

Glossary: First-Person Interpretation

compiled by:

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Actor

For purposes of this book, someone with dramatic or theatrical training who is accustomed to performing in plays or film, usually using a script.

Animation

Canadian term for costumed living history interpretation.

Breaking the Ice

Innocuous conversation during an initial encounter between visitors and an interpreter. Its purpose is to encourage visitors' comfort and open communication.

Character Interpretation

Another term for first-person interpretation.¹

Character Speaker

Sara Grant Reid's term for a first-person monologue influenced by public speaking techniques.

Composite Character

Fictional first-person character based on actual people, primary accounts, and demographic data.

Contextualist

A third-person interpreter who provides an introduction and possibly other commentary in conjunction with a first-person program.²

First-Hand Interpretation

The author's definition of third-person interpretation that incorporates a personal perspective, but little or no characterization. Often used by craft, trade, or foodways interpreters, who describe how they themselves experience historical activities.

First-Person Interpretation

The act of portraying a person from the past (real or composite). For purposes of this book, the standard form is one in which the interpreters refer to the past in the present tense; employ a combination of techniques including storytelling, demonstration, question and answer, and discussion; encourage verbal interaction from the audience; and avoid breaking character.

Fourth Wall

A presentation that does not offer visitors an opportunity to question or interrupt interpreters' dialogue while a scene is in progress.

Ghost Interpretation

A first-person character who travels into the present. The interpreter may acknowledge the present.

Guided First-Person

Program in which third-person guides escort visitors to (or between) first-person locations. See also Red T-Shirting.

Historical Character Interpretation

Broad term referring to the act of playing a person from the past. Can also refer to a part in a play.

Hooks

Gambits intended to spur visitors' interest and/or reaction.

Interactive Historical Character Interpretation or Interactive Historical Roleplay

Descriptive term for the standard form of "First-Person Interpretation."

Interpreter

One who translates material culture and human or natural phenomenon to the public in a meaningful, provocative, and interesting way. The term is usually applied to those who work in historic sites, parks, natural areas, zoos, etc.

Improvisation

Working without a script.

Live Interpretation

Another term for "living history interpretation" or "costumed interpretation." Turns up in UK sources.

Living History Site (or Museum)

A setting that replicates parts of a historical environment as a featured exhibit area. Can include historic houses, farms, villages, factories, encampments, battlefields, etc.

Mixed Interpretive Medium

Interpretation that combines more than one method of interpretation. For example, a third-person guide who acts as a mediator between visitors and first-person interpreters, or a first-person program that closes with a third-person question and answer session.

Museum Theater

A play, scene, monologue, or first-person interpretation performed in a traditional gallery environment or a museum auditorium. Museum Theater's popularity is growing in science, art, and children's museums; some have special platforms and auditoriums devoted to it.

My Time-Your Time Approach

A first-person character who understands and acknowledges the present and may make comparisons between various time periods.³

Persona

Another term for "historical character." Commonly used by members of the Society for Creative Anachronism and many reenactors. I prefer to invoke the word only when referring to characters' personality traits.

Red T-Shirting

Term coined by Andrew Robertshaw of the Historical Reenactment Workshop. Refers to distinctively-dressed third-person interpreters who act as visitor liaisons. They introduce the concept of first-person to visitors, provide background information, offer suggestions for interacting, and engage characters. See also Guided First-Person.⁴

Reenactment

The restaging of a historical or proto-typical event. Also, common term for battle reenactments and other reenactor activities.

Reenactor

Those who engage in historical simulations for personal enjoyment. Some reenactors have a strong interpretive impetus and/or an affinity for first-person. Many interpreters are active reenactors.

Role Acting

A hybrid of first- and third-person interpretation in which interpreters adopt a historical personality a la first-person, but respond beyond its bounds when prompted by out-of-period and personal questions.

Scenario

Outlined or semi-scripted sequence of dialogue and/or events that adds structure to a first-person presentation.

Self-Introduced Roleplay

First-person interpretation introduced (and/or followed up) in third person by the same interpreter.

Theme Park

What most people in the US museum community think of as an entertainment-based, commercial amusement park, along the lines of Disneyland or Wild West City. Outside the US, living history museums are also included in the definition.

Third-Person Interpretation

Informative, often interactive talks and demonstrations by interpreters who may be dressed in period attire but do not assume character roles.

Thought Linking

The process of flowing logically from one topic to another, building conversation in a non-scripted roleplay situation.

Verbal Prospecting

Promoting several subjects likely to pique visitors curiosity, combined with attention to visitors' verbal and non-verbal cues indicating interest.⁵

Worldview

A cultural mindset that affects the way a person functions within their society. Historical worldview is the basis for developing appropriate character responses. Pioneered as an important part of interpreter training at Plimoth Plantation.

Footnotes

1. Term coined by Colonial Williamsburg Interpreters.
2. Term coined by Colonial Williamsburg Interpreters.
3. Coined by Tom Sanders, "Thoughts on Effective Living History: Interpretive Suggestions," Midwest Open Air Museums Magazine XI:1 (Spring 1990): 10-11.
4. Andrew Robertshaw, "From Houses Into Homes: One Approach to Live Interpretation," Journal of Social History Curators Group 19 (1993).
5. Coined by Jeff Scotland, Plimoth Plantation.