

# How to Become A Great Docent

Thank you very much for volunteering to be a docent for the Museum on Main Street's exhibition *The Way We Worked*. In case you've never served as a docent before, we have put together some information about what docents do and guidelines to help you learn how to become a great *The Way We Worked* docent.

The role of the museum docent, tour guide, or interpreter is an essential one. Acting as a bridge between visitors and the exhibition, the docent is the catalyst for learning in the museum. It is the docent who guides visitors on their journeys of discovery, helping them blend what they already know with what they learn on the tour.

Docents rise to the daily challenge of engaging diverse and discriminating audiences in creative ways. They find themes that are relevant to visitors and provide them with an opportunity to tell their own story. Docents stimulate visitor curiosity, imagination, and individual expression by asking questions and encouraging the active participation of each tour group member. When docents actively engage visitors in looking at and talking about the exhibition, they will take with them a deeper understanding of the exhibition themes. Through this personal relationship between visitor and docent, learning and appreciation for the exhibition occurs. So, long after the exhibition has moved to its next venue, visitors continue to think about the issues raised in the exhibition and apply this new information to their everyday lives.

Sounds complicated, right? Not at all! But there are a few "tricks of the trade" that will help you become a terrific docent.

## **Know Your Stuff**

Nothing helps a tour go smoothly like thoroughly knowing the material you are presenting. The objects and images in *The Way We Worked* tell a story, so take time to read the exhibition script, or better yet, go through the exhibition and familiarize yourself with the information and images you'll be sharing with your visitors. Read the *The Way We Worked* Docent Handbook and use it to guide yourself through the exhibition. The more you know about the exhibition, the more your confidence will grow. You are not, however, expected to be an expert, so don't feel like you have to provide a lecture. Be familiar enough with *The Way We Worked* so that you can ask good questions and shape a conversation. If you feel unprepared to answer a visitor's question, don't be afraid to say, "I don't know." Before your visitors leave the museum, make every effort to find answers by consulting with museum staff and resources. Then perhaps, refer your visitors to their local libraries. Remember unanswered questions can be a positive way to lead visitors toward further inquiry and research.

## **Know Your Audience**

Most visitors to *The Way We Worked* are already interested in music and roots music traditions and they bring with them their own experiences and their knowledge. They've come to the exhibition to learn more, to share their experiences, and to have fun. However, every visitor or group of visitors is different, so it's important to assess your audience before your tour begins.

Take a look at your tour group. Is it made up of young adults or senior citizens? Is it a school group of teens or youngsters? Do you have a small group of tourists from out of town? Are the people in the group interacting with each other? Are they strangers to one another? Ask a few

questions to get to know your visitors: “*What grade are you in?*” or “*Are you from out of town?*” or “*Have you ever visited here before?*” Knowing a little about your audience will help you structure and direct your tour.

You already know that a tour structured for first grade students is not going to be appropriate or interesting for teens or adults. Without even thinking about it, you’ll adjust your tour length and content to the group. Your *The Way We Worked* Docent Handbook provides questions to ask your visitors. Some are more appropriate for student visitors; others are more appropriate for adults. It’s up to you to decide which questions will be most effective with each tour group. After leading a few tours, you’ll begin to see what works best with each group. Talk to your fellow docents and find out how they structure their tours for different audiences. (See “Know the Art of Asking Questions” below.)

### **Know Your Docent Handbook**

The *The Way We Worked* Docent Handbook will help you learn how to conduct your tour. It offers ideas, themes, and questions about the exhibition. There is an introductory section for each kiosk that provides you with the major theme (in a nutshell) of each exhibition kiosk. The “Think About It” sections give you some ideas or questions to “rev up” your visitors’ curiosity and prepare them to participate. “Let’s Talk” offers questions to ask your visitors. Most questions do not require “yes” or “no” answers. They are designed to prompt memories, opinions, and new ideas that will lead to a conversation about the exhibition. Don’t feel like you have to use all the questions provided. Let your group’s level of interest and participation be your guide. Work with the museum staff to develop other questions that may be more directly related to your community.

Feel free to carry the docent handbook on your tours, but use it only as a reference. Avoid reading directly from the handbook. This is the quickest way to discourage participation and conversation. The docent handbook also provides a list of “Hints for Being an Informed and Effective Docent” for quick reference.

