

Courier Training Framework:

Example Scenarios

The following scenarios have been put together as examples to accompany the courier training framework. These give trainees an opportunity to explore the types of situation a courier can face and discuss possible approaches. These are fictional examples, based on general experiences of what types of situation can occur.

Scenario 1:

Situation: You are at the venue, and it is the first time we have lent to this institution. You have two paintings to condition check and install, which you oversaw being unloaded last night and placed into storage. When you arrive for your unpacking appointment you bring the cased works through from storage into the gallery and there is a very strong smell of paint in the display space. You ask when the walls were painted and the technician say he thinks it was finished last night. You are due back on a flight in the afternoon and have an important meeting tomorrow. There are couriers from two other institutions present, one is already installing their works but the other seems hesitant and you overhear them asking about the paint as well. The staff from the venue are very keen to unpack as they say that there is a press event tomorrow so all works have to be in place.

What would you do?

To be completed by trainees after discussion.

What is recommended?

You could call the registrar straight away, but it would be useful to try to ascertain some more facts first. It would be useful to find the venue registrar or exhibition manager and ask if they can verify exactly when the walls were painted. Once you have the facts, calling the registrar is the next step. They will be able to help you decide which are the feasible options so you can discuss these with the venue. If the paint smell is very strong, it is highly likely that not enough off-gassing time has been given (and there is a chance that the paint may even be tacky and might possibly stick to the frame, even if it is dry to the touch). If this is the case, it may not be suitable to install the objects. It is likely that your registrar will consult with conservators and assess how vulnerable the objects are and advise accordingly. Together you will have to decide whether they stay in their packing until the paint has had time to dry (to minimise double-handling), or if there is an option to condition-check them ready to be installed later. If so, is it appropriate for them to be unpacked in the gallery or would they be at an increased risk here (both due to the paint fumes and the level of activity in the space)? Is there somewhere else they could be unpacked and checked, then stored which is secure and environmentally suitable?

Your registrar will be looking at all the possible options. As this is a venue you have not lent to before, it is unlikely they would agree to waive installation supervision to resolve the issue, but they will need to consider if this is appropriate. Although the press event is tomorrow, it may be that the opening is not for another week. There may be pressure to install the work rather than lose the opportunity for the press event, and your registrar may need to consult with management about whether the risk to the works is significant enough to warrant a delay in installation. It may be that you are asked to stay longer, or return in a few days (if there is enough time), or potentially you may agree for another colleague to return for install. It is possible that the couriers from the other institutions may be staying longer, or may need to return for the same reason – courier sharing might be a possible solution, but again they would need to think about how suitable this is, and whether it is compatible with insurance arrangements and the loan agreement.

Try to keep a good line of communication with the venue staff, as this will avoid unnecessary tension. If the situation is becoming uncomfortable, it could be helpful to ask your registrar to ring their counterpart to advise on next steps. The most important thing is to ensure any decision has the backing of your registrar, and that you do not proceed with any of the options under pressure without first thinking about all the solutions, and the risk to the objects. Ultimately if there is a risk to the objects, it should be in the venue's interests to avoid this as well as they are liable for the condition.

Scenario 2:

Situation: You are installing three artworks with three different curators (each with their own team of art handlers) within the same exhibition. You arrive at 9am and need to leave for the airport in the late afternoon so you should have plenty of time. The installation is moving very slowly and the curators are all keen to see how the works look in the spaces before committing to hanging them. After some hours, you realise time is becoming short and even though you point this out, nothing moves faster. Suddenly the museum director (also one of the curators) insists on taking everyone out to lunch. Everybody tells you to relax and that you have plenty of time. Lunch takes forever and time is running out as you feared. You manage to install one work, but have two more left and now it is the time you were meant to leave for the airport.

What would you do?

To be completed by trainees after discussion.

What is recommended?

This scenario highlights the need for good communication and time management, and also demonstrates a common issue that can arise when layouts are planned to be done 'on the day'. It is important for the lending organisation's registrar to confirm whether this was agreed, or whether a position and layout was already confirmed. Many organisations require a confirmed layout in order to approve security and environmental factors specific to the insurance, loan agreement or works being loaned, so this is worth checking. If a more flexible layout has been agreed, then really it is the responsibility of the venue to ensure this is achieved within the timeframe of the courier trip. It is important in this situation to communicate concerns early, both to the curators (who may be delaying the process without realising the impact), and to whoever is in charge of scheduling, so they can take action and manage the teams. It is helpful to call your registrar before the schedule becomes unmanageable, to discuss alternative options. This may involve staying later / additional days, or sending another courier. Or there may be flexibility to agree for the venue to install the remaining works without any supervision if you have no concerns about their ability to do so, and the works do not require your particular installation skills.

