Making Interpretive Signs

Creating an interpretive sign involves a number of different steps. It starts with choosing a subject and a theme . . . doing research and writing . . . testing the concept . . . design and layout . . . manufacture of the sign . . . and finally, the big moment: installing it in the garden. As always the end result should look professional and make the garden come alive.

Before you start

Before you start an interpretive project, you need to know your audience. Go into the garden and watch the visitors. How old are they? Are they families, individuals or groups? Chat to them and find out about their interests. Allow visitors to do most of the talking.

You also need to identify your goals – i.e. what you wish to achieve with the interpretive signs. It is very helpful to remind yourself of these goals later on, whenever you get 'stuck' while trying to write the text, or making a decision about something.
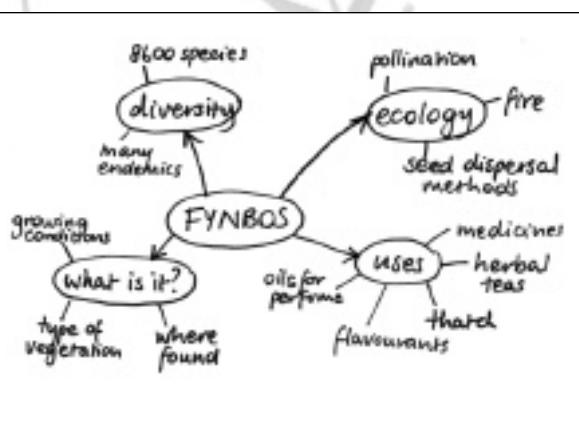
Choosing a concept

This stage involves generating lots of different ideas and then choosing a subject, a theme and an approach.

You could start by brainstorming ideas with your colleagues and friends. Try and look at the subject from different angles and record your ideas as a list or mind map (see page 14).

Next decide on the subject of the sign and its theme. The subject is the topic of the sign (e.g. Forests) whereas the theme is the main message which you want to put across to the audience (e.g. Forests provide us with food, medicine and shelter). Write down the theme as a simple sentence. This is what you would like people to remember and understand.

At this stage it's important to know the context of the sign. Go into the garden and look for suitable position(s) for the sign(s). Look closely at the plant

displays. Is there anything that jumps out at you? What would you like to tell people? How does this relate to their personal experience? Think of ways in which you can link the sign to the display and so encourage people to look more closely.

Organising the information

Once you have chosen the theme, it will be clear what kinds of information should be included on the sign. Write down the content in point form. If there is a lot of information, more than four or five points, use a **text hierarchy**. This involves arranging the content into different levels. For example:

Level 1: a title which summarises the theme
Level 2: the main ideas – subtitles
Level 3: short text to explain each idea
Level 4: picture captions/reference to more information

Using a text hierarchy makes the text easier to read and accommodates people with different levels of interest. If they are not very curious or don't have much time, they can scan the titles and still get a sense of what it is about. Organising information into different levels will give structure to the sign and help you later with the design and layout.

What is fynbos? (LEVEL 1)

Tough yet beautiful (LEVEL 2)
- fynbos is a type of vegetation
- found in the Cape provinces of SA
- it grows in harsh conditions

} (LEVEL 3)

Detail and diversity (LEVEL 2)
- fynbos is very diverse
- many species are found nowhere else on Earth } (LEVEL 3)

To find out more about fynbos, follow the Fynbos Walk (LEVEL 4)

Writing

Writing good interpretive text is a skill which develops with practice. The more often you write, the easier it will become. So don't be fooled: just because a final text is only four sentences or 80 words long, it doesn't mean it didn't take any effort! In fact, short signs that include all the relevant information take longer to produce than long rambling ones which are often unclear and hard to read.

Start with your theme and think of ways to get the message across in the title. Theme titles often include a verb and usually sound more 'catchy' and interesting than subject titles: compare 'A tree with a hundred uses' with 'The sweet thorn'.

Keep the text simple and easy to understand. Bear in mind that the average adult attention span is 30 seconds, and that most people have come to the garden primarily to relax, not to learn. If you're getting stuck, imagine that you're telling the story to a visitor or a friend. For further tips, see the Writing Checklist.

