



# Self-led school trails

**A toolkit for developing trails with impact**

Kayleigh Edun  
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# Introduction

**Many of us use self-led school trails as a staple of our museum learning programmes but how can we make sure that they are doing all they can for us?**

This toolkit is an introduction to developing effective self-led school trails for museum educators and interpretation designers who want to maximise the effectiveness of their self-led resources. Many education teams now face the task of redeveloping existing resources that have become obsolete due to the effects of the Covid-19 pandemic. Trails are commonly used interpretation and engagement resources, and when they are truly effective, the visit can leave an impression on students and teachers long after they leave the site. This guide explains how to develop trails with impact.

This toolkit was written by Museum Educator, Kayleigh Edun as part of a contemporary museum education research project for MA Museums, Galleries and Contemporary Cultures at the University of Westminster. The toolkit is underpinned by contemporary museum education theory and practice and is heavily influenced by constructivist learning theory.

This toolkit was developed primarily for resources aimed at schools but many of the principles are transferrable to other audiences. Pick and choose the suggestions that work for you and your venue and make them your own.

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# Self-led School Trails

**Effective trails provide opportunities for deep learning, meaningful experiences and powerful engagement with your venue's collections and spaces.**



## What are self-led trails?

Self-led trails are resources designed for groups to use independently.

Trails vary in content but commonly include:

- Maps of venue/ galleries
- Suggested route for visitors to take
- Health and safety information
- Behaviour management instructions
- Highlighted key objects
- Interpretation about venue/ objects
- Suggested activities

## When can they be used?

Self-led trails can be offered whenever groups are visiting sites independently.

This can happen when:

- A self-led visit is the school's most affordable option
- Facilitated workshops are unavailable
- The venue is unexpectedly short-staffed and unable to provide a facilitator
- Facilitated workshops do not meet the group's needs
- Schools would like to spend additional time at the museum before/after a facilitated workshop

## Why use them?

Effective self-led trails can:

- Provide fun, engaging and meaningful ways for students to connect with your spaces and collections
- Highlight key objects and stories, and manage narratives
- Increase your capacity to host school groups without requiring additional facilitators
- Enhance the quality of the group's experience, establishing a good reputation and encouraging repeat visits. This may be from the schools themselves, as well as individuals in the group including supporting adults and students who may return independently in the future, or recommend your venue to others
- Support school groups to navigate your venues confidently and successfully
- Provide a focus for the group's visit
- Manage safe and effective visitor flow around the museum
- Promote positive behaviours for the safety of students, other visitors, and the museum collections and venue
- Prepare students by offering trails before facilitated workshops
- Consolidate students' learning by offering trails after facilitated workshops



# Establish Purpose

The first step of trail development is having a clear understanding of what you want you want your trail to achieve.



## In-house Reflection

Develop an understanding of how you can meet the needs of teachers.

1. Examine your existing data. Who comes and why? Where are your current gaps?
2. Examine your existing resources. Which curricular/topical links can your sites/collections make with classroom teaching? Where are your current gaps?
3. Talk to team members who observe your existing resources in use. How do they feel about their performance?

## Consultation

Asking teachers for feedback about your existing offer can reveal current successes and areas for improvement as well as build and strengthen relationships with teachers who visit your venue.

Invite school groups to use your existing resources and discuss their experiences with you. To maximise the quality of the feedback:

- Consider inviting groups for an accompanied visit to allow you to observe the group using the resource. See first-hand what works and what doesn't
- For student questionnaires, provide spaces to draw, open-ended questions or statement starters, such as, 'Something that I enjoyed about my visit was...'
- Gather feedback immediately after the visit, factoring in space and time. Groups who feel rushed or stressed will not be able to provide valuable feedback
- Conduct loosely-structured interviews in person. This will often result in more useful feedback
- Keep in touch! The group may be willing to pilot the new resources you develop and they will be able to draw comparisons

## Set Objectives

Teachers usually select visits to complement classroom teaching and to develop cultural capital. Resources will often need to align with the National Curriculum, at the core of which is the development of skills.

Teachers' needs and expectations will vary. Establish how many resources it is practical for you to develop. If your time and budget allows, you may wish to develop a suite of resources tailored to the needs of particular key stages. If your resources are more limited, you may wish to develop fewer, more flexible resources which can be used by a wider range of groups, including families.

Remember that different visitors have different needs – if you try to make your trail appeal to too many people, you may end up alienating them instead!

Decide on the key objectives for your trail.

