

Photo Figures for Part V

Exhibit Labels

An Interpretive Approach

Third Edition

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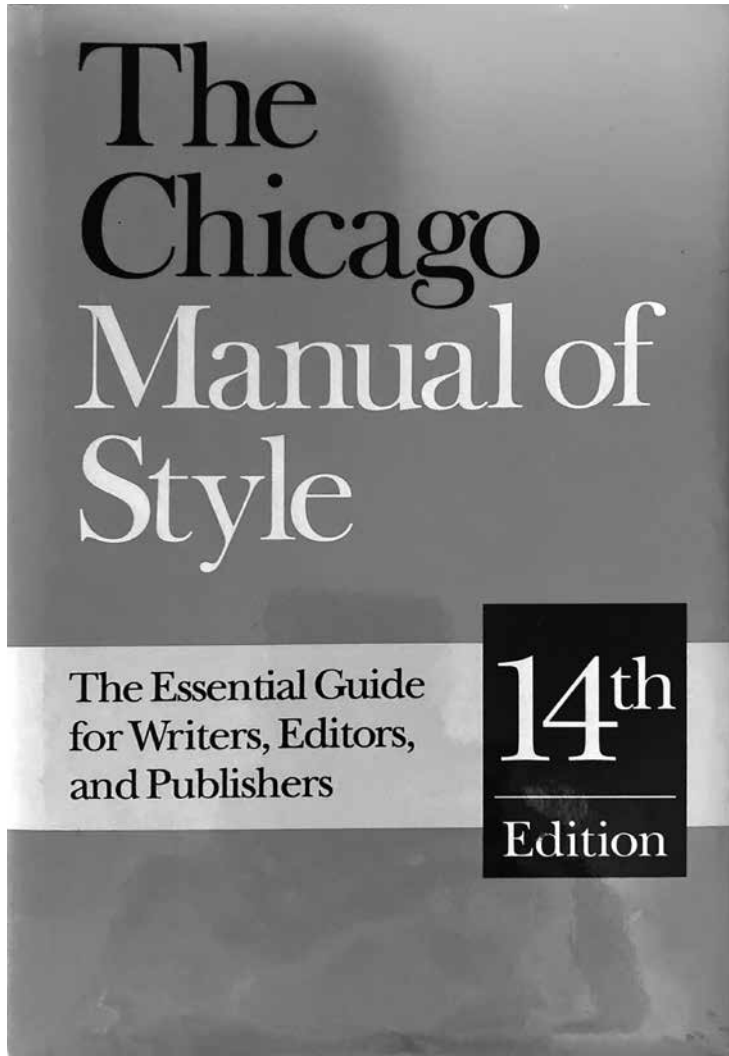
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CMOS aka *Chicago Manual of Style*

The *Chicago Manual of Style* is an editor's bible during the final stages of label writing. Writers should start with *Exhibit Labels* and other style guides available online.



Prototyping workshop

Exhibit developer Kathy McLean leads a workshop with museum staff and visitors to try out new content and designs.

Updating old labels in an existing exhibition can address issues such as colonialism and inequality in the interpretation.

Frogs use their vision to hunt. They have a hard time seeing things that don't move, but are good at seeing fluttering butterflies, crawling spiders, and other moving prey.

before

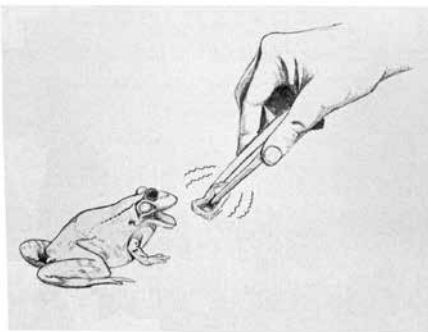
We feed our frogs both worms and venison. The frogs see the moving worms, but they can't find the venison until we wiggle it. Stand still and the frog won't see you! If you wiggle, you may become his lunch.



Frogs use their vision to hunt, but they have a hard time seeing things that aren't moving.

after

We feed our frogs both worms and meat. The frogs see the moving worms, but they don't see the meat until we wiggle it.



