

Embrace Your Inner Nerd: How to do Effective Research

Introduction

As you get more involved in the SCA, you'll no doubt want to start research into various topics, to find out how people lived, what they wore, and how they did things. But research need not just apply to the SCA; if you're a uni student, you need to know how to research effectively. You'll also need research skills throughout your life.

One of the keys to effective research is *organisation*. You may have found an absolute killer article on the topic you're researching, or sort of remember a crucial fact from a book you've read. But if you can't find the article in the geological strata on your desk, or you can't find the fact in the book (or even find the book), you have a problem.

The other key to effective research is *time*. There's a lot of data out there. You need the time to sift through it all to find the information you need to complete your research project. So start your research as early as you can manage. Leaving it all to the last minute is not going to produce good research, or a final result from the research (such as a uni essay or A&S project).

Getting Started - Your Topic

Before you do anything else, you need to define exactly what you're researching. This may seem simple, and most of the time it will be. Sometimes, however, you need to think carefully about what you're aiming to find out about. As most research is conducted with the aim of producing something, such as a period craft piece or a uni paper, that's your final goal. Write your research goal down on a piece of paper, and stick it to your wall.

And make sure you pick something to research that you're interested in. There's no point researching medieval brewing methods if you don't like beer.

Examining a Question/Topic

In many cases, the goal of your research will be clear. However, particularly in the case of university papers, there might be aspects to a topic that can trip you up if you aren't careful, so you need to be sure exactly what you're being asked to do.

Sample Topic: "Was Christine de Pisan an early feminist?"

This is a question that pops up frequently as a major essay topic for Introduction to Medieval History at Newcastle University. It looks obvious: you are being asked to discuss the work of Christine de Pisan. So, you need to find out who Christine de Pisan was, and examine her work. But what about the second part of the question – feminism? I've known of a few students who've tried to answer this question and completely ignored the feminist aspect. So, you also need to research the modern theory of feminism, and see whether or not Christine's work fits this theory, and if possible find the opinions of other scholars to see whether they think Christine was an early feminist.

Sample Topic: "Illuminations in the style of the Manesse Codex"

This is an example of a Kingdom Arts and Sciences competition. Your research goal is clear: you need to study illuminations from the Manesse Codex, so you can reproduce their style. You also need to find out how and why it was produced, and what materials were used.

Finding Your Information

Right, you've worked out what you're looking for, now you need to find it.

Primary and Secondary Sources (and, the Gods forbid, Tertiary Sources)

One thing you'll need to do as a researcher is differentiate between *primary* and *secondary* sources. A primary source is basically anything from the period you're studying – a written document or *translation of a written document*, or an object or *picture of an object*. A secondary source is anything produced after the period that interprets or comments – a modern history of medieval art, for example.

Some people also mention tertiary sources – generally considered a summary of a secondary (or primary) source. However, most Australian scholars don't go beyond Primary and Secondary; it gets too confusing, otherwise.

Evaluating your Sources – Good vs Bad

Just because something is written down, it doesn't mean it's true. Dress and textile researchers can go on for *hours* about wrong ideas propagated by Victorian scholars. Don't accept everything you read as truth.

Where did the information come from?

I've found that one of the best ways of evaluating a source is to check the bibliography and footnotes.

If they contain lots of references to primary sources, you can probably trust your source; the author is discussing actual evidence from the period, and more to the point, you can then chase up the source for further detail, and draw your own conclusions if you want. But if a source's bibliography and footnotes reference more secondary sources (or tertiary sources), that source may not be as reliable, because the author isn't necessarily working from original material, but other people's (possibly wrong) opinions. And if a source doesn't have a bibliography or footnotes, you have no way of checking the accuracy of the facts presented.

In general, more recent works also tend to be more reliable than older ones – modern standards of scholarship tend to be more rigorous. However, sometimes you will be forced to use older sources because there's nothing newer available. Sometimes an "old" work is so good, the information it contains is still just as relevant as it was when the source came out. And "new" sources aren't necessarily always better.

The Author

As you get more knowledgeable about a subject, you will come to recognise experts in that topic. For instance, if you are researching Tudor households and crafts, and you come across anything by Ruth Goodman you know you're in good hands. She is a social historian who believes firmly in hands on research, whether it be cooking, making clothes, manners or laundry.

However, when you're starting out, or you come across a source by someone you don't know, you don't have that knowledge. One very simple thing you can do is do a Google search for the author. Again going back to Ruth Goodman, if you do a Google search for her, you'll find she has a Wikipedia page (which she didn't create but has edited), a long list of books she's authored, particularly around manners and domestic history, and documentaries she's appeared in. You will also find a number of brief bios that note she's a historian specialising in the early modern period who has collaborated with museums (such as the Museum of London) and advised groups like The Royal Shakespeare Company. In other words, she knows her stuff.

