



INTERPRETIVE SIGNAGE GUIDELINES

A guide to developing outdoor signs for ODNR properties and trails



Department of
Natural Resources

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INTRODUCTION

What is the Interpretive Signage Guide?

The Signage Guide is an overview of the Ohio Department of Natural Resources (ODNR) wayside exhibit standards and work process. The guide emphasizes best practices and good examples of site-specific outdoor interpretation for all ODNR properties. Waysides may appear simple in form and function, but their development often involves intricate planning and attention to detail.

This guide is not a complete how-to manual. Instead, it complements professional-level expertise in graphic design, interpretive writing, research, and other related disciplines.

The why?

The primary goal of any interpretive sign or wayside is to educate and inspire readers to appreciate and care for the site or resource while enjoying Ohio's great outdoors. When visitors make this connection, they are more likely to take actions that help preserve these resources for future generations to enjoy. When starting the sign, determine what future action you want the reader to do. This is a critical piece of the exhibit planning process, explored later in this document.



Project planning & development



1. Establish the project team

Form a diverse and inclusive project team to drive the signage project forward. In addition to key subject matter experts, writers, and designers, consider reaching out to external sources or stakeholders who can offer valuable insights.

2. Identify potential sites and subjects

Compile a list of potential wayside sites and subjects, collaborating with team members during a site visit. Ensure you assess the number of signs needed to achieve effective coverage and engagement.

3. Determine budget and timeline

Set the project budget and timeline. Keep in mind that the production of pannier panels generally takes 6–8 weeks, and bidding through OhioBuys for larger entrance signs may take a similar amount of time. This does not include the time needed for planning, writing, designing, editing, and the approval process. If grant funding is involved, verify any time constraints for spending the allocated funds.

4. Map requirements

Determine if a map is needed to provide context to the reader. If so, contact the Office of Information Technology to get started.

5. Digital content integration

Consider if the signage will link to additional online content. If so, think about incorporating a QR code or a short URL for easy access to further information. Creative Services can create both of these. A short URL is a condensed version of a longer web address. These shorter links are easier to share, type, and remember, while still redirecting to the original, longer URL. These are commonly used in social media, marketing and print materials to save space and improve usability.

6. Marketing and public awareness

Determine the platform(s) for promoting the signage, including the ODNR website, social media posts, press releases, and a ribbon-cutting ceremony to generate excitement and increase awareness.

What makes a good signage opportunity?

3 key factors

1. Significant feature(s)

What intangible meanings are tied to this specific terrain? What makes this place unique, and why should it matter to visitors? Within the first three seconds of viewing a wayside, visitors should feel a connection to the landscape, whether through flora and fauna, trails, or historical, landscape, or geologic features. Some landscapes have clear, noticeable features (to the right), while others with more subtle landscapes may require visual aids to draw the reader's attention to less-obvious elements.

2. Visitor access and safety

Place wayside exhibits in “front-country” areas (avoiding wilderness zones) along pathways, trails, and vehicle pull-outs. These areas are developed or accessible sections of a park, forest, or natural area that are intended for public use, such as parking lots, trailheads, picnic areas, and visitor centers. Consider the surrounding landscape and the space needed to ensure visitors have a comfortable, safe, and accessible area to gather without obstructing foot traffic or interfering with automobile or bike routes.

3. Regular maintenance

Is there a plan in place (also considering funding) for regularly inspecting the sign for graffiti or other damage? Has a replacement schedule been established? Outdoor signage typically requires replacement every five to ten years. At a minimum, waysides require cleaning twice a year and regular inspections for vandalism or weathering. Refer to the [Pannier one-pager](#) on cleaning and upkeep procedures. Proactively identify and update outdated content or branding to ensure consistency and relevance as part of ongoing maintenance.



