

How to Do Research for the Performing Arts

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Part 1: General Research Methods

Part 2: Special notes for performance development

PART ONE: HOW TO DO RESEARCH

Working definition of research for this class:

The process by which you learn something, generally involving 1) acquiring new knowledge and 2) synthesizing it with other things (other knowledge, skills, artistry) to create a new thing.

Not using the academic standard of “original research,” as we are not necessarily academics.

Research is not:

- Scholarship (reading lots of books and knowing stuff)
- Artistry (doing amazing art stuff without reference to external sources)
- Practice (when you do that thing you do for the 20th time)

Scholarship, artistry and practice are awesome! But they are not what this class is about.

(N.B.: It is perfectly acceptable, and often advantageous, to enter the results of your *practice* into A&S competitions. You may want to hang onto your research notes, though, so you can document your 20th piece with what you learned by doing your 1st.)

Logbooks!

A logbook is a research (or research and scholarship/artistry/practice) diary.

As a “best practice,” they often do not prove their worth immediately, but rather over time.

Can be paper, electronic, Internet-based, whatever.

Write your goals, notes on information search, notable events during process, self-evaluation.

Research Process!

Four steps: goal setting, information search, “process,” self-evaluation.

Goal Setting

What do I want to learn?

Why? What do I want to get out of this?

- Just to try something out?
- Stretch my current knowledge/skills/abilities?
- Get a useful item for my SCA kit?
- Make a gorgeous display item?
- Make a gift?
- Participate in a competition?
- Win a competition?

These are all good goals! They suggest different *requirements*:

- I can't spend more than X hours on this
- I can't spend more than Y dollars on this
- I have to be able to store this
- I don't want to spend a lot of time maintaining this between events
- This [armor for fighting] has to pass inspection
- This [armor for procession] has to show off my chasing skills
- I need to handsew [machine sew] this.
- This has to be red, purple and silver, those are his colors.

You pick your own goals. You write them down and *you own them.* You do exactly as much or as little information search/craftsmanship/planning/whatever as you want to do.

This is your playtime, to learn exactly what you want to learn in exactly as much depth as you care to learn it! There is no test! If it's not fun (or satisfying, or rewarding) - why do it?

If you get a case of the "shouldas" as you move through your project, you return to your goal statements and you review whether or not this is your conscience telling you that you "should" stay true to what you want to do, or if it's peer pressure telling you that you "should" do something else. Listen to the first, not the second.

It's fine to change your goals partway through a project. Do it thoughtfully and with intention.

Information Search

What information should I use?

Primary, Secondary and Tertiary Sources

<http://www.lib.umd.edu/ues/guides/primary-sources>

Primary: original artifacts, manuscripts.

Secondary: (peer-reviewed?) analysis, discussion of primary

Tertiary: Summaries, reviews, round-ups

Definitions are slippery, people argue a lot. Some SCA-specific things to consider:

Translations: Not really a primary source at all; however, unless you are going to legalistically argue the exact meaning of specific words, often treated as good enough

Music: Any modern edition of medieval music has been edited. That's neither good nor bad, it just is.

Archaeological reports: Not the same as an original artifact, but maybe as close as some of us might get.

Peer-reviewed journal articles: Way underused, because they aren't readily accessible on the Internet or in local libraries. Highly focused, written by people dedicated to this stuff. Highly recommended (if that fits your goals).

About academics:

- Academics spend their whole professional careers wrapped up in this stuff, and they know a lot about it. It's not wise to dismiss their writing as "just book learning" if it contradicts what you would prefer to believe about the Middle Ages.
- On the other hand, they don't get the same insights that re-enactors can from using reproduction items, and their profession rewards highly-focused, deep research. Re-enactors are well-positioned to do "cross-disciplinary" research and see connections traditional academics might miss. So it's also not wise to dismiss your own *thoughtful, evidence-based* conclusions just because an academic says otherwise.

Textbooks: Higher-level (popular or undergraduate) books lean a little more tertiary; lower-level, more focused books with extensive citations lean more secondary.

Web Pages: There is excellent original research self-published on the Web, and there is utter junk.

