Consider two blocks of interpretive text for a panel in an exhibit about the Great Depression. Here's the first one:

_The Dust Bowl of the 1930s was one of the worst ecological disasters in U.S. history. It was caused by severe drought and erosion, and resulted in the loss of millions of acres of topsoil throughout the Great Plains. Baca County lay at the heart of the disaster. For several years, the region got less than half the annual average of 15 inches, the longest and deepest drought ever recorded here. The land was already in poor shape due to decades of overuse, and the drought left it unable to sustain crops. Baca County farmland lost more than 80 percent of its value during the 1930s. By the end of the decade more than half of its farms were in foreclosure._

And here’s the second:

_First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county’s residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932._

The first is not a bad label. It’s informative and factual, and it introduces a number of important themes in a very short space. But it’s also as dry as Dust Bowl dirt—a loose assemblage of facts that
are liable to drift out of the reader’s mind at the first gust of wind. The material is not binding. It’s not the kind of soil in which the roots of knowledge can take firm hold.

The second one has fewer facts but, I would argue, more truth. There’s a unity to it. The images are coherent, and the sentences build upon one another. This label is much stickier, much more apt to get caked under a reader’s fingernails—and more likely to nourish the seeds of lasting knowledge in his or her mind.

“History, a fable agreed on, is not a science but a branch of literature,” wrote Wallace Stegner in the Fall 1965 issue of the journal The American West. It is “an artifact made by artificers and sometimes by artists. Like fiction, it has only persons, places, and events to work with, and like fiction it may present them either in summary or in dramatic scene…. The dramatizing of legitimately dramatic true events does not necessarily falsify them, nor need it leave their meaning ambiguous. Dramatic narrative is simply one means by which a historian can make a point vividly.”

Dramatic narrative is dangerous territory for a nonfiction discipline such as history, and especially so when you’ve only got 100 words or so in which to write. What kind of story can you expect to tell in so short a space? Let’s turn that question around and ask how many facts can you really convey in a 100-word sentence, no surprises await the reader.

A Dust Bowl farmer and young son on a tractor near Cland, NM.

Is it a Story or Not?

Before outlining the key ingredients of a 100-word story, it seems appropriate to firm up the definition of “story” beyond the single example I cited in the introduction. As a general rule, consider a label to be a story if it produces some of the same responses in a reader that a much longer work of fiction can. Specifically, focus on the following:

1. Does it create an air of suspense and/or tension (hook the reader)?

This is a reader’s most primal response to any story, the desire to know what happens next. Creating this mood can be tricky with respect to historical material, because the sequence of events and eventual outcome is often common knowledge to some or all of your readers. This is likely the case with the Dust Bowl. But even so, a well-crafted 100-word story can simulate the feeling of suspense by leaving readers vaguely unsure of where the label is headed.

Compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one gets directly to the resolution, using the basic form of an expository paragraph, a topic sentence up front, followed by details and evidence that support the topic sentence. It is clear and informative, but not a story. Since the outcome is stated as a fait accompli, the reader has no sense of working toward an unknown destination. On the contrary, you start at a known destination (the worst ecological disaster in U.S. history) and work backwards. Once you’ve read the first sentence, no surprises await the reader.

In contrast, the second label begins with a vague, open-ended image. No specific time or place is cited,
nor even any particular historical fact. The ecological disaster is not stated so much as described, and the description unfolds incrementally and seems to deepen with each sentence, much as the Dust Bowl unfolded and deepened year by year. Most readers probably have a general sense of where the narrative is headed. They are viewing an exhibition about the Great Depression, after all, and most American adults probably have a general awareness of the Dust Bowl. Just the same, readers naturally look for resolution, and this label does not resolve itself until the final sentence. Until they reach the end, readers are going to be hungry for that resolution. They’re going to want to know what happens next, even if they already know.

2. Does it trace a journey through time and/or distance (frame the story)?

This is also integral to any story, and closely related to the element of suspense. More important, however, the passage of time is also integral to the telling of history. Events of great significance usually don’t happen in an instant, but they often come across that way in a 100-word label. That is unfortunate, and it is misleading.

Again, compare the two Dust Bowl labels. The first one cannot be described as a “journey” because (as described above) it begins and ends at the same known, fixed destination. The ecological disaster is presented as something that occurred in a single stroke, rather than as a dynamic process that occurred over a long period of years. Likewise, the decade of the 1930s is presented as a single, indivisible unit of time. There is little sense of a cause-and-effect relationship between events.

