

Reconsidering Language

Introduction

Reconsidering Museums, a three-year national project, set out to answer the question, what do museums mean to Canadians? Through a rearticulation of the value of museums and a rebrand of the sector, this project supports museums with the tools and language necessary to better connect with and serve their communities, deepening their relationship, and therefore their relevance, to the Canadian public.

As a sector, we understand the significance of museums and museum work. By generating dialogue about how and why museums matter to Canadians, this project empowers museums with a shared language to express our value, to increase meaningful engagement, and to create a more sustainable and relevant sector.

The resources developed through this project provide adaptable values-based messaging that bridges the gap between museums and their publics, substantiate the value of museums with data-driven insights, and help shape public dialogue around the vital role of museums in our society.

These Language Recommendations are one of the resources that we have created as part of *Reconsidering Museums*. They provide evidence-backed recommendations for how to speak about the changing role and value of museums in a way that resonates with public perceptions and expectation, while avoiding some of the outdated language around museums.

All data collected as part of a 2021 national survey, *Museums for Me*, undertaken as part of *Reconsidering Museums*. For detailed information on questions and responses, see the *Museums For Me: Engaging Canadians on the Future of Museums – What We Heard* report.

From Elitist to Relevant

Theme: Access

How do we currently talk about it?

People don't visit museums because **they are seen as elitist**, expensive, and 'not for' certain communities. Museums are not welcoming or accessible enough.

What are the consequences?

- Reinforces the perception that museums are not doing the work to engage and provide access to diverse visitors and communities.
- Assumes museums are closed off to their visitors and communities.
- Infers that museums are only for certain people, groups, individuals, or communities.
- Accepts that the perception of museums as 'elitist' is the only barrier for visitation or the most important barrier for visitation.

What is the reframe?

The majority of Canadians report feeling welcome and safe in museums, however, **many do not feel as though the museum represents them**. The idea that museums are 'not for them' persists as many people do not see themselves, and their interests, communities, and histories, represented in the museum's collections, exhibits, and programming. The disconnect is because the museums are not presenting stories that are relevant to their lived experience, **not** because people find museums elitist. People **would visit museums more** if museums told stories that are relevant to them and their communities.

What is the data to support the reframe?

- 83% of respondents agree that museums make them feel welcome
- In 1973, 28% of respondents agreed that museums are elitist, but in 2021 only 9% of respondents agreed that museums are elitist
- When asked what might make them go to the museum more often, the top two answers were:
 - 43% of respondents said that if museums told stories that are important to me, they would be more important to my life



- 40% of respondents said that if museums told stories that are important to different communities, they would be more important to my life

Sample Scenario:

A long-time museum volunteer and current board member sends an email to the Executive Director of your museum about proposed updates to the permanent galleries. They express concern that the changes will make the 'usual visitor' stop visiting.

Useful Phrases:

Here are some suggested useful phrases that can be adopted into your individual writing and communication styles to help reframe the conversation around museums being elitist.

- "Museums are for everyone."
- "Museums are not just about the past. As our current reality shifts, museums have a responsibility to shift the story that we are telling."
- "We have limited space and resources to tell every story. What stories do we need right now?"
- "Our community is changing, and we have an opportunity to build new audiences by rethinking what relevant content looks like."
- "Canada is changing. Let's help our visitors, both new and old, understand how we got here."
- "As members of our community, we want everyone to see themselves reflected in the museum."
- "The work of museums to remain relevant to their audiences is ongoing, we must continue to grow and adapt."

From Authority to Collaboration

Theme: Authority

How do we currently talk about it?

Museums have authority as spaces that preserve, collect, and exhibit our historical, cultural, and scientific expertise. Museums provide an opportunity for their visitors to **learn from them**. Canadians agree that museums have valuable roles in preservation and education. These roles are, in part, the basis for museums' credibility and trustworthiness with the public.

What are the consequences?

- Takes the authority away from other institutions, community groups, source communities, or individuals to also be seen as conservators, teachers, knowledge keepers, and experts who can offer opportunities to learn.
- Limits opportunities for interdisciplinary work and cross-sector collaboration.
- Reinforces the perception that museums do not have anything to learn from their communities and visitors, limiting participation.
- Creates a hierarchy of knowledge where museums are seen the ultimate authority on history, culture, etc.
- Values certain types of knowledge, i.e., academic, colonial knowledge, etc., over others, i.e., Indigenous knowledge, lived experience, etc.

