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ARTICLE

How to Create Exhibits

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Abstract

Drawing on examples and lessons learned from an array of the author's collaborative exhibit projects, this essay offers a model for making exhibits that a novice can adopt and adapt in a variety of contexts.

Keywords: collaboration; exhibit design; exhibit planning

Whether a single object in a display case or a traveling multimedia installation, exhibits are a common public humanities tool. We have entire institutions (museums) and scores of specialists dedicated to connecting people with objects, ideas, and each other, using exhibits as a primary mechanism for that work. Creating exhibits can be a highly professionalized practice. But it doesn't have to be. Scholars, students, or community groups might decide—or be asked—to mount an exhibit even without formal training in the field. If guided by some basic approaches that might not be obvious to the uninitiated, a modest exhibit organized by earnest contributors can be deeply meaningful.

For more than a decade, I've developed exhibits in collaboration with a range of partners, many of whom aren't professional exhibit makers. I've worked with students, neighborhood leaders, arts administrators, public health specialists, environmental justice advocates, and others. We've created exhibits in art galleries, community centers, and digital spaces (to name a few). I bring my knowledge of curatorial practice and exhibit development to these collaborations, but I approach the work so that when our project is over, my partners—if they would like—will be able to apply our process without me in the future to create other exhibits. Drawing on examples and lessons learned from an array of projects, I offer here a model for making exhibits that a novice can adopt and adapt in a variety of contexts (Appendix A).

1. Start with collaboration

Exhibits are usually collaborative projects. Like other public humanities work, they are an alternative to the image of the solitary scholar. In a practical sense, exhibits are complex—it takes more than one person to make them happen. Even if one individual independently

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organizes the content for a small exhibit, they will likely at least coordinate with someone else regarding the place where the exhibit will appear. Deeper forms of collaboration among partners who bring specialized skills, knowledge, and relationships can yield exhibits that honor the public humanities approach of creating *with* stakeholders rather than just *for* them.[1] The nature and extent of the collaboration can vary based on the partners' needs, interests, and abilities. It's important that all collaborators have a clear sense of the benefit of participating and also what the expectations are. Perhaps most significantly, collaboration is as much a mindset as it is a method. When I create an exhibit, whether with a small team or a large one, I think about how we can make meaning together so that the work will be better and we will be better because of our combined effort.

2. The four streams of creating an exhibit

Creating an exhibit is an iterative process. I have come to think of collaborative exhibit projects as a confluence of four streams: funding, feedback/reflection, program development, and content development.

Content development is the work that you probably imagine when you think about "making an exhibit." It involves planning and creating the overarching concept for the show and determining which objects, images, words, sounds, activities, or other materials will comprise the exhibit. However, content development is bolstered and facilitated by three other streams that should be integral parts of a good exhibit development project. Let's examine these additional streams before taking a closer look at content development.

2.1. *Funding*

Exhibits can work well on a shoestring budget or blossom with access to substantial resources. Regardless of the project's scale, funding is a crucial factor that can affect the process and the outcomes. Sometimes the project starts with the invitation to apply for a grant. In other cases, the idea emerges and the team seeks out funding to support it.

Funding can flow in a variety of directions. For some projects, a partner hired me as an independent contractor and paid me a fixed sum to work with them. For others, I've used my access to university funding to connect my partners with resources that might not have otherwise been available to them. Once, a university grant provided generous support for materials and labor from anyone affiliated with the university, but it could not be used to directly pay partners outside of the institution. This seemed unfair to many on the diverse project team (including those of us who were university-affiliated), so we applied to our state humanities council for additional funding to compensate project partners who were ineligible to be paid through our primary funding mechanism.

2.2. *Feedback and reflection*

Seeking feedback and making time for reflection will strengthen any exhibit. This process is often called "evaluation," and it can happen throughout the project. To inform work in progress, you can invite partners and other stakeholders to provide input on project goals, prospective exhibit locations, exhibit content, research sources, or public program ideas. We often convene a meeting or circulate draft documents and ask questions about what is

[1] On practices of co-creation in museum contexts, see, for example, Simon 2010 and Adair et al. 2011.