Pannier cantilevered, The Little Miami River at Great Council State Park



Pannier upright, Heritage of Freedom Trail, Alum Creek State Park

TYPES OF SIGNAGE AVAILABLE

In-house Print Shop

Creative Services (Fountain Square, Bldg H)

Large format color printing and mounting (signs, posters, and banners)

- Maximum print width is 53"

Available substrates:

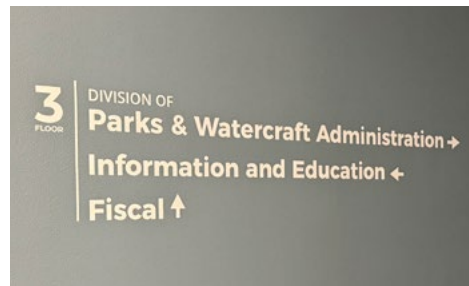
- Matte paper
- Indoor/outdoor vinyl with the ability to grommet for hanging
- Perforated vinyl used for windows and door panels
- Adhesive-cut vinyl in white and black for indoor and outdoor signage, can also print color graphics on vinyl

Mounting options for temporary event signage:

- 3/16-inch – black or white foamboard
- 4 mm – white plastic corrugated board



Event sign – printed on matte paper, mounted on 3/16-inch black foamboard



Directional sign – adhesive-cut indoor vinyl, applied to wall



Banner – (top) outdoor vinyl with grommets (bottom) outdoor vinyl



Garage door panels – perforated vinyl, applied to glass

Other needs? Reach out to Creative Services for other options.

TYPES OF SIGNAGE AVAILABLE

Dillon State Park Sign Shop

Dillon produces decals, banners, and signage. This option potentially allows for faster production and lower costs, while still maintaining quality standards for outdoor signage.

- Maximum print width is 63" / Maximum sign width is 48" / Length up to 10'

Available substrates:

- Vinyl, including reflective
- Aluminum Composite Material (ACM) – lighter material and more cost effective option compared to Aluminum
- Aluminum – heavier than ACM, which may add to structure support requirements.
- PVC – smooth, rigid plastic, perfect for indoor and outdoor.
- Corrugated Plastic (Coroplast)



Park kiosk panels – ACM



Wayfinding trail signs – (top) aluminum, (bottom) ACM. [Installation guidelines](#).



Storybook trail signs – aluminum

Barkcamp State Park Sign Shop

Barkcamp produces colorcore PVC composite signs. Consult the Division of Parks and Watercraft Sign Instruction Manual for the more details.

- Maximum print width is 48"
- 4' x 10' and 4' x 8' sheets in beige with green lettering and border



Park entrance signs – PVC composite

TYPES OF SIGNAGE AVAILABLE

Pannier Graphics*

*ODNR contract. Pricing subject to change. Contact Creative Services to place order.

Durability: Pannier signs are known for their long-lasting materials and construction, making them well suited for outdoor environments where they must be able to withstand adverse weather conditions like rain, wind, and sun exposure. This option would be good for long-term outdoor signs such as educational signage along a trail.

Low maintenance: These signs are designed to be easy to clean and maintain, helping to ensure they remain in good condition for many years with minimal effort.

Quality of graphics: Pannier signs provide high-quality graphic options that maintain legibility and vibrancy over time, even in outdoor conditions.



Parade (upright) – 24" x 84", 2-sided, base-plate mounted

Frame styles

Parades (upright)

Typically used at trail entrances, these are perfect for maps, safety messages, or other information. Uprights are designed to communicate boldly. These can be installed direct embedment or base-plate mounted to an existing concrete slab. Common sizes and pricing:

- 28" x 84" | \$2,350 | Panel replacement (using existing frame): \$470.00
- 24" x 36" | \$786

Cantilevered

The preferred interpretive style for our parks and nature preserves. This classic base fits unobtrusively into the landscape while angling the panel for easy viewing. It can be installed direct embedment, base-plate mounted to a concrete slab, or rail mounted (higher price). Common sizes and pricing:

- 48" x 24" | \$1,263–\$1,318
- 36" x 24" | \$788–\$843
- 30" x 20" | \$854–\$909

Please discuss your project with Creative Services before selecting a size. or we can assist you with determining the best fit for your project.