When you've written the text, ask an expert on the subject to check that the information is correct. This is important because errors and scientific inaccuracies can creep in when you simplify the subject matter.

Testing the concept

At this stage, you're ready to evaluate the concept of your sign. Before you go any further, you need to know whether it is effectively communicating the message (theme) to visitors.

Make a draft copy of the sign – either by hand, using cardboard and marker pens or on a computer. Arrange the text according to the different levels, with important points in large bold type and more detailed information in smaller type.

If you are planning to include an illustration, indicate this with an empty box or rough sketch and put in the caption. Aim to create a sign which looks neat, but don't spend hours on it. Write DRAFT COPY on the sign somewhere, so that people will know it is not a final product.

Now you're ready to install the sign in the garden at the intended site. Observe how visitors respond:
- Do people stop to look at the sign?
- Do they read it? And for how long?

Hmm, maybe the text is too small?

- Does the sign stimulate a positive response (e.g. visitors smiling, chatting or pointing to things)?
- Have they remembered and understood the theme? Ask visitors to tell you in their own words what they read about.

Use your observations to identify any shortcomings and to improve the sign. Test the revised version of the sign again . . . and again . . . until it works. You will have the satisfaction of knowing that you have created a truly effective sign.

We tend to forget that a botanical garden is a dynamic environment and so a sign is never truly 'finished'. It must be evaluated regularly to ensure that it continues to fulfill its purpose.

Designing and making the sign

As discussed earlier (Chapter 5), a variety of materials and methods can be used to produce a sign. A simple and inexpensive option is to make a sign of paper (or light cardboard) and have it laminated (see Box 5).

The design and layout of the sign can be done by hand, by cut-and-pasting, or on a computer, using a graphics programme. Even a word processing programme such as MS Word® enables you to design a simple sign.

Cut-and-pasting a sign

Write or print out the sign text using the different levels to guide you. For example:

Level	Content	Text type	Font size
Level 1	title	very big and bold	48 points
Level 2	subheadings	big and bold	36 points
Level 3	body text	medium	22 points
Level 4	picture captions	small	18 points

Ask someone to proofread the text to make sure there are no mistakes. Then cut out the different components of the text (title, paragraphs, captions) and arrange the text and illustrations on the page (see Box 3).

Make sure the layout is clear and that your theme stands out. A good test is to half-close your eyes and see which part of the sign demands your attention - it's got to be the theme! When you're satisfied with the result, stick it all down. Ask a colleague to check the sign one last time, because signs with spelling or typing errors create a poor impression.
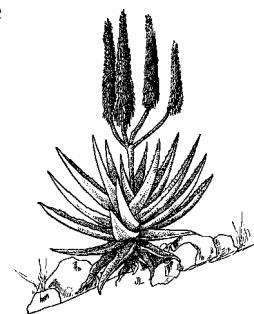
Using illustrations

There is a proverb which says 'a picture is worth a thousand words'. Line drawings, photographs and cartoons enable you to give a lot of detail and information in a visual form. This helps you to keep the text short and concise. Illustrations can be used for different purposes:

- to identify the subject of the sign (e.g. this is what an acacia looks like).
- to tell a story about the subject (e.g. acacias have a special symbiotic relationship with ants: ants live inside the thorns and protect the tree from insect predators)
- for decorative purposes (e.g. a border of acacia thorns around the page)

Illustrations which tell a story need to be carefully planned. If you are asking someone to do an illustration for you, you need to tell him/her exactly what you wish the picture to show. It is good practice to write this down and give the artist an *artwork brief* for each illustration. Knowing the purpose of the illustration will help the artist to interpret and tell the story. For further tips about using illustrations, see Box 2.
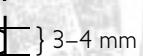
Box 2   Tips for using illustrations

- Pen or ink line drawings are the most versatile type of illustration because they are easy to photocopy or scan. If they are not too detailed they can be silk-screened or transferred photographically onto a permanent sign face, such as aluminium.

- Photographs and coloured images are generally not suitable for outdoor use because they tend to fade very quickly (depending on the technique used).

- Avoid using kokis and coloured marker pens because they fade very quickly in sunlight.

- Pencil crayon doesn't fade. Try using coloured pencils to add some colour highlights to black and white line drawings – this can look very effective.