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working well and what might be missing, from their perspective. We typically talk with community stakeholders whose experiences are reflected in the exhibit, with people who have subject matter or methodological expertise related to the project, and with people who might be able to point us toward resources we're overlooking.

After you've developed the exhibit, take a step back to examine whether you've achieved what you set out to do. Observing or surveying visitors, talking with other collaborators, and requesting reviews from outside experts can help you understand what worked well and what you might do differently in a future exhibit (or what you might change midway through the run of a show).

There are many tools for evaluating exhibits.[2] Sometimes you can learn a lot from simply talking with people about their experiences. When we weren't able to conduct a formal study, chatting with the manager of a park site helped me learn that an exhibit we presented there brought in new visitors and also engaged people who use the community center on a regular basis. For an exhibit that opened in one gallery and was scheduled to travel to another, much larger, location several months later, I convened a focus group to reflect on the first exhibit and inform decisions about what to change for the expanded version. The group included people whose artwork and community were featured in the show as well as representatives from our funders and the first gallery. Independent reflection, such as freewriting periodically about how a project is going, can help you hone a self-aware and deliberate exhibit-making practice.

2.3. Program development

How do you activate the exhibit that you've put so much energy into creating? A common way is to plan one or more events that invite audiences to connect with each other and with the exhibit. Programs can take many forms, depending on the exhibit topic, duration, audience, budget, and planning capacity.

When my colleague Lois H. Silverman and I partnered with the Zagreb-based Museum of Broken Relationships (MBR) to host a 3-month exhibit, *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis*, Lois and her students worked with MBR and local partners to organize an array of creative programs, including a care fair, where youth and their families could learn about topics such as how broken bones heal, and a workshop on preventing domestic violence. The programs reflected months of planning and discussion among Lois, her students, the MBR team, and local stakeholders.

When my students and I partnered with Indianapolis' Garfield Park Arts Center (GPAC) to create *Monumental Changes*, an exhibit examining the history and legacy of a Confederate memorial that had been removed from the park, GPAC's manager knew from the start that we should convene a panel of local experts to give presentations that expanded on the themes of the exhibit. For *Indy Toxic Heritage: Pollution, Place, and Power*, which traveled to several city park locations, more than one park manager and their neighbors told us that a simple reception with drinks, snacks, and time for casual conversation would be the most meaningful type of program we could organize in their communities.

[2] The Institute of Museum and Library Services highlights an array of evaluation resources on its website (Institute of Museum and Library Services n.d.).

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Figure 1. The content development stream for creating an exhibition.
Source: Figure by the author.

Creative programs can be exciting, but as we learned from our partners in that last instance, sometimes simplicity is best. In all of these cases, insight from various collaborators shaped the direction and outcome of successful programs.

2.4. Content development

Throughout an exhibit project, it's helpful to intentionally attend to each of the first three streams. You might designate a point person responsible for each area or structure planning meetings with time to address each topic. While each stream can be shaped by collaborative work, in some projects the deepest collaborations might be focused on just one or two of these areas. For example, partners might work together closely to develop and reflect on the exhibit content, while one party takes nearly full responsibility for obtaining and managing the funding. Having established a general sense of these streams, we can look at content development, the most involved part of creating exhibits.

What follows is an overview of five key stages of the content development stream of creating exhibits (Figure 1). I offer examples from my own practice to illustrate how these stages can manifest. Use it as a guide. Be organized and stay flexible. Remember that this is just a starting point. There are many sources available for readers who want to explore in more depth.[3]

2.4.1. Build the partnership

The first and most foundational step for collaborative exhibit development involves determining who is participating in the project and establishing a strong working relationship among participants. An exhibit might grow out of an established relationship or mark the start of something new. My experience with the *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis* reflects how partners with different degrees of familiarity and different types of skills can come together around a single project. My colleague Lois, a specialist in museum education, had known the team behind MBR for more than a decade. She first connected with them while writing *The Social Work of Museums*, and subsequent collaborations grew

[3] Handy, more detailed guides to exhibit development include McKenna-Cress and Kamien 2013, Hughes 2015, Piacente 2022, and Smithsonian Exhibits 2018.