[Installation guidelines – Parade \(upright\)](#)

[Installation guidelines – Cantilevered](#)



Upright – 24" x 36" direct embedment



Cantilevered – 36" x 24" direct embedment

TYPES OF SIGNAGE AVAILABLE

State printing

Copy center

The Copy Center in downtown Columbus is a good option for large, quick print runs that we are not able to complete in-house. If you are unsure if we can do your print job in-house, please reach out to Creative Services for assistance. Copy Center specialties include quick print turnaround, digital printing, document finishing, laminating, kitting-pick-pack & shipping. Copy center asks for a 7 to 10 day turnaround time so factor that into your jobs. View the latest [pricing guide](#).

- Copy Center full color and B/W printing
- Document scanning
- Document finishing
- Pocket cards
- Large format printing, mounting, and laminating
- Banner stand (retractable)
- Printed envelopes
- Fulfillment services

To place a print order, please complete the [Print Request Order \(PRO\) ADM0515](#). Creative Services can assist with filling out the print specifications; however, you must obtain the designated coding from your fiscal team before submitting the order to State Printing. While our team is available to review digital or hard copy proofs, it is the responsibility of the Division or Program to submit the order to State Printing.

Commercial print procurement

DAS will help procure items like unique signage, which may include entrance signs for nature centers, storybook trail markers, large banners for advertising programs or projects, and more. Creative Services will provide design specifications once the final design is approved. Be sure to include us when reviewing vendor proofs. Please confirm procurement procedures with your division, including how to complete a Print Request Order and submit it through OhioBuys.



Pull-up vinyl banner



High Density Urethane (HDU) sign, Haiku Trail at Hueston Woods



Billboard, Shawnee State Park Campground & Marina

WRITING FOR INTERPRETATIVE SIGNAGE

Consider your audience

ODNR primarily serves the general public, including hikers, bikers, and outdoor enthusiasts of all skill and age "levels. This also encompasses families with children seeking trails for recreation, exploration, and education. Other audiences could include:

Nature enthusiasts and educators
Individuals seeking to learn about Ohio’s natural resources, wildlife, plants, and geology such as teachers or group leaders using trails for outdoor education.

Local residents and tourists
Residents looking for outdoor activities close to home or tourists visiting Ohio’s parks, forests, and natural areas.

Trail runners, cyclists or equestrian riders
More active users who may seek quick, easy-to-read signage for navigation and safety.

Accessibility-minded visitors
Individuals with disabilities or limited mobility who rely on accessible trails and clear signage.

Cultural and historical explorers
Visitors interested in the history and cultural significance of Ohio’s landscapes.

Conservation advocates
People interested in learning about conservation efforts and how they can contribute to preserving Ohio’s natural spaces.

Writing style

Readability
Write at an 8th grade or lower reading level for accessibility. Use the readability statistics feature in Microsoft Word.

Clarity
Keep text clear, concise, and correct. Use short sentences and paragraphs (3–5 sentences per paragraph). Avoid scientific jargon and define any scientific or technical terms.

Chunk information
Break content into smaller, manageable text blocks to enhance readability.

Engaging copy
Write compelling and thought-provoking content. Use prompts or questions to engage readers.

Consistency
If the signs intend to be a series at one or multiple properties use a consistent writing style with tone and messaging.

Conciseness and attention span
The average attention span is only 30 to 45 seconds. Convey the main message—why the site or topic matters—within this time frame.

Readability Statistics	
Counts	
Words	134
Characters	657
Paragraphs	4
Sentences	9
Averages	
Sentences per Paragraph	2.2
Words per Sentence	14.8
Characters per Word	4.7
Readability	
Flesch Reading Ease	69.8
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	7.2

Microsoft Word example

WRITING FOR INTERPRETATIVE SIGNAGE

Follow the “3-30-3” rule

- **3 seconds:** Hook the visitor with a compelling title or striking first line.
- **30 seconds:** Provide engaging content to maintain their interest.
- **3 minutes:** Offer deeper content for those who are highly engaged.