In the second label, effect follows cause. First the land suffers, then farm property suffers, and ultimately people suffer. It’s all presented in sequence, creating the illusion of movement through time. Reinforcing that sensation, the years 1931, 1936, and 1940 are called out by name explicitly depicting the passage of years, and framing the era with start and endpoints. As a result, the Dust Bowl comes across not as a static event, but as a progression of events, a discrete period of time with a beginning, middle, and end.

3. Does it encourage readers to suspend disbelief?

This is certainly essential for readers of fiction, but how does it apply to readers of history? Insofar as the events of a historical narrative are all true, the suspension of disbelief would seem to be unnecessary. What is really referred to here is the reader’s willingness to place him or herself in an alternate world—to become drawn into a reality that exists only in the text and accept that reality on its own terms. In historical writing, this is often helpful, because it encourages readers to identify with the bygone world they’re reading about—to feel, if only fleetingly, as if they’re living in the past.

Such an effect clearly is not produced by the first Dust Bowl label, with its authoritative textbook-ish prose. But the second label achieves the effect. It encourages readers to feel, hear, and sense the events of the past as if they are really happening. And they really did happen. That is the whole point. Labels that nudge readers to suspend disbelief can thus produce a depth of identification that’s impossible to achieve with a more expository, objective approach.

Elements of a 100-Word Story

Keep in mind that writing story labels is a matter of tradeoffs and choices. This form of storytelling is as elastic as every other form, which means that a writer often gets the best results by breaking the rules.

Don’t consider the following to be rules. Think of them as guidelines—instruments that can be useful, but are not essential, when constructing a 100-word narrative. It’s a short list with only three elements. They are:

• A narrative arc,
• Thematic unity, and
• A provocative first sentence.

But remember it’s all about tradeoffs. It may be that one particular label works more effectively if you sacrifice a measure of thematic unity in order to sharpen the narrative arc. For a different label, you might have such a great first sentence that you just can’t alter it, even though it dilutes the narrative arc somewhat. So this recipe for 100-word stories is exceedingly mutable. You can alter the ratio of the ingredients and/or substitute liberally as need, taste, and/or circumstances dictate.

Narrative Arc

That’s fancy talk for saying the label needs a beginning, a middle, and an end. The beginning introduces a problem and a crisis, or an unresolved question. The middle describes the grappling with that unsolved problem, the attempts to rectify the imbalance.
The finale reaches a point of equilibrium—not necessarily resolution, but at least a point of stability or of change. Something has changed; the universe of the story has been altered.

Sticking with the Dust Bowl label of the introduction, what’s the narrative arc? Here’s the text again:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling earth blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first fields were plowed here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county’s residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County soil finally brought forth a wheat crop—the first since 1932.

In the simplest terms, this narrative says:
**Beginning:** There was a famine.
**Middle:** The famine tested people’s faith in the land and Providence.
**End:** The famine finally ended—having left a deep scar.

There is nothing too fancy about it. You can’t (and shouldn’t try to) get too fancy in 100 words. But thinking in terms of beginning/middle/end helps you make choices about what information to include in a label, and what information to leave off. It provides a through-line, a backbone, which every piece of information has to support. If it doesn’t, the label sags.

Take a quick look at the first and last sentences of the Dust Bowl label, and note how the last sentence reflects back directly upon the first. Indeed, one could almost fuse the two sentences together to form a mini-narrative, viz.:

First the rains stopped; then the land dried up and billowed. ...no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County finally brought forth a wheat crop.

Use this fusion as a shorthand way of evaluating a draft of a label. Ask yourself if the last sentence reflects back to the first one. If you only read those two sentences and nothing else, can you discern the outlines of a story? Consider these pairings:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard “lunger” prescription: get rest and fresh air. ... By 1887 his ravaged lungs were beyond saving, and he expired within two months.

In the late 19th century, towns came and went in the San Juan Mountains as abruptly as gusts of wind. ...But their remnants, still visible throughout the San Juans, bear powerful witness to the enterprising spirit of the frontier.

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn’t leak so badly. ...the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.

In every case, the last sentence is a natural extension of the first. So no matter what information you pack in between, the whole thing is going to hang together.

