

Entering Arts & Sciences Competitions

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Entering A&S can be an intimidating experience, either for new folks or those who remember the bad old days where A&S Competitions were ugly things. However, they need not be a thing of horror, fear, and tears. Below are some easy steps to having a successful A&S Competition experience. (Please note: these comments are largely directed at physical A&S entries. Performing arts present unique challenges not directly addressed in this class.)

Read the entry rules and the judging criteria

It is important to know what the standards are for the competition you hope to enter. Different competitions have different rules and sets of judging criteria, so don't get caught off-guard and be informed in advance. In particular, check whether there is a theme, any restrictions (size of display, dry site, etc.), or documentation requirements. If you can, take a look at the judge's sheet to see what categories you will be judged on and what the criteria are for each section.

Do your research & create your item

Research should come first when creating a well-documented A&S entry. Make sure you know the specifics of the item you are recreating – you may make substitutions and changes, but these should be conscious decisions, not deviations you discover after the fact. Evaluate your research sources carefully – are they good sources? Why? Make sure to include sources other than just web pages and avoid general-knowledge sites like Wikipedia as sources. Take extra care in the construction of the item and, if applicable, take pictures of the process at regular intervals or at key points.

Write your documentation

Once your piece is completed, carefully write your documentation. Remember, the documentation is where you show you really know what you are doing, not just that you got lucky, and it is what will speak for you if the judging is not done face-to-face. The goals of your documentation are to educate the reader and to demonstrate how you created the item. It is generally safe to assume that the judge is someone who has very basic knowledge about the item you are making, but that they know no specifics about the details of its history or construction. This is also your place to justify any departures from the norm that you made. Offer well-reasoned explanations, not excuses! When it is completed, for the love of all that's holy, spell check your final document! Consider including an appendix of key pages from references you used so judges and passers by can see where you got your ideas. See the separate "Writing Documentation" handout.

Register your entry

Before the registration deadline, fill out any required forms and submit them to the A&S Coordinator. This is not always a required step, but we are working to make A&S friendlier, in part by ensuring that every piece is provided with an appropriate judge, which often needs to be arranged for in advance. If there are several levels of entry allowed (novice, expert, etc), be honest with yourself and enter the appropriate category. Entering in a category too far above your level will result in tears and entering in a category too far below your level is stomping puppies and not nice. Challenge yourself, but be realistic.

Present your entry & documentation

Presenting your item is more than slapping it down on a table with a note card! Take care in arranging your item so that it is presented in a pleasing manner. Consider a tablecloth, particularly if it is an item that could be damaged from a rough or dirty surface. Make sure your documentation is neatly printed out, organized, and easy to access. Consider having a single page summary of your project or business cards available for gentles to take in case they want to contact you later. If it is part of the competition format, be available for face-to-face judging or a meet-the-artisan time.

Self-evaluate and set expectations

This is one of the hardest steps! If you can, obtain a copy of the judging sheet, then step back and look at your project critically. Where are you succeeding and where does your piece still need more work? Where did you make substitutions in materials and methods and were those well supported choices? Is your workmanship the best that you can produce? How does that compare to the period examples and the state of the art among others in your field? Be strict, but fair. Give yourself both comments and a score – you'll be amazed at how much you can learn from examining your own work! Then, go have a look at the other entries in the competition with the same critical eye.

Receive your comments and results

As hard as it is to self-evaluate (and never mind that you signed up for this), getting feedback from others can be very challenging. Keep in mind that judges have a hard job to do too and are trying to be both helpful and fair. Comments should be viewed as an opportunity to improve, not a condemnation of your work. If all you got were 9's and 10's, the feedback might be more palatable, but it wouldn't necessarily be helpful. Read or listen to the comments carefully and with the assumption that they are provided in the spirit of helpfulness. If you are getting oral feedback, take notes.

Discuss with your judges or experts

If you have any questions about your scores or the comments provided, please contact the judge so they can clarify their meaning. If you received a low score but are unclear on how to improve your piece, discuss with the judge or with other gentles who are accomplished in the art you are doing. Discuss different interpretations, alternate construction techniques and materials, and other ways of supporting your choices.

Rinse, repeat!

The only real way to get better at A&S Competitions is to keep entering and keep working at your art. Remember that the goal is not to get a perfect score on your first attempt, but rather to improve your scores each time you compete and to improve your art every time you create a piece, whether or not it is for entry into a competition!

Judging Arts & Sciences Competitions
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At least as much as entering A&S, judging can be an intimidating experience until you become familiar and comfortable with the process. Below are some tips to help you get started. (These comments are largely directed at judging the physical arts. Judging performing arts presents unique challenges not directly addressed in this class.)

Read the entry rules and the judging sheet

It is impossible to adequately assess an item without knowing the constraints that were put on the competition or the criteria you will be using to judge the item. Read these materials before you begin judging the entries.

