

How to Enter in an Amtgard A&S Tournament

By Baron Master Thalen Tannon

Competition is a word that many people find intimidating. Some people get so worried about these trials that they're unable to participate, or if they do compete they fall short of their own expectations. They do not fail because of the task itself, but rather because of their own concerns about success. We live in a culture that thrives upon competition; we play a game that revolves around it, most notably the tournaments in which our next Monarch is chosen. Those that find such activities intimidating often deny themselves an opportunity for an experience only a competition can give.

As Marianne Williams wrote, "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond measure. It is our light, not our darkness that most frightens us.' We ask ourselves, Who am I to be brilliant, gorgeous, talented, and fabulous? Actually, who are you not to be? You are a child of God. Your playing small does not serve the world."

So how do we overcome our fear and start playing bigger? The best way to overcome a fear of competitions is to properly prepare for them. For that you must start by answering two very important questions.

Why am I entering this competition?

Fortunately, there are many reasons for entering an Arts & Sciences Tournament. Here are some of the most common reasons:

- To share – showing others what you have done
- To win an award – gratification in getting recognized for work well done.
- To expand your knowledge – Explore an area of an Art or Science that you have not explored before
- To qualify for an elected position

When you've determined what your reasons are, then it's time to figure out what you're going to create.

What am I entering in this competition?

Now that you've decided to enter a tournament, the next thing is to come up with an entry or several entries for the competition. Try to fill a need that you've noticed. Are you lacking garb? Do you need a new weapon? Would you like to learn how to make jewelry? Does your province need a new banner? Find a need and fulfill that need. That way what you enter gets used rather than shuffled away in to the closet. Any thing you make but don't personally use perhaps could be donated to a person, or to the Kingdom for auction.

I know what I want to make. Where do I start?

This is where we get down to the brass tacks of the matter.

1. Create some sort of journal for your entry.

This journal should be used for making notes as you research your entry. This research might take the form of books, magazines, online tutorials, even pictures or art that you've seen. You could get an actual journal to keep track of all your ideas, however another idea is to keep them as folders of text files and images on a flash drive or your home PC.

2. Research your item.

This would be where you gather all the information you would need to determine the scope of your project. Let's say you're making some garb. You've decided on a "Tunic". You might research various patterns, collar styles, sleeve types before choosing exactly what kind of "Tunic" you're making. Then there's research on materials, and colors and accents. If you're unsure about a certain technique such as Satin Stitching, you might research the how to do that kind of a stitch. You might not normally do this much preparational work on another project, but remember you're entering this piece of work. It has to be the best you can do.

3. Write first draft of your documentation

It is best to start your documentation as early as possible. With a chosen item and the research you have done for the competition, you have a basis for your write-up. Because documentation is one of the judged categories, work out a preliminary interpretation of your item. Most of the information that should go into your write-up should be in your journal. Essentially, you are taking your journal, organizing it and condensing it.

Although your research will vary depending on the kind of project your documentation might have the following elements:

- Name of entry
- The intended Entry Category
- Your number of awards in that Category
- Your experience in this particular field
- Your Scope of Work
- Background on why the entry was chosen
- Your interpretation of the creation of the item
- Notes of any changes you made from the original idea
- Source of information

5. Create your item

Prepare your entry according to the initial interpretation you have already written in your rough draft of your write-up. This is critical when creating this type of item for the first time. This gives you the opportunity to evaluate your interpretation and adjust it, as you find necessary. The workmanship of your item is a category that the judges evaluate. If something is going horribly wrong with your item, this is the opportunity to rework it. Make sure you journal all your successes and challenges during this process.

6. Finalize your documentation

Your write-up speaks for you when you aren't around. It explains what you made, the materials used and the process of creating the piece.

You can include pictures if you like, but don't get stressed over the aesthetics. The important thing is to share the information you have. Good documentation does not mean a formal research paper filled with footnotes and printed out on a ream of paper; rather, it places the value of content over format. Keep it neat, simple and cover all of the basics. Try to keep your write-up to no more than two pages. Remember that the judges are evaluating several entries and they can only absorb so much in a single reading of your documentation.

Make sure that your write-up reflects the changes that you made in the creation of your item based upon the discoveries you have made. You may want to note any special insights you had through the creation process.

Review your documentation to make sure that you have not forgotten anything. Have someone proof read your write up; there may be issues with it that you had not noticed.

My projects are done. Now what?

You might want to set your entries on a table and decide the best method of presentation. Run this checklist in your head.

- Do I have all my documentation? Did I spell check and grammar check?
- Does my work look professional?
 - For garbing entries make sure you've clipped all of the dangly threads and brushed the item free of lint or thread bits. Make sure the item is clean and ironed.
 - Artwork should be framed or matted.
 - Written entries should have at least 5 copies bound in some manner (binder, folder, presentation sleeve, etc).
 - Jewelry and sculptures might look better on a dark background. Consider using a cloth to place under those items.
- Do I need any accessories for any entries?
 - Plates, cups, bowls, utensils, napkins for food entries, etc.
 - Tape or pins to attach your entry information or documentation to the item.

Once you're sure of every entry, pack them carefully for travel.

The Competition itself

First and foremost, arrive before the cutoff time for entering the tournament. There may be a line and the paperwork can take a few minutes. Fill out any entry info cards the Autocrat may have and find out where they would like you to set your entries.