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from there.[4] In addition to operating a museum in Zagreb, MBR frequently develops traveling exhibits that blend objects and stories of broken relationships from their global collection with crowdsourced contributions from a local host community. As Lois hatched the idea for an Indianapolis exhibit, she invited me to co-lead the local team because of my curatorial experience. Even though I was new to working with MBR, we all knew and trusted Lois, which facilitated our collaborative relationship. Through a series of virtual meetings, we all got to know each other better and built a shared vision for the project.

As you assemble the project team, it's crucial to identify team member responsibilities, keeping in mind that everyone does not need to contribute in the same way. For *Indy Toxic Heritage: Pollution, Place, and Power*, the team included another professor from my university (Elizabeth [Liz] Kryder-Reid), a PhD student, representatives from the city's Parks and Recreation department, environmental justice specialists from a local community empowerment organization, and a community-based scholar and activist who also works in the environmental justice sector. Some of us had worked together previously, and others were new to the partnership. We established from the outset that Liz and I would take the lead on project management. Out of respect for our other partners' time and expertise, we wanted them to determine how they would participate throughout the project. We'd found that asking generally about participation preferences was too open-ended. Our partners didn't know how to respond because they weren't clear on what, exactly, the participation would look like. So we made a menu of "partnership options" that listed each phase of the project and specific activities to choose from. For example:

> Exhibit concept development (January–February 2024):
>
> A. Meet with others from the project team to generate ideas about exhibit goals, main messages, and the scope of the story. Laura + Liz will revise and recirculate for further feedback.
>
> B. Provide feedback on draft goals, messages, and scope that Laura + Liz generate.
>
> C. No involvement in concept development.

The menu helped articulate shared expectations and gave our partners a straightforward way to identify how they wanted to be involved.

Building the partnership also involves creating a project timeline, which, in turn, helps partners understand their roles and expectations within the collaboration. Every project I've worked on has involved some adjustments to the initial timeline, but identifying key tasks and an anticipated schedule is crucial for planning and accountability.

2.4.2. Create the concept

The "concept" is the organizing vision for the exhibit. It becomes a map that helps you navigate to a successful finished product. It might come together through deep and sustained collaboration among several partners, perhaps with input from additional advisors. The exhibit concept doesn't have to be written collaboratively, but it should be something that all of the partners review and agree on. Creating a solid concept helps the rest of the content development flow smoothly and generates a more compelling and cohesive exhibit.

[4] Silverman 2010.

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To develop the concept, consider the following questions and work iteratively. The answer to one question will likely inform another.

What are your goals?

Determining what you want the exhibit to accomplish will guide the choices you make throughout the rest of the development process.

For *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis*, we articulated goals with an eye toward what our evaluation team could assess. Our aim was that:

> Indianapolis community members who contribute an object, attend the exhibition, and/or attend a related program will:
>
> 1. learn about the MBR in Zagreb and the Indianapolis exhibition;
> 2. reflect on the ways that people, including themselves, lose, love, and/or grow;
> 3. learn something new about loss, love, and/or growth.

For an exhibit inspired by a colleague's community-based archeological research into the history of our campus and the communities that have lived here, we also set an aspirational goal to "prevent Indiana University and other institutions from causing further harm to [neighborhood] residents and descendants of those who used to live here." We knew that we couldn't control institutional actions in this regard, but the themes of learning from the past and prompting better choices in the future featured so heavily in our early conversations about the exhibit that we set this goal as one to strive for.

Who is the audience?

It can be tempting to want to create an exhibit "for everyone." But if you can get specific about the primary audience(s) for the exhibit, you will be better positioned to make choices that meet them where they are.

When I served as a curator of the House Life Project (HLP), a community-based art initiative in a rapidly changing neighborhood, I worked with a group of our community members to create an exhibit about HLP that we called, *We're Open, Come In.* We defined our audience as:

- Residents of Indianapolis and its surrounding areas who are interested in the art scene but who may not have spent much time [in the HLP neighborhood] or who have not thought critically about the neighborhood and challenges related to housing, identity, and creativity.
- HLP community members. The exhibit will honor their work and create a space where they are comfortable. The exhibit will not try to teach them what they already know.
- At future venues: people who do not know much about Indianapolis but who can connect to the broader themes of the show (this may involve some rewriting of exhibit text).

