How to Research like an Academic:
Moving Towards a Major A&S Project

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An updated copy of this document can be found at
https://sites.google.com/site/elenasthreads/a-s-documentation/how-to-research

Introduction

This handout will walk you through how to research like an academic: what are sources, how to find sources, how to evaluate a source, and how to turn your research into a finished product. The main focus is sources as they normally make up the meat of your A&S research, but we will also touch on other tips to help your research take off!

This guide is mostly designed to help you prepare for a major A&S competition or large project, but the basics can be used at any level of research. This has a lot of information crammed in together, so you can also use the page guide to just look at the sections that may answer questions you may have.

1. Where to start?:

A research project normally begins with a question or topic - “How were 14th century widgets made?” “My Recreation of a 12th Century Widget” or “Widgets in 1580s’ London.” Once you have this topic, you need to search for information to answer the question or support your statements on the topic.

Initial research:

This is where we get the basic ideas of what you are looking at. Wikipedia, Pinterest, and basic Google searches can turn up all sorts of information that can be a helpful place to start off

with, but they are not enough on their own. Do some searches and possibly look at what others have written about and posted on the subject. Are any books/articles/museums frequently mentioned? Are certain time periods/locations/subtopics exciting to you? This can be a great way to get started on your search.

Narrowing down your topic area:

At some point, you will want to decide where you want to focus your research. Answering the following questions can help keep your research focused and cohesive. As you move forward your answers may change (if you find your widget was only used by the upper classes, or only in northern climates, or that you prefer the style seen in a slightly earlier or later period), but starting with a basic idea can help you determine what research will be useful to you and what will not.

Where (England, Paris, Western Europe, China, East Asia)?
When (8th-10th centuries, 13th century, 1480s, 1578)?
Who (upper class, royalty, clergy, merchants, everyone, farmers)?
Why/How (for cooking daily food, to make ropes for sailing, to decorate garments for special occasions)?

Once you have a basic awareness of your topic and your research goals you can start searching for good sources on it. If others have published their work on your topic, then you may already have a list of good sources to get you started!

2. Sources:

What is a source? A source is a text or item that provides you with information regarding your research. It could be a book, an article, a 16th century painting, or a 12th century piece of cloth. However, not all sources are created equal, and not all sources than you come across should be included in your research.

Types of Sources:

The exact definitions of these types of sources can vary depending on which University or book you look at, but in general a primary source is anything from the period you are researching and secondary sources are later pieces which provide context and analysis. By using a mix of both, you can get a more thorough understanding of a topic. **Most SCA A&S competitions will expect to see at least one primary source that you have looked at.**

A **Primary** source is a source that was created during the time period that you are examining.[1] A shirt, a diary, a letter, a knife, a book, would all be primary sources if they were from the time period you are looking at.[2] The advantage to using primary sources is that they are concretely from the time period you are examining and can therefore be known to have a certain measure of accuracy. The downside to using primary sources is that for many we do not know the exact context or veracity of the source - a person may have written in a letter that they saw a major historic event occur in a certain way, but they may be lying or mistaken. A painting is not a photograph, it can show a very different visual from what actually existed. A garment can be an excellent resource for determining techniques and materials used, but a single garment might be ceremonial, only have been used by the clergy/young unmarried women/children/old men, have been mislabeled by the museum, or might be an outlier for the period. This is why ideally you want a mix of multiple primary sources as well as secondary sources for your research to give a broader base.

Many people may not come into personal contact with a primary source from the SCA period, but a scanned copy of a period book/letter or a high-resolution image of an extant garment, knife, or painting (from a reputable source such as a museum or archeological report) can allow you to reference the primary source even without having seen it in person.

