Introduction: Hi, my name is Aisling Quigley and I graduated from Carleton in 2009. I was a Studio Art major. I worked for Kathy in the Write Place and as a Writing Assistant/ESL tutor for three years. Now I'm back as the Viz-Visualizing the Liberal Arts- Initiative Program Associate.

So...we're here today to talk about Exhibition Labels. Why? Faculty are increasingly using labels as an assignment format in classes, both in preparation for physical or virtual exhibitions or just as an isolated exercise in writing. It is likely that you will encounter label assignments as writing assistants/tutors, or that you may one day write an exhibition yourself.

Labels are challenging to write because they are inherently short but demand engaging and insightful language. As Nina Simon mentioned in the blog post that I sent out, labels are sometimes inaccessible to non-art-experts and are also often skipped over because of their daunting length. Today, I hope to teach you a bit about writing useful labels. But firstly, how many of you have written an exhibition label before? Great. Did you find it challenging? Why? First of all, there are many different TYPES of labels or exhibition texts. Title and Intro Labels. Today we'll just be focusing on OBJECT labels. Object labels are used to describe a particular object and its relation to the BIG IDEA or overall theme of the exhibition. Object labels can also be called "interpretive labels." In this book, Exhibit Labels, Beverly Serrell describes...
This first one was written by Clara Hardy for Intro to Classics. Clara limited her label to 50 words. She wrote this as a sample for her students.
The second example is from a student who was in Susan Jaret McKinstry's class, The Victorian Novel. This label is slightly longer-150 words. I appreciate that this student asked questions of the viewer, a great way to engage and invite the viewer to look closer. I also appreciate that the student talks specifically about details of the object and significance of those details in relation to her experience of Trilby.
From these labels you will again gather that the main challenges faced in writing exhibition labels, even for extremely strong writers such as yourselves, is, firstly, condensing your thoughts into a 50-200 words and secondly, describing the image or object in sufficient detail to convince the viewer that this object is significant and related to a larger narrative or theme.
Susan Jaret McKinstry/ English
ENGL 328- Victorian Poetry

Your team will work together to create an interpretive label (150-200 words) that helps gallery viewers understand your pair of photographs. Your label should explain your photographs as illustrations/interpretations of the lines from the selected poem. The goal of an exhibit label is to be concise, informative, and interpretive: engage the viewer by pointing out something that makes them look again, carefully.

Your label should provide the following:
• Lines from the poem and the title of the poem, author, date.
• A concise interpretation of the lines from the poem: what do you want the gallery viewer to notice? What do you want them to understand about your interpretation of the selected poem? A description of each photo in relation to the poem: What are we seeing in the photo? What does it mean? How does the photograph demonstrate Pater or Ruskin’s aesthetic theory? How does it illustrate the poem? Include a concise description of the process of creating the photographs.

At Carleton, you’re most likely to encounter labels in an assignment (unless you decide to curate your own exhibition for a project)...So, working backwards a bit, we’re going to look at a couple of label writing assignment prompts. As we read through them, notice elements that are mentioned in the prompt, etc. Here are some faculty-written label-writing prompts: Susan Jaret McKinstry wrote this prompt for her Victorian Poetry class. Really cool exhibition up right now in the White Space 226 right across the hall from here. Collaboration with Linda Rossi.
Stephanie Cox's Transnationalism in Quebec class in the library. Bilingual labels. Strictly confined to 75 words.
For this assignment each student will create a bilingual exhibit label, which will be peer edited, reposted and finally used as part of the art exhibit. Your objective is to be the connection between the viewer and the art.

1. Choose one piece by David Garneau. (There are 10 paintings and one figurine in a glass case.)

2. Write 75 words (first in English, then translate) focusing on these three essential questions:
   - What are we seeing here?
   - What is it about?
   - What is the significance?

Limiting your text to 75 words is difficult so craft it carefully. Don’t worry about commenting on the aesthetics and stay focused on concrete information which will lead the viewer to understand what he/she is seeing.
A **Big Idea** is a sentence, a statement, of what the exhibition is about.

Ballet is a From these prompts hopefully you've gotten a sense that these labels are asking for conciseness and for some description of what is going on visually...They also ask the students to identify the significance of their object/image. Asking about the significance really brings us to the BIG IDEA or the big picture of an exhibition. In object labels you may never explicitly refer to the big idea of your exhibition, but it is the unifying theme that dictates everything you include in your exhibition and will therefore be a part of the significance of the object and its relation to the whole.
Sharks are not what you think.

Big Ideas can be really simple (from the aquarium), or more complex,
Medieval Iberia witnessed significant social, economic, and cultural exchange between the three predominant monotheistic religious traditions of the time: Christianity, Judaism, and Islam.
So, to review:
1. What are we looking at?
2. Why are we looking at it?
3. What is its significance?

So, in review, these are our main questions.
Fun stuff: First, to get your visual juices flowing we’ll look at a painting and start free-associating. Without thinking too much about it, just tell me what you see:

what do you see?
what else do you see that makes you say that?
what do you see that makes you say that?
Good. Now we'll do a quick Haiku exercise. A way to start learning how to describe an image and to pay close attention to what you're looking at. Rather than worrying about the history or context of an image or object, just focus on the image for this exercise. Meditative and enjoyable! With this exercise, you'll learn how to respond to one part of the exhibition label prompt: what are we looking at. From there, the context and significance of the object/material will come more naturally. Structure of the Haiku 5-7-5

Haiku
5
7
5
no prepositions, please!
just nouns, adjectives, adverbs, and verbs
So, for example, here's a painting:
Here’s a Haiku that I came up with yesterday with a colleague...Now give it a go. Look at the piece of art I handed out. Disregard the title and what it might tell you about the context of the piece. Just focus on the visual. What are you seeing? Write a Haiku on the piece of paper I gave you and share it with the person sitting next to you...

Messy, colors, snap
Layers, letters, runs, drips, lines
Spilling, shocking blast
Resources:

1. Beverly Serrel, Exhibit Labels, at the library
2. Viz Website: http://apps.carleton.edu/campus/viz/
3. Museum 2.0: http://museumtwo.blogspot.com/
   http://tang.skidmore.edu/pac/hr/mainpage/index.html
   http://tang.skidmore.edu/pac/mtm/