A professional historian, whether freelance or academic, will frequently have their qualifications and where they got them listed, along with academic specialties. You may also find current research foci, where they are based and papers and other work they have done. You may even find info about their pets, family and gardens.

However, if you can't find any details anywhere about how an author got interested in a subject, where they got their training or qualifications, or even where they are based, it's a red flag. If you don't have

multiple links to various sources, or they all eventually link back to one place, it's another danger sign.

With the rise of blogs and self publishing, the propagation of poor or plagiarised research became so much easier. A number of prominent academics and even SCA artisans have had their work stolen by people looking to make a quick buck off the latest epic TV series. SCA food historian Daniel Myers, who hosts and curates the excellent medievalcooking.com, had some of his recipes stolen by an author who slapped together several really dodgy Tudor e-books to capitalise on the popularity of *The Tudors* and *The Other Boleyn Girl*. And with the rise of AI tools like ChatGPT, it's become even easier for grifters to slap together really nice looking books on any number of subjects, from Regency manners and etiquette to wild foraging and cooking. These "books" can range from reasonable to downright dangerous. The person that put the book together will generally create an author as well, and if you search for these "authors" on Google you'll generally find it all links back to the one retailer page where their "books" are available.

(Note: much of this is paraphrased from Alexis Nikole Nelson, an incredibly lovely social media creator who appears on TikTok as AlexisNikole and YouTube and Instagram as The Black Forager. She presents really fun and informative videos about food foraging in the US, and how to cook with foraged foods. She has produced a number of videos about "foraging guides" generated by AI and why these works are so dangerous.)

One final way to evaluate a source is to ask. Social media means there are so many groups for arts and crafts where you can find help and advice. Some of them may already produce reading lists, and many enthusiasts are very aware of good sources, bad sources, and forthcoming sources.

Author Bias

As "bias" is an opinion on a topic, just about everything you read will present a "biased argument," as most authors write for a specific purpose or to present an argument. However, *bias* is considered to be an opinion coloured by preconceived notions that distort the truth. You need to be aware that author bias exists, and sometimes recognising it can be difficult. It's much easier to pick up in primary sources; as most medieval chronicles were compiled by authors patronised (paid) by powerful nobles, you can pretty much guarantee that any medieval chronicle is going to be biased in favour of the patron, and against the patron's enemies. For instance, if you read the Chandos Herald's biography of Edward the Black Prince, you could be forgiven for thinking the *chevauchee* raids he conducted in France were little more than a grand boy's own adventure, and the massacre of Limoges never happened. However, author bias can exist in secondary sources and scholarly research, where it can be harder to spot.

The best way to spot author bias is to read a wide array of material on a given topic. If you find an author has glossed over certain evidence, or is using evidence to back up an argument that seems very flimsy, you are probably looking at a biased work, and should proceed with caution.

Where to look - books

Even though cyberspace is becoming more and more pervasive, you'll probably find the best information in books. Often the best way to start a research project is to take yourself off to the library and find a general medieval history, or survey of your topic. Uni libraries tend to be better for this, though public libraries can yield surprising gems if you're patient. Most library systems also have interlibrary loan services, where you can request a book from another library for a fee. It can get expensive, but it's an invaluable way of tracking down out of print books you can't get any other way.

As well as books, try magazines and scholarly journals as well – journals in particular can be treasure troves of information on less common subjects. Some research libraries also have electronic databases of journals, such as JSTOR. These are fantastic resources, because you can search multiple journals at once with a search similar to a Google search. If you've never used these before, you may want to ask the librarians for help – they're generally happy to show you what to do.

However, to access research journals, you generally need to be in a research library, or a university student. For example, the Australian National Library in Canberra has an amazing collection of online and printed journals you can access at no cost, but you can only access the online collections from computers within the library building; you have to be onsite to look at the printed journals, and they can't be borrowed. Newcastle University only allows students and paying borrowers access to their online databases, though in the past Sydney University let anyone on site use theirs.

Where to look - the Internet

As well as the digital resources mentioned above, the internet can be an incredibly valuable research tool (questions about wikipedia's reliability notwithstanding). More and more SCA craftspeople and groups are setting up websites to share their own research, museums are setting up online catalogues of their artefacts, libraries are scanning famous manuscripts, and there are electronic libraries of texts.