- Who are they aimed at?
- Will they be linked to a particular subject?
- Will they focus on particular skills?
- Do you wish to highlight key narratives or objects?

Think quality over quantity – attempting to cover too many objectives can over-complicate the trail and may compromise how effective it will be.

**It is unrealistic to expect your trail to teach students new information. Learning is not always about the acquisition of new knowledge. Trails should instead give students the opportunity to use their existing skills and knowledge in different ways, in novel situations, to develop and consolidate learning.**

# Select a Trail Format



The format of your trail will influence both its content and its design, so you need to establish this before you go any further!

## Paper Trails

### Single-use trails

- These should have value beyond the visit, either as souvenirs, or for use in post-visit classroom activities. If students and teachers do not see a reason to keep the trail, they are likely to end up in the bin at the end of the day!
- Students can draw or write on these trails. This can be useful for follow-up work but can also cause problems. Pencils are liable to break, clipboards can be unwieldy in little hands and writing and drawing requires appropriate time and space. Consult with your conservation team before deciding on this option. Historic properties or collections on open-display may negate the use of pencils
- Be aware that during Covid-19, anything involving physical items will need to be risk assessed to minimise the risk of infection. Getting rid of pencils and clipboards eliminates the need to clean or quarantine equipment between pupils. Alternatively, you can ask schools to bring their own
- Trails can be downloadable for groups to print themselves. This is cheaper for museums, but more expensive and inconvenient for schools. Trails intended to be printed by teachers need to have a simple A4 format and be usable in black and white
- Large print-runs printed by external print companies are usually the most cost-effective
- Single-use trails need to be printed on robust paper to avoid disintegration in the hands of enthusiastic pupils!
- Paper trails are best avoided for many outdoor venues. Wind and rain can render your trails useless!
- Trails need to be easy for students to handle alone. Avoid multiple pages and trails with complicated folds

### Borrow-and-return

- This option can be more cost-effective and sustainable than single-use trails
- Borrow-and return trails need to be robust and able to be cleaned between groups. Laminated paper is a good solution for this
- Borrow-and-return trails need to include activities that do not require writing or drawing
- Trails should not require students to handle more than one resource at a time

## Digital Trails

- These trails can be intuitive and engaging for students
- They can often be quickly updated
- They are most effective if your venue is able to loan devices to visiting groups. You will need to ensure that devices are charged in advance of groups visiting
- Ensure that devices are secure and safe for students to use
- If your trail requires an internet connection, ensure that you have a reliable Wifi signal in the spaces in which it will be used
- You will need to allocate a budget to enable repairs and replacements as equipment and software become outdated

**Consider the ongoing cost of the trail. If you are including additional equipment such as stickers, you will need to ensure that your budget can sustain this.**

# Select a Developer

Choose an option which best suits your requirements, budget and skills.



## Museum Staff

The most affordable way to develop self-led trails is to do so entirely in-house. Consider the existing skillset and workload of your team.

- Do you have knowledge of the content that you wish to cover? If not, can you research this yourself?
- Do you have an in-house education team?
- Do you have time to dedicate to the development of the resource?
- Do you have access to the skills and tools to design your trail in-house?

If you have answered no to any of these questions, you may wish to seek external support.

## Freelancers

If you do not have the capacity to develop resources in-house, you may wish to commission a freelance museum educator to develop trail content and create a design brief.

This can be given to the museum's in-house design team or to an external graphic designer.

## Graphic Designers

External graphic design companies are often the most costly option but are often worth the investment to ensure a high quality product. Designers can be involved at different levels, so find the option that works for you.

Graphic designers can:

- Advise on trail content and activities. The most successful trails will often involve designers working closely with the museum education team/freelancers who will have a deeper understanding of the venue and collections, and what they want the trail to achieve
- Produce high-quality, visually engaging designs that communicate content effectively
- Create templates that you can adapt in-house to suit your requirements
- Create illustrations that you can reuse for future resources

# Develop Content

Trails should link with your learning objectives but it's not enough to simply satisfy curricular requirements. The most effective trails lead students on a journey of discovery.



## Construct Narrative

Trails can be used as a method of storytelling. Students need to have an enjoyable, meaningful and memorable experience that is relevant to them in order to engage them at a deeper level.

