

A&S Documentation

Prepared by Lady Tiphina of Ledbury MKA Tina Durham
tqd@artfuldogger.com • June 2009

What (in a nutshell) is documentation?

Documentation consists of text and graphics which tell the judge:

- what the item is,
- how it was made,
- how period it is (Hindin).

If I'm not declaring for Champion, why should I care about documentation?

Creating your documentation is "a method of learning" (Reed). Research is "useful as a basis for understanding the medieval and Renaissance world" (Reed).

Documentation is a tool for teaching "what you have learned to others" (Reed). It can be used as the basis for a class you'd like to teach, or to make a demonstration more meaningful to others. Your documentation can enrich an Artisan's Showcase display, or transform a public display case into a learning opportunity.

Documentation can streamline future A&S projects because it will serve as a reminder of "things you tried [which] were successful and what mistakes to avoid" (Reed).

Finally, documentation permits the judge to give you meaningful and helpful feedback. "Without the documentation, there is just no way that a judge can tell what the entrant intended to do or show" (Keller). The judge can make more informed comments if he or she knows what you were attempting and why you chose specific materials, processes or techniques.

If you are serious about winning a competition, why is documentation important?

Documentation is "often the key to the success or failure of your project in a competition" (Keller). In part, this is because "even an expert judge is not likely to know everything about any type of entry from any place and period that we [i.e., the SCA] cover" (Hindin).

Also, photographs of a work-in-progress may reveal period techniques and features that are not visible in the completed work. Whether the final product is period food, clothing, or other objects, "processes that go into creating something are not always obvious from the final item's presentation" (Hindin). If you have been careful to use period materials or techniques, include this information in your documentation.

How does SCA research and documentation compare to the kinds of research you might do in modern education?

One obvious difference is that research papers for school or university are often intellectual explorations which rely solely on insights or information

gathered by recognized experts. Additionally, the topic may or may not be relevant to the person doing the research, and the writer of the paper may or may not be emotionally vested in the project. Most students hate writing such papers, and most instructors dread reading them.

SCA research and documentation, on the other hand, are often interesting both to the writer and the reader. The research and writing are usually focused on the creation of a specific object or activity used during a particular time period and in a particular place. Documentation includes one's own observations and decisions as well as the opinions of recognized experts. The object or process being documented is self-selected, and the person doing the research has had hands-on experience while making the object, cooking the food, or learning and performing a piece. As a result, the SCA researcher is often passionate about his or her subject, and this passion shows in the quality and quantity of the documentation produced.

SCA documentation is similar to traditional research in that both use some form of notes (footnotes, endnotes, or parenthetical references within the body of the text) to "indicate that you have used material from someone else" and both include a bibliography, or "alphabetical list of all the sources you use in your paper" ("Basic Forms for Bibliographies").

Just as in a traditional research paper, "neatness" and the quality of thought or ideas matter for SCA documentation ("More Documentation Hints").

Other Significant Differences

Do research BEFORE you make your project (Hindin). In addition to helping you create a more period artifact or performance, this research will enable you to "learn more about your project, making similar projects easier to complete" (Griggs).

In addition to making notecards or taking written notes, make "photocopies of specific references" to document "period standards of practice" in case a judge is unaware of the latest research, etc. (Reed).

Your document should also include photographs or videos of the work-in-progress. If the object is an article of clothing, documentation should include photographs of the clothing being worn (Reed).

After you have completed your project, keep a record of when and where you entered each item (Hindin).

How do I evaluate my sources to be sure they are credible and accurate?

In SCA research and documentation, it is important to distinguish between primary and secondary sources. A primary source is the actual object itself (often inaccessible to the SCA researcher) or an exact reproduction of the object (such as a photograph of a painting). A secondary source would be a sketch of clothing based on a period painting).

"Whenever possible, refer to primary sources" (Griggs).

Instead of merely relying on secondary sources, you can use the bibliography at the end of a book or article to look up sources and "work back to the original source of information" (Griggs).

What sets great documentation apart from average or mediocre documentation?

Pay attention to presentation. Your documentation should be typed or neatly handwritten, without fancy calligraphy (Keller). Karen Larsdatter agrees that "neatness really counts" but considers the "spiff factor" to be important as well. She recommends using a good quality paper and including an attractive cover sheet.

Great documentation includes supporting images and information, such as photographs, photocopies, musical scores, recipes or ingredient lists, diagrams, patterns and dance-step patterns (Keller).

Superior documentation is "brief and concise" (Keller). If your documentation exceeds four pages, add a one-page summary to the beginning of your text (Griggs). Highlighting the pertinent parts of your photocopies can also help the judge quickly locate salient information (Griggs).

Make certain that you have covered all your bases by using a template for your documentation (Hindin) or by using the judging criteria to organize your writing (Keller).

Accuracy is crucial. Have other artisans proofread documentation and "trial judge" your entry before the competition ("More Documentation Hints").

Summary

"Living the dream" includes understanding the past and recreating its beauty and intricacy to the best of our individual abilities. Although research and documentation may not be much fun, these processes allow us to understand, create and communicate more effectively. Whether or not you win the competition, we ALL benefit from research and documentation.

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