

## Writing Documentation

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When gentles begin to consider entering Arts and Sciences competitions, they are often intimidated by the prospect of needing to write documentation for the piece they would like to enter. While documentation can be turned into an extensive, laborious endeavor, there is no reason for it to be so. There are six critical, but simple, parts to good documentation. Simply follow the outline below to reliably produce solid documentation for your project.

### Full Documentation:

- 1. Present your item.**
  - a. Provide a short description of the item and a photo if possible.
  - b. Explain what the item is, when it is from, and who would have used it.
  - c. Provide details about its use if it is an unusual item.
- 2. Discuss the period materials and methods.**
  - a. Provide details about the types of materials that were used in period.
  - b. Describe the period production methods and tools that would have been used for this sort of item, include construction techniques, dimensions, etc.
  - c. Include examples (pictures and/or descriptions) of similar extant items wherever possible and explain if they are atypical in some way or if they are particularly important to your piece (i.e.; making a copy of a piece, or copying a particular component).
- 3. Report the materials and methods used for your item.**
  - a. Report all the materials used in your project.
  - b. Describe how you produced the item.
  - c. Provide descriptions and/or pictures of your project in process, if possible.
- 4. Explain any variations between period examples and your item.**
  - a. Did you use any alternative materials?
  - b. Did you deviate from the period construction techniques?
  - c. Justify your departures from the period examples.
    - i. Justifications for materials can include things like the materials being no longer readily available or not financially feasible.
    - ii. Justifications for methods can include things like using a power saw instead of a handsaw to save time.
    - iii. Justifications should never, never, never, include "if they had it, they would have used it." Explain your rationale, but don't make excuses.
- 5. Discuss the completed item**
  - a. What did you learn while working on the project?
  - b. Is there anything you would have done differently?
  - c. What do you like/dislike about the finished product?
- 6. Provide the evidence**
  - a. Include citations and a bibliography
  - b. If you have not already, provide pictures and descriptions of your project in process and completed.
  - c. Include your name and contact information, unless barred by a competition's rules.

Of course, this should be tweaked for each project, increased, decreased, or changed as applicable, depending on the type of project and the resources used. The format can be re-arranged as necessary, but most of the above information should be present.

Customization of your documentation should also take the intended audience and environment into account. If it is for an entry in an A&S Fair, consider looking at the judging criteria to see if there is anything else they will be looking for or if there are requirements of things that must or must not appear on your entry. If it is for a demo, you may want to consider critically reading it and removing overly technical jargon and removing or explaining any SCA terminology. If it is for a school's educational demo, consider whether you should simplify the wording to bring it to an appropriate reading level. Remember – wherever you are using it, it must be understandable to your audience, or you might as well not have any documentation at all!

To that end, regardless of where you mean to use it, have someone unfamiliar with the project (and ideally someone unfamiliar with the art or science) read the documentation to check for readability. And, of course, spell check the final document!

**Regarding A&S displays** – At a typical A&S display, few people will take the time to carefully examine the potentially lengthy documentation that could be the result of the above outline. Therefore, a single page summary can be incredibly useful in providing the key information in a user-friendly format. You can also consider making copies of the summary available as hand-outs for interested gentles who view the A&S display and might be interested in contacting you or attempting a similar project later.

#### **Summary Documentation Checklist:**

- A title that concisely presents the item
- Your name and contact info
- A short description and photo of the item
- A short summary of the materials and methods used
- A minimalist bibliography of the critical source(s)

#### **A caution against back-documentation:**

*The proper process for any well-conceived A&S project is: first doing the research, next creating the item and recording the process, and lastly writing the documentation. First creating a piece and then looking for supporting evidence after the fact is called back-documenting and is not a good habit to fall into. It can work if you are doing a piece similar to ones you have researched, made, and documented in the past, but far too often, looking for “proof” to support your choices in a project after the project is already underway leads to shoddy research and questionable documentation, however nice the piece itself may be. If you are looking for information for section 2 after beginning your project, be extra careful to evaluate your sources and ask yourself whether you are seeing what is there or what you want to be there. Remember, the ideal is always to research, make, then document!*

See additional resources online at <https://eithni.com/research/>