



Thematic Interpretation

The benefits of using themes

- Using a theme makes it easier for the audience to follow and understand.
- Themes are easier to remember. People remember messages, not facts.
- Themes provide focus – they help us to select information and decide on which facts to include.
- Themes help to organise the subject material and give it structure.

Why use themes?

Interpretation is thematic when it contains a message or main idea. When the information we present has a clear theme, people find it easy to follow and understand. When there is no theme, the information appears to be unorganised and unrelated. It becomes difficult to follow and is less meaningful to the audience.

In thematic interpretation information is carefully selected to convey the main message or idea - i.e. everything relates to the theme in some way. This makes it much easier to be selective about what to include in your walk or sign. Once you have chosen the theme, you'll know exactly which facts and bits of information are needed to put across the message to the audience. In this chapter I have drawn quite extensively from Sam Ham's excellent account of thematic interpretation. You can find further guidelines in his book *Environmental Interpretation – a practical guide for people with big ideas and small budgets* (1992, North American Press).

Subjects versus themes

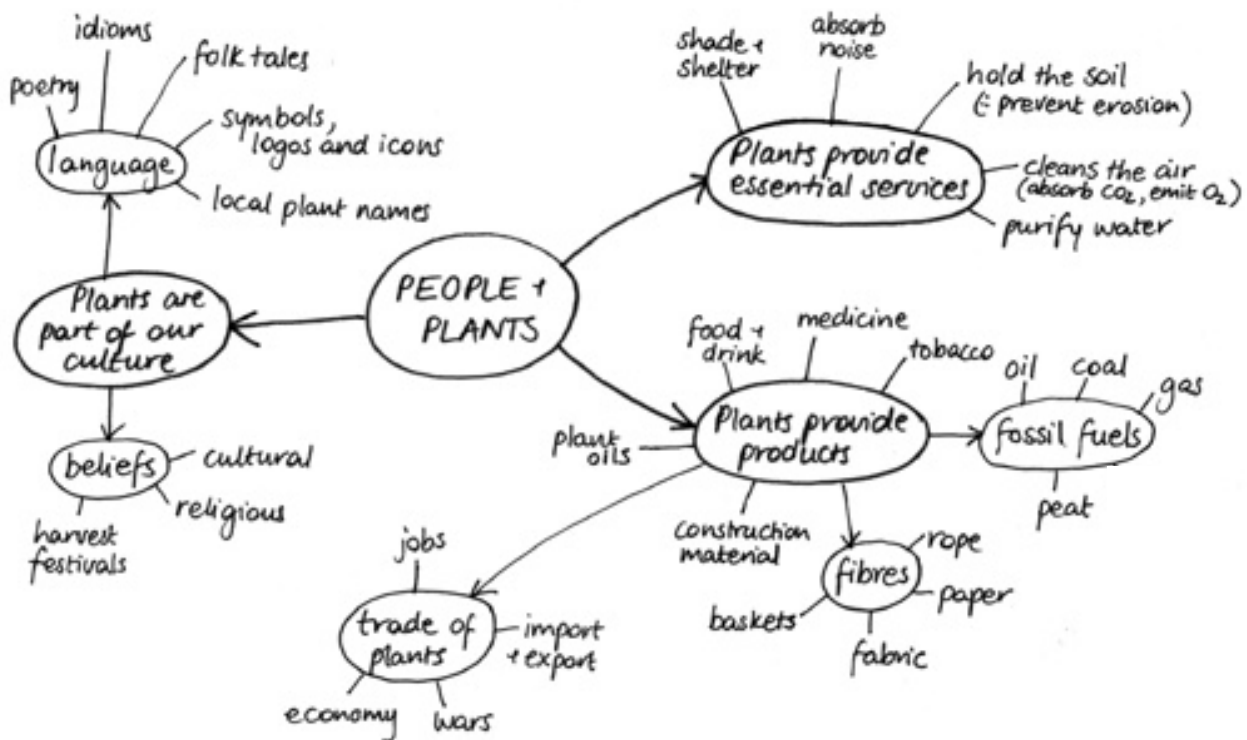
There is a big difference between a subject and a theme. The *subject* is the topic. It's what you are going to talk about. The *theme* is a specific message about the subject which you want to communicate to the audience. Look at the examples below and see how one subject can have several different themes.