- In situations where scientific detail is not that important you could consider using woodcuts, linocuts, collage or other forms of illustration.

- Cartoons (humour) can be used to offer a new perspective on a subject.

- Add human interest to the illustrations: show people harvesting or using plant products (provided this fits into the theme of the sign).

- Support local artists!

Box 3   Layout and design

- Avoid cramming too much onto a sign. It will be easier to read and will have more visual impact if there is lots of white space between the various design elements (titles, text, illustrations).

- DON'T ONLY USE CAPITAL LETTERS, EXCEPT FOR SHORT TITLES. AS YOU CAN SEE HERE, IT IS DIFFICULT TO READ LONG TEXTS IN CAPITALS.

- Avoid underlining words. Use capital letters for titles, and **bold** or *italics* for special emphasis.

- Computers have different fonts (type styles). Use a simple clear font such as Arial, Universe, Optima, Lucida Sans or Tahoma. For a more casual hand-written look, try Comic Sans MS. Do not use more than two or three different fonts per sign.

- Text should be big enough to read at a distance of one or two metres. The smallest readable font size is about 18 points.

A font size of 22 points is much easier on the eye. Read this from a two metre distance and see if you agree. If you are not sure, use this as a guide: ⊏ } 3–4 mm
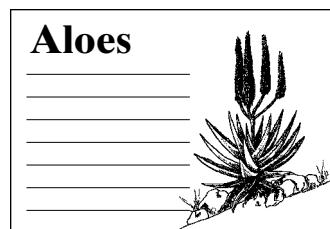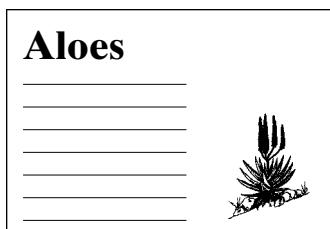
Box 4   Having fun with a photocopier !

Copies of nature – you can photocopy or scan leaves, grasses, etc. by placing fresh or dried material directly onto the glass. Experiment with different settings.

From a simple page to a smart sign – prepare your sign on a standard A4 page and photocopy–enlarge it 141%. This will give you an A3-sized sign.

Made to fit – When cut-and-pasting a sign, you can use a photocopier to enlarge or reduce illustrations to fit onto the page.

Add a professional touch – first make several photocopies of your corporate logo or a standard decorative border. Use this paper and copy the sign text onto it.

A leafy background – place several leaves or grasses onto the glass of the photocopier and close the lid. Change the light/dark setting to very light. Make several copies while experimenting with different leaves and settings. Now use this paper and copy your sign text over it. Make sure the text is still easily legible on the leafy background.
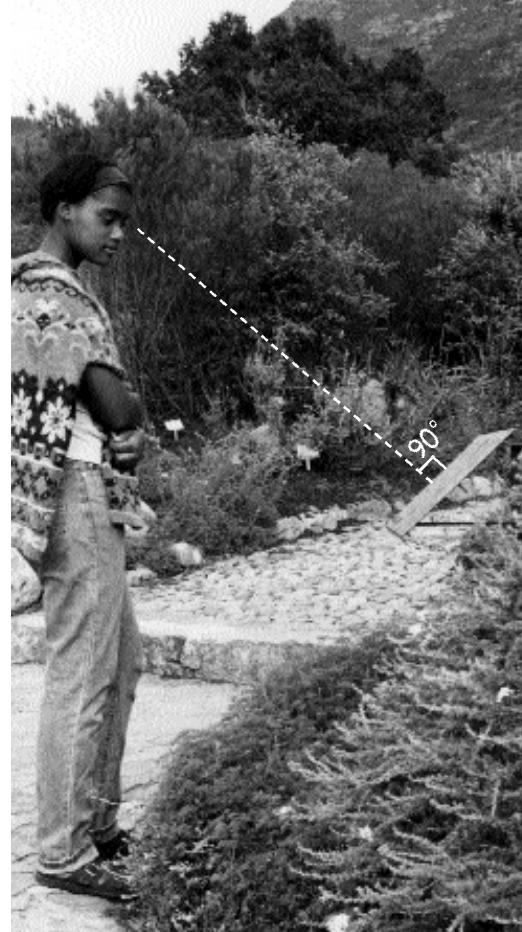

Black is boring! – buy green or brown toner for your photocopier and use this instead of black toner. This will make your signage look distinctively different.