Some ways of achieving this include:

- Choose narratives that resonate with your audience. Can they identify with the stories being told? Does the information lead them somewhere new or add new value to their lives?
- Choose narratives that intrigue the audience. Capture their curiosity and spark their imagination
- Choose narratives that engage students emotionally without overwhelming them. Harness their sense of empathy. Emotion and memory are closely linked and empathy brings learning to life
- Students like to be entertained and surprised. If the subject matter is appropriate, don't be afraid to make them laugh!
- Choose narratives that appeal to your students' sense of social justice. Controversial topics can ignite passion and can provide powerful opportunities for meaningful learning, provided that they are communicated sensitively

## Highlight objects and spaces

Trails give students the opportunity to connect objects, spaces and narratives with concepts they are learning in class, and in their everyday lives. This brings learning to life and helps students consolidate and remember what they have learned.

When choosing your highlights:

- Make sure that objects/interpretation are at a comfortable height to be viewed by wheelchair users and are not in dimly lit areas
- Make sure that objects are on permanent display. You don't want your trail to become obsolete when an item on loan is returned to its owner or an artefact is removed for conservation!
- Check that the information you have about objects is accurate
- Consult with curators and conservators to unearth intriguing hidden stories. Including wider team members can also strengthen working relationships and encourage others to act as learning advocates
- Ensure that objects/spaces are spread throughout the venue as appropriate to maximise visitor flow. You don't want your students to spend half an hour in front of one display case!
- Ensure that the number of objects/spaces that you highlight is appropriate for the amount of time that you expect the trail to take
- Try not to select too many objects/spaces. If you are designing activities to go alongside them, you'll need to ensure that students have time to complete them at a comfortable pace without feeling rushed



# Develop Content

**Imagine how your visitor will experience the trail. Their visit will only be a positive one if the trail is user-friendly and helps visitors to feel safe, included and comfortable.**



## Plan your route

Whether or not you are planning for your visitors to take a sequential route, you need to choose the spaces that you are asking your audience to visit carefully. Walk the route during development to identify potential opportunities for and barriers to engagement.

- Do not include areas that are prone to congestion to avoid bottlenecks. Visitor service staff and room stewards will be able to provide valuable insights into the visitor flow of your spaces
- Ensure that the proposed route is accessible for wheelchair users
- Be aware that sensory discomfort can put strain on your visitors. Make sure that the spaces you choose for activities are fit for purpose. Students need enough space to feel safe and relaxed and lighting and noise levels need to be at a comfortable level for the activities that the students will be doing
- Consider the physical needs of your audience. Some visitors will need frequent opportunities to sit. Is it possible for visitors to use seats on your selected route?
- Consider the physical comfort of the group as a whole. Museum visits can be tiring for everyone. Can you build opportunities for the group to rest into your trail?

## Get your message across

Your trail needs to do many things for you. It needs to engage visitors, make them feel welcome and support them in their experience.

To communicate as effectively as possible:

- Use a friendly tone
- Include the trail objectives, such as "Use this trail to explore the museum and discover what everyday life was like for everyday children in the 1830s." This sets an expectation for the visit and helps students to understand the purpose of activities
- Use catchy headings to grab attention and stimulate curiosity
- Consider the reading age of the target audience. Introducing new vocabulary and concepts is helpful if visitors can make sense of this in context or if you can define this in the trail, but make sure that understanding is within their reach
- Avoid lots of text. Fun facts are good but you shouldn't expect students to read large amounts of information
- Be as clear as possible. Use simple, plain, direct vocabulary and grammar
- Use active language to enliven the trail
- Avoid complicated instructions. Use symbols instead of words where possible to reduce text and to be inclusive and user-friendly
- Avoid potentially ambiguous messages. For many visitors, "look" is all too easily confused with "touch!" Be careful when wording instructions to avoid putting visitors and collections at risk

# Develop Content

The activities that you suggest should act as a bridge between your collections and venue and the meanings that your visitors make. Trail activities can provide meaningful experiences that they will remember long after their visit.



## Maximise Learning Potential

Students learn best when they are active and given opportunities to apply their learning.

To make experiences as powerful as possible:

- Activities should be meaningful and deeply connected to your collections and spaces
- Activities need to be fun, playful or enjoyable. Students will quickly switch off if bored
- Activities should be varied. Too much repetition can be tedious
- Make the most of your venue! Avoid activities that disassociate students from the space. If an activity could be just as easily achieved in the classroom it may be more suitable to include in a pre- or post-visit resource
- Ensure that students do not need prior knowledge to complete an activity. They may not have covered the content and their accompanying adults may not be able to help
- Students need to be able to make sense of the activity in the context of their location
- Choose activities that are suitable for the needs and abilities of the group. Students need to feel a degree of challenge without feeling overwhelmed. Ability levels differ within groups so choose activities that peers can support each other with if some struggle. Extension activities can help higher-ability students who may work faster than their classmates
- Find opportunities for students to take the lead, exercise choice and agency and express their individuality
- Find opportunities for students to contribute meaningfully to the museum. Leaving their mark can empower students and offer the museum valuable feedback

## Reinforce Skills

Do not just think about what you are asking the students to do – think about why you are asking them to do it. Skills development is at the core of the National Curriculum and teachers will appreciate activities that they can recognise as useful.