SUBJECTS are single words or phrases.	THEMES always contain a verb. They are usually full sentences.
Forest ecology	This forest is teeming with plant and animal life.
Medicinal plants	Plants have been used throughout the centuries for healing purposes. Plants are essential for our health: 60% of the world's medicines are of plant origin. The trade of medicinal plants in South Africa makes a significant contribution to the national economy.
Sensational succulents	Succulents are uniquely adapted to survive dry conditions.
Water-wise gardening	You can have a lush, colourful garden and save water at the same time.


Practising themes

Choosing a theme is the first and most important step to any interpretive effort, whether it is a sign, a guided walk, a slideshow or educational theatre. A subject can have several different themes, so it is useful to first explore the options during a brainstorm. Just let your ideas and creative juices flow, and write them down as a list or mind map.

A **mind map** is a simple technique which helps to explore a subject and record your ideas as you go along. It helps to 'unpack' a big subject and see how it can be divided into smaller, more manageable units. A mind map (also known as a spider diagram) enables you to put related ideas and information into groups. As a result the diagram gives a simple graphic overview of the subject.



A mindmap which explores the role of plants in our lives.



Once you have created a mind map about your subject you will be able to identify a range of different themes. Remember that a theme is a message: it contains a verb and must be a full sentence. You will need to choose ONE of these themes for your guided walk or interpretive product.

If you find you're getting stuck, try to complete the following sentence:

"At the end of the guided walk I would like visitors to know or understand that(the theme)".

or

"Basically what I'm trying to say is (the theme)".

Theme Gardens

The term 'theme garden' is commonly used to describe an area in the garden with a specific focus. Typical examples include herb gardens, medicinal gardens, a cycad garden or any other specific plant collection (e.g. plants belonging to a particular taxonomic group).

If you are planning to develop a theme garden from scratch, you'll need to work closely with the horticulturist(s). Explain what you intend the educational purpose of the area to be (the theme) and discuss what kinds of plants you require to 'tell the story'. Invite their ideas and let the horticulturists decide on which plant species will grow well in the intended area. They will probably need to propagate plants from seed or cuttings, so it may take at least two or three years for the garden to be established. This gives you good time to plan and prepare the interpretation for the theme garden.

Theme Gardens and Trails – some ideas

➡ The **Fragrance Garden** at Kirstenbosch NGB features a collection of plants with interesting scents. An interpretive sign invites visitors to touch and smell the plants growing there. Raised beds make it easier for people to reach the plants. Plants need to be replanted every 1–2 years because they are continually touched and pruned by visitors.



🕒 The **Forest Braille Trail** has a guide rope and braille signs which enable blind people to walk the trail independently.

➡ The **'look listen feel smell' Garden** at Natal NGB encourages visitors to explore plants using all their senses.



The 'look listen feel smell' Garden
Where nature's always more than meets the eye...

Fun with your fingers

Try using the back of your hand or the tip of your nose to really feel the leaves of this plant. Do they remind you of anything?



Look for the hand sign next to other plants which are fun to feel.





📍 The **Muthi Garden** at Natal NBG features a traditional Zulu beehive hut surrounded by a collection of indigenous plants used for *muthi* (medicine). Posters inside the hut tell visitors about traditional healers, the big trade in medicinal plants and the over collection of plants in the wild which is posing a threat to some species.

📍 The **Water-wise Demonstration Garden** at Kirstenbosch NBG shows how you can have a lush, colourful garden without using lots of water. Interpretive signs explain the principles of water-wise gardening and suggest practical ways to save water in the garden.



📍 The **Geological Trail** at Witwatersrand NBG interprets the geological history of the area.

Two gardens – Two different experiences

In Garden A interpretation is done on an *ad hoc* basis. As a result there are some interpretive signs scattered throughout the garden; there is a poster about plant diversity, a tree trail, and some guided walks and lectures about a variety of unrelated topics. Visitors may read or listen to this and that, but there is no relation between the different subjects. As a result the information seems rather pointless and is quickly forgotten.

In Garden B an interpretation programme has been planned around a central theme – ‘Plants are vital for our well-being’. Signs in the garden interpret the many uses of plants and show how plants have been a source of inspiration to artists, poets and musicians. A series of guided walks and workshops cover topics such as medicinal plants, cooking with local herbs and dyeing with plants. A display in the garden shows how plants are used to prevent soil erosion on a steep bank. All the different components of interpretation complement one another and help to reinforce the main theme. Visitors simply cannot miss the message that ‘Plants are vital for our well-being’.

A carefully planned interpretation programme is more effective and will have far greater impact on visitors than an ad hoc approach.