Look at the item and skim the documentation

Take a quick perusal of the item and the documentation to familiarize yourself with it. You will be referring back to it in some detail, but here is a chance to get a basic concept of the intent of the entry, the level of the artisan, and the organization of the documentation. Make some general notes, particularly if there is anything you want to see explained in the documentation or any features that are remarkable in any way.

Assess your ability to judge the entry

Step back for a moment and assess the item and your ability to judge it. Do you know enough about this art to adequately judge the piece? Is the documentation sufficient to fill in holes in your knowledge if you feel you are borderline? Is it by someone you know and feel you will have a conflict of interest in judging (good OR bad)? Is the piece clearly in the wrong category, either the wrong subject (armor instead of clothing) or the wrong level (novice vs. intermediate)? Is the entry outwith the scope of the competition? If you have a serious conflict or question about the item, its classification, or your ability to judge it, this is the time to approach the coordinator and address your concerns.

Determine the level at which you are judging

Just as the entrant should appropriately choose the category they enter, the judge must carefully consider the level of the entrant when deciding how strictly to judge the entry. Get down and dirty with uber-Laurels, but take a gentler touch with folks new to an art form. This likely will not change the numerical score given, but will guide the tone and the detail of comments you make.

Examine the item and documentation closely

Now comes the most time consuming phase of judging – the critical evaluation of the entry. Start by carefully examining the documentation – if it is only a few pages long, read it in its entirety. If it is a longer piece of documentation and you are pressed for time, at least read the key parts and the summary, if provided, and skim the rest. Evaluate how well the entrant explains the piece and their process, particularly any changes or substitutions that were made. Then examine the entry itself, looking closely at the workmanship of the piece and taking note of features mentioned in the documentation.

Comment

Start to solidify your thoughts about the entry by writing your observations and comments in the appropriate spaces in the judging form. Try to find at least one positive aspect in every category and likewise look for opportunities for constructive criticisms under each heading – even really

great entries usually have a few places they could improve! Take care in wording your comments so that they are clear and non-judgmental – the purpose is to guide the artisan toward greater success in their art, never to belittle the level they currently are at. If you have any questions about the item, refer back to the documentation as needed. This may also be the phase where you realize you need to pull in some specialty assistance if there is an aspect of the entry you are unfamiliar with – do so if needed and possible.

Discuss the item with the entrant

If there is a face-to-face component of the competition, this is where you would pause in your judging to discuss the entry with the entrant. Have them present the item to you, then ask them any remaining questions you have. Give them the opportunity to explain anything that was unclear or unsupported in the documentation. Indicate areas that are excellent as well as those that need work. If you obtain a significant amount of oral information from the entrant, point out that such information should appear in the documentation or, if it is there, that it should be more clearly presented.

Enter scores

Re-read your comments and re-read the scoring scale for the judging sheet. Carefully examine each component and assign a score based on your comments and impressions. If you have any remaining questions, again refer back to the entrant and/or the documentation. Be strict, but fair and compassionate. If you have to assign a particularly low score in an area, clearly explain your rationale, but try to balance it with praise for aspects that went well or carefully worded constructive comments. However, avoid the impulse to assign a higher than warranted score – such inflated scores simply mislead the entrant and do not provide appropriate guidance.

Discuss the scores with entrant

If possible, meet briefly with the entrant to present the final scores and to explain why they were given. If you were able to meet for a face-to-face judging, this will likely not come as a surprise to the entrant. Allow them the opportunity to discuss their scores and try to keep the conversation positive, focusing on the things that went well and the opportunities for future growth, rather than what was “wrong” with the current piece. The goal is to foster the further growth of the artisan, not to chastise them for falling short of the perfect period ideal. If you cannot meet with the artisan, ensure that your name and contact information are on the judging sheet and clearly legible so that they may contact you later to discuss.

Happy judging! ☺

Postscript on handling disappointment, tears, and anger

When judging, we make every attempt to make the experience one of learning through evaluation, and while it is not common, there will come times when an entrant has an emotional reaction to the feedback. If the entrant is disappointed or tearful, try to meet with them and explain why scores were given. If it seems it might be helpful, have an impartial third party that the entrant trusts attend. In the absence of the emotional personal involvement, this impartial person may be able to help the entrant better hear you and understand your rationale. Emphasize positives and offer to assist the entrant in future projects or offer to direct them to others active in the art. Anger can also be difficult to deal with from an entrant. Stay calm and composed and explain your decisions succinctly. Limit your comments to factual statements as much as possible and avoid value judgments. Consider asking the entrant to walk through the judging process with you and explain why they would have assigned different scores, supported by their entry and documentation. If an entrant is angrier than you are comfortable dealing with alone, ask the competition coordinator or a trusted and respected third party to mediate.