

Assignment 1:
Composing a museum label

On Wednesday, September 11, we will be visiting the Harvard Art Museum to sample various textual remains: cuneiform tablets, ancient coins, stamps, inscribed drinking vessels, manuscripts, paintings, and photographs with snippets of text, and many other fascinating objects. Our visit will have three parts which all students will experience in varying orders: a brief tour through selected galleries in the museum to view the material forms of texts from different regions of the world and historical periods; a visit to the University Study Gallery, where we have assembled a bay window of objects specially selected for public display; and a visit to the Art Study Center, where we will have the chance to view objects up close in a more intimate setting.

For this week's assignment, due on the Friday following the Museum visit, you will **compose an exhibit label** for one of the objects we visit in the Museum. Imagine you are a curator, organizing an exhibit called "Texts in Transition." In a short label (**150-250 words**), tell visitors to the exhibit about your chosen object focusing on the material form of the object and the text preserved on it. You may choose an object from the University Study Gallery or from the Museum's permanent display collections (see attached Object List). You will notice that the objects in the bay windows do not yet have exhibition labels: we need to create them!

To complete this assignment, you will need to return to the University Study Gallery on your own time between Wednesday and Friday. Before composing your label, carefully observe the object you have chosen to focus on. Use the questions below to guide your observation, taking detailed notes on your object. You may not be able to answer all of these questions, but make educated guesses when you are uncertain. You should also consult the entry for your object in the Harvard Art Museum [Catalog](#) (search by object number) which may provide you with helpful information.

Type of Object, Date, Provenance

- What kind of thing is your object?
- To what historical period does it belong (give date range as BCE or CE)
- What part of the world does it come from?
- When, where, and in what context was it found?

Size, Shape, Color

- How big is your object? What are its dimensions and shape?
- What colors are present in your object and in what proportions? Where do the colors come from? How did the colors get on the object?

Materials, Techniques, Tools

- What materials is your object made of? If paper, what kind of paper; if metal, what kind of metal; if stone, what kind of stone?

How do you think your object was made? What tools or technologies might have been used to create it? What technical knowledge was required to design and fashion it?

Text, Writing, Language

- What words or letters appear on your object? What language are they written in?
- How much of your object is taken up by text? How is the text positioned on the object?
- To what extent are the words or letters discernible or legible? If they are only partially visible, what prevents their being fully visible?
- What do the words say? (If your object contains a great deal of text, or if it is a language other than English, you need not transcribe it in its entirety—but if possible, summarize the nature of the text and write down a general idea of what content it conveys).
- How has the text been inscribed on your object? With what kind of writing instrument or writing technology? If the text on your object is written in ink, what color(s) is the ink?
- Who do you think composed the text? Who do you think was responsible for its content?
- For whom is the text intended? To whom is it directed?
- Why do you think this text appears on your particular object?

Purpose, Function, Use, Transmission

- How do you think your object was intended to be used or viewed when it was created?
- Was this an ordinary object or a special one at the time it was made? How expensive do you think it was then (we're not asking for a price in some long lost currency, but a sense of relative worth — i.e. comparable to a loaf of bread, or a piece of furniture, or an expensive piece of jewelry, or a house)?
- What evidence do you see of the object's use after it was made?
- What about damage, or evidence of aging? Does the condition of the object suggest anything about how it survived to the present or what happened to it between the time it was made and now?

Once you have finished collecting notes on your object, write your museum label. Present the object to visitors in the form of a caption (such as the example below) explaining the relationship between the text on the object and its material form.

Below, adapted from descriptions in the Harvard Art Museum Catalog, is an example of a label that you may wish to use as a model for your own:

Inscribed Arrowhead
Greek, first half 4th century BCE
Leaded bronze
1960.490

This large bronze arrowhead is inscribed with the Greek letters Φ Ι Λ Ι Π Π Ο (“of Philip”) inscribed on one side. The letters are only about a centimeter high, so you have to be very close to the arrowhead to read them. If you look carefully, you can see three raised lines on the conical section at the bottom of the arrowhead, where the shaft of the arrow would have been inserted. These lines mean that the arrowhead was cast with a wax mold. Since the shapes of the letters of the raised inscription are soft, a round-tipped tool was probably used to inscribe the mold.

The arrowhead is made of bronze, and it has a green patina. There are also brown accretions built up on top of the patina, which are the result of the arrowhead having been buried for a long time. The fins of the arrowhead are sharp, but the tip is blunted, as if from impact, so this arrow was probably used in a battle.

Who was meant to read the inscription on the arrowhead? Probably, this inscription was meant to be seen after the arrow had been shot at its target during a battle. Reportedly found “near the city of Olynthos,” scholars think that this arrowhead was probably used during the siege of Olynthos by King Philip II of Macedon in 348 BCE. Only the troops personally commanded by the King carried weapons inscribed with his name. So maybe the inscription on this arrowhead was meant to increase the reputation of the King’s personal troops, or to demoralize the enemy—or both.