- Is it trying to sell you something using a romantic 'historical' story? ("This necklace displays the Love Knot, used by ancient druids to represent the enduring love of the Mother Goddess. Buy now!")
- Are there citations? Are they to something like "Holy Blood, Holy Grail" or to something like "A report of the excavations of sarcophagii XI - XIII at Saint-Denis"?
- Does the author freely admit where he or she is uncertain, lacks information, or has made assumptions? These are good signs! Weak research tries to hide or cover over uncertainties.

Wikipedia: What's your scope? What are your goals?

Wikipedia is not a traditional, academic citable source. However, when I've wanted to

do a quick, exploratory project, and I haven't wanted to spend a lot of time on my information search - yes, I use Wikipedia. I *don't* try to present that as great-shakes information search, because I'm owning my goals of a quick and exploratory project.

How Do I Find It?

1. Ask a librarian. Make an appointment, if you like, and tell them your basic project goals (that you wrote down in your logbook). "I am a historical re-enactor, and I want to make a 14th cen. French gizmo. I need information on the production, use and decoration of gizmos." When you show up, they will probably have a stack of stuff for you to look at.
2. Keyword search using your favorite search engine
 - a. You can Google "How do I use Google?" and it will tell you.
 - b. Try adjusting the scope of your search in time, geography, and craft
 - i. "medieval [European] garb" - may be too broad
 - ii. "Parisian pearl-embroidered sleeve 1440-1460" may be too narrow
 - iii. Time: by epoch (Roman Empire, medieval, Renaissance), by cultural definition (blends with geographical: Viking era, Carolingian France), era delineated by major political events (Crusader era, Tudor era), by century, by span of years
 - iv. Location: Broad geography (European, Middle Eastern), nation/kingdom/empire (Ottoman, Spanish), county/region/duchy, city/town/village.
 - v. Craft: explore related techniques, related products. So "pearl-embroidered sleeves" might relate to: decorated sleeves, decorated clothing, pearl-embroidered anything, beaded decorations on anything
 - c. When you do find a site, pay attention to professional jargon.
 - i. Is it "pearl-embroidered," "pearl-worked," "beaded embroidery (sometimes done with pearls)"? Search those terms.
3. Citation surfing
 - a. Find a paper/book/website with a bibliography.
 - b. Read bibliography, identify interesting/related articles.
 - c. Acquire articles, read, read *their* bibliographies.
 - i. You will likely have a list of dozens of resources after just a few hits
 - ii. They may all/mostly cite a few "seminal papers," frequently older, which you may want to read.
 - iii. To get information newer than your first article, take the names of all of the authors who are writing interesting things, and Google them with the word "Publications" or the name of their institution. If they are still alive and writing, you will probably find their publications page, which will list *everything they've ever written*.
 - iv. Drown in information

Remember to take notes in your logbook as you read! Write out the citation, any quotes you may want to have for later, and what page the quote came from.

Process

Select your Methods and Materials based on your project goals and what you've learned from your information search. If you decide between possibility A and B, consider recording which you picked *and why*.

Record your artistic process in your logbook. "Threw weaving shuttle 1,458 times" is probably too much information. Record problems and your ideas for solving them, questions that have sent you back to your books, ideas that have occurred to you, things you figured out, successes and triumphs, problems and failures.

If you get 85% of the way through your project and learn something that makes you think you did everything totally wrong:

Hurray! What a fantastic learning experience!

No, it does not feel good. (Especially if you are a perfectionist.) You feel like you wasted your time. But you didn't. You had to do what you did to learn the things you learned. This is a learning process. If you had all the answers and could do everything perfectly already, it wouldn't be research.

It's okay to take your imperfect project, use it, even display or compete it. It's definitely okay to say, in your documentation, that you started the project believing *this*, and now you believe *that*, and if you do this over, you'll do something differently. That is exactly what professional researchers do.

Self-Evaluation

Look back at your goals. Did you meet them?

What 1-3 things are you not happy about, that you'd like to improve/change/work on?

- *1-3 is plenty*. Most artists have no problem reeling of a huge list of every tiny flaw in their work. *Stop*. That does you no good. Focus on a small number of things and you can actually make progress on them in your next project.

What 3-5 things are you happy about or proud of?