Feeding a frog

How to feed a frog

After an early draft of this label was tested with visitors, several changes were made:

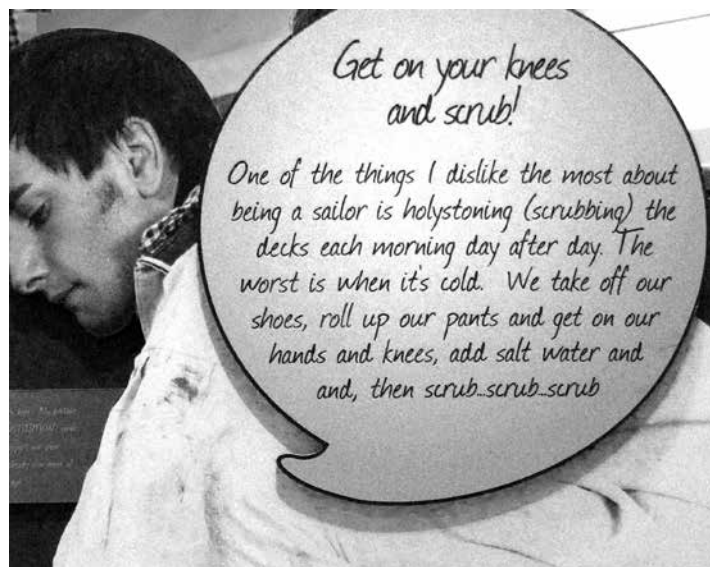
- The first paragraph was shortened.
- “Venison” was changed to “meat.”
- The frog photo was replaced with drawing of the action described in the text.

The final draft was shorter, easier to read, more to the point, and a lot more fun.

Scrub the deck

A label commands, “Get on your knees and scrub!” While they are scrubbing, visitors can look up and read a quote from a fictitious nineteenth-century sailor about this miserable task.

Exhibits in *All Hands on Deck* had extensive prototyping and experimentation, resulting in compelling interactives for all ages, including teenagers!



Life-sized nature

JOHN JAMES AUDUBON (1785–1851)

The Birds of America: From Original Drawings

London, 1827–38

Audubon sought to portray birds as they appeared in nature, showing them in their habitat and drawing them from life as well as from posed specimens. To do so, he needed an enormous page: small birds were often shown in flocks, yet large birds, to fit on the page, were illustrated with folded necks or frontally, rather than from the side.

Life-sized nature

The variety of typefaces and sizes in this label clearly separate the different parts: Title; author's name; name of the book and printing date; and a very legible sixty-one-word caption.

The last sentence leads your eyes back to the large Audubon drawings on display to see what the birds' necks look like.