Box 5   Tips for making temporary signs

- Printing **inks** tend to fade more quickly than the powder-like **toner** used by photocopiers and laser printers. If you have a printer which uses ink (e.g. DeskJet), it is best to photocopy the sign and use the photocopied version for outdoor signage.

- White paper is very reflective and difficult to read in bright sunlight. It's therefore preferable to use coloured paper for signs. However most coloured papers fade quickly in sunlight. Try using recycled paper – it contains small bits of fibre which don't fade and make the sign less reflective.

- You can waterproof a paper sign by having it **laminated** with plastic. This is known commercially as **plastic sandwiching** because the paper is literally sandwiched between two sheets of plastic. Most cities and towns have a bureau which offers this service. Remember to ask for a 5 mm sealed edge around the sign.

Box 6   Sign installation

- As a general rule signs and posters should be mounted at right angles to your line of vision. This means that labels and signs placed lower than eye height should be angled. This has certain disadvantages: angled signs receive more direct midday sunlight than upright signs, especially when north-facing (in the southern hemisphere). As a result they are more reflective and may fade more quickly.

- Height: place the sign so that someone in a wheelchair can easily read it. About 80 cm above the ground seems to be a good height for children and wheelchair users.

- Make sure the sign is close to the subject which it interprets, preferably within 2 metres, unless of course it's a landscape view, or a big tree! Check that the subject to which the sign refers cannot be confused with another subject.

- Place the sign in a fairly level position where visitors can easily walk up to it (i.e. not deep in a plant bed).
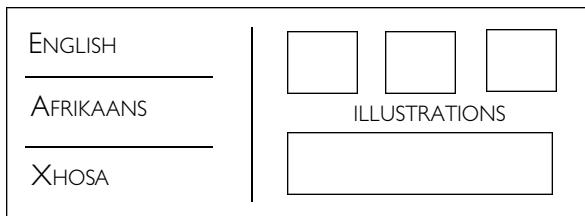
Multilingual signs

While working on interpretive signs at Kirstenbosch NBG, I was faced with a problem: which languages were we going to use in the garden? In addition to tourists speaking a variety of foreign languages, South Africa has eleven official languages!
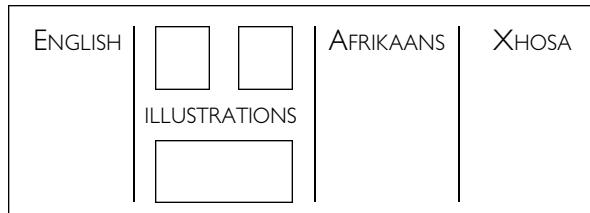
After much discussion we decided on the three dominant languages spoken in our province (Western Cape) – viz. English, Xhosa and Afrikaans. A visitor survey had shown that only a third of our visitors were foreign tourists, so it made sense to accommodate local visitors first. English, being an international language, would accommodate most of the foreigners.

I was concerned about the visual effect of having three languages on each sign: wouldn't visitors be 'put off' by so much text? So I decided to keep the text REALLY short (60 to 80 words) and to use lots of illustrations to convey additional information and detail.

To make it easier for visitors to find their preferred language, I used a standardised layout. We have a simple template on the computer and have done about 40 different signs using this layout. In some ways this is a bit boring, but the advantage is that visitors know what to expect and don't have to search for their language.

ENGLISH			
AFRIKAANS	ILLUSTRATIONS		
XHOSA			

For the water-wise demonstration garden, the sign texts were longer, so I used a four column layout. Using columns or a grid helps to organise the text and images and keeps the layout looking neat.

ENGLISH	ILLUSTRATIONS	AFRIKAANS	XHOSA

On some days this multilingual system of signage felt like a real constraint – there was so much I would've liked to interpret and so little space to do it! But actually it was a good thing: it forced me to be concise and to present ideas (themes) in small bite-sized chunks. I have no regrets.

Marÿke Honig, Interpretive Officer, Kirstenbosch NBG.