- "That I tried it" is always a thing you can count. "That I finished it" is another. "That I learned something" is a third.
- But get into the habit of seeing the good, the progress, the awesome! in your own work.

Document!

My favorite report format (optimized for recording a research process, not necessarily for A&S competition) follows. You can write a few sentences for each part and have a 1-page summary, or write many pages and have a dissertation. Your call.

Introduction (mirrors Goal-Setting): Tell the reader what this project is about and what you went into it hoping to learn.

Background (mirrors Information Search): Give the reader enough information that they can understand the context of your project.

Methods and Materials (mirrors Process): Explain what you did, with what materials, and why. A good place to mention any variances from authentic practice and why you chose to do it that way (because you had a goal about that?) (By the way: “Because it isn’t important to me” is an accurate and acceptable statement. “Because it isn’t important” will start fights.)

You might discuss any interesting problems you experienced during your process here, as well as how you solved them. (That’s a method.)

Results (mirrors Self-Evaluation): Technically, how’d your thing turn out? Is it a good thing, well-made? If you were judging it, what might you say about it? You can be honest here.

Conclusion (mirrors Self-Evaluation): “Results are what you did; Conclusions are what you learned.” Did you learn the things you set out to learn in your Introduction? What’s the answer? What new questions has your project suggested to you?

References (mirrors Information Search): Listing of the resources you used.

Summary

- Research is an applied learning process.
- It can be exploratory or in-depth.
- Exploratory research is not the equivalent of in-depth research, but it can be personally rewarding. There’s no reason not to do it if you’re so inclined.
- Because in-depth research takes more time and effort, that’s the style that is generally rewarded in the SCA. That doesn’t mean you have to do it that way if you don’t want to.
- Research can be represented as a four-part process of goal-setting, information search, a process of synthesizing or applying the information, and a self-evaluation/reflection.
- This process can be applied to exploratory or in-depth research.
- Keeping a journal of the research process is often helpful.

PART TWO: RESEARCH AS APPLIED TO PERFORMANCE

Goal-Setting for Performance

Frequently involves questions of accessibility (to audience) vs. authenticity. There is no magic right answer, and what we can authenticate is limited. But it isn't zero, either - we can see a sort of plausible envelope into which performance can be fit. Have an idea of how many guidelines you're willing to break.

Information Search for Performance

Storytelling

I decided to try to "show, not tell" and actually document for you how I tried to educate myself on what's out there for medieval storytelling. Not medieval stories - we have plenty of those - but how to perform prose stories.

I started with the obvious: Google "Medieval Storytelling." Some first-page results:

- Sioned Davies. "Storytelling in Medieval Wales." *Oral Tradition*, 7(2), 1992, 231-57.
http://journal.oraltradition.org/files/articles/7ii/4_davies.pdf
- Cariadoc's Miscellany: Period Sources for Storytelling.
http://www.pbm.com/~lindah/cariadoc/period_sources_for_story_telling.html (Mostly story resources but also a few notes on presentation/staging.)
- 2 different college syllabi for classes about medieval storytelling (although the class seems more focused on the stories rather than the performance)
- YouTube video of someone performing medieval narrative:
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8U4DkjbEUWA>

Those weren't bad, but most of the results were about medieval story composition/writing, not performance. So I added that word: Google "Medieval Storytelling Performance"

- "Scholarly articles for 'medieval storytelling performance' right at top of page!
 - Head over to scholar.google.com
 - WOW a whole bunch of articles!
- Back to regular Google
- Patrick Ball and others: historically informed production of Tristan and Iseult with audio clips http://www.patrickball.com/pages/shows/show_flamelove.php
- A website called "Performing Medieval Narrative Today." <http://mednar.org/> Hot Dog! And it's got a bibliography page that's packed with potentially useful stuff:
<http://mednar.org/bibliography/>