**Thematic Unity**

More fancy language, which means, in this case, that a 100-word label can only be, ultimately, about one thing. In the Dust Bowl example above, the one thing is the land blew away. Look at how the word choices reinforce that unifying theme:

First the rains stopped; then the **land** dried up and billowed. In those two cruel strokes, the Dust Bowl swept much of Baca County away. Swirling **earth** blackened the skies, jammed machinery, choked livestock, and stripped farmhouses free of paint. Since the first **fields** were **plowed** here in the 1880s, farmers had always lived with drought—but not on this scale. Half the county’s residents drifted off between 1931 and 1936, often reaping no return on acreage their families had worked for 50 years. Those who remained were certain recovery lay just one thundershower away. But no one breathed easy until 1940, when Baca County **soil** finally brought forth a **wheat crop**—the first since 1932.

The words in **bold** all refer to the land; the words in roman text, to wind. So the language itself is structured to reinforce the storyline of the Dust Bowl. Look at another example:

Admirers said William “Billy” Adams **shot down** more bad laws than any legislator in Colorado history. During forty years as a state representative and senator (1886-1926), the Alamosa rancher won **countless battles** for his working-class constituents. He **muscled** wage supports, agricultural
loans, child-labor laws, and mine-safety statutes through the legislature, as well as the bill authorizing Alamosa State College (now Adams State). Most important, he led a heroic stand against the Ku Klux Klan, whose allies controlled the legislature during the 1920s. Adams used parliamentary tactics to beat back the KKK faction and then, in 1927, defeated its candidate in the gubernatorial race. He served three terms in that office and retired in 1933, having never lost an election.

What do these words in **bold** tell you about Billy Adams? He was a strong man, a fighter. We could come right out and say that in a single expository sentence—“Billy Adams was a fighter”—but the statement has no resonance. Embedded within a narrative, in a suite of coordinated images, the assertion carries far more power and makes a much greater impact on the reader.

### A Provocative First Sentence

A good first sentence has three main purposes. It should:

A. Convey information,
B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader), and
C. Frame the theme of the story.

You can’t always achieve all three of these objectives in a first sentence—indeed, sometimes you don’t even want to achieve all three. But when I’m writing my first sentence, I always evaluate it in terms of these three criteria. Let’s take them in order.

#### A. Convey information

In a 100-word label, there’s no room to waste; every sentence has to convey information. But that doesn’t mean every sentence has to be an expository statement of fact. On the contrary, you can pack plenty of information in a sentence that seems less a statement of fact than a flippant opinion, like this one:

*Stagecoach passengers on the Butterfield Overland Despatch stood a better-than-even chance of surviving the journey to Denver.* That was the good news. The bad news? They had to endure hour after punishing hour on the coach’s wooden bench, bouncing over prairie trails in hot, dusty, stifling misery. Although Butterfield used era’s most comfortable coaches (Concords), travelers suffered from the very first mile. Even the price ($75 one way from Kansas City) hurt. But travelers had no better option during the Butterfield’s years of operation (1865-1870)—the railroads wouldn’t be complete until 1870. And if they happened to pass the corpse-littered scene of an Indian attack, those road-weary passengers swallowed their complaints. **Things could always get worse.**

So while this first sentence does convey information, it defers certain pieces of “introductory” information (i.e., the time frame) in order to meet the other two objectives (i.e., raise an unanswered question and set up the rest of the story). This is a tradeoff that should be made consciously. You need to balance the three objectives.

Let’s quickly look at another example:

*Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not.*

Without having been told directly, the reader knows the following facts:

* Juan de Oñate lived in the late 1500s.
* Judging by his name, he was Spanish or Mexican.
* He must have been a soldier or explorer, because he built forts.
* He might have traveled in the vicinity of the Spanish Peaks.

We could state all those things directly: “In 1598, the Spanish conquistador Juan de Oñate led a group of 25 men from Santa Fe into this region.” But that wouldn’t achieve Objective 1 (hook the reader) or Objective 2 (frame the story). To show you what I
mean, let’s stick with this example.

B. Raise an unanswered question (hook the reader)

While the first sentence has to provide information—to fill gaps in the reader’s knowledge—it’s just as important for the sentence to create gaps in the reader's knowledge by asking an unanswered question. In this example, the unanswered question is explicit, “Did Juan de Oñate build the fort or not?” The reader’s curiosity is naturally aroused, and he or she has a strong incentive to keep on reading—to get the answer to the unanswered question. That is the air of suspense mentioned in the previous subsection.

In this example, it so happens that we’re unable to provide the answer to the unanswered question of the first sentence:

Juan de Oñate may have built a fort beneath the Spanish Peaks in 1598—but maybe not. Another Spanish explorer who ventured into this region, Antonio de Valverde, supposedly erected a post nearby in 1719. Who can say for sure? So many legends surround these mountains that it’s impossible to tell fact from fiction. The Utes called them Huaajotollaa—“breasts of the earth”—and believed vengeful spirits haunted the slopes. Spanish prospectors coveted the peaks’ treasures but dreaded their power; one explorer swore he saw fire shoot forth from the crest. Visible from 100 miles off, these landmarks guided 19th-century travelers, but most kept a respectful distance away just in case.