A **Secondary** source is a source that was created after the time period in question but that discusses/analyses the topic.[3] These often look at multiple primary sources, though this is not required (an article which analyzes a single extant book for example), or may look exclusively at other secondary sources and analyze them for themes (though this definition is somewhat debated).[4] A journal article, a modern book, or a documentary would all be secondary sources. The advantage to secondary sources is that they often provide analysis and context that a single source may not. For example, a secondary source may tell you that a word (such as "wool") may have meant something different in period than it means in modern English, or that while a single source (such as a letter) might claim an event happened one way, other evidence may have disproved it. They also often may reference other primary sources that you have not seen, so they can be a good resource for finding more primary sources for your research.

A **Tertiary** source is reference material which list information and sources regarding a particular topic.[5] Examples include encyclopedias and bibliographies.[6] Tertiary sources are

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[1] Arlene R. Quartiello and Jane Devine, *The College Student's Research Companion. 5th ed.* (New York: Neal-Schuman Publishers, Inc., 2011), 26.
[2] "Primary and Secondary Sources," *Ithaca College Library*, accessed May 3rd, 2016, https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/subjects/primary
[3] Ibid. - Ibid in a footnote means the source is the same as the previous footnote.
[4] "Primary, secondary, and tertiary sources," *Virginia Tech University Libraries*, accessed May 3rd, 2016, https://library.ithaca.edu/sp/subjects/primary
[5] Ibid.
[6] Quartiello, *College Student's Research Companion*, 26.

sometimes mistakenly identified as “bad” sources with the reasoning that they may not cite primary sources directly or many not include analysis. However, these compilations of information can often be very useful to the researcher looking for a broader context of a topic (such as looking at an encyclopedia entry for a basic understanding of a related topic) or by providing potential resources for further research (like using a bibliography to look for other books on your topic).

Evaluating Sources:

So you’ve found a source for your research, excellent! But how can you tell if something is a documentable source which should be trusted?

Books and Journal Articles:

Date Published: New things are being discovered all the time, and with the rise of the internet researchers are able to share results much easier than before, resulting in a plethora of new information coming out each year. Additionally, there was a good deal of misinformation that came out during the Victorian period that was treated as fact for many years which we now know was fiction. As such, many older books have inaccurate information. While older texts certainly have value, the older something is (pre 1960 and before especially) the more I would be cautious of using it as your main source for your documentation. You can always look up reviews online and see if people comment that there are known inaccuracies or if modern researchers are still quoting it now.

Publisher: While many well-researched and exceptionally documented books have been self-published or published through other companies and will make great sources, university presses and academic journals can be a safer bet if you are unsure. If the publisher is ---------- University Press that is a good sign. These works are usually held to a higher standard for their documentation and research. You can also look up reviews of the work online and see what others have said about the book regarding its veracity.

Topic: If the purpose of the text is to teach a craft to a modern audience, then be very wary of the statements of the historic use of the craft. These books often are excellent for learning a technique, but they frequently contain major errors regarding the historic usage. Try to use texts which are focused on an academic subject of some sort, cite multiple extant examples to go along with their claims, or which are targeted towards researchers.

Citations: If the text uses formal citations and cites many other sources, this is a good sign. It also means that you can try to track down their citations to confirm the accuracy of a statement if you have any questions.

Websites:

While books and journals are excellent, there are many online options too.

Museum websites: Many museums have their catalogs listed online. This is an excellent way to find extant items (paintings, carved chests, clothing) which count as primary sources.
University libraries: Some Universities have made parts of their collections available online, including scanned copies of extant works.
Project Gutenberg/Google Books: You may be able to find scanned books available online for free if they are in the public domain.
Academic Journals: There are collections of academic journals which are published online and are sometimes freely accessible (see page 5 for examples).