Partners and advisors with strong connections to the primary exhibit audience can help the rest of the team understand more about what knowledge and expectations the audience is likely to bring to the exhibit. As you learn more about the audience, consider what you'd like

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them to think, feel, and do in the exhibit. These are some of the audience experience goals from our campus/community archeology exhibit:

Think: about the pros and cons of urban development.

Feel: a sense of responsibility to this place and its communities.

Do: look from a new perspective.

Where will it appear?

The context of a formal gallery is different from the context of a hallway display case or a neighborhood gym. Understanding where the exhibit will appear allows you to account for physical, social, and esthetic factors that may be specific to that space. When we installed part of the *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis* in a busy hallway, we selected objects that might visually attract attention from passersby (e.g., a white garter belt displayed against a black backdrop; Figure 2). We also chose to present relationship stories that would not be too emotionally overwhelming, in recognition of the very public nature of the space. When we determined that the *Indy Toxic Heritage* exhibit would travel to several local parks, we made sure to include images and examples that had a direct connection to the parks that would host the exhibit. We also decided to structure the show as a series of pop-up banners so that it could work well in a range of physical spaces and be easy to move from one location to another (Figure 3).

What are the hooks?

Near the start of an exhibit project, collaborators often have ideas about some of the specific details—*we'll use huge photos! There will be an interactive map!* It's premature to decide exactly



Figure 2. "Garter belts." Installation detail, *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis*, 2023.
Source: Photo by the author.

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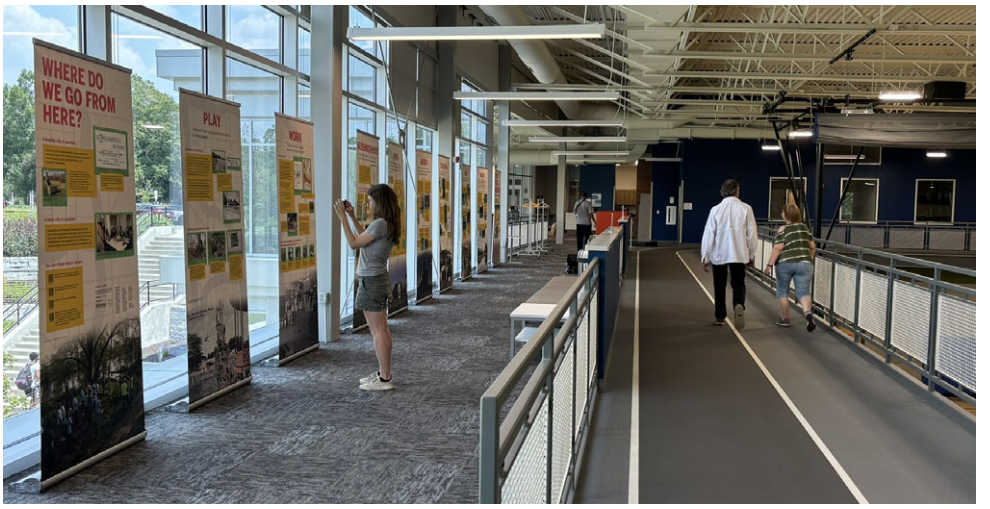


Figure 3. Installation view, *Indy Toxic Heritage*, Broad Ripple Park Family Center, 2024.
Source: Photo by Elizabeth Kryder-Reid. We knew that the exhibit would travel to different locations across the city, so we designed an easily portable show and included historical content that directly related to several of these sites.

what will appear in the show, but it is helpful to identify key images, objects, stories, and/or actions and discuss, generally, how those elements might come together.

For *We're Open, Come In*, we knew that the exhibit would feature several of the art projects that HLP community members had created in previous years. We identified the most visually compelling ones and confirmed that they would anchor the exhibit. We also established early on that we wanted interactive elements that could make the art galleries that hosted the show feel more like the relaxed neighborhood setting where the HLP was based. We eventually decided to install a mini-fridge in the gallery and invite visitors to help themselves to a drink and a snack, just as they would have at our project site (Figure 4).

