

A Practical Guide to Documentation for Arts & Science Competitions

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So you have decided that you want to enter an Arts & Science Championship, or submit a single entry for comment. What's next? Doing the project is only part of the challenge. Documentation and presentation are integral parts of the process.

You know how you made your project. Now you want others to know, too. It is a way to pass on what you have learned, to encourage others to pursue knowledge, and to hone your own skills.

I. Know Your Stuff

When you come before an A & S judge, that person may or may not know you and your work. This is your chance to show the judge that you understand what you have researched.

Know your subject. Do your homework. Judges are chosen because they are familiar with or are experts in your field. They can spot a guess. If you do not know the answer to a question, admit it. It is much better to admit that you don't know an answer than to stammer through or to fake it. A simple "I don't know the answer to that, but I will be sure to research it for the next time" is so much better.

Knowing your subject involves Research – can't get around it. And here's a hint – it is much harder to do reverse documentation. That is, to create an object, and then try to find documentation. Do the research first, and keep track of it. Make use of the photocopier to keep records of articles, keep a good bibliography, and get good color copies of pictures. Then, using your research, create your project.

Also, know which books are good documentation and which are not. A good way to do this is to check with those people you respect, who are studying in your field. You will find that most people are eager to talk about their obsessions. In addition, there are a multitude of email lists on almost every A & S Subject, plus guilds on a variety of the arts.

Also, you will find that authors will refer to each other. Look at the bibliography in some of your books. You will find where that author found their research, and it will give you more examples of books that would help you. Cross-referencing is a wonderful tool, and lends credibility to your research.

Whatever you do, do not depend on a single source for your documentation. Use as many as you can find, but a minimum of three is a good rule of thumb.

II. Sources

Sources are comprised of Primary and Secondary

Primary sources include (but are not limited to):

- 1) Books
- 2) Manuscripts
- 3) Extant items (i.e. actual examples of medieval objects)
- 4) Archeological reports
- 5) Photos of actual items
- 6) Photos of actual paintings

Primary sources are of course the best, but you can supplement your documentation with Secondary Sources:

- 1) The internet (caution – don't believe everything you read – best to use this for museum collections and photograph sources. Anyone can write anything and put it on the internet)
- 2) Other people's documentation – but be careful not to plagiarize.

A really poor example of a source would be a historical novel. You may want to refer to it, but don't use it as a primary reference.

Museum sites have been improving by leaps and bounds. Museums all over the world are photographing and posting their collections. Photos can be easily downloaded and incorporated into your documentation – just be sure to give credit where credit is due, and include the sites in your bibliography.

III. Process, Process, Process

Now you have completed your research, you have all of your sources compiled. You may have started working on your project at this point. If at all possible, take pictures of the process. Judges (and interested onlookers) want to see the process. That's the most interesting part! How did you do it? How do your methods compare with medieval methods? What tools did you use? Did you make your own tools? Did you weave your own cloth? Many of these questions can be answered with key photographs or illustrations, and a few lines of description. Work up a step by step record to incorporate into your final documentation.

IV. Putting it on Paper

Now to put what you have learned in an easy to understand and concise format. The first rule is don't write a research paper (unless, of course, that is exactly what your entry is). About five pages of documentation is usually more than enough for one single entry, including photographs and diagrams. It's a judgment call, but more is not necessarily better. Judges usually only have a limited time to examine your documentation. Keep to the important points.

Make it easy to read and understand. Use everyday language. Define words that the typical person may not understand.

And use a font that is easy to read! Specialty fonts are fun for things like invitations and cards, but they make documentation very hard to read. For example:

Here is one of my favorite fun fonts, but it is the devil to read...

...and then there's Old English...

...and the list goes on and on...

In today's computer age, we have access to so many different fonts, but I find good old Times New Roman, or even Arial for a nice clean look, to be the easiest to read. And I use a 12 font for ease on the eyes. Ten font can get kind of small.

V. The Actual Paper

Start with your cover page. This should include the name of your project, and possibly the time period, and then your name. I might also include my title and awards if appropriate (depends on what kind of display or competition), and my Barony/Shire/Kingdom.

Next comes the main document. It is a good idea to start out defining what your project is, especially if it is unusual. Do not assume that everyone knows what a "spindle whorl", an "aquamanile", or a "meat pasty" is. Including a phonetic pronunciation may be advisable in some cases.

