

How to Become A Great Docent

Thank you very much for volunteering to be a docent for the Museum on Main Street's exhibition *New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music*. 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 “*Have you ever studied about music or music traditions?*” 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies* 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 *New Harmonies*, 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 kind of music do you listen to?*” or “*What kind of music do you associate with your hometown or home state?*” 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 *New Harmonies: Celebrating American Roots Music*, then read and practice with the docent handbook. Be sure to use your new “great docent” skills as you lead tours through any *New Harmonies* companion exhibits or displays and permanent exhibitions at your museum.

Guidelines for Structuring Tours to Family and Student Groups

Family Tour Groups

American families are more diverse than ever, but a family acts like a family no matter its makeup or nationality.

Families

- Family members receive and share information from each other.
- Family members learn through conversation and social interaction.
- Families members come in all ages—from infants to grandparents.
- Because families are busier than ever, they sometimes have less time to spend at the exhibition than do scheduled groups.
- Families need to know where rest rooms, water fountains, and food concessions are located.

Hints for Leading Family Tours

- Be clear about the length of the tour.
- Make sure you address both children and adults.
- Be sensitive to the fact that adults accompanying the children may not be their parents.
- Create a team spirit by encouraging adults and children to answer questions and examine objects together.
- Tell children that their “job” is to assist the adults in solving problems or answering questions.
- Don’t be insulted if a family must leave before the tour is over.

Student Tour Groups

Pre-kindergarten–2nd Grade Students

- have vivid imaginations and like to pretend
- have short attention spans
- are more physically oriented than verbally oriented
- strongly identify with their names

Hints for Leading Pre-kindergarten–2nd Grade Student Tours

- Employ activities that allow children to discover things—don’t tell them, ask them.
- Ask children to look or touch, then describe.
- Ask children to solve a riddle.
- Tell stories.
- If students are wearing nametags, call them by their names.

3rd Grade–5th Grade Students

- are avid observers
- are eager to learn new things
- like to talk
- love being challenged to find objects or clues
- work well on independent assignments

Hints for Leading 3rd Grade–5th Grade Student Tours

- Ask children to hunt for an image or an object in the exhibition.
- Ask children to describe that image or object.

6th Grade–9th Grade Students

- are aware of their appearance
- are peer centered

- like to work in groups
- can be distrusting of adults
- have an uninterested air about them (they seem like they don't want to learn or don't care)

Hints for Leading 6th Grade–9th Grade Student Tours

- Treat adolescents with respect and as adults.
- Ask open-ended questions that allow them to express their opinions.
- Ask pointed questions (“*Do you think it’s important for immigrants to America to bring their music traditions with them? Why or why not?*”).
- Give group-oriented assignments.
- With the teacher’s permission, give adolescent students time to visit some of the exhibition on their own.
- Don’t take whispering, giggling, or imitating personally.
- Don’t take yourself too seriously; keep your sense of humor.
- Don’t ask them to sit on the floor in a circle.

10th Grade–12th Grade Students

- have strong opinions about what they find interesting and relevant to their lives
- have longer attention spans
- like doing activities alone or with friends
- are peer centered
- often are compelled to challenge the status quo

Hints for Leading 10th Grade–12th Grade Student Tours

- Let students express their opinions and provide opportunities for them to give feedback.
- Express your opinion and why you feel the way you do.
- Ask a provocative question or make a provocative statement at the beginning of the tour. Ask the same question at the end of the tour to test if opinions, values, or perceptions have changed.
- Create a debate over a value-laden or emotional issue.
- With the teacher’s permission, build in some flexible or free time to their visit.

Educational Promotion Strategies

Promoting MOMS Educational Opportunities in Your Community

Or, If you build it, they may not come

The tour of a Museum on Main Street (MOMS) exhibition offers exciting educational opportunities for students and teachers in your community, as well as a chance to strengthen your museum's connections with educators. Students will be able to tour the MOMS exhibition and accompanying local exhibition, create products to be displayed in the exhibitions, engage in lessons activities that explore the exhibition themes and your community, and participate in the local programs you host.

However, given teachers' busy schedules and the many curriculum requirements they must address in their classrooms, simply offering these valuable educational experiences does not guarantee that teachers will take advantage of them. To effectively engage teachers and students in the MOMS exhibition, you will need to actively promote the educational opportunities and their educational value to teachers. Following are a few suggestions for maximizing the participation of students and teachers in the MOMS exhibition in your community.

