ DOES THE EXHIBIT TELL ITS STORY IN MULTIPLE WAYS, FOR DIFFERENT TYPES OF VISITORS?
hey! that's a lot to ask!
- I'm just a space with some things in it!

YOU'RE RIGHT!
ONE OF THE MOST IMPORTANT THINGS I'VE LEARNED
MAKING EXHIBITS IS...

EXHIBITS CAN ONLY DO SO MUCH!

THEY CAN
- inspire curiosity!
- introduce new points of view!
- give context!
- give people a meaningful experience!

THEY CAN'T
- please everyone!
- talk about everything!
- include every fact!

AN EXHIBIT IS JUST ONE PART OF A MUSEUM EXPERIENCE

we can use programs, lectures, books, social media, + more to build on what visitors got out of exhibits.

THE END!