Demystifying Documentation

You've decided to enter an A&S contest and heard the statement "Documentation Required". Don't worry. If you have ever written the requisite school class paper – 3-10 pages on a specific topic – you have all the skills and knowledge you need to do documentation.

First, let me point out that this is the Kingdom of the West. Our requirements here simply state that "Documentation is an important aspect of these activities." Documentation is 1/5th of the possible points in a Kingdom level contest. It is not even required!!!!! Having said that, documentation is an important part of entering A&S contests and should be done. Not for the documentation points per se, but for enhancing the journey of understanding what you are doing and doing it well.

What should the documentation cover?
The best explanation I have heard about what the documentation should cover is – does it answer the following questions?
　　　　What did they do historically and how did they do it/use it?
　　　　What did you do?
　　　　What, if anything, did you do differently and why?
If you have answered these questions, you have met the basic burden of documentation for a contest.

How should it be written?
Do not assume the judges know all about the subject. We always try to have knowledgeable people judge the contests so that the entrants both receive a fair judging, but also to ensure that the comments provided are helpful to the entrant. However, some categories are broad, requiring several judges of differing backgrounds or very narrow and there may be few people with a background right on point. Therefore, write to inform the judges and lead them along the path you took from research to final product.

Organizing your text
Start with an identification header. Include a title line that is a brief (1-10 words) description of your item. This is primarily to link your documentation to the actual piece. Do not put your name on the documentation. Judging is done "blind". Do provide a place for your entrant number.

Your first paragraph should be an overview of your item. Where possible, be exact as to relevant year(s), country, who would have/use it, etc. The majority of your text should be given over to answering the 3 questions above. Then, close with a summary of what you believe your research has shown as it relates to your item. The more straight forward your presentation of the information and the conclusions you reached, the clearer the information will flow to the reader.

Your text need only be as long as it takes to answer the 3 questions. I have seen excellent documentation that was 1 page and excellent documentation that was10 pages. You are not writing a text book, nor a journal of your detailed findings, but a presentation paper that hits just the high points. Since your piece, hopefully, will not be the only entry, try to keep your text to under 3 pages double-spaced.

Be kind to the judges. Present your materials neatly, and in an easy to read format. Neatness does count and a good presentation, while probably not the deciding factor will be considered.

You need not include copies of all your research notes as Appendices – at least not in the West. If there is a piece of research or a picture that supports a key point, you may wish to include it.

Footnotes and Bibliographies
A list of your sources should be included at the end of your documentation. Provide sufficient citation information that someone, if they wished, could go back to any of the items cited. If you choose to quote from any of your sources or use an assumption or conclusion from one, you should footnote the source – just as you would in any essay.

Have fun with your project. Consider the documentation just one more way of firming up your understanding of history along your journey.

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* Written by Sabrina de la Bere. Sabrina is a member of the Order of the Golden Poppy, former Minister of Arts in the Kingdom of the West and Principality of the Mists. She has been active in the SCA over 30 years. Over the years she has been asked to judge all manner of contests and periodically appears on panels discussing documentation and entering contests.