

Improvisation Can Nest Respectively and Effectively Within Interpretation

Alaskans affectionately and proudly refer to their state as the “Last Frontier,” and rightfully so. Alaska is one-fifth the size of the lower 48 states combined, but its population hovers only around 750,000. It offers more than 3,000 rivers, three million lakes, about 27,000 glaciers or 34,000 square miles of ice, 70 potentially active volcanoes, and Denali, the highest mountain in North America. We cannot overlook Southeast Alaska’s notable icefields and mystical rainforest rich with flora



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and fauna, including black bears, eagles, mountain goats, five species of salmon, more than 350 bird species, myriad mushrooms, lavish lichen species, and much more.

In short, Alaska is a nature interpreter’s dream. Its vibrant landscape, meandering waterways, and spine-tingling wildlife encounters are beyond “Wow!”

I work as an interpretive guide for Gastineau Guiding Company located in the capital city of Juneau. I lead multi-hour interpretive town tours, whale-watching excursions, mountain hikes, and glacier-viewing walks. Gastineau Guiding’s excursions trek through the emerald-hued Tongass National Forest. With this in mind, Gastineau Guiding’s management trains its

staff as certified Alaska Tour Guides (ATG) so they may inspire guests to appreciate, respect, and protect Alaska’s natural, historical, and recreational resources. Developed by the Alaska Department of Commerce, the ATG curriculum is similar to NAI’s Certified Interpretive Guide training. In fact, my CIG credential spurred Gastineau Guiding’s management to grant me a job interview after I applied through NAI’s Career Center.

According to cruisecritic.com, Alaska’s Glacier Bay National Park was the number one cruise ship destination worldwide in 2018. Therefore, more than 1.3 million cruise ship passengers are expected to visit Juneau in 2019. Consequently, I may lead as many 100 tours over

the summer driving the same road, hiking the same trails, traveling the same coastal fjords day in and day out, but guiding will not be boring. This is because Mother Nature routinely presents unexpected distractions or opportunities. Bear cubs in a tree, a plodding porcupine, the shrill whistle of a varied thrush, a whale breaching, an eagle screeching—any, and all, of these wildlife encounters could be a reason a guide might veer from a program's theme.

Whereas NAI defines unexpected turns, opportunities, or interruptions as teachable moments, I prefer to think of such moments as improvisational opportunities.

Improvisation: to compose, play, recite, or sing on the spur of the moment.

You see, I don't always have the luxury of interpreting what is considered a teachable moment—for example, when a bear lumbers toward my guests, a tour is behind schedule, or misty precipitation turns torrential. Providing clear and concise direction, a quick fact, a snappy snippet, or a simple yes or no may take precedence over interpretation. In addition, my tours offer a cornucopia of sights, experiences, and discoveries, but guests' interests and expectations may not fall within a particular theme's parameters. Consequently, I often veer off theme to satisfy my guests' curiosities or interests.

Veering off program or theme is not a bad thing, according to Kerry Plemmons, a professor at the University of Denver's Daniels School of Business. Plemmons says interpretive programs are like his executive classes where he strives to provide "edutainment," his catch phrase for "educating, entertaining, and inspiring students."

"My classes never turn out exactly as planned, although we always get through the scheduled content," Plemmons said during his keynote appearance at the California Park Rangers Association's annual conference in Ventura, California,



in March. "I try to interact with students when they ask questions or want to look at something differently, even when it is slightly off curriculum. Just like Tina Fey, I say 'yes and' to almost anything, and then work to direct the improvisation back to the subject at hand."

Plemmons added that shifting off topic or theme, and back, takes skill.

"Improvisation is creativity," he told more than 100 rangers in attendance. "If you talk about the same thing, the same way, in the same sequence you are going to fail. At the end of the day, I want students to understand this, or be inspired by that. ... I get my message across, but if I follow a script, I have lost my students."

I suspect many interpreters don't equate teachable moments as improvisational opportunities, but Sandy Tolzda, a California State Park interpretive ranger, does, and agrees that improvisation can add value to interpretive programming.