Ensure the sign is structured with **three levels of text**, allowing visitors to engage at their chosen level:

- A short, impactful title. The title of the exhibit should express the significance of the story. Don't just label “Shawnee River Walk Trail”—use a hook to pull someone into a story such as; “The Great River”.
- A brief paragraph summarizing the key point.
- Additional details for those who want to explore further.



Cantilevered sign, Shawnee State Park Riverwalk

Visual layout

Signs should balance 1/3 text, 1/3 graphics, and 1/3 blank space for an easy to follow, inviting design.

Suggested word counts for:

- **36" x 24" cantilever signs:**
100–250 words
- **36" x 52" park kiosk signs:**
50–100 words per main section,
25–45 words for the “Try this” section



Park kiosk, Old Man's Cave

Content approval process

Collaborate with the Public Information Officer (PIO) in the Office of Communications and Creative Service to **refine the content before layout begins**. This ensures the final product aligns with both the Department's and the Division's standards and objectives.

LAYOUT AND DESIGN OF SIGNS

Branding & fonts

Creative Services will incorporate consistent branding elements, including headers, footers, and approved color schemes and typefaces. Ensure ODNR Department/Division logos are prominently included where appropriate. Consider if any partner logos need to be added.

Best practices suggested for the visually impaired by the National Park Service include:

Titles: 60–72 pt

Subtitles: 48–40 pt

Body text: 24 pt

Captions: 18 pt

Minimum 18-pt type

Imagery

Provide high-resolution photos when available to enhance visual appeal and storytelling. When suitable photos are unavailable, consider illustrations to convey the message effectively. Bold graphics, combined with the surrounding landscape, help focus attention and communicate meaning.

Photo support

If specific images are needed, consider coordinating with Creative Services to arrange a photoshoot. Plan in advance if photos need to be taken at a certain time or season outdoors.

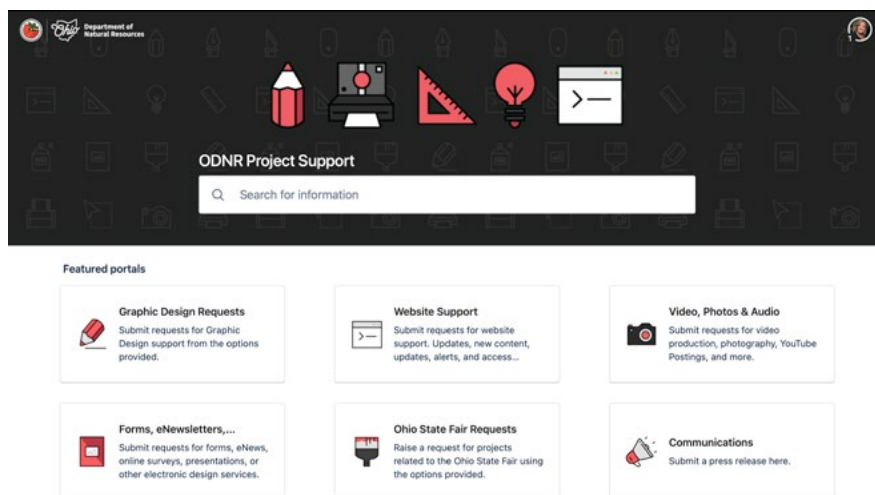
Captions and credits

Include clear, concise captions for all images. Provide proper credits for photos and illustrations, as required. While we prioritize using ODNR images, we recognize that outsourcing, such as for historical images or specific species, may sometimes be necessary.

READY TO SUBMIT YOUR SIGNAGE PROJECT?

Submit your project through Jira, our project management software, [here](#).

- ☐ Project approval from Division Chief
- ☐ I have my content written
- ☐ A Public Information Officer (PIO) in Communications has reviewed my content
- ☐ I have photos/illustrations gathered if need be
- ☐ Funds approved



Not quite ready?

Contact Creative Services to schedule a brainstorming session. We're here to help refine your ideas and bring your vision to life.

CONTACT CREATIVE SERVICES



Jenna Britton

Creative Director

Contact me

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Design resources

Available internally on the Intranet at ohiodas.sharepoint.com/sites/DNR_Comm