This is a question we can’t answer. But that’s kind of the point. In this case, the Spanish Peaks possessed a mystique, and even today there are legends and rumors about them that historians can neither confirm nor refute. (Note that most of the implied information in the first sentence is made explicit in the next sentence—Oñate was, indeed, a Spanish explorer.)

Take a look at this one:

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn’t leak so badly.

There is some good information here. Castlewood Dam was built to irrigate local farms, and it apparently had some structural problems. But what’s going to keep people reading? Are the unanswered questions implied by the reference to the leak? Did the dam eventually burst? And, assuming that it did, what happened afterwards?

Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres—or would have, if it didn’t leak so badly. The seepage began the year the dam was completed (1890); within seven years, a 100-foot section of the earthen barrier had crumbled. Engineers made repairs and vouched for the structure’s soundness, and local farmers—who needed the water—trusted them, even though the leaking continued on and off for decades. On August 3, 1933, the inevitable happened. Castlewood collapsed, releasing a two-billion-gallon tidal wave down Cherry Creek. Only two people drowned, thanks to a switchboard operator’s life-saving calls, but the flood devastated farms in this area and tore out six bridges in Denver, thirty miles downstream.

So the rest of the label provides the answers to the questions raised in the first sentence.

- Year of completion? 1890
- Composition of the dam? Earth
- Stream dammed? Cherry Creek
- Location? Thirty miles from Denver

We might have dispensed with all this information in a single expository sentence: “Built in 1890 on Cherry Creek, 30 miles upstream of Denver, Castlewood Dam backed up enough water to irrigate 30,000 acres.” Sure it’s informative, but it’s boring. It doesn’t pique our interest or make us want to learn more about the subject.

C. Frame the story

Continue with the first sentence about Castlewood Dam. The choice of detail, and the presentation thereof, sets up this label as a story about misplaced faith in technology, about humankind’s inability to ever truly tame nature, and about hubris and humility. If one wanted to frame the story differently—say, as a story about heroism in the face of calamity—one would make different choices in the composition of the first sentence.

So before you write that sentence, you have to know what kind of story you want to tell. The rest of the story should hang off that first sentence the way a coat hangs off a hook on the coat rack.

Beyond the 100th Word—the Untold Story

Consider the following 100-word story:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday came west in 1873 with the standard “lunger” prescription: get rest and fresh air. Instead he drifted like a contagion, drinking and gambling his way from Dallas to Dodge City to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he killed a poker rival in 1880, his first—and maybe last—murder; most of Holliday’s attempts failed because his wheezing and boozing made him an unsteady shot. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly and at random,
making brave men uneasy, just like his disease.
By 1887, when Holliday moved into the Hotel
Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond saving.
He expired within two months.

A reader is going to form a certain impression
of Doc Holliday from this label, but he or she also
might come away with it with a few questions about
the subject. For example:
- Where did Doc Holliday come from?
- Why did he ignore his doctor’s orders?
- Why did he kill that rival poker player?
- Why didn’t he go to jail for it?
- What’s a longer?

These are all good questions, and it is not bad
that they’re left unanswered. On the contrary, it’s
consistent with the storyline to leave them unanswered,
insofar as the narrative equates Doc Holliday with
an impersonal force of nature—a contagion, an
epidemic. Who knows where a virus comes from?
Who knows why it acts as it does? Doc Holliday
always has been a mythic figure, and this label
acknowledges and respects that status. He remains a
sketchy, somewhat outsized figure in this telling.
But the label still dispels the myth of the Wild West
gunslinger as somebody endowed with superhuman
powers. On the contrary, in this story the gunman is
only too human—he is what he is because of his own
mortality and his frailties. We don’t encourage the
reader to reflect on these things unless we leave a few
blanks for him or her to fill in. So I would argue that
the existence of these unanswered questions actually
strengthens the label.