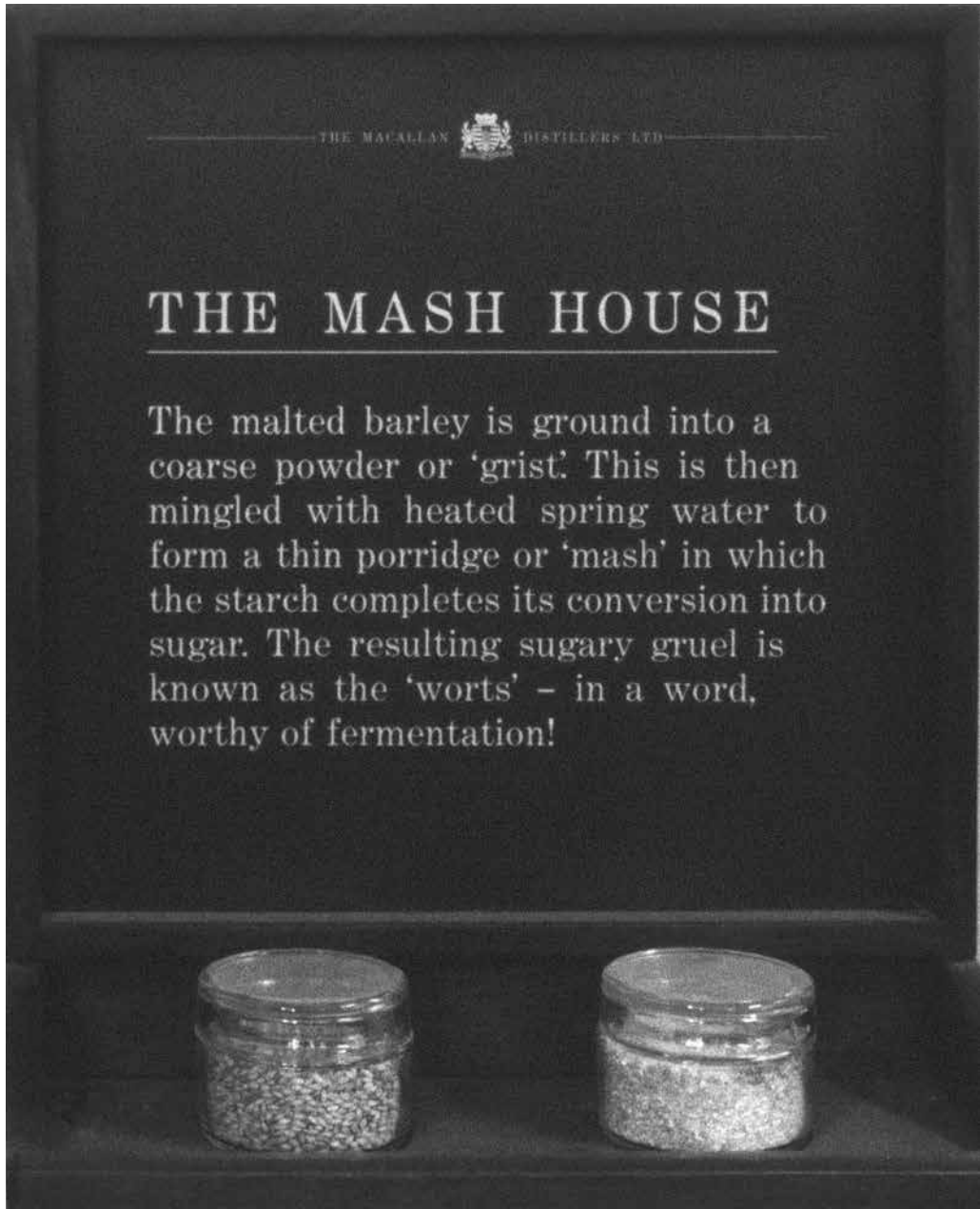
Bridges

DREAMING BIG, BUILDING BIG

Setting out to improve on nature, people constructed massive new bridges across the water. Bridges forever changed how we live on and move around the Bay. We even see the Bay differently—zooming high above the water, we gaze at the distant waves.

Bridges

The readability of this label is due in part to the use of three versions of the same white serif font—bold, all caps, and regular text—against a black background. A compact forty-three words also helps.



Mash house

At a whisky distillery, the steps of fermentation are elegantly interpreted with classic typography.

Fifty words set with excellent spacing and line lengths enhance the label's readability. Specimens of the products add a nice touch.



Large-eyed pronghorn

This diorama label uses bold words to call out the names of the animals and plants in the scene, thereby serving two functions: identification and interpretation.

**THREE ANIMALS,
TWO MEALS,
ONE FOSSIL**

This rare fossil preserves **stomach contents** that show one part of a Cretaceous marine food web. The large bones of a plesiosaur (a marine reptile) to your right were **found inside the ribcage** of the *Tylosaurus* in front of you. They have tooth damage and pitting made by *Tylosaurus*'s stomach acids. The **smaller bones come from a third species**—probably the plesiosaur's last meal.

Tylosaurus proriger and *Plesiosauria* indet.
Lived 85–61 million years ago
Niobrara Formation, Logan Co., Kansas
USNM 888, 890, and 948

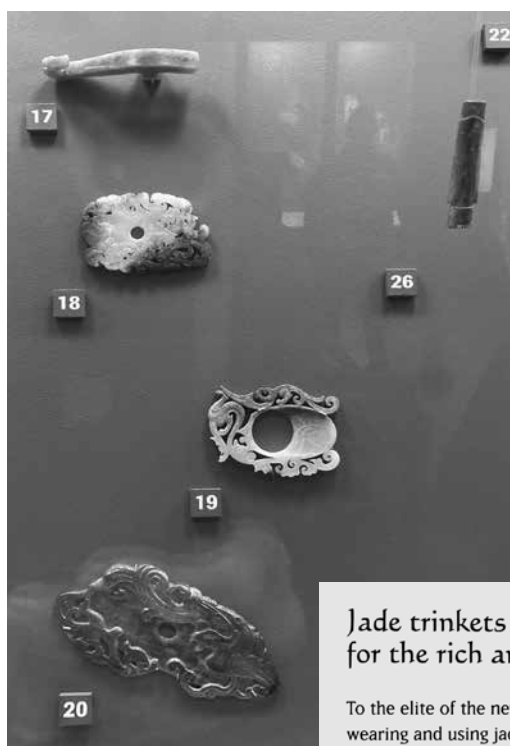
Legend:
 ■ In the mosasaur (above →)
 ■ In the case (right →)
 ■ Plesiosaur bones found in mosasaur stomach
 ■ Bones found in plesiosaur stomach

Timeline: Cretaceous (14,600 mas, 14,000 mas, 1,800 mas, 1,400 mas, 1,200 mas, 1,000 mas, 100 mas, 100 mas, 100 mas)

The mosasaur *Tylosaurus* chases a group of ammonites in Late Cretaceous Kansas.

One fossil

Bold words don't always contribute to quick and easy comprehension of the label's purpose or meaning. After the catchy title here, confusion reigns.



Jade trinkets were only for the rich and powerful

To the elite of the new empire, wearing and using jade in daily life were unmistakable signs of status. Different colors of jade indicated a person's rank; white jade was reserved for the emperor.