- Sioned Davis (hey she's on the bibliography page I just read!) "From Storytelling to Sermons: The Oral Narrative Tradition in Wales." *Oral Tradition*, 18(2), 2003. "As someone whose main interest is storytelling in medieval Wales, orality, aurality, and performance are key issues in any analysis of the Middle Welsh prose corpus, especially in matters relating to style and structure." Her main research interests are exactly what I want to find out - I should Google "Sioned Davis publications" and see what else she's done.
- Thor Ewing's website - he is a professional storyteller working with medieval narrative. Might be interesting to see what his recreations look like.
<http://www.historicalarts.co.uk/thor/stories.html>
- Evelyn Birge Vitz. (Hey her name is at the top of the bibliography page!) "Tales with Guts: A "Rasaesthetic" Aesthetic in Medieval French Storytelling." *The Drama Review*, 52(4), Winter 2008, 145-173.
 - "Scholars of medieval Europe tend to see aural performances of narrative works as just medieval "books on tape" with a disembodied reader. But the auditory element was often only a small part of the live performance. Narrative works in medieval Europe were performed, and storytellers engaged audiences' bodies and emotions as well as their minds. Richard Schechner's "Rasaesthetics" helps us recognize the strong emotional flavors and dynamism inherent in the performance tradition of many medieval stories."

Okay, I have no idea what Rasaesthetics is, but I could find out. I admit that I'm skeptical, but who knows? Could be good stuff.

Ideas for More Googling, based on the summaries and blurbs. We look for keywords that sound like technical jargon used by academics that will distinguish the articles we want from random Internet content: oral narrative, oral poetry, oral tradition; any of those with "performance" added; Sioned Davis, Evelyn Birge Vitz; Rasaesthetics; medieval performance tradition; et cetera...

I might eventually find that "Performing Medieval Narrative" is also a book, and here's its table of contents: <http://catdir.loc.gov/catdir/toc/ecip051/2004022272.html>. Then I might check on the off-chance that a contributor has his or her chapter available for free, like Benajim Bagby does: http://bagbybeowulf.com/background/PerformingMedNarr_13.pdf)

Teleri's Bibliography for Music

Timothy McGee. *Medieval and Renaissance Music: A Performer's Guide*. University of

Toronto Press. 1985.

A general handbook addressing most of the basic musical matters needed to put together a performance. Out of print, available used from \$15 on Amazon.

Timothy McGee. *The Sound of Medieval Song: Ornamentation and Vocal Style according to the Treatises*. Oxford University Press, 1998.

I don't have this one, but I covet it badly. At \$99, it is an investment.

Timothy McGee, ed.. *Singing Early Music. Singing Early Music: The Pronunciation of European Languages in the Late Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Indiana University Press, 2004.

Detailed information on how to pronounce medieval languages. Comes with a CD to help you hear it. \$40 list price.

Timothy McGee, ed. *Improvisation in the Arts of the Middle Ages and Renaissance*. Early Drama, Art and Music Monograph series, vol. 30. Western Michigan University Medieval, 2003.

Very interesting articles on very hard to authenticate practices. Only \$15. Volume 30? Makes me wonder what the others are about...

Timothy McGee. *Instruments and their Music in the Middle Ages*. Ashgate, 2008.

A collection of some of the most influential articles on medieval musical performance, with a price tag to match (almost \$350). Probably want to get this one from the library. (I have not read it myself.)

Ross Duffin, ed. *A Performer's Guide to Medieval Music*. Indiana University Press, 2002.

\$36. Collection of essays by various authors on types of medieval music, instruments and voices, and essential musical theory. Similar to the 1985 McGee but I'd rather have both.

Christopher Page. *Voices and Instruments of the Middle Ages, The Christian West and Its Singers*. Yet more information on and ideas about how songs were sung and how instruments were played.

Richard Hoppin. *Medieval Music*. Kinds of music (religious and secular), musical theory; standard graduate text. Also has an accompanying anthology of tunes.)

Cambridge Companion to Medieval Music - I don't have it

And so many others!

Teleri's Bibliography for Narrative Poetry

This overlaps some with the storytelling - folks in the Middle Ages were as likely to have their narratives in verse as in prose.

Albert Lord, *The Singer of Tales*.

So a bunch of academics were arguing over whether or not Homer was an oral poet. And a guy thought, "Hey, let's go and study a living oral tradition and see if it has any unique features! And then see if those features are in Homer!" And then his student wrote up the results in this seminal work. Oral-formulaic theory is no longer the be-all and end-all of oral performance, but it is still a force to be reckoned with.