- Design activities for groups. Classes are often split into smaller groups for gallery visits and group work can reinforce learning and develop skills such as teamwork, social skills and discussion
- Provide activities that encourage students to articulate what they have learned, such as reporting back or demonstrating. This can help to develop skills such as problem solving, memory, reflection and verbal reasoning
- Asking questions challenges students to build their own understandings and helps with cognitive and linguistic development. When asking closed questions, check that students can find the answers in the space without struggling. Closed retrieval questions often have limited value when used alone and are best paired with open questions to encourage students to make deeper connections
- Avoid activities that require lots of reading. This is not engaging for the majority of students and can use up time which would be better spent on more active learning
- Avoid activities that require lots of writing. This can be time-consuming and impractical, can distract students from the space and can be off-putting for students who do not enjoy written work
- With the exception of trails for very young children, design activities that students can complete without the help of adults to help develop independent learning skills

# Develop Content

**The most powerful knowledge comes from experience. Learning comes alive when we give our minds, bodies and imaginations the chance to work together.**



## Create Immersive Experiences

Learning is holistic. We learn with our entire bodies, minds and emotions. Multisensory engagement offers opportunities for deeper learning and knowledge retention and opens up experiences for those with sensory impairments. Immersive learning is natural and unconscious.

Each learner has different skills, abilities and preferences, so make sure that your activities are as varied as possible.

- Engage the learner's imagination. Visualisation develops empathy and social skills, deepens understanding and boosts creativity. Activities such as role play, dressing up and storytelling can benefit students immensely
- Encourage students to slow down and look carefully. Close-looking strengthens observational and analytical skills and works particularly well with drawing and writing activities
- Use sound to create atmosphere, transport your audience and develop aural and observational skills
- Guide students to tactile elements. Touching objects can change perceptions, strengthen memory, and make personal connections to objects and their histories
- Incorporate movement and motion. The ways that our bodies relate to objects and spaces help us to make sense of the world
- Include activities that involve scent. Smell is highly evocative, can affect mood and is strongly linked to memory. It can also help us to perceive flavour

Remember, all activities should have a purpose to them. Make sure that the student has the opportunity and the time to think as well as do.

**Covid-19 has had a huge impact on hands-on interactives and it is not currently safe to do many activities such as object handling, using smell jars and dressing up in ways that we would otherwise so often do.**

**Each activity needs to be carefully risk assessed. In the absence of a facilitator, the use of hands-on interactives may no longer be safe to include in self-led trails.**

**Think of alternative opportunities for engagement. Focus on other senses. Consider the audience's capacity to hear, see, feel warmth and coolness, and experience light and shade. Harness the imagination and the capacity to move to create immersive experiences in the absence of touch.**

# Accompanying Adults

**Teachers have limited time and budgets and have many options when it comes to school visits. Effective self-led school trails can demonstrate the worth of the visit and help your venue stand out from the crowd.**



## Supporting Adults

From the journey to and from the venue, to the logistics of the visit and the need to ensure that students have a safe and enjoyable experience, school visits can be stressful experiences for teachers. Self-led trails do not only benefit students, they can also provide valuable support for the adults in the group. As well as teachers, this can also include teaching assistants or other supporting members of staff, and parent helpers.

To help adults lead students confidently and effectively:

- Ensure that your trail is simple to use and allows students to use them independently as much as possible. This will free up adults to focus on the safety and well-being of the group
- Do not assume that adults will have prior knowledge of your venue or the content covered in the trail. If your trail has closed questions, make sure that adults have access to the answers by providing an answer sheet and/or supporting notes. These need to be kept brief and user-friendly
- Materials for adults should be designed for a reading age of no more than 12.5, using simple grammar and plain, direct English. Remember that some adults may not have a high level of English and resources need to be as straightforward as possible
- If you have any behaviours that you expect adults to enforce, state these clearly and simply

## Consulting Adults

Once you have developed your trail content, you can test them with your target audience.