There's also the social networking aspect of the internet – search Facebook for “sca” related groups, and be daunted by the groups out there – and that's just one social media platform.

A Word of Caution – Good vs Bad Internet Sources

There is (generally) no editing or peer review of information on the Internet. Anyone can stick anything on the Internet; anyone can present themselves as an expert on any subject, and only rarely do people get challenged on this. Again, be careful evaluating your Internet sources. If your Internet source has no references, or references sites like personal blogs or popular news sites, rather than scholarly sources, treat it with caution.

A Word of Caution – Pinterest

Pinterest doesn't appear as much today, but it's still a very popular social networking site, especially for would-be scholars. And if you come across a well organised, carefully annotated Pinterest page, it can be a wonderful resource. BUT, too often, Pinterest can be a way for everyone's inner hoarder to grab cool pics of all the stuff. There are too many Pinterest pages out there which aren't organised, which are full of pins which are only vaguely related to their purported subject, and which don't cite the source of the pin. This can be a real problem in the case of objects – you have no way of telling whether that “Viking brooch” really is a Viking brooch, or where the actual artefact is located.

A Word of Caution – AI

Until the AI bubble bursts (PLEASE!) it's unfortunately something everyone needs to be aware of, and unfortunately the red flags tend to vary depending on what you're researching. But in general, remember the points I made earlier about evaluating sources. If you can't find good period evidence for something, such as a painting with a “renaissance gown” that you've never seen in a manuscript, it's probably AI, or at the very least a dodgy fantasy. If someone mentions “research” or a “study” but doesn't say where it happened or who did it, it's probably AI or someone's telling lies. Remember, slop predates AI by centuries.

Where to look – experts

You will often have a very specific question relating to your research that you simply can't find the answer to anywhere. For example, you may be trying to find out what colour were the *stolas* Roman matrons wore. This is where mailing lists as mentioned above come into their own – there's a strong possibility someone else has asked your question and found the answer.

You can also approach professional academics, be they museum curators or university staff – most universities and museums list contact details for staff on websites. If you have a very specific question, they are often the best source of info you can get, and the vast majority of academics are only too pleased to share their knowledge. You may find they go above and beyond what you were expecting,

and let you know of sources you'd never considered.

That said, most experts, be they professionals or knowledgeable amateurs, do not appreciate “can you do my homework?” style questions; asking for help finding basic material is not going to be well received. However, asking for help evaluating a source will generally get you loads of good advice and pointers to other sources, because at least you've shown you're prepared to do some work.

Similarly, in social media groups, there are groups with varying levels of play. Some groups are *really* hard-core in their approach to authenticity. When you join a group, check out the information page if there is one, because such groups are usually very up front about their approach, and will shoot down anyone who puts up a post implying authenticity is not their major goal, and some of the people in these groups can be really snarky.

And SMS-speak in query emails/posts is *never* appropriate.

Searching for Information

When looking for information, remember that sometimes you'll need to generalise, particularly if what you are looking for is very specific. A library catalogue search for books on a specific topic may not yield any books on that subject, but a search for a generalised topic will probably bring results. For example, if you're researching the Battle of Agincourt and can't find any books about that particular battle, look for books on the Hundred Years War or Medieval Warfare, and then look for Agincourt in the table of contents or the index. If looking for the Manesse Codex, try looking for books about Medieval Illumination or Medieval Manuscripts, and check the index.

While you're reading, remember to pay attention to the footnotes and bibliography – they will frequently lead you to excellent sources.

Doing the Research

Right, you've identified your topic and found your starting resources. Now it's time to actually do the research.

Materials Required

As one of the keys to effective research is organisation, most of the materials you'll need will enable you to keep your research notes organised.

- Lever arch folder (for keeping articles etc you've photocopied)

- Dividers (to separate stuff on different topics)
- Loose leaf pages
- Post-it flags of various colours (for marking pages in books)
- Index cards for taking notes (if you have several projects going at once, make sure you have different coloured cards for each project)
- Shelf space for keeping related books together (tearing around the house trying to find a particular book is Not Fun, so keep everything together)
- Highlighters in various colours

Taking Notes

I use index cards to take notes. At the top of each card, I put a heading saying what the note is about, and at the bottom of the card I put the source of the note (author, name and page of a book, for example). Each card contains A SINGLE FACT, POINT OR QUOTE. This is important – if you start to put different points on the one card, you'll find it hard to sort your research out later. I try to write the note on the card in proper sentences, in my own words. If it's a quote, I use quote marks to say so. If I have a thought of my own while I'm researching, I write it on a card and put "OWN THOUGHTS" as the source.