Unanswered questions also provoke curiosity and
can motivate the reader to seek answers on his or
her own, after leaving our exhibit—and that is surely
one of our goals. However, if a given curator was
uncomfortable with this level of ambiguity, unanswered
questions can always be addressed without damaging
the overall narrative:

Stricken with tuberculosis at 21, Doc Holliday
came west from Philadelphia in 1873 with the
standard prescription: rest and fresh air. Instead,
seemingly gripped by a death wish, he drank
and gambled his way from Dallas to Dodge City
to Tombstone. Hot-tempered and reckless, he shot a
man in 1880 during a cardroom dispute—Hollid-
day’s first, and maybe last, murder (he was acquit-
ted on a self-defense plea). Most of his shootings
failed because his wheezing and boozing unsteadied
his aim. Still, he was dangerous—striking suddenly
and at random, making brave men uneasy, just like
his disease. By 1887, when Holliday moved into the
Hotel Glenwood, his ravaged lungs were beyond sav-
ing. He expired within two months.

This version is only ten words longer than the origi-
inal, but it addresses all of the questions on the bullet-
pointed list above (answers in bold):
- Where did Doc Holliday come from? Philadelphia
- Why did he ignore his doctor’s orders? Seemed to
  have a death wish
- Why did he kill that rival poker player?
  Cardroom dispute
- Why didn’t he go to jail for it? Pled self-defense
- What’s a longer? N/A

The tradeoff here is that, in order to include the
“death wish” text, we lose the “drifted like a contagion”
metaphor. I think it’s a losing exchange. To answer that
question adequately, it would take a whole chapter (or
more) of a book. It’s a complex question without a pat
answer. We only have enough space here to provide a
hasty answer to the question, one that will still leave
many readers unsatisfied. The contagion metaphor
gets closer to the truth. He ignored the prescription for
health because he was flat-out unhealthy. One might
as well ask why a germ kills its own host, and thereby
destroys itself. It’s simply in the germ’s nature to do so.
Live for the moment and damn the consequences—
that’s as good an answer to the question as any.

Let’s take another example:

In its own way, Brown’s Hole circa 1890 was the
very picture of frontier law and order. People gen-
erally got along with their neighbors and minded
their own business, and no wonder—their business
sometimes included cattle rustling, bank robbery,
tax evasion, or worse. Safe from the authorities’
prying eyes, wanted men such as Butch Cassidy,
Black Jack Ketchum, and Isom Dart lived peace-
fully in this inaccessible valley. Almost everyone was
welcome—except men with badges. One lawman
who’d chased a fugitive across most of Wyoming
stopped his pursuit when it reached Brown’s
Hole and banded the case off to a man named
Philbrick—who was himself wanted in three states.

But hold on a second—
- Where was Brown’s Hole?
- Who were Black Jack Ketchum and Isom Dart?
- Why didn’t authorities just raid the place?
- Why did the law-abiding residents tolerate these
criminals?

I cite this example to suggest other, non-textual
ways of answering the questions. The first one is
simple enough, include a map on or near the label
that shows the location of Brown’s Hole (it’s in
extreme northwestern Colorado). The second ques-
tion can be answered in captions accompanying
photographs of Ketchum and Dart (the former was
a train robber, the latter, a cattle rustler). The third
question also takes a graphic answer. Topography made a raid out of the question, so a topographical map or illustration is in order. A caption might cite a description of the citadel’s impregnability contained in a U.S. marshal’s report.

As to the last question—I think this one is best left to the reader’s imagination and curiosity. Much like the question of why Doc Holliday didn’t obey his doctor’s orders, this one admits no easy answers. There’s a complex dynamic at work, one that would require many pages to illustrate adequately. It is best merely to drop a hint and try to prod readers to investigate on their own.

**Conclusion**

The point I would like to conclude with—one I’ve returned to throughout this essay—is tradeoffs. There’s no right or wrong way to write an exhibit label, nor is there a hard delineation between an “expository” label and a “narrative” one. Most labels contain both elements out of necessity. The question the writer must answer is this: what is the proper balance to strike among these elements? What effect do I want to achieve? What do I want my audience to walk away with?

When we write, we compose a mosaic. We pick and choose the “tiles” (the words, facts, and images) we want to include, and which ones we want to withhold. We pick and choose the shape and arrangement of the tiles. In a 100-word label, the number of available tiles is far greater than the available space, so the use of one tile necessarily excludes the use of many others. That makes each choice an extremely important one. The key to writing good text is to make those choices deliberately—to weigh what is gained and what is lost if I swap out tile B for tile A; if I tilt a given tile at an angle instead of lodging it square; if I pack my tiles densely or disperse them unevenly.

If I follow this process, I end up with labels that make the most of that 100-word space—labels that not only convey facts but also hint at truths; labels that not only inform but also entertain, maybe even enchant.

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