Finding and Assessing Information,
especially for Arts and Sciences projects in the SCA.

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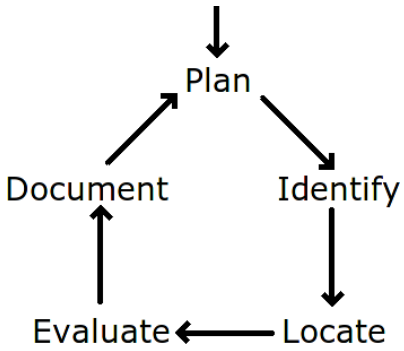
So you've picked your research topic, and narrowed it down enough so that you now know what sort of information you are looking for. But where and how are you going to find it? The best way I've found is to follow the *research cycle*, illustrated below.



Plan!

The first thing you need to do, is plan what information you are looking for, and how you are going to find it. Are you interested in general information (eg. English poetry), or something more specific after you have already looked at the generalist sources? (eg. *16th century* English poetry *about battles*.) What words or phrases do you plan to put into the search textbox of a library catalogue, or search engine?
Try different words, and word combinations and usually you will find different results. Try different resources, and try different catalogues and databases (see the resources at the end of this handout for some general ones.) Keep in mind that no single resource is going to reveal to you *all* of the information that is available.

Identify Useful Resources!

The next step is all about becoming familiar with the topic. Your local council library is extremely useful here, as they often have general reference works, like an encyclopaedia, which may have a brief blurb on your topic but includes a bibliography or references at the end. Note down those references, and see if you can find them (in the next step). For material culture, glossy exhibition catalogues and sometimes children's books can be fantastic for providing a general overview. Websites – and Wikipedia articles – you find on your topic may have bibliographies, which indicate more resources that could be useful. The aim is to make a big list of all the sources you would like to look at, because chances are you'll have to whittle it down according to what is locally available, or what you are willing to pay for an inter-library loan or three.

Locate!

If you have been noting down the interesting things you want to look for, you can look them up in a catalogue like *Trove* to see if they are available in a nearby library. Keep in mind that to find a journal article, you will need to look for the journal title not the article title.
For older books and artides published before ~1920, they may have been digitised and put on the internet as public domain materials (this can be useful for things like the original archaeological reports, or transcriptions of manuscripts). Sites like the *Internet Archive* and *Hathitrust* may be useful.

If you do make it into a library, note the Dewey number used to order the library collection. If you can, browse the shelves around the book you are looking for to see if anything looks promising. If it is the sort of library where the folios or oversized books are kept in a seperate spot to the normal-sized ones, it is always worth wandering over to check the 'other' section's books, too. If you are looking through journal articles, flick through other issues or volumes to see if anything catches your eye – oftentimes there are *very* interesting book reviews towards the back by other experts in the field.

Evaluate!

Evaluating the information in front of you is probably the most important part. You need to figure out how trustworthy the source is.

Anyone can make a website and write whatever they want, while a book (that isn't published through a vanity press) often has undergone some sort of editorial process, and the author is assumed to have at least some experience in the field of study. This is why sites like Wikipedia are great for getting an overview of the topic, but you can't quite trust the details.

How do you evaluate trustworthiness? You need to consider at least five things; *authority, audience, bias, accuracy,* and *currency*.

Start with what sort of *authority* the author(s) have on the topic. Are they an expert in the field that is frequently referenced? For academic journal articles, has their article gone through a peer-review process where the article has stood up to criticism by fellow experts?

For SCA-member websites, this is much harder to assess. Not even relying on the award structure can help; the author may be a Laurel, but they may have received their award in the 1970s and never kept up to date with later developments, or they may be writing about a topic that is new to them, too. A person with a real-life PhD in their topic of choice may be in the SCA but 'only' has an Award of Arms. In general, it is probably better to rely on the other five points for SCAdian-specific information.

The *audience* is who the author intends to read their work. The more technical and specialised the writing, the more likely it's to be for a similarly narrowly-focused audience. Often, having more detail is better than not having enough in the long term, even if you don't

use that information in your current projects. It means if you ever review your own work or wish to build upon it, you may already know where the nitty gritty details can be found.

