

Strengthening Interpretive Themes

Prepared by Max A. van Balgooy, Engaging Places • March 18, 2018

Adapted from *Interpretation: Making a Difference on Purpose* by Sam Ham.

“TORE means that you have a strong theme that’s communicated in an ORE way.”

Sam Ham

1. **Avoid theme look-alikes.** See pages 138-43.

- Not a topic or subject (usually one or two words).
- Not a title or headline.
- Not a tagline or slogan.
- Not a command or call to action.
- Not a question.
- Not a statement of fact.

2. **The audience will be motivated to process the theme by connecting to things that matter to them—that is, it must be relevant to them.**

- Integrate or connect the theme to a universal concept or value. See page 125 or the “Values of History” at HistoryRelevance.org.
- Add a well-placed metaphor or simile. See page 125.
- Make it personal. See page 126.

3. **The audience will find the theme easy to understand and process.**

- Use analogies to make connections easier to see. See page 127.
- Shorten the theme so it is easier to process (15-20 words maximum). See page 127.
- Break the theme into two sentences. See page 127.
- Use everyday conversational language; avoid jargon. See page 128.
- Consider historical categories of inquiry such as cause and effect, change and continuity, turning points, and multiple perspectives. See *Thinking Like an Historian* by Nikki Mandell and Bobbie Malone (2007).

4. **Use active verbs.** See also pages 226-233 for a list of verbs.

- Use active voice, not passive. See page 136.
- Use verbs you can see or visualize. See page 137.
- Use verbs that are more intense, emotional, or dramatic. See pages 131-3.