"The ability to improvise during programs allows interpreters the freedom to address unexpected teachable moments, like an egret scooping up a wriggling fish," said Tolzda, who provides interpretation at parks within the San Diego Coast District, North Sector. "It can also provide new ideas for keeping a program fresh and enjoyable."

Whereas a successful interpretive program is anchored by a primary theme that is specific and expresses a singular message or point of view, my themes are broad by necessity. I rely on secondary themes as the lynch pins for connecting the various elements of a multi-hour interpretive tour. During Gastineau Guiding's five-hour Alaska's Whales, Glaciers, & Rainforest Trails excursion, not only do we encounter whales, glaciers, and forest flora, we may chance upon bears, beavers, deer, orcas, porpoises, sea lions, seals, and throngs of birds. And that's just the wildlife! Each of

these species can be a primary theme by itself. My primary themes for my programs are:

- Little details create the big picture of Alaska's history, mystery, and magnificence.
- Southeast Alaska is a land shaped and sustained by rain.
- In Southeast Alaska, the land and sea are intricately interconnected.
- Discover Juneau's 3Gs: gold, glaciers, and government.

Some secondary themes I use interchangeably across different tours include:

- Little hints of history reveal Juneau's eclectic past and present.
- Little snowflakes create, shape, and sustain big glaciers.
- Devils Club is a mythical and medicinal plant revered by Native Alaskans.
- Big whales depend on little plankton to survive and thrive.
- Black bears are more afraid of us than we are of them.
- Glacial recession sprouts forest succession.

While I absolutely agree with the principles of interpretation, I find that improvisation nests respectively and effectively within an interpretive program. I also find that improvisation provides a less scripted and more authentic experience across my lengthy interpretive programs.

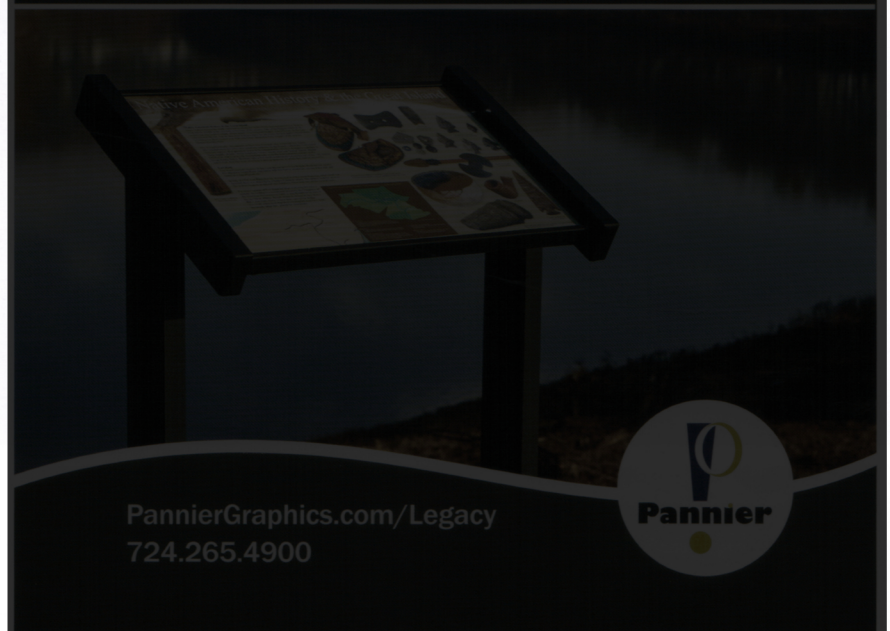
ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Aleta Walther, CIG, ATG, CTA, has led more than 300 interpretive tours through the wonders of Southeast Alaska and looks forward to 300 more. People ask her "What's it like hanging out with the whales and hiking the awe-inspiring Tongass National Forest?" Find out. Check out her blog, Thanks to God and Gastineau Guiding – Living the Dream, at prwriterpro.com/blog. She can be reached at aleta@prwriterpro.com.



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