What is the reframe?

Authority is held by everyone. Museums share authority with communities by collaborating to produce and disseminate knowledge. Multiple types of knowledge, including oral traditions and experiential knowledge, are valued and included. The relationship between museums and their communities is relational, not transactional. Through those relationships, the museum can move from seeing themselves as the expert to embracing the role of learner. By doing this, museums earn the trust of their communities through reciprocity and knowledge sharing, not solely expertise. Visitors are seen as community members that actively participate with the museum to **co-create their own learning experience**.

What is the data to support the reframe?



- 96% of respondents agree that the museum is a place to learn and *be inspired*.
- 68% of respondents agree that local museums can be a place to engage with the community.
- 76% of respondents agree that museums give people a sense of belonging and membership in a community.
- 58% of respondents agree that museums should have dialogue with local communities to develop programs that resonate with community interests.

Sample Scenario:

You are discussing incorporating oral histories into an upcoming exhibit with a fellow curator and they say, “We cannot include these oral histories in the exhibit because they conflict with the historical record. We’re a museum, we’re supposed to be presenting the truth.”

Useful Phrases:

Here are some suggested useful phrases that can be adopted into your individual writing and communication styles to help reframe the conversation around museums and authority.

- “Museums are not the sole authority on the past or the truth. There is more than one way to get at the truth.”
- “Truth is not singular but contains multitudes. There is room for multiple interpretations here.”
- “There are multiple, parallel, and often divergent perspectives on historic events.”
- “Collaborating with communities can help us better understand the past by acknowledging the divergent records of a single event. Telling history requires interpretation.”
- “Collaborating with knowledge keepers, elders, and communities means we can present a story that reflects those groups and is relevant to them today.”
- “Our visitors trust us to share the whole story with them. Let’s trust them with the complexities of the past.”

From Neutrality to Credible Advocacy

Theme: Activism

How do we currently talk about it?

Museums should be neutral and unbiased in their presentation of objects, exhibits, and programming.

What are the consequences?

- Reinforces the perception that museums are, or have been, neutral.
- Ignores the conscious and subconscious bias that all people, including museum workers, have.
- Creates a hierarchy of whose truth is considered natural and neutral, enforcing cultural hegemony.
- Places limits on the stories that museums can tell, the relationships they are able to build, and the work that they can do in a community.
- Removes the ability of museums to be agents for social change.
- Creates internal fear of backlash when museums “step outside” of their traditional activities
- Does not allow for interpretation and storytelling that honours multiple perspectives.

What is the reframe?

Museums are trusted institutions that can combat disinformation and encourage critical thinking by presenting the facts, sharing multiple perspectives, and creating space for dialogue. Museums should acknowledge their biases and encourage visitors to reflect on their own. Museums have a role in addressing societal issues like reconciliation, the climate crisis, and inequity. Younger Canadians in particular, want museums to take a more active role in advocating for social issues, because they are accountable to their communities.

What is the data to support the reframe?

- 80% of respondents agree that museums are a highly credible source of information, more than daily newspapers and television.
- 88% of respondents agree that museums give us information and perspective on important cultural and social issues.
- When asked how can museums address societal issues like climate change, COVID-19, racial injustice, etc.?



- 65% of respondents said they should play a prominent role in education.
- 44% of respondents said they should play a more active role in advocating for social change.
- 40% of respondents agree that museums should take a stand in their presentation of exhibits to challenge the status quo (only 16% disagree).

Sample Scenario

Your museum has a new exhibit on the climate crisis that explores the causes and local impacts of climate change, as well as future projections. After exploring the exhibit, a visitor approaches guest services and says, “Aren’t museums supposed to be neutral? Where’s the other side of the story?”

Useful Phrases:

Here are some suggested useful phrases that can be adopted into your individual writing and communication styles to help reframe the conversation around museums and neutrality.

- “Neutrality is a stance in itself.”
- “Museums offer interpretation. They help us make sense of our world.”
- “Museums create space for dialogue about the issues that are important.”
- “Museums are not neutral, but they can be credible.”
- Ask visitors questions to spark discussion, such as:
 - “Did anything in the exhibit surprise you?”
 - “How did the exhibit challenge your expectations?”
 - “What does neutrality mean to you?”
 - “Had you considered the perspectives presented here before?”

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