**But I Can’t Use THAT!
Strategies for when you need to make a substitution in an A&S Competition**Eithni ingen Talorgain eithni@gmail.com

It’s a common problem – you would like to enter an A&S Competition, but the period-correct materials are too expensive, not available, or do not suit you for some reason (an allergy, for example). You’re worried that the substitution will result in low scores or negative comments from the judges. Never fear! Below follows a guide on making appropriate, reasonable, and supportable substitutions. You may not get as many points as using 100% the right thing, but providing solid justifications should improve your overall score.

**Materials are available, but too expensive**

First off, are the materials REALLY too expensive? Set aside the sticker shock for a moment and consider the amount of time and effort you will be expending. If you will be putting long hours in on a project, often it is your time that becomes the biggest investment. It’s a sad thing to put dozens or hundreds of hours into a project and then regret not having used better materials. If, after consideration, the materials are, in fact, too expensive, another option may be to find a patron who would be willing to sponsor your project. Bartering work on one project in exchange for enough materials for two iterations of the project may also be an option, if there are other people who might want a copy of your project.

**Materials are too expensive or not available**

Sometimes, we think of an item as being made of a specific material which is either too expensive or not readily available. However, sometimes this is where research can be our friend. It is worth investing some time and effort in investigating whether there are other materials that might be acceptable. Even if a piece is *usually* made out of one material, being able to document one or two examples where the piece *can* be made of something more readily available will help justify the use of that material.

**Substitution of material is absolutely necessary**

If a substitution is absolutely necessary, it is important to make sure that the substitution made has a rational justification. Simply choosing a material that is less expensive or immediately available is not an adequate justification, the substitution must also have properties that make it a good alternative. If I want to make a replica of a gorgeous silk gown, but cannot afford the silk, making the dress out of tissue paper is not an acceptable alternative. Yes, it is cheaper, but the properties of the material are nothing like the properties of the original. Rather, it is important to think about the properties of the material you are replacing.

The specific qualities that are important to match will depend on the project you are working on, so take some time to think critically about what the original object looks and feels like. If it is a fiber you are replacing, think about the hand of the fabric, its weight, and its drape. If it is a pigment or dye, think about not only the color, but the sheen and the opacity. If it is a wood, consider grain, color, hardness, and density. Every material will have appropriate and inappropriate substitutes. It can be worth setting up a table to compare the properties of the original to several alternatives side by side.

In the example of a silk dress, you could make a table like this, comparing several (hypothetical) options available at the local store:

|  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- | --- |
|  | Original Silk | Cotton | Linen | Wool | Rayon | Polyester |
| Weight | Lightweight  | Lightweight | Midweight | Heavy | Lightweight | Midweight |
| Thickness | Thin  | Thin | Moderate | Thick | Thin | Thin |
| Sheen | Shiny | Matte | Matte | Matte | “eggshell” | Shiny |
| Hand  | Firm/Crisp | Soft | Crisp | Soft | Crepe-y | Firm |
| Color | Crimson | Many | Many | Crimson | Black, Red, Blue | Crimson |

You may think that a natural fiber is most “period” and so look at those first. In this example, the wool is available in the right color, but nothing else about it is right. The cotton is a similar weight and thickness, but the hand and the sheen are all wrong. The linen’s weight is wrong, but the hand is more similar to the silk. You can’t use these natural fibers without making significant changes in the final product. If you then turn to the man-made fibers, the rayon is the right weight and it has some sheen to it, but a crepe texture is all wrong. The polyester is a little heavier than you want, but it is otherwise a good match and does come in the right color. In this case, you might actually choose the polyester, even though it is a completely synthetic material because it will produce a final product that is most similar to the original. You could justify this substitution with a statement like “I was not able to afford the quality or quantity of silk that this dress would have required, so I have chosen this polyester as a substitute. The original dress’ silk was a lovely crimson color (see Figure X) that I wanted to retain in my dress. The polyester has both the right color and the smooth sheen of the original silk. The silk of the dress is described by Professor Y as being “tightly woven and crisp, retaining sharp pleats” (Professor Y BookYear, Page) and the chosen fabric is able to create similar pleats, due to its firm, tight weave, as shown in my picture below.” It’s a much longer justification than “I can’t afford silk,” but it’s a better one.

**Substitution of techniques or tools is necessary**

Substituting a technique or tool should follow a similar process. Carefully think about the piece you are recreating. What effect does the technique or tool have on the final product? What are the differences between the period tool or technique and the modern equivalent? Will those differences be evident in the completed project? Even if the substitution of tool or technique (an electric saw for a handsaw, for example) is not able to be detected in the final product, you should still acknowledge the substitution and clearly explain that you had considered the similarities and differences between the techniques or tools and why you decided to go with the more modern option.

Following this method of thoughtful, well-justified substitutions, I hope you will be able to produce the projects of your dreams… even if you don’t have the budget, materials, or shop of your dreams! Remember this simple shorthand for evaluating your justifications of substitutions:
 **Avoid EXCUSES - Provide REASONS.**