How to Do Research
Lady Teleri the Well-Prepared
sca_bard@yahoo.com

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.)

<u>Results</u> (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.

<u>Conclusion</u> (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?

<u>References</u> (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.