

Entering Arts and Sciences Competitions

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Entering an A&S competition can be an intimidating experience, either for new folks or those who remember the bad old days where A&S competitions were ugly things. However, they need not be a thing of horror, fear, and tears. Below are some easy steps to having a successful A&S competition experience. *Please note: these comments are largely directed at physical A&S entries. Performing arts present unique challenges not directly addressed in this document.*

Read the entry rules and the judging criteria

It is important to know what the standards are for the competition you hope to enter. Different competitions have different rules and sets of judging criteria, so don't get caught off-guard and be sure to be informed in advance. In particular, check whether there is a theme, any restrictions (size of display, dry site, etc.), or documentation requirements. If you can, take a look at the judge's sheet to see what categories you will be judged on and what the criteria are for each section.

Do your research & create your item

Research should come first when creating a well-documented A&S entry. Make sure you know the specifics of the item you are recreating-you may make substitutions and changes, but these should be conscious decisions, not deviations you discover after the fact. Evaluate your research sources carefully-are they good sources? Why? Make sure to include sources other than just web pages and avoid general-knowledge site like Wikipedia as sources. Take extra care in the construction of the item and, if applicable, take pictures of the process at regular intervals or at key points.

Write your documentation

Once your piece is completed, carefully write your documentation. Remember, the documentation is where you show you really know what you are doing, not just that you got lucky, and it is what will speak for you if the judging is not done face-to-face. The goals of your documentation are to educate the reader and to demonstrate how you created the item. It is generally safe to assume that the judge is someone who has very basic knowledge about the item you are making, but that they know no specifics about the details of its history or construction. This is also your place to justify any departures from the norm that you made; offer well-reasoned explanations, not excuses! When it is completed, for the love of all that's holy, spell check your final document! Consider including an appendix of key pages from reference you used so judges and passers-by can see where you got your ideas. See the separate ["Writing Documentation" handout](#).

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Register your entry

Before the registration deadline, fill out any required forms and submit them to the A&S Coordinator. This is not always a required step, but we are working to make A&S friendlier, in part by ensuring that every piece is provided with an appropriate judge, which often needs to be arranged for in advance. If there are several levels of entry allowed (novice, expert, etc), be honest with yourself and enter the appropriate category. Entering in a category too far above your level will result in tears and entering in a category too far below your level is stomping puppies and not nice. Challenge yourself, but be realistic.

Present your entry & documentation

Presenting your item is more than slapping it down on a table with a note card! Take care in arranging your item so that it is presented in a pleasing manner. Consider a tablecloth, particularly if it is an item that could be damaged from a rough or dirty surface. Make sure your documentation is neatly printed out, organized, and easy to access. Consider having a single page summary of your project or business cards available for gentles to take in case they want to contact you later. If it is part of the competition format, be available for face-to-face judging or a meet-the artisan time.

Self-evaluate and set expectations

This is one of the hardest steps! If you can, obtain a copy of the judging sheet, then step back and look at your project critically. Where are you succeeding and where does your piece still need more work? Where did you make substitutions in materials and methods and were those well supported choices? Is your workmanship the best that you can produce? How does the compare to the period examples and the state of the art among others in your field? Be strict, but fair. Give yourself both comments and a score-you'll be amazed at how much you can learn from examining your own work! Then, go have a look at the other entries in the competition with the same critical eye.

Receive your comments and results

As hard as it is to self-evaluate (and never mind that you signed up for this), getting feedback from others can be very challenging. Keep in mind that judges have a hard job to do too and are trying to be both helpful and fair. Comments should be viewed as an opportunity to improve, not a condemnation of your work. If all you got were 9s and 10s, the feedback might be more palatable, but it wouldn't necessarily be helpful. Read the comments carefully and with the assumption that they are provided in the spirit of helpfulness.

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Discuss with your judges or experts

If you have any questions about your scores or the comments provided, please contact the judge so they can clarify their meaning. If you received a low score but are unclear on how to improve your piece, discuss with the judge or with other gentles who are accomplished in the art you are doing. Discuss different interpretations, alternate construction techniques and materials, and other ways of supporting your choices.

Rinse, repeat!

The only real way to get better at A&S Competitions is to keep entering and keep working at your art. Remember that the goal is not to get a perfect score on your first attempt, but rather to improve your scores each time you compete and to improve your art every time you create a piece, whether or not it is for entry into a competition!