This might seem a very intensive way of taking notes, and it does tend to generate a lot of note cards. However, having all your notes on little cards makes it easier to sort your notes out – you can put all related cards in piles, rather than having to sort through wads of paper. When you begin to sort your notes out, bulldog clips are wonderful for keeping related cards together. Especially if you have a cat, because she will invariably try to "sort" your notes for you.

While you're taking notes, write down on another page the author, name and other citation information of your sources as you go. This will form your bibliography.

How to use Post-It Notes and Flags

Post-It Notes and Flags are wonderful inventions. You can easily use them to mark not only pages, but passages, you don't have to worry about them falling out (or the cat pulling them out) and Post-It Flags can even be re-used.

However, it's easily possible to over use them. You may become so carried away marking important passages that your book starts to resemble a colourful echidna. When this happens, your Post-Its are effectively useless – there's so many of them, it's impossible to find the Post-It that marks the item you

want. Yes, you can get cute and use different coloured Post-Its for different research aspects, but trust me, you'll forget which colour is which, and one aspect will wind up dominating all others and you'll run out of Post-Its of the relevant colour. Use Post-Its wisely – to mark only the most important parts of the book, such as a major chapter, or a passage you find particularly relevant.

Artefact/Object Research

As you continue on in the SCA, you may want to get involved in some form of medieval craft, and make period-like items. In this case, you need to learn how to analyse craft styles.

Compare Like with Like – Time and Place

Make sure you are comparing like with like, in terms of object, place and period. If you want to make C11 Norman belt buckles, there's not much point looking at C6 Anglo-Saxon belt buckles (unless you want to become a maker of belts from all periods, in which case you would have several research projects analysing belt buckles of different periods). You may also find that objects identified by a particular style show significant variation over time, and early examples of the style aren't comparable to later examples of the style.

Unless you are replicating a specific object, don't just look at one object of a particular type. And even if you are replicating a specific object, it's probably best to look at similar objects so you can be sure the object you're replicating isn't an oddity.

Compare Like with Like – Designs and Motifs

Remember that just as you can't transfer techniques between crafts, you can't always transfer motifs. Even within period artifacts, different motifs appear on different types of objects; and sometimes even different techniques are used on different objects produced with the same craft. Avoid using designs taken from one craft or type of item and applying it to another, unless you can show they were similar in period.

Context

Think about the *context* of the object; this means the setting in which it was found. If you are looking at archaeological grave finds, consider the social status of the person being buried. There is a regrettable tendency to mass-replicate objects/crafts based on finds from royal graves – they tend to have the most stuff, and the prettiest stuff. BUT, was their stuff readily available to all classes of the society?

Analysing Your Objects

When you have assembled your range of objects, you are going to need to ask the following questions:

- What were they used for?
- Who would have used them?
- What materials are they made from?
- Can I tell anything about the construction?
- Are there any recurring decorative motifs and common design elements?
- Are there any colours that appear a lot?

If you come across a picture in a book of a really good artefact, check out the picture credits in the book – copyright laws require acknowledgement of the holder of the piece. This will generally be a museum, and as mentioned earlier, most museums have websites you can check for more information. You might find they have an online catalogue with more information on that object or similar ones, and they'll also list contact details for curators you can contact if you're really interested.

Keep Your Research Focussed

If you are working to a deadline, remember what it is you're researching, and limit your research only to that topic. This may seem obvious, but while you're researching, you'll come across lots of interesting topics that are fun, but not related to what you're doing. Make a note of these topics, by all means, but don't waste too much time pursuing them now. Staying focussed isn't as important if your research is for fun, such as in developing a persona, but you should still try to remember your main goal, otherwise you may find yourself getting snowed under by a whole heap of little research projects and facts.

You will probably also come across resources that appeared useful at first, but turn out not to be. Again, don't waste too much time with these. Accept that not everything you come across is going to be relevant.

