The Do’s and Don’ts of Interpretation

Members of the Division’s I&E Training Committee have listed some of their favorite “Do’s” and “Don’ts” on the following pages. We hope these will be helpful to you.

Do you have any “pet peeves,” or “do’s” and “don’ts” of your own? Watch other interpreters give talks, programs and hikes to find out what works and what doesn’t.
DO’s of Interpretation

1. Do organize your interpretive talks, hikes and programs into three sections: introduction, body and conclusion.

2. Do have a simple, clear message (also called a theme sentence) for all your interpretive talks, hikes, programs and exhibits.

3. Do carefully research all the facts and concepts you provide in your interpretive programs, exhibits and publications so that they are accurate and up to date.

4. Do eliminate technical jargon, or provide simple definitions of technical terms, when giving programs to the general public.
   
   Note: Many science words familiar to a person with a college degree in parks and recreation, wildlife or forestry may not be familiar to the general public.

5. Do outline and practice your interpretive talks, hikes and programs before giving them to an audience of park visitors.

6. Do prepare all your materials and/or inspect the site of your outdoor program/trail walk before the program begins.

7. Do use a relaxed, friendly approach when providing interpretive information to park visitors.

8. Do encourage audience participation when possible.

9. Do pass around your props to allow everyone a closer look, or invite the audience to come up after the program for a closer look.

10. Do begin and end your programs on time.

11. Do modify your programs to better suit the needs of specific audiences and/or adjust for changing weather conditions.

12. Do remember that the role of a park interpreter is to inspire appreciation and wonder, as much as it is to educate.
DON’Ts of Interpretation

1. Don’t argue with members of your audience. Recognize other viewpoints and, if you must disagree, do so respectfully.

2. Don’t make up answers to questions. Say “I don’t know” and follow up with the interested person(s) after the program if possible.

3. Don’t cover up your mistakes. Simply admit them and explain why you were wrong.

4. Don’t be rude, sarcastic or attempt to get a laugh by making fun of someone else. Humor is great, but it can be easily misinterpreted or abused.

5. Don’t make any racist, sexist or political comments. Be sensitive to the various members of your audience.

6. Don’t make any negative comments about state government, the division, your park, co-workers, etc. in front of park visitors. Maintain a professional demeanor.


8. Don’t use your interpretive program as an opportunity to “get on your soap box” and push your opinions and ideas on others. Try to present a balanced approach when discussing controversial issues.

9. Don’t be a “know-it-all” or try to dazzle your audience with your profound knowledge of the natural world. A big part of interpretation is to arouse curiosity and inspire others to learn and explore on their own.

10. Don’t forget to ask your audience and/or coworkers to evaluate your programs, talks and hikes on a regular basis.
Additional Do’s for Hikes and Outdoor Programs

1. Do set ground rules for hikes. Examples: stay behind the ranger, stay on the trail, be very quiet so we don’t frighten the animals, don’t pick any plants, etc.

2. Do plan for the slowest person in the group on your hikes.

3. Do scout out your hike beforehand and make sure the trail (or other outdoor site) is clear of debris and hazards.

4. Do explain any safety hazards/rules to the group at the beginning of your outdoor program or hike. Safety first!

5. Do describe the difficulty level of the hike and/or the types of skills the participants should have to comfortably participate in the activity.

6. Do wait for everyone to catch up before you interpret something along the trail/tour.

7. Do make sure you are facing your audience before you begin speaking; talking over your shoulder along a trail is not effective.

8. Do make sure you are staring into the sun, not your audience, whenever you stop to interpret an object or provide a lengthy explanation.

9. Do place the spotting scope, or one of the spotting scopes, at the height of the shortest person in the group.

10. Do explain the rules of any environmental education game twice; then ask if the children have questions.

11. Do allow all participants playing games to switch roles.

12. Do be patient, understanding, and considerate of the needs and abilities of all the participants.