

The Documentation on how to Document the Documentation....

Sounds scary huh?

In talking to people about arts and sciences projects, probably the single topic that comes up most often is documentation. Everybody hates it, nobody seems to know what is expected and so you go and ask a handy all-knowledgeable Laurel about it and you get a different answer from each one you talk to...

So everyone ends up making lots of brilliant stuff, but none of it ever gets entered into a competition or display because of the paperwork. Sad, eh?

So this year, we thought it would be an idea if we gave you a helping hand. A set of guidelines for what we would hope a documented entry would contain. In other words...

Ye Olde Recipe for A&S Documentation.

Now, the operative word here is “guideline”. Depending on the entry, some of the following may not be applicable, so use your judgement.

In most cases we would be talking about an item that has been made, in which case these guidelines will be reasonably applicable. However things like performances are more difficult to document, so some of the following may not be needed or desired.

Do remember however that an entry can always be marked down if something is not included, never if it is, so make the paperwork as complete as possible.

General Layout

Nicely bound and covered documents are great, but not necessary (remember you are being judged on the content of the document, not on how pretty it is).

Entries written on napkins and the backs of cigarette packets are probably not acceptable.

Neatly handwritten documents are certainly acceptable, as long as they *are* neat and legible.

Typed is certainly preferred. If typed up, please use at least 12 point to make it easier on the judges’ eyes. Ariel as a font can be scanned much better for storage. Also try to make use of bullet points, neat layout and “white space” (white space means nice gaps between sections and paragraphs; a lot of cramped text makes a document harder to read whereas a document with a lot of white space is generally more pleasing to the eye and therefore easier to read).

Content

Probably the best thing to do will be to list out the relevant sections, then we will look at each one in turn for what they mean and what we would hope they will contain.

- Overview
- Ingredients
- Construction guide
- Deviations from the original
- Supporting evidence
- References, acknowledgements and bibliography

Just a reminder at this point that these are guidelines; a dance project is hardly likely to contain an ingredient list (hmmm, well maybe 1 dancer, half a dozen silk veils, a set of bells, bucket of cold water for the judges...)

Overview

Otherwise known as a description.

What is it, what was it used for, what time period / culture / region it comes from. Is it a close copy of another item (e.g. Queen Elizabeth's Coronation gown), or an example or interpretation of the style of an item (e.g. a typical Viking cooking pot). This may be obvious to you, but not the judges.

Hint Pictures are an excellent way of comparing your item with an original. Judges love pictures!

Ingredients

What has been used in the construction of the item. Remember to include tools or special equipment that may be needed or useful in manufacture. If you are working from a historical set of instructions, a copy of the original along with a translation, modern equivalents or substitutions may be a good idea at this point (pretty easy for food recipes, not so easy for ironmongery).

Construction Guide

This section is often open to a lot of controversy. A lot of people will argue that documentation is not a "how to" guide. Others will say that you cannot judge the manufacture of an item if you don't know how it was made.

I refer you back to an earlier comment:- "an entry can always be marked down if something is not included, never if it is".

So please take it for granted that the judges will expect a construction guide for any manufactured item.

That being said, how detailed should it be?

The best guideline I can give is “can a reasonably sensible adult with the basic skills in this field use this guide to reproduce the item without resorting to a lot of guesswork”?

If the answer is yes then you have used enough detail. If not, then re-read and clarify anything that appears unclear.

If your instructions read more like a DIY kit-set translated from the original Swahili, perhaps you had better start over.

Hint Judges love pictures and diagrams because they show a concept far easier than lots of paragraphs of text; use them liberally!

Deviations from the Original

In most cases there are going to be some changes you have had to make that deviate from the way things would have been done originally. These should be stated where possible and the reasons for the change explained.

A few examples

- **Metalwork** Using a gas forge instead of a charcoal one; use of lead free pewter for safety reasons.
- **Cooking.** Substituting food coloring or turmeric instead of saffron because of availability.
- **Viking bone carving.** Ivory is too expensive, whalebone is hard to come by, therefore beef bone is used.

It may be more appropriate to mention deviations or substitutions in other sections. As an example, substitute ingredients would probably be better suited for inclusion in the ingredient list.

Making changes is a perfectly acceptable practice. The point is that changes from the original to your piece should be mentioned and explained, not omitted.

Supporting Evidence

Have you heard Laurels using the term “Stay Items”? These are things that have survived from period times to the modern day and can be used as reference and evidence to support a particular idea.

Stay items can consist of many things.

- An archeological find is definitely a stay item, because it is an actual item that can be studied and copied from that period. Examination can also give evidence of construction techniques used.
- Old texts often describe period items. While not as good as the actual thing, it is certainly considered supporting evidence.
- Paintings and tapestries are good sources of evidence in that they give a pictorial representation of what the item would have looked like.
- Place names, family names and landmarks can all give corroborating evidence to stories and sagas.

Hint sometimes quantity can be better than quality. A single archeological find can give us an example of one single item. If however you present a descriptive text along with a painting and tapestry all showing or describing the same type of thing then we have a *common* item or a *style* of item. The more pieces and types of evidence you present, the better. If it is in picture form, so much the better; judges love pictures!

References, Acknowledgements and Bibliography

We want to know where you have gained your knowledge. It is a starting place for others who are interested in your piece to do their own research.

- Any pictures or diagrams should have a description and reference.
- Reference books should be listed by title, author and page number of the reference used. (including a photocopy of the original page is a good idea).
- Internet references should contain an author and URL **and a date downloaded as information on websites can change**.
- Any person whose advice you sought or who gave assistance in terms of materials or services (sourcing materials, research, proof reading etc.) should be acknowledged.

Final Tips

- Check your spelling (use a spell checker if word processed, manually check historical names or references).
- Proof read the document to make sure it says what you want it to. Get somebody else to check it for ease of reading.
- Check the layout to make sure it is clear, easy to follow and does not strain the eyes of the reader.
- Count the number of pictures in the document. Then go back and add 2 more just to keep the judges happy. Judges love pictures!

Well I hope this has taken a little bit of the mystery out of A&S documentation. I can certainly recall my first attempts at documentation and how much of an uphill struggle it seemed to be. Hopefully this has shown you that while it can take a small amount of time, it is not an impossible task.

And here's hoping that a few less people will be put off by the spectre of the dreaded documentation.

Hope to see many more entries in this Years A&S contest!

Yours in service of the Dream,

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