Recall of Label Content:  
The Effects of Length and Sequence  
Amy Cota and Stephen Bitgood  
Jacksonville State University

Introduction

Visitor research has revealed several consistent findings related to the physical features of label design. For example, studies have found that visitors are more likely to read short labels (e.g., 50-75 words) than longer labels (e.g., Bitgood, et al., 1987; Bitgood & Patterson, 1993; Thompson & Bitgood, 1988; Borun & Miller, 1980). Another aspect of label design is its content. One problem related to content is the retention of information be related to the length of the text? That is, will information be more difficult to recall if it is presented first versus last?

We could find only one study that addressed the question of information recall related to label length (Borun & Miller, 1980). Borun and Miller asked visitors to read labels that included from one to five topics. They found that as the label length increased, the frequency of reading the whole label decreased. In addition, the scores on a test of cognitive gain also decreased beyond the label containing two topics. Unfortunately, amount read and label length were confounded in this study.

The question remains: If the entire label is read, will retention of information be related to the length of the text? The current study attempted to answer this question by exposing individuals to text samples composed of one and two paragraphs with five chunks of information per paragraph. Of concern was whether people would recall more information when it was presented alone rather than in combination with another paragraph.

A second question addressed in this study was the sequence of presentation. When information is presented in two paragraphs, is the order of presentation important? That is, will information be more difficult to recall if it is contained in the first or the second paragraph of a two-paragraph label?

Method

A total of 34 undergraduate students recruited from introductory psychology classes at Jacksonville State University served as subjects. Subjects were shown samples of label text from an exhibition (Birmingham Museum of Art) on Northwest Coast Native American art on an overhead projector in a classroom.
because the information in paragraph 3 was easier to recall than paragraph 1. Overall, more complete items were recalled from paragraph 3 than from either paragraph 1 or 2.

Sequence of paragraphs. Recall of information contained in paragraph 2 was about the same whether it was presented as a first paragraph in condition P1/P2-3 or as a second paragraph in condition P1-2/3. Thus, in this study, the sequence of information didn't seem to make a difference with respect to recall.

Significance

At least under one condition (paragraph 3), information was easier to recall when it was presented in a short text label (one paragraph with five information chunks) than in a longer text label (two paragraphs with ten chunks of information). Combined with the common finding that visitors are less likely to read long labels, the current study offers additional rationale for keeping labels short. A follow-up study is currently being conducted to investigate this problem further and to control for confounding variables.

References


Figure 1
Label Content Used in the Study

Paragraph 1:
Totem poles have been a part of native life on the Northwest Coast of North America for over two hundred years. Totem poles traditionally represent the ancestry of a family. The figures on totem poles consisted of symbols and illustrations, many of them comparable to our family coat of arms, and others commemorating historical events. They were not pagan gods or demons as is commonly supposed; they were never worshipped. Usually they illustrated myths or tribal traditions.

Paragraph 2:
There is great similarity between two-dimensional and three-dimensional art of the Northwest Coast. The artists are exceptionally good at adapting the form of an object to the shape of whatever surface they are given to work with. The Chilkat blanket is an example of two-dimensional art from the Tlingit tribe. Its figures or events are rarely depicted in a realistic style. Parts of the represented animal are distorted beyond recognition, completely filling the available space.

Paragraph 3:
The tree for a totem pole must be carefully selected. Haida artists traditionally cut the log in half, and hollow out the back to help it dry evenly and reduce cracking. After the log is rounded and smoothed, the figures are drawn onto the wood. Sometimes a chainsaw is used to remove large areas of wood, but axes and chisels are used for most of the work. Finally, the totem pole is left to the elements to weather naturally.

Figure 2
Items Recalled from Each Paragraph