Unfortunately, not all online sources can be taken as fact.
Newspapers: Online news archives may often have articles commenting on popular historic topics (such as discussing Richard III when his grave was found a few years back), but these are usually written by journalists and not academics, and can sometimes contain serious errors. Be wary and avoid if possible.
Personal Websites: Many wonderful SCA and mundane researchers have published their work online, and if you took an idea from their site (a specific way to sew a seam, a way to translate a period recipe to modern ingredients, etc.) certainly cite it to show that it was not your own idea and to make sure you are not accidentally plagiarizing their work. However, if someone states "all widgets in the 14th century were made of iron," you have no way of knowing if this statement is accurate and so generally should not cite it as fact. Many misconceptions exist, so try to avoid citing from non-academic websites.

What does "peer reviewed" mean? Why should I trust this writer/book/website but not that one?

"Peer reviewed" means that the source has been examined by other scholarly experts in the topic and that they have approved it for publication.[7] Ideally, this means that if a source contained serious errors or misinformation, it would have been caught. Academia relies on various types of such community policing (either through officially "peer reviewed" journals or through the general response of the scholarly community), where if something is published (a book or an article) other scholars look at it and can comment on if they think it is accurate (such as in book and article reviews found on sites such as JSTOR, and in other articles or books citing and responding to these sources). Because non-academic texts are not necessarily reviewed by other scholars in the field at any point, craft books, popular history texts made for non-historians, and personal websites are not considered to be completely trustworthy sources. While their information may be accurate, and while mistakes do get made in academia, such sources are on average more prone to misinformation compared to scholarly texts.

[7] Brittany Cronin, "What Does Peer Review Mean?," *San Diego State Library and Information Access*. Accessed May 3rd, 2016, http://library.sdsu.edu/reference/news/what-does-peer-review-mean

Where can I find good research/sources?

Online

There are many free resources available online to anyone. As mentioned briefly above, many pre-1600 texts as well as more modern secondary source materials can sometimes be found for free online.

Books.Google.com - Google Books has full and partial scans of many books, including many modern scholarly texts on historic subjects as well as reprints of period texts.

Academia.edu - This site has an extensive collection of scholarly articles on SCA topics, especially archeological reports across many time periods and locations.

Scholar.Google.com - Google Scholar allows you to search for scholarly pieces and can also assist in ways to track down the articles you find. While not all articles listed will be easily/freely accessible, the articles you find this way can be a great starting point and there may be some available for free.

JSTOR - While full access to JSTOR (an online collection of numerous scholarly journals) is expensive, they do allow you to access 6 articles per month for free if you make an account.

Directory of Open Access Journals (DOAJ) - This site allows you to search for scholarly work written on a topic that is free to the public.

Directory of Open Access Repositories (OpenDOAR) - A sister-project to DOAJ, this allows you to search through a different interface.

Google.com - While it might not be exclusively scholarly, you can find a surprising amount of data there and though you need to be careful with what you cite, you can find many small collections of primary and secondary sources through basic web searches.

Local libraries

Your local public library (or local University library - many are open for use by the public!) can have multiple options to help you. Also, many libraries do not require you to live in the town they are located in to receive service, so you may have access to multiple libraries in your area.

Books - While they may not have an extensive collection on some SCA subjects, you may be surprised at what they have on your larger topic (blacksmithing) or time period (14th century England).

Online Journals - Many libraries provide access to some online scholarly journals that may have primary sources (EEBO - Early English Books Online) or secondary sources (JSTOR) that you can use.

Interlibrary loan (ILL) - This is an amazing service which unfortunately not all libraries are able to offer. They work with other libraries in their network to get free or very inexpensive

access to books that your library may not have. Call your library to ask or look on their website if there is a book that you would like to look at/cite but do not want to purchase.

Ebooks - More and more libraries are expanding their ebook collection available online. Depending on the topic, you may be able to get access to some books just by visiting your local library's website.

Alumni access

If you attend or attended college you may still have access to your school's library (different institutions have different restrictions). If you are near your university it can be worth calling their library to ask if alumni retain access to university library resources. Some even grant access to shared college library networks, so you may be able to benefit even if you no longer live near your school.

How many sources do I need?