John Miles Foley, *How to Read an Oral Poem*

This is meant to be an introductory text, and the tone is sometimes a little "GOSH GEE WHIZ". You'd think the author had never seen a live performance - a play, a concert, anything. But he contrasts and compares some very different kinds of oral performance (a Nuyorican poetry slam, Himalayan oral poetry, ancient epics) and points out the sorts of things you can learn thereby.

Foley has published a huge number of more sober articles and also maintains a very interesting/useful website "Center for Studies of Oral Tradition,"

<http://www.oraltradition.org/>

Other Poetry (and also some music)

Probably your best bet is to search by historical performer type: Anglo-Saxon scop, Icelandic skald, Occitan troubador, northern French trouvère, Welsh bardd, German minnesänger, etc. The context and culture which would have influenced their performances will be best highlighted in books specifically about them.

So on my bookshelf I have: *Anglo-Saxon Oral Poetry, The Mead-Hall, The Anglo-Saxon Scop* (a reprint of a 1903 Master's thesis now free online from Google Books!), Ben Bagby's *Beowulf* DVD, Christopher Page's PhD dissertation on the playing of the Germanic lyre (also free online) and a reprint of a translation of three music theory treatises from early period.

An Expensive Hint:

Amazon.com's "Customers who bought this item also bought" feature. If I go and stumble across "The World of the Troubadors," it recommends a host of other books, at least four of which look possibly relevant to someone who wanted to research the performance practice of the troubadours.

Where to Find Repertoire

YouTube

Great for ideas. Many performances of actual medieval music, poetry, stories. Just Google what you find because there's also lots of performances of "medieval" stuff that's not.

ChoralWiki

http://www0.cpd.org/wiki/index.php/Category:Musical_eras

Bam, medieval and Renaissance sheet music. Free.

Google

Ask Google. Type in what you want, as general or as specific as you know. "medieval short stories for kids;" "Renaissance war poems;" "12th century love songs" You may not get what you want, but you'll start seeing what's there. *There is a lot there.*

And of course, the library. But you can get really far these days with just an Internet connection.

Secondary Sources

scholar.google.com

A good tool for searching for secondary sources (academic journal articles). Write down the reference and bring it to a library. A university may have the journal; your local county library can get it via Interlibrary Loan.

Your Nearby University Library

They have amazing journal databases you can search just like the Internet. A research librarian will be happy to show you how to use the system.

Period Sources

The repertoire: musical notation may reflect the needs of performance; the Globe

reconstruction takes cues from lines from Shakespeare's plays.

Instructional treatises: Rich sources for music and song, perhaps less so for stories and poetry.

Records: Exchequer records of which performers were paid for what events; letters home describing performances seen; laws concerning "minstrels and sturdy beggars;" histories; travelogues

Fulminations: Sermons or moralizing treatises decrying the temptations of wicked performers in the tavern, godless May-Day activities, etc.

Images: Carvings, illuminations, etc. Use with care - illustrators aren't always true to life, either through inexperience (mechanically impossible instruments), copying issues (antique items/practices copied from older image), or allegory (a group of musicians represents "make a joyful noise" instead of a real consort)

Fiction: Also use with care! Small details meant to add verisimilitude: probably okay. Used as a framing device (e.g., tale-telling contest): evaluate carefully. Fantastic element (e.g., court of the fairy queen): Probably not.

Performance Development

Translation or not?

Type of performance?

Period source?

Source needs augmenting? (e.g., poem survives without music but you want to sing it)

What do you need to know about:

- Vocal production

- Ornamentation and improvisation

- Musical composition

- Instrumentation and accompaniment

- Solo or group work

- Body language

- Body motion

- Facial affect

- Props, costumes

- Typical venue

- Historical circumstances impacting performance

Can you infer information about some of these things? (e.g., if the performer typically sings and plays the vielle, he may not be leaping about the room, too)

Performance

How do you think it went?

How were you, technically?

What was the audience response?

Any environmental issues at fault? (e.g., rain on tent roof drowned you out)

Did you meet your goals?

If not, any ideas about why not?