### **Know the Art of Asking Questions**

There’s a knack to asking questions, encouraging visitors to participate, and limiting discussion time. Here are a few hints:

#### It Takes All Kinds of Questions

To facilitate a conversation, docents are encouraged to lead “inquiry-based” tours. So instead of reading from note cards or the *The Way We Worked* Docent Handbook, involve your visitors by asking them different types of questions. Try to elicit opinions, memories, ideas, and new questions. Here are some types of questions (based on the Aschner/Gallagher System of Classifying Questions) you can ask on your *The Way We Worked* tours.

- **Cognitive/Memory** questions ask what visitors already know or can see. Answers involve simple recall and are either right or wrong.  
For example, “*Have you ever played an instrument?*” or “*What are the well-known or famous kinds of music in your region?*”
- **Convergent** questions ask visitors to do something with the information they already have or can see. They involve finding similarities, differences, patterns, and/or relationships. Convergent questions ask visitors to categorize, to organize information, or to find a central theme.  
For example, “*Why do you think Chicago is famous for blues music?*”

- **Divergent** questions ask visitors for new ideas or inferences; they are open-ended (no one right answer). To answer divergent questions, visitors must gather information from past experiences, link it to information being explored in the exhibition, and create new understanding and interpretations.  
For example, *“How can new generations be introduced to blues music and encouraged to create their own blues songs?”*
- **Evaluative questions** ask visitors for judgments, choices, or conclusions. Answers should not be casual opinions. To be valid, answers must come at the end of time spent considering the subject.  
For example, *“Do you think that music festivals help build a sense of community or a shared sense of identity? Why or why not?”*

You have probably asked and answered questions like this all your life. It’s not important to memorize the names of these types of questions. You’ll find that asking questions of all types will come naturally to you as you explore the exhibition. There are also questions of these types in your docent handbook. Try to use a combination of these types of questions on your tours to keep the discussion lively and interesting.

#### It’s Worth the Wait

After asking a question, give your visitors some time to respond. Usually, someone will speak up in about ten seconds. This “wait time” may seem endless, but it’s worth the wait. If, after ten seconds, your group remains silent, a little coaxing is in order. Rephrase the question or redirect it to an individual. If you still don’t get an answer, try someone else. It is important, however, not to intimidate anyone when you address them directly. If no one has a response, you may answer the question yourself and then ask, “Does anyone agree or disagree?” You very likely will get a response. Remember, when asking questions to individuals, make sure to vary your audience sampling. Try to pose your questions to visitors of various ages, genders, ethnicities, and cultures.

#### It’s All About Timing

Your tour of *The Way We Worked* should take between 30 and 45 minutes, however, most venues will advertise hour-long tours. This will give you some leeway in managing your tour. In some instances, the tour discussion may go on longer than it should. It may only include a few visitors while the remainder of the group becomes restless or bored. There may be another tour group waiting. No matter the reason, it is the docent’s responsibility to limit the discussion, then guide the tour group to the next kiosk. Use a comment like: “I’m sure we could talk about this subject for hours, but I do want you to enjoy the rest of the exhibition.”

#### **Know Who’s Boss**

You may occasionally experience an unhappy, unruly, or disruptive visitor. If you have an unruly student on your tour, remain calm and focused. Encourage his/her participation in the discussion. If the problem persists, ask the teacher or adult chaperone to remove the student from the tour. You are not responsible for discipline; you are responsible for a great tour.

If you are dealing with an unhappy or disruptive adult, calmly explain that his/her comments are interfering with the other visitors’ enjoyment of the tour and ask him/her to refrain from the behavior. Most museums and exhibition venues have policies in place for dealing with disruptive visitors. Check the museum’s policy and defer to it if you find yourself in a sticky or uncomfortable situation.