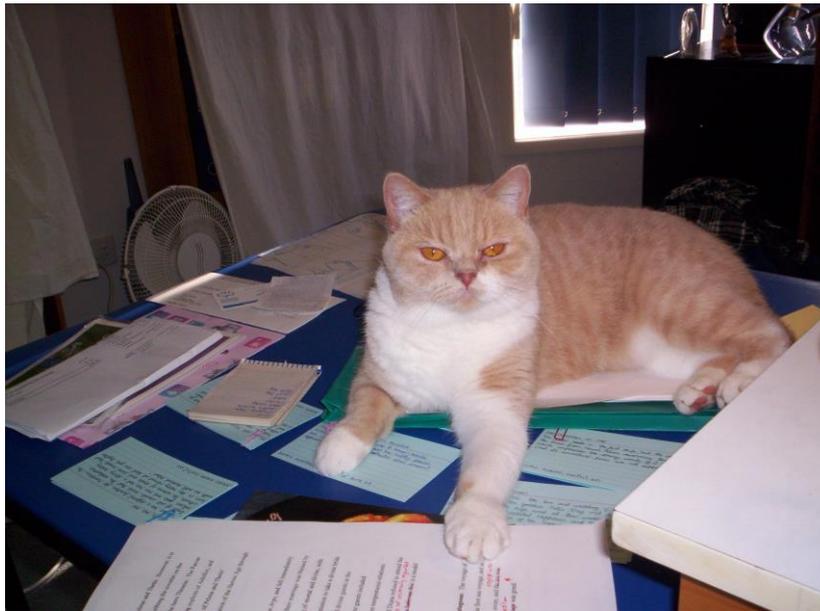
Don't Make Assumptions

You will find that some of the great mythconceptions of the SCA have come about because someone made an assumption based on incomplete evidence. Just because you have some evidence for a practice in one time and place, don't assume that practice existed in another time and place, or was even universal for the time and place you have evidence for it. Just because one 6th century grave in Gloucestershire has elaborate hair decorations, don't assume that all 6th century (or later) Anglo-Saxon women wore elaborate hair decorations – or even that all women in 6th century Gloucestershire did.

Just because the Greek Roman Empire (Byzantium) had laws regulating the amount of *purpura* that could be worn by various classes, doesn't mean that only royalty could wear purple clothing throughout the whole of SCA time and space.

And Finally....

Remember that research can be, and should be, enjoyable – if you choose to look into areas you already enjoy, or think you may. Just remember to give yourself plenty of time, stay focussed and organised, and pretty soon you will be dazzling everyone with your knowledge.



Tilly, Research Assistant Extraordinaire

Where to next - some online resources

Although I have no idea where your research might take you, here are some online links you may find useful.

Libraries Australia - <http://trove.nla.gov.au/>

An online catalogue of every research and many public libraries in Australia. A great tool for tracking down those hard to find books.

Libraries New Zealand - <http://nzlc.natlib.govt.nz/cgi-bin/Pwebrecon.cgi?DB=local&PAGE=first>

A similar catalogue of all New Zealand libraries, for the Crescent Isles populace.

The British Library - <http://www.bl.uk/>

The Grandpappy of libraries. You can get lost in the building and get lost on the website. Here you will find a huge collection of illuminated European manuscripts, oriental manuscripts, maps, early printed books and an awesome collection of embroidered bookbindings.

The Bibliothèque Nationale - <http://www.bnf.fr/default.htm>

France's answer to the British Library, but somewhat annoying if your French is limited to "french" words. They do have an English section, but you can't access the whole site through it.

The New York Metropolitan Museum ("the Met") - <http://www.metmuseum.org/home.asp>

Probably the best collection of medieval art outside of Europe.

St John's College Cambridge -

http://www.joh.cam.ac.uk/library/special_collections/manuscripts/medieval_manuscripts/image_index/

Images from St John's College collection of medieval manuscripts.

The Bodleian Library - <http://bodley30.bodley.ox.ac.uk:8180/luna/servlet>

Images from the Bodleian's collection of medieval/celtic/roman/everywhere manuscripts.

Victoria & Albert Museum Collections search - <http://images.vam.ac.uk/indexplus/page/Home.html>

The V&A has a truly awesome collection of medieval artefacts, and one of the best digital catalogues to go with it. Be sure to visit their online shop, too.

Council for British Archaeology Publications - <http://www.britarch.ac.uk/publications/>

Online publications of the CBA, including reports from archaeological digs.

Internet History Sourcebooks - <http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/>

Links to sourcebooks that contain a multitude of translated online documents from all time periods, including a medieval source.

The Online Medieval and Classical Library - <http://omacl.org/>

An internet sourcebook dedicated to classical and medieval texts.

Project Gutenberg - <http://gutenberg.net.au/> or http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page

A huge collection of public domain eBooks.

Kingdom of Atlantia A&S Links - <http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/index.php>

Probably the best kingdom collection of SCA Arts and Sciences material.

David Friedman's Homepage - <http://www.daviddfriedman.com/Medieval/Medieval.html>

David Friedman, AKA Duke Cariadoc, is one of the founding fathers of the SCA. Contains a lot of great stuff about authenticity, persona construction, cooking...