What's the big idea (and main messages)?

The "big idea" is the overarching point of the exhibit, similar to a thesis.[5] Sometimes it's easy to determine a big idea because it's the concept that sparked the exhibit project in the first place. Sometimes it takes substantial time and effort to figure out what the real focus is. "Main messages" are key points that support the big idea. Ideally, the big idea and main messages are easily digestible sentences—the best ones are likely to be clear and memorable.

What's the mood?

If the exhibit were a person, how would it feel? How would it speak? How would it dress? These considerations all correspond to the mood of the exhibit—the overall vibe you're aiming for. It's important to identify a mood that serves your primary audience, advances the exhibit goals, and supports the big idea. You'll ultimately create the exhibit mood

[5] For a close look at the big idea and activities to help you create one, see Serrell 2019. On the big idea, main messages, and other elements of writing for exhibits, see Serrell and Whitney 2024.

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Figure 4. Installation view, *We're Open, Come In: The House Life Project.* Richard E. Peeler Art Center at DePauw University. 2019.
Source: Image courtesy of Richard E. Peeler Art Center, DePauw University. The mini-fridge was stocked with seltzer and juice boxes. Stickers on the individual drink and snack containers raised questions such as "What makes you feel at home?"

through features such as word choice and writing style, graphic design, lighting, sound, and even the objects or activities you incorporate into the show. *We're Open, Come In* aimed to be welcoming, so we used bright colors, wrote as if we were talking to a friend, and created opportunities in the gallery for visitors to relax and connect with each other (Figure 5).

What's the format?

Determine the basic structure and layout of the exhibit. Let the audience, space, or exhibit sources inform your choices here.

If you are working with a collection of objects and you have a safe place to display them, you might decide to arrange the objects in that space and create accompanying labels to help visitors interpret them, as we did with *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis.* Every MBR exhibit uses a consistent approach: each object appears alongside a label that includes basic identifying information (a name for the object, the location of the relationship, and the dates of the relationship) accompanied by an anonymous statement submitted by the donor. MBR juxtaposes objects to draw out connections across geography, generations, and relationships and to take visitors on an emotional journey (Figure 6).

If you do not plan to display objects, you might decide to present the exhibit as a series of panels or create a virtual exhibit. For *Monumental Changes*, which was organized around a sculpture that was no longer present in the park, we created a panel-style exhibit that combined images of the Confederate memorial, other public art projects, and interpretive

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Figure 5. Installation view, *We're Open, Come In: The House Life Project.* Gallery 924, Indianapolis, IN. 2018.
Source: Photo by Kurtis Bowersock.



Figure 6. Installation view, *Museum of Broken Relationships Indianapolis*. Indiana Youth Group, 2023. The show included a large exhibition in our campus galleries and smaller student-curated "satellite displays" in community spaces across the city. Each installation reflected the MBR approach of arranging objects and their accompanying stories to invite connections across geography, generations, and relationships.
Source: Photo by the author.

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text. Each panel addressed a different topic; together, they communicated the main messages and the big idea of the show.

2.4.3. Outline, draft, and revise

After your team agrees on the exhibit concept, start making that vision a reality. Create a more detailed outline of the elements that will comprise the exhibit. Develop a full list with each object, image, or activity you plan to include in the exhibit and consider where it will fit in the flow of the story. Determine precisely what will appear in the introductory text that invites visitors into the exhibit, where else you will use text in the exhibit, and what that text will say. Make decisions about the esthetic features that will evoke the mood.

For many projects, I've developed the outline, drafted the exhibit, and revised it, usually seeking out feedback from partners at each stage. For *Monumental Changes*, my partners drafted the content, and I offered feedback for revisions. We took yet a different approach with *Indy Toxic Heritage* when a team of coauthors drafted the exhibit. For the panel-style show, we built an outline together, which detailed the scope and structure of each panel. We then divided the panels among the team and, for each of our assigned panels, spent about 30 minutes creating a very rough draft. We took turns revising the content across all of the panels, which took substantially longer than the initial drafting. We sent polished, nearly final exhibit materials to additional partners and advisors for a last round of review.

