

# Evaluating Interpretation

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## Why evaluate?

Evaluating your interpretation will tell you whether it's working or not.

To evaluate you must have clear objectives for your interpretation. There are four kinds of interpretive objective:

- Learning objectives – what do you want visitors to *know* about the site?
- Emotional objectives – what do you want visitors to *feel* about the site?
- Behavioural objectives – what do you want visitors to *do* as a result of the interpretation?
- Promotional objectives – how do you want to *present* your *organisation*?

If you do not already have clear objectives, you need to decide what they should be. See the guidance notes on interpretive planning for help.

## When do I evaluate?

Evaluation is classified according to when it's done in the interpretive process.

**Front-end evaluation** is done whilst you're developing your interpretive objectives. It answers questions such as 'what do the audience already know about this topic?' and 'what are they most interested in?' This way you can tailor your interpretation to your visitors' knowledge and interests.

"...only another 40 questions to go madam,"



**Formative evaluation** tests visitors' reactions to trial versions of your interpretation. For example, proofs of leaflets and panels can be tested to see if they attract attention and communicate the right messages. This allows you to change the design or content to make sure it works.

**Remedial evaluation** checks that once all the elements in a display are brought together they work – for instance, the lighting is appropriate, visitor flow patterns are optimised, and distraction/competition between elements is minimised.

**Summative evaluation** answers the question 'is our interpretation meeting its objectives?' Summative evaluation is carried out once a project is implemented.

## How do I evaluate?

A range of evaluation methodologies are available.

They can be subdivided into:

- **Quantitative methods** which count and measure things. Here your data is already in the form of numbers or can be converted into numbers that can be analysed statistically.
- **Qualitative methods** which attempt to describe your visitor's opinions, attitudes, perceptions and feelings. This information will require further interpretation and organisation.

Quantitative and qualitative research can be undertaken using the following techniques:

- 1 **Observations** involve observing visitor behaviour, for example to determine how long people spend looking at an exhibit, and whether they repeat any of its contents out loud (a 'text echo').
- 2 **Tracking/behavioural mapping** involves following visitors to find out where they go, how they use a space or area, and the amount of time they spend in different places.



- 3 **Questionnaires** involve both qualitative and quantitative information. Questionnaires can be done by an interviewer or can be filled in by the visitor. They can contain closed questions that can be coded and treated statistically such as:

*On the following scale how would you rate the design of the forest floor panel?  
very poor / poor / average / good / excellent*

They can also contain open questions that provide insights into opinions, feelings and perceptions such as:

*What do you like and dislike about the forest floor panel?*

- 4 **Focus groups** involve gathering information through semi-structured in-depth interviews with a group of people. The interviews are usually tape recorded and analysed later. The interviewer's job is to provide prompts and open-ended questions aimed at exploring a topic in some depth.
- 5 **Critical appraisal** asks for an expert opinion about your interpretation from an interpretive professional. Award schemes such as 'Interpret Britain' involve a critical appraisal where experienced judges assess the various attributes of the interpretive facility.

Each method has its own strengths and weaknesses, and combinations of methods usually give the best results. Here are some guidelines for appropriate methods to use in different phases:

Phase	Method
Front end	Focus groups Questionnaire interview
Formative	Observation Simple interviewer administered questionnaire
Remedial	Observation Simple interviewer administered questionnaire
Summative	All methods but primarily observation and questionnaire Critical appraisal

## How many people do I need to interview or observe?

Some guidelines on your sample size are as follows:

- Evaluation is always a trade-off between time, money and accuracy. The bigger the sample size, the more accurate the results are, but the more it costs.
- For formative evaluation quite small numbers are all that's required – if something doesn't work it will show up quickly.
- Qualitative research usually involves smaller sample sizes, for example in-depth interviews of 20 visitors to a site.
- Quantitative research involves bigger sample sizes, such as interviews of 150+ visitors to a site. To ensure the sample is statistically representative interviewees must be chosen at random. When interviewing groups of people the 'next birthday' rule helps here – find out whose birthday is next and then interview them, rather than the dominant 'group leader'.
- Focus groups typically involve 8 -10 participants from one particular visitor group, such as social class ABCI or urban fringe dwellers. Several focus groups may be needed to reflect the visitor profile of a site.



*"You've now been evaluated,  
and I'm very happy to say  
you have passed."*

## Further Reading

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