Scenario 3:

Situation: You are installing a painting with a gilded frame at an overseas venue in a country where you don't speak the language. There is a translator helping interpret your instructions to the art handlers, all of whom seem very professional. The work is heavy and a load bearing plinth has been prepared by the venue to take the weight of the work. Your organisation has a policy requiring all loans to be handled with latex (or nitrile) gloves. When you mention this, it takes a long time for the team to find gloves and they seem unhappy to wear them, but they eventually do. The work has been lifted out of its case and transit frame, to be condition checked. At this point you notice that some of the art handlers seem to be complaining and gesturing toward the work and the gloves. When you ask the translator if there is a problem, she goes to speak to the head art handler and they discuss the issue (this seems quite heated). When the translator returns, they say 'there is no problem'.

What would you do?

To be completed by trainees after discussion.

What is recommended?

Your concern at this stage should be ensuring that the work can be safely handled. If the team are not used to the gloves, they may be worried about moving the heavy work into place safely as gloves could make gripping the frame more difficult. With a heavy work, there could be a genuine risk of damage through slipping. If this is the case, check with your institution (via your registrar) to see whether handling the frame without gloves would cause damage to the surface. Alternatively, does the venue have some picture lifting equipment they can use to ensure lifting is minimal? You should definitely explore the issue further with the translator, making it clear you are happy to hear any concerns about the method being requested, or you can ask if the head art handler can run you through how they plan to get the work onto the wall, which might help identify any issues.

Scenario 4:

Situation: You are travelling with an exhibition and have just finished working with the team to load the crates on to a truck and trailer. The drivers suggest you have lunch at the museum restaurant before you take off as it is a long way.

What would you do?

To be completed by trainees after discussion.

What is recommended?

One of the key principles of couriership is to never leave the truck unattended. Unless the collection venue has a secure lockable space for the truck and trailer, and this is ok with the organising registrar, then it is important someone stays with the truck at all times. You would expect the courier (and the drivers) in this situation to have prepared so that they are ready to get straight on the road, but this is not always possible (sometimes things take a lot longer than planned). It is important in this scenario to know where your next destination is. If you are working to a schedule, then you should get some lunch you can eat on the journey (it may be that you need to be at the airport for a certain flight, or perhaps the next venue has delivery restrictions). If you do need to take a quick food or comfort break, then take it in turns and make sure you agree who is staying with the truck. If there is a delay to the schedule, then make sure this is communicated to everyone involved (this might be shipping agent staff at the airport, or receiving staff at the next venue).

Scenario 5:**Situation:**

You leave the borrowing museum early in the morning on schedule to accompany a crate to the airport for palletisation and onward transit home. There are no delays on the road and everything is going according to plan but when you arrive at the airport the agent tells you that you are very, very late and he appears to be incredibly stressed. He hurries the crate off the truck (which leaves) and then tells you that there is no time for loading onto a pallet. The only option is for the crate to be loaded directly into the aircraft. He reassures you he has done this many times before and can send you a picture of the crate after loading. He says that 'plenty of other international museums allow this' and that you have to decide immediately otherwise you (and the crate) will miss the flight.

What would you do?

To be completed by trainees after discussion.

What is recommended?

This is an unusual scenario as you would expect the journey to have been arranged to fit with the airline's stated 'lock-out' time for presenting palletised cargo. You would also expect the agent to be more attuned to the safety of the work, and to offer other options rather than applying pressure to do something potentially risky. 'Loose-loading' of cargo should be avoided as this offers no mitigation against the risk of damage in transit. You should make clear that this is not acceptable, and ask the agent to look at all the alternative options, at the same time calling your registrar who will be able to reassure you this is the right course of action and can also start looking at alternatives and letting the borrowing venue know. It may be possible to put the crate into a container. These can be quicker to load than building a whole pallet from scratch. If there really is no alternative, then you will need to start looking at the next flight and ensuring the safety of the crate in the meantime. Once a new flight is found, depending on the delay, it may be acceptable to palletise straightaway and secure the palletised crate in the aircraft warehouse. Some warehouses have temperature controlled lockers for cargo. Ideally the truck should not have left so quickly, as this would have provided a secure and controlled place to leave the crate until a solution was found.