To pilot trails effectively:

- Fact-check, proofread and test the route and activities rigorously to identify errors, typos or potential snagging points. Initially, this should be done in-house, first by yourself and then by others who have not been involved in the trail development, who have an awareness of how school groups use trails. This may include colleagues from education, front of house or volunteers
- Invite groups to pilot your trials using the methods described on page 2
- Review feedback and make any necessary adjustments
- Introduce all members of staff and volunteers who will oversee the use of the trails to the new content before launching the final product
- Evaluate your final trails against your original objectives as well as the Arts Council's Generic Learning Outcomes to understand their full impact



# Effective Design

High-quality, attractive and engaging self-led trails can make visitors feel valued, respected and motivated. The trails that have the biggest impact are easy to read, easy to use and visually appealing.



## Design Objectives

Design conveys impressions about your organisation and your attitude towards your visitors. It also helps to communicate narratives.

Effective design is purposeful. Key design considerations include:

- Target audience. Visitors need to feel that trails have been designed with them in mind. What will your visitors find appealing and engaging?
- Trail objectives. What is the purpose of your trail? How do you want users to feel? How can your design reflect this?
- Brand identity. Trail designs should be consistent with your organisation's existing visual identity
- Trail format. Digital trails need to be designed for user-friendly navigation on your device/s of choice. Physical trails need to consider the number, size and layout of pages, as well as printing requirements

## Navigation

Trails should be as simple and as intuitive as possible to use.

- Westerners are taught to read from top to bottom, left to right. Trail design should take this natural inclination into account
- Trails should help visitors to navigate spaces, locate objects and easily find the facilities they need. Include clearly labelled maps where appropriate
- As some visitors find maps difficult to use, consider including images of spaces and objects and clearly-worded directions to help guide your visitors

## Design Elements

Good design captures attention, piques curiosity and conveys important information. All design elements should be chosen with intent.

Key elements of design include:

### Graphics

- People tend to look at images first. Make the most of this by choosing relevant graphics that illustrate concepts that you are highlighting
- Images should be high-quality, in-focus, and of proper resolution and proportions

### Colour

- Make sure your design is inclusive. Some visitors may be colour-blind
- Consider if your design will be printed in black and white or colour. If both methods may be used, colours must have a high range of light and dark, otherwise they will lose definition when printed in black and white
- Limit the amount of colours and use them effectively. Colour can convey mood, add emphasis and help to organise information

### Text

- Limit your choice of fonts to one for headings, and another for the main text. Headings can be decorative and chosen to convey emotion, whilst larger bodies of text should be simple. Both fonts need to be easy to read
- Make sure that your text is not too small. It needs to be comfortable to read

# Effective Design

Effective design flows, guides the reader's eye across the page, and sustains interest.



## Avoid visual fatigue

Your trail design should be consistent enough to be visually appealing but varied enough to be visually stimulating.

To avoid tiring the reader:

- The majority of your text should be dark on a light background. Overusing light text on dark backgrounds can strain the reader's eyes
- Choose left or right aligned layouts. Centring content can make it difficult for the eye to flow across the page
- Avoid busy backgrounds
- Include generous margins around the entire page
- Avoid visual clutter and confusion by grouping together elements on the page that belong together

**If possible, trial the final design with a school group before sending it to the printers. Print runs can be expensive, and costly to correct if you notice any problems!**

# Value Beyond the Visit

Providing activities that complement your self-led trail that can be done in the classroom can be an added incentive for teachers to book visits, and can improve the student experience.



## Pre-visit Resources

Pre-visit resources can help prepare students for their visit.

To make these resources as effective as possible:

- Include information about the museum that will help students to know what to expect from their visit, such as the layout of the building, the structure and timings of their visit, and what they will be learning and doing. This can be reassuring for students, and will help to focus them on the day
- Make sure that your self-led trails are able to stand-alone from any pre-visit activities. You cannot assume that classes will have used them
- If you provide pre-visit information aimed at teachers, keep this brief and do not presume that teachers will have shared this information with other adults in the group

## Post-visit Resources

Post-visit activities can help to consolidate students' learning and reinforce the memory of their visit.

- Use self-led trails to allow students to collect information that they will use in a follow-up classroom activity. If students are made aware of this in advance of their visit, it will help to focus them on the day. When using trails in this way, allowing them to draw or write to record information is often helpful
- Providing post-visit resources is an opportunity to make the visit part of a larger project. Consider offering students the chance to present what they have learned to the class using the method of their choice
- Inviting school groups to share the outcomes of post-visit activities can be a rich source of evaluation, helping you to better understand the impact of their visit

**Providing pre- and post-visit resources can allow students to engage in enquiry-based projects, supporting school groups before, during and after visits.**