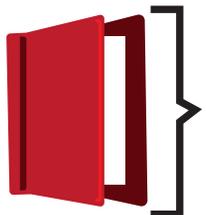


BOOKS & CATALOGS

BY Gary Wayne Loew Gary@stamps.org



Creating the Philatelic Exhibit Synopsis – A Master Class. By Andrew McFarlane. 99+xv pages, 8½ x 11 inches. Published by Exhibitors Press, 2021. First edition ISBN: 9798731447959. Available from amazon.com.

Exhibitors can get lots of advice from many sources. Some of it is even good advice! The literature on philatelic exhibiting – both books and periodicals – is robust. When one adds in the large numbers of exhibits that are reproduced and available in both print and on the web, there is really a lot of material for exhibitors to study.

Most of the exhibiting literature focuses on either the physical exhibits themselves or the judging rules promulgated by major rule-making bodies. But there is an important aspect of exhibiting that does not appear in the exhibit itself: the exhibit synopsis. And, while synopses have been discussed in articles found in *The Philatelic Exhibitor (TPE)* and elsewhere, there has not been a full, book-length treatment of these documents. Andrew McFarlane has stepped in to fill that gap. And he is exactly the right author for the subject.

McFarlane has a 20-year history of championship

exhibiting. While his material and his presentation are acknowledged as top flight, McFarlane has another “secret ingredient”: he enhances his juries’ ability to understand what he is exhibiting by preparing well-targeted and well-designed synopses.

After a brief introduction, the author sets out to demonstrate his approaches by reproducing several synopses from his previous exhibits. He includes both single and multiframe exhibits. Some exhibits were major award winners, others merely did “well.” But in each case McFarlane critiques his own synopses and points out their strengths and weaknesses.

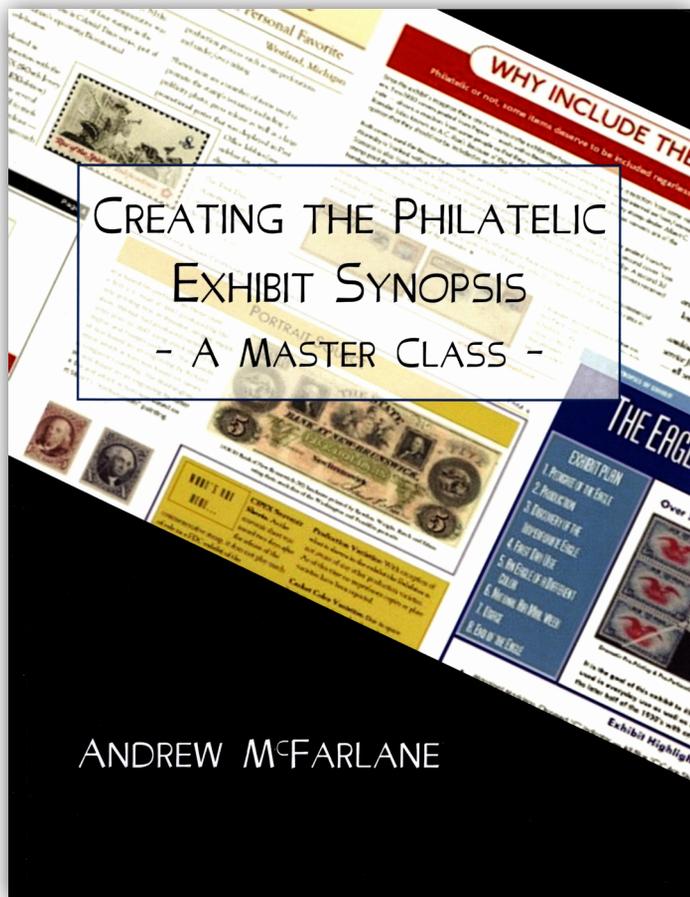
To understand what McFarlane is up to, it is really necessary to study, rather than merely peruse, the first chapter, “What Is a Synopsis and Why Is It So Important.” He starts by stating the obvious but important point that no jury can be fully expert in all of the exhibits they must judge. Judges do advanced preparation and research prior to the actual judging on the show floor. The exhibitor provides the jury with two documents: the Title Page and the Synopsis. (I shall not go into the title page here as it is both widely written about and out of scope.) It is up to the exhibitor to educate juries about what is in the exhibit and – perhaps more importantly – key information that is not in the exhibit. *That* is the role of the synopsis.

McFarlane specifies six sections that must be included in the synopsis:

- A short description of the exhibit
- The goal(s) of the exhibit
- A listing of important items
- The exhibit plan or chapter listing
- A targeted bibliography
- Original research by the exhibitor

There is enough information about these points to enable the reader to understand their role in the sample synopses that follow. In my view (and based on the written length, the author’s too), the most misunderstood and the most pivotal is the bibliography. McFarlane demonstrates how the bibliography is necessary to both guide the jury’s preparation and help them to not waste time. “Targeted” is the key word.

McFarlane lists an additional six sections that may also be useful to juries, depending on the nature of a specific exhibit. Treading carefully, he cites the concept of “importance” as both a challenge and a risk to the exhibitor. Several of his synopses demonstrate that including importance can be advantageous. But the exhibitor must be sure to make a strong case for importance if one is to be made at all.



The next chapter is an annotated version of one of the author's synopses. Each page is marked up with the key points on that page. On the page across is an explanation of each point. For this two-page synopsis, a total of 25 points are highlighted and described.

Each subsequent chapter contains a single synopsis with a one- or two-page introduction. The author explains the key elements of each, what he was seeking to achieve, a self-critique, and a description of how the exhibit fared with the judges. There are several chapters where different versions of an exhibit – and the different versions of the synopsis – are displayed and compared. This evolutionary approach is very helpful. Intermediate exhibitors, in particular, will relate to how the exhibits evolved and improved and how the synopsis reflected that evolution.

Which leads to another interesting point. As the author was creating his synopses, he would often identify weaknesses in the exhibit. The process of developing and crafting a synopsis can help exhibitors refine and improve their exhibits. Indeed, it is frequently an iterative process.

Each of McFarlane's synopses is visually dramatic and attention-grabbing. His graphic layouts are carefully planned and structured to direct the readers (judges) from one key point to the next. These are very compelling documents. Even accomplished exhibit designers and builders will be very impressed by the appearance of McFarlane's work.

Which brings me to something of a weakness in this

otherwise powerful Master Class: there is no description of *how* the author actually created these beautiful documents. What software was used, or can be used? Does he build templates? How does he go about structuring and revising each synopsis? I am not asking for a treatise on graphic design tools and methods. But a brief chapter outlining how McFarlane does his work, including citations of recommended references, would have given the reader a helpful head start in emulating the master.

My only other issue with the excellent book is its size. The book is a standard 8½ x 11 inch format. However, the actual synopses were originally that same size. In order to fit on the book's pages and allowing for margins, headers, and footers, the reproduced pages had to be reduced. The original 11-inch page is shown about 8 inches in height. This (approximately) 42 percent reduction in image area is an impediment to easily reading the text. The reproduced images of covers and stamps suffer quality degradation as well. The book would have been much easier to read and use had it been printed in an also-standard 9 by 12 inch format.

At its heart, *Creating the Philatelic Exhibit Synopsis – A Master Class* is an important reference tool for philatelic exhibitors at all levels. This book is not an "easy read." The insights are contained deep in the detail of each document. It is necessary for the reader to take a deep dive. But for competitive exhibitors who want to advance, McFarlane's book is essential reading.



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