Unfortunately, there is no exact answer for this. It can depend on the depth of your topic, how much research has already been done on the topic, and what scenario you are writing your documentation for (a local A&S competition may have very different expectations than your Kingdom's A&S Championship). You want to make sure you have a solid amount of evidence to answer your claim/question - if your claim was that 1450s widgets were sometimes made of gold, that may require less evidence than claiming that the majority of 1450s widgets were made of gold. If you are disagreeing with a popular statement you may likewise need much more evidence to prove your claim. If you are recreating an exact extant piece you made need fewer than if you are doing something inspired by multiple pieces.

At least one primary source should be examined and cited, but if possible it is always good to branch out to more, especially for larger projects or more major competitions. Even if there is only one extant example of an item from your period, can you find examples from other nearby time periods/locations and compare them? You can also look for period letters or laws regarding your topic, or paintings showing your object in use. The more sources you can find the better you can understand the context of your example.

Multiple secondary sources are also ideal for larger projects, as the more you have read on the topic the more you will be aware of what the community has found to-date on that topic. A collection of multiple primary and secondary sources will show your judges that you studied the topic enough to have a thorough understanding of it.

Remember though, an extra source could simply be a painting you found from Pinterest (after confirming its accuracy), a book where you only read the brief chapter that was to do with your topic, or the online article you found on Academia.edu after a quick search. Sources can be much easier to find and look at than they sound sometimes.

3. How should I document/write-up my research?

Research first, then craft!

If you are researching to document a craft (embroidery/blacksmithing/bead making) **always** start with the research first, and then begin the craft or writing. Otherwise you frequently run the risk of trying to "backwards document" something that you made and then realized was not as period as you had thought. For example you may discover that the first recipe you found may have been labeled or translated incorrectly, the fabric that many people recommended was not actually used in your period for outerwear, or that the wood you want to use for your spoons may be significantly different in texture from what was used in period. You may end up wanting or needing to swap out a more availible/comfortable/inexpensive material for the period option, but by researching first this is a choice, not a necessity. Your research doesn't have to be pretty or 100% complete, but you want to make sure you have a solid idea of time period, location, technique, and materials before you purchase materials or begin crafting something.

Document as you go:

If you are writing a larger project that may take multiple weeks/months, take notes! Typing up your notes and citations as you go can make assembling the full project vastly easier and keeps you from frantically searching for that one quote you know you read but forgot where. I suggest breaking your topic down into sub-topics (I often do Use in period, Materials, Construction techniques, and Misc.) and then type in any notes with the citations there.

Example:

Materials

Johnson, 61. "Red was a favorite color for widgets"
Doe, 70-74 - whole chapter on what widgets were made of
Peabody, 78 "only royals used widgets of gold" - what was his source for this?
Widgets.edu article, 4 pictures of period widgets

If you have a printed copy of an article, pull out your highlighter or pen and underline/annotate important things. If you know you will most likely refer back to something then having it highlighted/underlined can make it much easier to find. Sticky notes can also flag pages you want to return to in books. Future you will thank you.

Formatting your research:

There are many valid ways to organize a paper, but try to break it down in a way that will make it easy to read. This means having clear statements that explain the topic, what sources you used, and the conclusions you reached. Putting different major ideas into different paragraphs can make it easier for your reader to follow. If the topic may be debated (for example, some

people state that 14th century widgets were only made of wool, but others believe many materials were used but only wool survived for various reasons) it can be helpful to briefly explain the debate, what you think on the topic and why, and how that affected your work.

Revising your research:

Nothing is perfect on the first round, an entry might be entered or displayed multiple times before you finalize everything, and some competitions/displays might have rules or a focus that make you want to expand or summarize your work in different ways. Share your work with various online groups, enter it in a small display or competition, and see what feedback you get!

Citations:

Most A&S competitions request that you cite your sources using any of the most commonly used citation styles. Different styles work well for different mediums and topics, but it is a personal choice.