Keep these basic tips in mind as you work:

- Write clear, brief, and engaging text. Tell an evocative story. Use as few words as possible. As a rule of thumb, you might aim for up to 200 words of introductory text and even shorter passages throughout the rest of the exhibit.[6]

- Make sure that printed text is large enough to be legible. It probably needs to be bigger than you think. Consult the Smithsonian Guidelines for Accessible Exhibition Design for recommendations (or give a copy to the graphic designer you're working with if they don't specialize in making exhibits).[7]

- Try to incorporate at least one interactive element—something visitors can do to shape the exhibit (e.g., a flap they can lift, a question they can answer, or an invitation to share their perspective).

- Include a way to let audiences know who created the exhibit. I like to post a detailed credit panel that acknowledges everyone who helped make the exhibit happen.

- Draw inspiration from other exhibits you've encountered. Borrow what worked well and avoid what didn't.

2.4.4. Finalize and fabricate

Incorporate the last rounds of feedback and finalize your materials. Send files to the printer, build elements that need to be fabricated, and install the show. Your collaborators may have technical skills that help this phase go more smoothly.

[6] Writing for exhibits can be very different from academic norms. For specific techniques and overall exhibit writing guidance, see Borowsky 2007, Willis 2019, and Serrell and Whitney 2024.

[7] Smithsonian Accessibility Program 2010.

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2.4.5. Present and celebrate

When the exhibit opens, thank your partners, advisors, and visitors and take the chance to enjoy what you've accomplished. Run your public program(s) and connect audiences with the exhibit in different ways. Reflect on the project and seek feedback from others. Remember that an exhibit does not have to be perfect to be powerful.

3. Developing your style

When I began making collaborative exhibits, I improvised a lot. As I developed my practice, I sought out sources from the field and advice from colleagues. Through trial and error, I learned which processes tend to work well for me, my partners, and the types of exhibits we create together. With each exhibit that you make, you will similarly hone your skills and develop your own variations of the models and methods you encounter.

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Appendix: A quick guide to creating collaborative exhibits

Creating a collaborative exhibit is an iterative process. You can imagine it as the confluence of four streams:

I. **Funding.** Consider your budget. What type and scale of work will it facilitate?

II. Feedback and Reflection. Invite input to help you understand what works well (or doesn't) as you develop and present the exhibit. Give yourself time to reflect on the process and outcomes.

III. Program Development. How will you activate the exhibit once it's open? You might get creative and plan an innovative series of events. Or the situation might call for something simple like a reception. Let your audience and goals guide your choices.

IV. Content Development. Determine the overarching concept of the show and prepare the materials that will make up the exhibit (Figure 1). While this is the bulk of creating an exhibit, it should happen in conjunction with the other three streams.

1. *Build the partnership.* Who is involved? What are everyone's strengths and roles? Make a work plan and accept that you'll probably adjust it later.

2. *Create the organizing concept* by answering some questions:
    - *What are your goals?*
    - *Who is the audience?* Consider what you want them to think, feel, and do. Resist the temptation to simply make the exhibit "for everyone."
    - *Where will it appear?* Understand the unique needs of your display environment.
    - *What are the hooks?* Identify key images, objects, stories, and or/actions and how those elements might come together in the show.
    - *What's the big idea (and main messages)?* Identify the overarching point of the exhibit and the key supporting points. Make it as clear and memorable as you can.
    - *What's the mood?* Identify the overall vibe you're aiming for. Make sure that the mood serves your primary audience, advances exhibit goals, and supports the big idea.
    - *What's the format?* Determine the basic structure and layout of the exhibit.
3. *Outline, draft, and revise.* Keep the word count small and the text size large. Try to include a way for your audience to play an active role in the exhibit experience. Remember that some academic norms will not apply here.

4. *Finalize and fabricate.* Your collaborators may have technical skills that help this phase go more smoothly.

5. *Present and celebrate.* Open the show, run the programs, and invite more feedback. Remember that an exhibit does not have to be perfect to be powerful.

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