## Know Your Own “Star Power”

In a way, docents are performers, so stage presence makes a difference. Here are some things to remember about performing your “starring role” as a docent:

- Follow your museum’s guidelines for attire, name tags, etc.
- **Be confident!** If you believe you could be Hollywood’s next big star, your visitors will too!
- Facial expressions are the primary way we assess each other’s feelings, so **SMILE!** A friendly face will put visitors at ease and make them feel welcome. But don’t let that smile get stuck on your face. You’ll naturally respond to visitors’ comments and questions and that lets visitors know that you’re listening. Remember, a pleasant, smiling face tells visitors that you are having a good time. If you are enjoying yourself, they will too.
- **Make eye contact with your visitors.** Good eye contact will make visitors feel included in the discussion and will often encourage their participation. Make sure your eye contact is natural and relaxed. Don’t try too hard or you may end up staring at visitors, which may intimidate them or, at least, make them feel uncomfortable. Good eye contact is a great feedback tool—you easily can assess whether you’re keeping the interest of your audience.
- If you use hand gestures in your usual conversation, please do so on your tours. It’s much better to **use natural hand gestures** than to shove your hands in your pockets and jingle your change, or twist your rings, or wring your hands. Be careful not to get too close to the exhibition. Remember, you serve as a model for appropriate museum behavior, so don’t lean on the kiosks or touch the cases.
- Be aware of your posture. Confident, professional docents **stand up straight!** Try not to sway or shuffle back and forth while you’re talking to your visitors. It’s very difficult for visitors to focus on a moving object. It is likely that visitors will be scattered around you, so try to place yourself so that your back is not toward anyone for any length of time. Move around just enough so that you can see everyone’s faces and they can see yours.
- **Be a good listener.** When a visitor raises or answers a question, focus on the visitor, make eye contact, and respond appropriately. If the rest of the tour has not heard the question or comment, repeat it for the entire group to hear.
- Your voice can be used to create a lively and exciting presentation. **Vary the tone and volume of your voice;** use it to show emotion or to emphasize a point. Try not to sound “canned” like a television commercial or a telemarketing representative, but natural and engaging.
- **Speak clearly;** try to enunciate or articulate your words precisely. Try a few tongue twisters before your tour to get your mouth, lips, and tongue loosened up and working together. You’ll lose your audience’s interest in no time if they can’t understand you.
- **Make sure you can be heard.** Think of “projecting” rather than speaking loudly. Shouting uses only your voice and it strains it as well. Support your conversation with lungs full of air. Let your diaphragm push out or “project” your words on a stream of air. Think of a

musician squeezing a bagpipe with his elbow, forcing air into the pipes. Good projection is based on that same principle. If you are getting a crowd of blank stares, ask your audience if they can hear you. If not, you'll have to project a little better!

- Banish “um,” “you know,” and “like” from your vocabulary ... or at least try to. These pause fillers disrupt the flow of your tour. They may also make you seem nervous or unprepared. **Be aware of these pause fillers and try to avoid them.** There is nothing wrong with a few seconds of silence while you find the right word or collect your thoughts.

### **Know How to Practice**

Once you've explored *The Way We Worked*, read the docent handbook, and thought about the themes of the exhibition, it's time to start practicing for your tour. Practice introducing yourself and welcoming your visitors. Then, walk yourself through the exhibition again and see what objects and images catch your eye. What aspects of the exhibition most interest you? The ideas and thoughts you have will guide you in developing your tour.

Another good way to practice is to ask questions. Start a conversation at the dinner table, in the office, or at a local gathering place. Ask your family and friends a few questions like: “*What did you learn at your first job?*” or “*How do you think your job contributes to our community?*” Really listen to their responses. This practice will prepare you for the conversations you will have with visitors to the exhibition.

After leading a few tours, meet with other docents and share your experiences. Find out how they answered an unexpected or challenging question. Share with them how you structured your tour to a mixed group of senior citizens and their grandchildren. Take tours led by fellow docents; you'll be surprised at what you can learn from other docents' tours and they from yours. Don't be shy about incorporating others' good ideas and successful techniques into your tours.

### **Know You Can Do It!**

There is a great deal of information here about becoming a terrific docent, but it is not as challenging as you might think. The most important thing to remember is to relax and enjoy your tour. Most docents feel relaxed when they have a good grasp of the information in the exhibition, so explore *The Way We Worked*, then read and practice with the docent handbook. Be sure to use your new “great docent” skills as you lead tours through any *The Way We Worked* companion exhibits or displays and permanent exhibitions at your museum.