The three most popular styles of citation are MLA, APA, and Chicago/CMS. One of the best and most commonly used resources for learning how to cite in one of these styles is **Purdue OWL** (Online Writing Lab)[8]. It has detailed examples of how to cite such things as a book with multiple authors, an essay in a larger work, a website page, or a painting. I highly recommend you use it to learn how to format your work.

MLA (Modern Language Association) uses in-text citations, meaning that the information on the source is in the main text, not in a footnote. You list the author's last name and the page number in the text, then at the end of your piece you have a page labeled "Works Cited" where you list all of the sources with their full publication information. This style is frequently used on websites as the sources are listed as you read and do not require you to scroll to the bottom of the document each time you see a source.

Examples:

Widgets of the 14th century were "covered in gold, silver, and jewels" (Smith 98).

14th century widgets were heavily decorated with precious metals and gems (Smith 98).

APA (American Psychological Association) also uses in-text citations with a full list of cited materials at the end labeled "References." However, in addition to the author's name and page number, this style also requires listing the year published. Like MLA, this style is often used on webpages due to it not requiring the reader to scroll down to find the footnote.

Examples:

[8] The website is https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/ but a web search for "owl purdue" should bring it up easily!

According to Smith (2011) “Widgets were used by every man, woman, and child in 10th century London” (p. 77).

Widgets were incredibly common in London in this period (Smith, 2011, p.77).

Chicago/CMS (Chicago Manual of Style) uses footnotes or endnotes to provide the full publishing information when the source is cited. While you do need to stop for a moment to read the citation on the bottom of the page or an endnote at the end of the document, the advantage is that the reader can immediately determine the source and quality (is “Johnson” from a scholarly journal/Cambridge University Press or the author of “Making Widgets is Easy and Fun!”).

Chicago shorthand: “Ibid” in a footnote means that the source is the same as the most recent footnote.

Example:

[1] Jane Smith, *14th Century Artisans of London.* (New York: Publishers Inc., 2015), 55.

For additional examples see bottom of page 3.

To quote or to paraphrase? As you can see in some of the above examples, you do not need to always use exact quotations, you also have the option to summarize or paraphrase. It is a good idea to summarize when you are simply providing information (red widgets have been seen across multiple time periods and locations), or when the original quote is very long. If the quote is particularly poignant, amusing, dramatic, or strongly worded, it can be better to keep the original quote.

Research Support from your Community:

While the above are the most formal options for conducting research on your own, I cannot stress enough how helpful it can be to speak with others in your community. Look for e-mail lists, Facebook and Google+ groups about your topic, other researchers in your area, message boards, anything. You can also find help with how to research, how to structure your documentation, ideas for sources, and potential proofreaders by looking to your local or larger A&S community. Look up the A&S minister for your Barony and contact them, join one of the Facebook groups for your Barony/Kingdom or listed in the recommended resources, or speak to someone at an event who is working in A&S.

4. Online Resources for A&S Assistance:

Websites:

http://www.sca.org/geography/findsca.html Find your Local SCA Kingdom

Look for kingdom guilds in your area of interest and/or your local A&S minister.

www.sca.org/officers/arts/ Society Minister of Arts and Sciences:

Provides contact information for all SCA Kingdom's A&S ministers if you cannot get in contact with the A&S minister of your local group.

Facebook Groups/Pages:

https://www.facebook.com/groups/ArtisanSupportNetwork/ Artisan Support Network.

This group is entirely focused on helping people create and improve their documentation and is a lovely resource.

https://www.facebook.com/groups/SCA.Library.of.Alexandria/ SCA Library of Alexandria.

https://www.facebook.com/groups/195046376566/ Artisans of the Society for Creative Anachronism

A Final Thought:

A&S is something we do for fun, and there is no need to stress or panic. Just pick your topic, find a range of sources on it, write up your findings, and sometimes ask for help along the way. Anyone can learn to write excellent documentation, and every bit of research and experience is a step in the right direction!

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