These flat, elaborate jades with center holes are pendants, made to be strung with beads and hung from the waist, neck, or shoulders. The dragon-head shape of the green belt hook was popular in the Han period and for centuries afterwards.

- 17** Belt hook
Han period, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220
1926.1689.183181
- 18** Pendant
Han period, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220
1910.1114.116553
- 19** Pendant
Han period, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220
1926.1689.183048
- 20** Pendant
Han period, 206 B.C.–A.D. 220
1910.1114.116555

Jade trinkets

When objects are placed far from the labels that identify them, legible numbers make the connection easier. But it's always more work for visitors when the words are not next to the objects.

Bending with bifocals

Labels placed too low with type too small puts a strain on people's eyes and backs. This one should at least be mounted at an angle to bring the label closer to the reader, like the ones in the background.





Panel with cleats

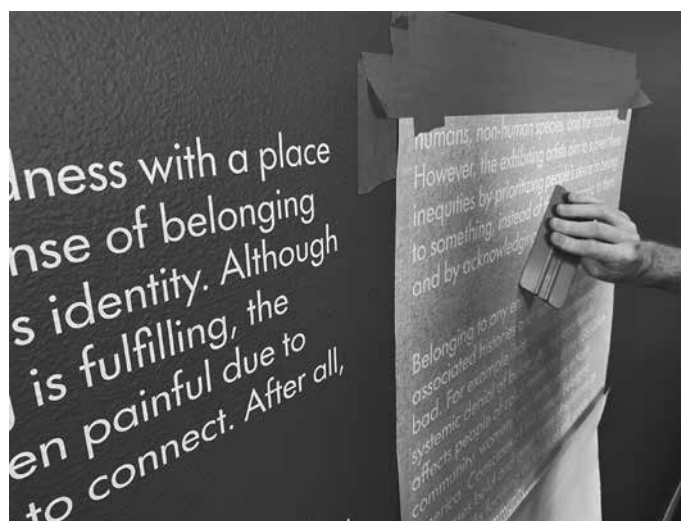
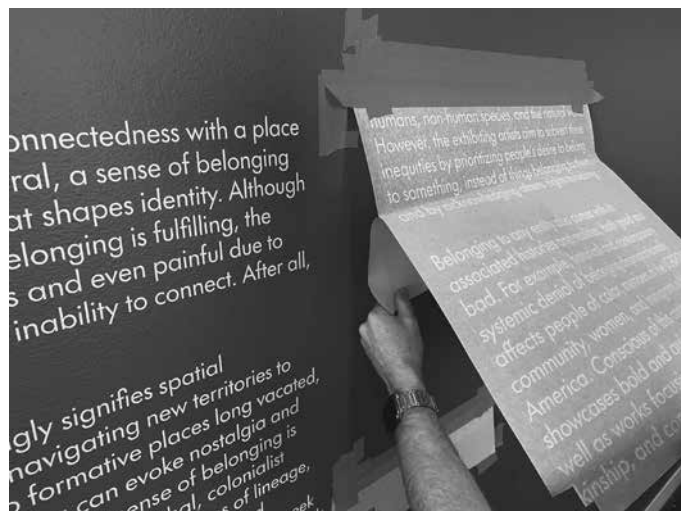
Large panels mounted with cleats are easy to hang, and no hardware is visible from the front.



Bedrock

Removal might be the best option when a label has deteriorated to this extent.

The life span of a label, especially when placed outdoors, should be calculated in the planning process, along with replacement schedules and budgets.



Putting up vinyl letters

The task of installing vinyl lettering involves positioning, peeling off the backing, rubbing down the letters, then peeling off the facing.

For a 350-word introductory label, this task is time consuming, difficult, and tedious. If writers had to do it, would they write less?



Vinyl letters rubbed off

If vinyl letters are within hands' reach, beware.



Data collector

A data collector watches visitors as they spend time looking at and reacting to the exhibits (or not).

The data will reveal the exhibits' abilities to attract and hold visitors' attention and whether visitors are reading, pointing at, and talking about the labels.

This is an actual nestling albatross that was found dead at the breeding grounds on Midway Island. An autopsy showed it to have plastics that may have contributed to its early death.



Dead albatross

Visitors reacted to this dead albatross with shock and sympathy, as well as curiosity about the impact of plastic on the ocean environment. Visitors saw what happened to the bird, and the label concisely reinforced it.



Exhibit labels competition

Winners of the 2019 Excellence in Label Writing competition were posted at the annual meeting of the American Alliance of Museums. The 2020 pandemic interrupted this tradition.

An online archive of past winning labels is available, including photos and the judges' opinions. It's a great resource for inspiring ideas about content and design as well as the helpful exercise of critiquing exhibit labels.