Then go into your research. Include any photos and illustrations in a way that makes sense. Having all photos and illustrations at the end of a paper can be difficult to follow, especially if you refer to those examples within the paper.

Footnotes are nice, but not necessary in all cases. However, I have always found it helpful to at least refer to my sources within my write up (so that the judges can see where my statements are coming from). Footnotes are an easy way to accomplish this.

Try not to jump around – go in a logical order, and include your process. Remember, process is just as important as your research. Include how your process may differ from the medieval method, and why.

For example, a question I am always asked is why I do not use period glazes on my pottery. My answer is modern practicality – most period glazes contain lead, and I do not have the facility at my home to be able to safely use lead glazes, so I resort to the closest modern glazes I can find. However, if it were a period glaze, this is how it would be made, and what it contain...

You are not expected to use all period methods in all cases – just remember to know what those period methods may have been and refer to them in your documentation.

After the main document is done, add your bibliography. This is extremely important. This is how you tell the judges where you got your information. Include not only books, but websites too.

Another handy page is a glossary, especially if your paper contains a lot of words that the layman may not be familiar with.

I also include my mundane contact information at the end of my documentation. This can be very handy in case someone is really interested in your work.

VI. Putting it All Together

When you are all done, pictures in place, spelling and punctuation corrected – have someone read it! You will be amazed how many errors you will miss because you are so familiar with the subject. It's best to have someone who has no knowledge of what you do – I always take my papers to work and have my friends read it with a red pen handy.

When it's all together and checked, make your copies. I like to have my original in a binder, with each sheet in a sheet protector. This is the copy I put with my display for everyone to see. You usually also need at least one copy for each judge, and sometimes the person who is running the competition would like a copy too. Always check to see how many copies you will need – but better to have too many than too few. Again, personal preference, I put my copies in report covers – that makes a nice neat presentation of the documentation.

VII. Display

Now comes the time to think about how to display your project to it's best advantage. You want something that will catch the judges' eyes, without being either too busy, or too sparse. Let your project be the determining factor. Include the tools that you used with your display. Use labels if necessary – you want to make a “viewer-friendly” display. Table coverings and props are always helpful. For instance, if your project is a meat pie, you might serve it in a medieval style dish, and include all of the ingredients in a kitchen-like display, and then serve it to the judges in period dishes, and perhaps include a side dish that might accompany it. It's those extra bits that really enhance the entire display.

VII. Presentation

Presentation is a combination of your written documentation, the physical display of the project, and your own verbal knowledge of the subject. You are not expected to read your paper verbatim. But judges do expect you to know what is in there.

Start out by introducing yourself – don't expect them to know who you are! It's a good way to relax, and gives you a starting point. Then tell them what your project is, just like the cover sheet on your paper.

Again, keep in a logical order, go through your research and your process. In most cases, you will be allowed to complete your presentation without interruption. However, if you are questioned during your presentation, answer politely, and then get back on track. Use index cards as necessary for prompts.

After the presentation is over, then there will be the questions from the judges. They may ask simple questions that are answered in your documentation – answer politely anyway. They may be checking to see if you understand what you have written. They may also give you advice and suggestions during the judging.

Confidence is the key – and having the knowledge of your subject is the key to confidence. If you are enthusiastic about your project, it will show in your physical presentation.

Also, sometimes hands-on demonstrations as a part of the presentations are quite helpful and can be engaging. For instance, if you have made a distaff for spinning thread, give a demonstration of how it's done. It does not have to be big, just enough to show your ability.

If you are very nervous, or even if you are not, it is a good idea to practice in front of someone before you present. This gives you a chance to work the kinks out of your presentation.

VIII. Conclusion

And now you're done! It's time to wait for judges' comments and scores. Remember to take all comments as constructive – judges are just people, and are really there to help you, even if it is by pointing out shortcomings in your project. Use the comments and scores as they are intended - as a learning tool - to improve, to learn, to grow.



Gwen the Potter, with a single entry/demo at An Tir Kingdom A & S, March 2004.



The Pipkin
The Pipkin

The Pipkin is a small, round, ceramic vessel used for storing and serving food. It is often found in traditional settings and is made of various materials, including clay and stone. The Pipkin is a common household item in many cultures and is used for a variety of purposes, from storing spices to serving food. It is a simple, functional object that has been used for centuries.