ACTIVELY PROMOTE THE EXHIBITION AND TEACHER'S GUIDE TO EDUCATORS

1. Invite an educator to participate on your local exhibition committee.
Someone familiar with the ins and outs of your local education community can help you decide on the most effective strategies for promoting the exhibition and associated educational opportunities to teachers.
2. Contact teachers well in advance of the exhibition's arrival in your community.
Teachers plan their curriculum months in advance. The sooner teachers know about the exhibition and the educational opportunities it affords, the more likely they will be to include them in their curriculum. Advance notice is especially important if you would like to feature students' work in the local exhibition.
3. Use of variety of strategies for promoting the exhibition and teacher's guide lesson activities.
Possibilities include:
 - Send a catchy postcard or poster to all teachers in your community;
 - Get on the agenda of school staff meetings and PTA/PTO meetings;
 - Lead a session or host a booth at an education conference;
 - Ask district officials to send an e-mail or flyer to all teachers and/or include an article in the district newsletter;
 - Contact your state council of social studies teachers to find out how you can promote the exhibition and lesson activities to its members. (Contact information for your state council is available on the National Council for the Social Studies website at www.socialstudies.org.)
 - Host a workshop for teachers to acquaint them with the exhibition and demonstrate the lesson activities.
 - Host a reception for educators at the exhibition once it opens.

4. Offer to assist educators in their classroom activities.

Your museum's staff and/or volunteers have valuable resources and expertise to offer teachers. Teachers will welcome your assistance in locating research sources, identifying guest speakers, and relating the themes of the exhibition to your community. Review the lesson activities in the teacher's guide and identify ways that your museum could assist teachers. Let teachers know you are ready to help.

DEMONSTRATE THE EDUCATIONAL VALUE OF THE LESSON ACTIVITIES

1. Emphasize that the lessons meet objectives in the National Curriculum Standards for Social Studies.

There is a major emphasis nationwide on standards-based education. Basically, teachers are supposed to insure that everything they do in their classrooms helps students attain competency in the skills and knowledge specified in their state curriculum standards. These state standards are derived from national curriculum standards. Because MOMS is a national program, the lesson activities in the teacher's guide are keyed to national standards.

2. Enlist an educator to key the lessons to the curriculum standards in your state.

This will make it easier to demonstrate how the lessons will assist teachers in meeting their state-mandated curriculum goals. Teachers are unlikely to use the lessons if they see them as "add-on" activities that do not meet curriculum goals.

3. Ask a curriculum specialist at the state department of education or local district office to endorse use of the lesson activities.

An official "seal of approval" from state or local education experts will lend additional credibility to the lessons, but can be difficult to obtain. Don't be discouraged if education officials decline to endorse the lessons.

4. Emphasize that the lessons help students develop critical thinking skills.

Developing students' critical thinking skills is a focus of many education programs nationwide. The MOMS lesson activities promote critical thinking by engaging students in examining real issues in your community and analyzing primary historic documents.

5. Focus on the opportunity for students to create products for a community audience.

Current educational theory stresses the value of students creating products for a "real world" audience. The MOMS exhibition offers students the chance to share their work with the entire community. Displaying a student's work is also a great way to lure an entire student's family to the exhibition.

Overview: Marketing Tool Kit

This Marketing Toolkit is designed to provide local hosts of *New Harmonies* with resources and information to effectively market their exhibition tour and related programs. Tools are provided in printed and/or digital formats and are available in the Administrative section of the MoMS website at www.museumonmainstreet.org.

Printed Promotional Materials provided by MoMS (preview available at www.museumonmainstreet.org)

- Exhibition Poster (50 copies per venue)
- Exhibition Brochure (1,000 copies per venue)
- Exhibition Postcards (50 copies of 10 different images per venue)
- Exhibition Banner (1 copy per state tour, ships with exhibition)
- Performance Banner (1 copy per state tour, ships with exhibition)

*State humanities councils hosting MoMS tours often create their own printed materials (brochures, posters, etc.) to further promote the exhibition tour within the state. Be sure to contact your state council regarding such possibilities.

Digital Files and Images

- Exhibition Graphic Identity
- Selected Exhibition Images
- Smithsonian Logo

PowerPoint Presentation providing an overview of the MoMS program and the exhibition. Please note that we strongly encourage local hosts to refrain from sharing this resource until after they have attended their state program planning workshop.

Guidelines, Templates and Resource Lists

- Promoting Your MoMS Exhibition: "How To" Guide & Best Practices
- Tips on Strategic Use of Printed Materials
- Sample Press Releases:
 - Pre-Tour
 - Mid-Tour
 - Post-Tour
- Credit Line
- Website Guidelines & Suggestions
- Marketing & PR Web Resources