

10 Philatelic Exhibiting Tips

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I have served as exhibits chair for VANPEX, the British Columbia Philatelic Society's annual stamp show, for seven years. I have come up with what I hope are 10 useful tips for exhibitors. I also recommend the *APS Manual of Philatelic Judging* for detailed information about what is allowed and what is not in national-level exhibits.

1. **Find a new “hook”:** You *could* assemble an exhibit of re-entries of Canada's Admiral stamps or colour varieties of Great Britain's Machin Heads. But those exhibits have been done before — probably a thousand times. Finding a new way to look at stamps and covers will hook viewers and judges alike, and will be more fun for the exhibitor. And keep this in mind: exhibits need not contain expensive items. Award-winning exhibits have been assembled from common, dirt-cheap stamps and covers.
2. **Tell a story:** A philatelic exhibit is not just a stamp or postal-history collection. It's a purposeful assemblage of stamps and/or covers, perhaps with collateral items, that illustrates a philatelic point you are trying to make or a story you'd like to tell. Do not include anything in your exhibit that falls outside its stated scope. And don't pad the exhibit with similar items: One example of a particular stamp or type of cover is all that's needed, unless other examples introduce new information.
3. **Do not “overwrite” your exhibit:** You may be convinced that your words are golden, but it's the material in your exhibit that will win a medal, not excessive verbiage. Careful proofreading is important. If you are using a word processor, take advantage of your spell checker!
4. **Employ the KISS principle (Keep it simple, stupid):** I certainly don't mean to imply that you are stupid, but we exhibitors sometimes do get carried away with our efforts to squeeze as much material into an exhibit frame as possible. It *may* be possible to get six covers on a single page (by overlapping and using windows), along with a complete set of a dozen or so stamps, a photograph or drawing or two, and maybe a map, not to mention a 600-word description (in a 4-point font). As I said, it *may* be possible, but the result would be a design disaster! So, keep it simple. A single cover on a page, with perhaps a small photo or other illustration, along with brief write-up, is visually more appealing and satisfying than the crowded page (and easier to create). You could even devote a page to a single stamp, thus highlighting the stamp and showing how creative you are!
5. **Use standard fonts:** The fonts that are used by 99% of print publishers were not created by Microsoft, but have been around for decades, even centuries, and will continue to be used, simply because they are readable. Computers give the wannabe publisher access to scores of goofy, nearly unreadable fonts which exhibitors should avoid like the plague.

Serifed fonts (the letters have little points at the ends) have a classic look because they *are* classic. It's said that the points represent marks that chisels made in stone by Roman stone carvers. It just makes sense to use a serifed font, like Times New Roman, for an exhibit of classic stamps, and a more modern font, like Helvetica Neue, for more modern stamps. However, handwriting or printing by hand is still acceptable. The appearance of an exhibit, while important, carries far less weight than a good philatelic story supported by the appropriate philatelic and collateral material.

6. **Do not decorate your sheets unnecessarily, or use gaudy stationery:** In the past, white or ivory-toned paper was the rule, but exhibitors these days, at least in regional and national-level exhibitions, are less conservative and more creative. Coloured exhibit sheets, sometimes with unobtrusive patterns or texture, are often seen and can enhance an exhibit, whereas a white or ivory-toned paper seems to highlight the faults of “dirty old covers” in postal history and cover exhibits. Avoid frame lines, which eat up valuable display space; keep in mind that every exhibit sheet will benefit if you maximize white space. No one wants to read acres of print, even if your words are golden (which they probably won’t be!).

If you don’t use a computer to design your exhibits, feel free to use quadrilled paper, which helps perfect layout. Feel free to scan and print images of the backs of covers (or the fronts if the backs are what make the covers significant) or of details of covers or stamps. Modern ink-jet and laser printers are so good that it’s necessary to identify digital images as reproductions (which should always be significantly smaller or larger than the originals).

7. **A synopsis is your friend:** Most exhibitions require synopses, and all judges appreciate them. Think of a synopsis as a sales pitch for your exhibit. A useful synopsis concisely outlines the purpose of the exhibit, provides general information about its content and plan, and points out philatelic items that are unusual or rare. A good synopsis guides the judges in their study of your collecting area, greatly improving the quality of the judging and maybe even the award given.

If you write the synopsis before actually starting to put your exhibit together, you can use it as a guide. Your exhibit may evolve as you work on it, but you can always rewrite the synopsis to reflect changes.

8. **Exhibit for yourself, not for the judges, other collectors, or medals:** Medals are in fact relatively unimportant. The real rewards in exhibiting come long before the exhibition, when you are working to acquire specific items, when you do research on them, and when you write up and design your exhibit. You’ll never have a better opportunity to learn about your collection.

(Not all exhibitors exhibit for the same reasons. Some seem to collect medals as fervently as they search out stamps and covers. Some pray for gold medals and “Best of Show” and “Champion of Champions” awards because they know that such medals awards will substantially increase the cash value of their exhibits. (Some exhibitors actually pay “professional exhibit designers” to create exhibits from their collections, a practice which I believe should be banned outright.)

9. **Burn the midnight oil to create your title page:** The importance of the title page cannot be overstated. It introduces your exhibit (and you!) to your fellow collectors, the public, and the judges. The title page should concisely state the purpose of the exhibit and outline what the viewer will see. It should be visually stimulating (don’t be afraid to include graphic elements along with your text), and it should lead the viewer naturally to the next sheet. Do not promise what you cannot deliver.

10. **Don’t take judges too seriously:** It is common for the same exhibit to do well at one exhibition and poorly at another, even if the exhibitor followed the advice of judges from the first exhibition and tried to improve it for the second. Judges are just collectors who have decided that judging is one way they can enjoy their hobby and give something back to it. They don’t know everything, and they can and do make mistakes. Far more often, they provide useful feedback. But at the end of the day, you are the best and final judge of your exhibit, regardless of the medal you receive.

Are you inspired? I hope so. But all the exhibiting advice in the world won’t replace the lessons you learn when you create an exhibit, especially your first one.