The problem with more general-audience works, like popular history books, is that there often isn't as much need for obsessive referencing for accuracy, so it is more difficult to judge if the author has done their homework, or if they are making things up. Or, relying on outdated information.
Consider the difference between a big, glossy coffee-table book about the 14th century frescoes of Giotto di Bondone, and a boring-looking academic article about analysing the chemical composition of his paints. Both might be useful, if you want to paint in his style, but it is unlikely that chemists would be looking at the glossy book for 14th century fashion tips, and a fashion historian is less likely to be interested in lead-based paints.

Bias and *accuracy* are interrelated. *Bias* may come from the author trying to sway you to a particular point of view, like advertising websites that claim to be informative, or to persuade you to a particular point of view. It can be more subtle, and it is probably impossible for anyone to truly be unbiased, but better resources will at least acknowledge that they have a particular viewpoint up-front that may cloud their judgment. To pick a period example, would you trust a medieval biographer to write about his patron in an honest, possibly unflattering light? The biography still has value, but is important to be aware of the inherent bias.

Accuracy, for many resources used in research, largely revolves around clearly stating one's sources. It's important to see if their facts match up with the information you have read already, and to be able to then take the next step to figure out why or why not.
Can you find at least another two sources that agree with what this source says, and are they all referring the same source? Can you verify how accurate this work is?

Sadly, you may be reading the most accurate research on the topic ever, but if it doesn't have references or a bibliography, you will have no way of knowing if you can trust it or not.

Currency may or may not matter, depending on your topic. A transcription of a 15th century manuscript will hopefully be the same whether it is in a 19th or a 21st century book, but an up-to-date translation of said manuscript may be more desirable as our modern language, and our understanding of the 15th century language changes.
For example, for projects based on archaeology, have there been any major finds, or updated information, since the work was published? It is good to stay up to date with the latest findings in your topic, but remember that you might also find useful information in older works, too.

Document!

It's great that you've found the information, but now you need to record it somewhere (before you use it in your project). There's nothing worse than to have a 'fact' you've written down from somewhere, but have no clue where you found it. If possible, record as much detail as you can, such as author, title, journal title, book chapter, URL or page number so you can find it with a minimum amount of fuss later on.

Another trick, is to use index cards. At the top of the card, write down a facet of the topic, and in the body of the card, quote from the source and give its' bibliographic details. That way, if you want to review what you already know, it is already neatly organised for you.

Keep Going!

One of the joys of research is that, if you want to, you can stay in the never-ending loop of the research cycle and keep finding out more things. You might start looking for general information about poetry, and after a while you realise you want to know about 16th century ballads about battles... or hats... or... and suddenly you're back at the planning stage!

Resources

- **Beginning Research** – a guide intended for Melbourne University students that (it seems) anyone can access. It has links to videos, and other useful websites that goes into more detail than this handout.
  http://unimelb.libguides.com/begin_research
- **Google Scholar** – a specialised search engine that nominally looks for academic articles, often freely available online. It isn't perfect though, it will give results for personal websites and sometimes can't find articles that a more general Google can.
  http://scholar.google.com/
- **Trove** – a catalogue of items held in libraries Australia-wide.
  http://trove.nla.gov.au/
  It also lists information, such as if the library can be visited by the general public. If you are looking for a journal that a nearby library only has electronic database access to, then it is worth contacting the library to see if they have a public-access computer terminal where you can wander in and look at their journals. Don't forget your USB key.
- **Hathitrust** – Digital respository of public-domain and non-public-domain works. Sometimes very useful.
  http://www.hathitrust.org
- **The Internet Archive** – Digital repository of public-domain works. Often has copies of books available that GoogleBooks has blocked viewing of outside of the US.
  Also useful, is a partial archive of websites which comes in handy if you find a dead link and want to know what was once there. Sometimes this website archive, called **The Wayback Machine** can be very useful.
  http://www.archive.org
- **The State Library of Victoria** – If you are a Victorian resident, then you can sign up to become a member of the library which gives you perks such as access to academic journals you would normally pay a subscription for.
  See: http://www.slv.vic.gov.au/explore/research-tools/access-eresources-home
- **The Atlantia A&S Links** – A Collection of links on a broad range of topics, within the pre-17th century focus of the SCA. Note though that the quality of information on the pages can be extremely variable, and carefully evaluating what you read is important.
  http://moas.atlantia.sca.org/wsnlinks/