

FRAMEWORK

Assessing Excellence in Exhibitions from a Visitor-Centered Perspective

Use this Framework to talk with your peers about excellence and improve your professional practice.



First Meeting

Gather a team of six to 10 museum professionals and meet for at least two hours to become familiar with the Framework and to come to a common understanding of procedures before judging an exhibition.

You will be rating and discussing an exhibition regarding its level of achievement for four different **Criteria**. Is the exhibition:

Comfortable? Engaging? Reinforcing? Meaningful?

1. Comfortable

An excellent exhibition helps the visitor feel comfortable—physically and psychologically. Good comfort opens the door to other positive experiences. Lack of comfort prevents them.

2. Engaging

An excellent exhibition is engaging for visitors. It entices them to pay attention. Engagement is the first step toward finding meaning.

3. Reinforcing

In an excellent exhibition, the exhibits provide visitors with abundant opportunities to be successful and to feel intellectually competent—beyond the “wow” of engagement. In addition, the exhibits reinforce each other, providing multiple means of accessing similar bits of information that are all part of a cohesive whole. Visitors are confidently on their way to having meaningful experiences.

4. Meaningful

An excellent exhibition provides personally relevant experiences for visitors. Beyond being engaged and feeling competent, visitors find themselves changed, cognitively and affectively, in immediate and long-lasting ways.

Ratings are based on two different kinds of data:

Call-outs: your experiences in the exhibition as a visitor

Aspects: the evidence you found that supported each Criterion

At the end of the first meeting, pick an exhibition to visit.

Exhibition Title _____

Institution _____ Your initials _____ Date of Visit _____



Create Call-outs

Visit the exhibition by yourself. Keep notes about your experience in the form of sentences with feeling verbs—your thoughts, feelings and responses as you experience the exhibition as a visitor. These are your Call-outs.





Call-outs Continued



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Assess the Aspects

After visiting, leave the exhibition and then assess the Aspects—the evidence defining each Criterion—listed below. Using your Call-outs as a reference, think about to what degree each Aspect was appropriately present or not present in the exhibition. Using the following guidelines, put pluses and minuses in the right-hand columns.

++ Excellent, a wonderful example	– Not quite there	NA Does not apply (Not all Aspects apply to all exhibitions.)
+ A good example	– – Self-defeating	

1. Aspects of Comfortable	
a. Physical and conceptual orientation devices were present.	
b. There were convenient places to rest.	
c. The lighting, temperature, and sound levels were appropriate.	
d. Everything was well-kept, functioning, and in good repair.	
e. There was a good ergonomic fit. Exhibit elements could be read, viewed and used with ease.	
f. Choices and options for things to do were clear. Visitors were encouraged to feel in control of their own experiences.	
g. Authorship, biases, intent, and perspectives of the exhibition were revealed, identified, or attributed. The exhibits reveal who is talking, fact from fiction or opinion, the real from the not real.	
h. The exhibition welcomed people of different cultural backgrounds, economic classes, educational levels, and physical abilities.	

2. Aspects of Engaging	
a. The physical environment looked interesting and invited exploration.	
b. Exhibits caught my attention and enticed me to slow down, to look, interact, and spend time attending to many elements.	
c. Exhibits were fun—pleasurable, challenging, amusing, intriguing, and intellectually or physically stimulating.	
d. Exhibit components encouraged and promoted social behaviors. Exhibits encouraged visitors to call one another over, read out loud, point at, and converse about the exhibit material.	
e. Experiences came in a variety of formats (e.g., graphics, text, objects, AV, computers, living things, models, phenomena) and a variety of sensory modalities—sight, sound, motion, touch, etc..	
f. Regardless of a visitor’s prior knowledge or interests, there were interesting things to do.	

3. Aspects of Reinforcing	
a. The exhibition was not overwhelming. There were “just enough” things to do.	
b. Challenging or complex exhibit experiences were structured so that visitors who tried to figure them out were likely to say, “I got it,” and feel confident and motivated to do more.	
c. The presentation had a logic. It held together intellectually in a way that was easily followed and understood.	
d. The information and ideas in different parts of the exhibition were complementary and reinforced each other.	
e. The exhibit built on itself.	

4. Aspects of Meaningful	
a. Ideas and objects in the exhibition (natural specimens, living collections, cultural artifacts, demonstrations, and activities) were made relevant to and easily integrated into the visitors’ experience, regardless of their levels of knowledge or motivation.	
b. The exhibition made a case that its content had value. The material was timely, important, and resonated with the visitors’ values. Meaning is the “so what.”	
c. The exhibition content touched on universal human concerns and didn’t shy away from deep or controversial issues.	
d. The exhibit experience promoted change in people’s thinking and feeling, even transcendence. Exhibits gave visitors the means to make generalizations, change beliefs and attitudes, and/or take action.	

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Rate the Criteria

To what extent did you think each Criterion was likely to be experienced in the exhibition?

Assign a rating level (1-6) to each Criterion.

Level 1 Excellent—Consistently good Aspects (+’s), with many excellent (++’s)

Level 2 Very Good—Consistently good Aspects (+’s) with very few or no misses (–’s)

Level 3 Good—Mostly good Aspects (+’s), but with some misses (–’s)

Level 4 Acceptable—A balance between good Aspects (+’s) and missed Aspects (–’s), or a few noteworthy things

Level 5 Misses Opportunities—Mostly missed Aspects (–’s), but there may be a few good Aspects (+’s)

Level 6 Counterproductive—Mostly self-defeating (– –’s), with many missed Aspects (–’s)

Using the evidence of your Call-outs and Aspects, write a Rationale for your rating.

1. Comfortable

Level Rationale:

2. Engaging

Level Rationale:

3. Reinforcing

Level Rationale:

4. Meaningful

Level Rationale:



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Assessment Comparison Meeting

Allow at least two hours for the follow-up meeting. Start by recording everyone's ratings in the chart below.

Criteria Level Ratings Summary

Judge's Initials	Comfortable	Engaging	Reinforcing	Meaningful
1.				
2.				
3.				
4.				
5.				
6.				
7.				
8.				
9.				
10.				

Any Strong Disagreements?

Discuss areas of greatest disagreement among the ratings above. Why do you disagree?

Recording Consensus

Discuss, then list, specific features, experiences, or feelings about the exhibition—both positive and negative—that you ALL agree on.

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____
4. _____
5. _____

Social Moderation

After all the discussions, did anyone want to modify his or her ratings? If so, alter the ratings in the chart above.

Congratulations! You are now an Excellent Judge!



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