Once your items are set up, leave the judging area and let the judges do their job. Go socialize, or watch or fight in the warskill tourney, but let the judges work. The only reason you should stick close by is if you're also entering in the bardic category.

The Judging

Bear in mind, not all judges use the same criteria! So how do judges know how to assess points? Sometimes the judges are given a sheet that explains the criteria the person in charge wants them to use.

In the instructional guide, "How to Judge an A&S Tournament" there are 5 categories the judges are looking at.

Documentation - Documentation is the foundation of a good entry. It provides the judges with the necessary details of the conception and creation for the item entered. It shows the entrant's understanding of the overall techniques and the adaptations that had to be made for this specific project.

Scope of Work - This section is used to determine the depth and breadth of the work. The judges should try not to look at the piece solely as it is, but what the entrant was envisioning from the start from what is in their write-up.

Relevance - While we aren't "Period Specific" like they are in the SCA, Amtgard DOES have a time period and place that we're trying to represent. The Rules of Play define that period by declaring that "Every persona must be either of an ancient, medieval, or swords and sorcery related background." That gives us a lot of time and space to work with. Keeping that in mind, the entry should bear some relevance to what we do in Amtgard. The obvious things like garb and weapons are easily recognizable as relevant, but it might take some real thought to decide if a bardic entry is "Amtgard Relevant".

A Judge should ask themselves “If Amtgard were real, would this (insert entry here) be out of place?” If so, the Judge would need to determine to what extent and critique the piece accordingly.

Workmanship - This is the section where experience in the field of the entry is the most helpful. In this section, the judges will determine how well the entrant completed the piece. Complexity is the degree of difficulty in creating the item. Consider how much physical time the entry took to construct, the use of elaborate or sensitive processes, and the availability of materials used in the creation of the item. Workmanship is the degree of quality of the item created. It shows the entrant’s skill in the use of the documented processes and materials.

Creativity - Creativity is the degree in which the entrant shows their understanding of the processes and materials to create an original item. It shows how well the entrant can adapt and interpret what they have learned.

Judges Observation - This section is designed to cover how all the other sections fit together. What is the overall effect of the piece? Aesthetics is the degree in which the entry is pleasing to the eye.

This is the judges’ one spot to let their personal feelings through. If the entry has documentation, matches its scope of work, is well crafted and original but the judge just does not like it, this is where that opinion goes. The corollary, however, is that for all the other criteria, the judges must remain impartial and objective.

The Tournament is over. Now what?

- Look at your scores and comments as soon as the judging is done.
- Accept constructive critique graciously. If the judge took the time to write a comment to try and help you improve you should give it serious consideration. However, seriously question or even disregard any criticism that comes without any positive aspect or recommendations.
- Please remember that the judges are human. Poorly written comments, a missed word in the documentation, different approaches to the art...many things can lead to misunderstandings. If you have questions or wish to make comments or clarifications of your own, please find the judges and speak with them. That doesn't mean track them down and scream at them. It means politely ask for a few minutes of their time and use it to communicate both ways. Also bear in mind that once the tournament is over the scores should not be changed. Aim for a better understanding, rather than a change in your score.
- Please remove your entry from the competition area in a timely manner to ensure its safety.

Now that you've entered a tourney and you know what it's all about it's time to start thinking ahead. Start planning your next project and encourage others to try A&S competitions. Take some time to figure out what you have learned both for your art and in the process of entering in a Tournament.

Three ways to set yourself up for almost certain failure:

1. If competitions just aren't the right venue for you... don't force yourself to enter them. There are many other outlets for artisans – Demos, teaching classes or just using/wearing the wonderful things you've made.
2. Don't convince yourself that winning is the only option. Winning can be the goal, but what happens if you don't win? Better yet, use the tournament as a test of your knowledge and skills. Don't do it for the awards, do it for the practice.

3. Don't use the competition to prove you know it all; none of us really do. Everybody can learn something from someone else.

Some ways to set yourself up for success:

- Plan – Take your time and don't rush. Some entrants start working on projects many months before a major competition.
- Research – Start off by finding out all you can about your entry. Any well-researched project can become an A&S entry. It doesn't work very well if it's done the other way around. It also may help to enlist a "research buddy" or two. These are others who know what you are interested in and will send you interesting little tidbits they trip across.
- Write everything down – Keep a log of research notes. Many artisans use a spiral bound notebook or folder to keep everything organized. Personally, I keep a lot of information on a flash drive. Write down the books you used, what materials you used, the step-by-step process to make your entry, substitutions ... right down to what you learned or would do differently. Keeping good notes will make developing your write-up easier.
- Double check – When you think you are done, have someone else look over your entry and documentation. They may notice flaws you can fix or have questions that aren't answered in your documentation. Some competitions provide the rules and judging criteria ahead of time. Read them and use them to your advantage. Even using the criteria from another competition or kingdom to pre judge your entry may help you find areas for improvement before you enter a piece.

Ultimately, don't give up on A&S Tournaments. Keep at it and excel at your art. If you like the atmosphere, but aren't inspired to enter, volunteers are often needed to organize or help out at a competition. Those who remain active in the A&S community often become judges and organizers themselves. They draw upon the experiences they have had, both good and bad, to make tournaments better for the next generation of artisans.