

TITLE and SYNOPSIS PAGES: DIFFERENT PURPOSES – DIFFERENT CONTENT

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After a couple of years reviewing title and synopsis pages for Dr. Guy Dillaway's Title and Synopsis Page Critique Service, I feel comfortable in saying that there are a great many exhibitors who do not understand how to maximize what a synopsis can do to help "sell" an exhibit to the judges. Most people do seem to have a good grasp of what a title page is for, and use it effectively. Still, in presenting in this article how to use a synopsis, it is necessary to say a bit about the title page, if only to help differentiate it from the synopsis.

The title page is the first page of your exhibit. It is addressed to the public as well as the judges, unlike the synopsis which goes to the judges only. The first thing on your title page is the title of your exhibit. That should be followed by any amplifying information you want to provide on the scope of your subject, or what is not included. Then it is useful to include a statement of what the exhibit is supposed to accomplish, and why you think this is a worthy challenge.

Many people like to include at this point an eye-popping philatelic piece related to the subject, and/or a list of wonderful material in the exhibit. I won't say you should never do this, but there are better ways to use the space available on this one page, because there are some things that any viewer, not just judges, needs to know before looking at and properly appreciating your exhibit. They are:

1. How is your exhibit organized? What is included and where will it be found? This can often be amplified in a second page (usually for multi-frame exhibits only) called a "plan page" that lays out the organization much like the table of contents of a book.

2. How do you highlight special items (and please do not label them as the "significant items in the exhibit" as this leaves the impression that the rest of the exhibit is NOT significant.) Here you need to talk about matting, labels, special type of text or whatever else you use to highlight the especially significant items.

3. If you are showing material subject to being questioned — often-counterfeited or altered, stamps added to cover, etc., you need to make a statement about expertising, e.g. "Every questionable piece in this exhibit has been authenticated by a recognized expertising service," or "items in this exhibit that have been expertised are identified by a notation of the expertising service and expert certificate number (example: pfc7693872).

4. Special things you want to highlight should be noted, such as answers to these questions: Does the exhibit contain the results of your original research (information that you have developed that adds to the body of knowledge about your subject area)? Do you have especially rare material or key pieces that may not be obvious? Is this, objectively, the best exhibit or the first exhibit (to your knowledge) of the subject that you are exhibiting?

5. You may want to provide some historical information to put your subject in context — either in its era, or in philately, but be wary of too much information. Remember that you are in a philatelic competition, and it is the philately of your subject that should be showcased.

Now we are ready to look at the synopsis, and what it should include to help your exhibit get the best award possible. I have heard it said that the synopsis should grab the judge by the shoulders and tell him or her why this is a great exhibit and why the judge should pay attention! While perhaps overly dramatic, the thought is right. Judges are required to read the synopsis, and it needs to have compelling information in it that is not just repetition of the title page.

First of all, label it as the synopsis. If I had a dime for every time I have gotten a title page and a synopsis page for an exhibit to be judged, and could not tell which was which...!

Use the same exhibit title as the one on the title page. This should not need to be stated here, but it can be a problem. While we are looking at things not to do, let me add here that five or more pages of synopsis is way too much. You need to respect the judge's time, knowing that the judge often has 30 or more synopsis pages to read. Try to convey in brief and pithy form (using at least 10-point type), what you want the judge to know about the exhibit and your effort in putting it together.

Don't put your name on the synopsis page. It is the exhibit that is judged, not you.

The information included should avoid repetition, should flow in logical order, and should be specific and factual, with as little speculation or editorializing as possible. Increasingly popular is information responding to the judging criteria, which facilitates labeling what you present so as to invite the judge to read and understand. (Large blocks of small print with no introductory labeling is likely to make a judge's eyes glaze.)

The criteria are Treatment and Importance (or Significance) of the subject, Knowledge and Research, Condition and Rarity, and Presentation. However you organize what you put into the synopsis, here is what ought to be there (not necessarily in order of importance):

- a. Expanded comments on the scope of the exhibit and the challenge it presents, if needed.
- b. How long have you been collecting the area? How long exhibiting it? How long has it taken you to assemble the material in the exhibit? What were the difficulties you had to overcome? How many pieces from how many different sources? Could the exhibit be replicated or not?
- c. Define what completeness of the subject is, and state how well you think you have done in achieving completeness (telling the entire philatelic story, with philatelic material). This can include totally objective statements such as "There are 42 different design types (or 36 rate periods) and all are represented in the exhibit."
- d. Have you exhibited this collection before at the level you are exhibiting now (National, Regional, Local)? What award(s) did it receive? Have you changed the exhibit (if so, how?) since it last outing?
- e. Have you received comments from previous judging panels that were either ill-informed or just plain wrong? Here is your opportunity to defend those criticisms. Telling the judges, for instance, that material they might expect has been proven to be counterfeit, that the only known copies are in a museum, why premier condition should not be expected, etc. will help to avoid uninformed critique.
- f. What have you used as resource material in gathering information needed to tell the story? Is there a single source?, Widely dispersed sources?, Gaps in knowledge that your own work has filled?
- g. Related to "f", has your work resulted in unearthing new material or new facts of developing new conclusions not previously known in the philatelic community?
- h. Characterize the scarcity level of what is included, not necessarily in terms of cash value, but in terms of difficulty of acquisition.
- i. If you have not covered the expertising of questionable material in your title page, cover it here.
- j. You have noted on your title page HOW you have organized the exhibit. Take space in the synopsis to explain WHY you have chosen as you have, and why you have not chosen other methods.
- k. If you have not addressed quality/condition in your title page, speak to it here, especially if you have gone out of your way to include only the scarcest and highest level of quality in the exhibit.
- l. Part of treatment is balance of the chapters in your story. If the parts of your story are not roughly equal, and there is a good reason for it, explain that.
- m. If the start and end points of your exhibit are arbitrary, you might explain why you chose to start and stop where you did.
- n. If your subject is wide, and you have purposely left out material that is cheap or insignificant, acknowledge that and say that you have left it out in favor of more difficult material.
- o. Make sure to define technical terms and references in your collecting area that are used in the exhibit.
- p. Finally, give the judges up to five references that will help them prepare, including articles or books that you yourself have written. DO NOT give 20 references including, for instance, Indian specialty society literature in Hindi, which the judges can neither access nor understand. Mention also "standard" references that you know to be out of date and no longer accurate.

Is this list complete? Probably not. But I hope it will give you a starting point for what information will convey to the judges what they need to know, AND the feeling that you are a subject matter expert in the area you are showing.

One last word: don't be shy about bragging in the synopsis, so long as you do it factually. If you have formed the best ever exhibit of this subject, don't hesitate to say so. If every cover you show is of the highest level of quality, make note of it. Not for nothing are synopsis pages known as "Brag sheets"!

The Philatelic Exhibitor has been reproducing title and synopsis pages for several years as a means of providing models for our members. We will continue to do so. If you think you have an effective example

of either or both, write the author, who is also [The Philatelic Exhibitor's] editor. They are needed for use in a future issue. Write to me at PO Box 1125, Falls Church, VA 22041-0125, or contact me at *jmhstamp@verizon.net*.