How to do Effective Research, or, Becoming Hermione Grainger

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 HIST105 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 was a recent Kingdom Arts and Sciences competition. Your research goal is clear: you need to study illuminations from the Manesse Codex. 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.

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 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.

**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, and you can find many of them in . 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; and you have to be onsite to look at the printed journals, and they can’t be borrowed.

Where to look – the internet

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. If you are in a research library, you will probably find they have online resources that aren’t available to the general public (you generally need to be onsite to access these).

There’s also the social networking aspect of the internet – search Yahoo!Groups for “sea” related mailing lists, and be daunted by the groups out there – and that’s just one mailing list provider. Blogging sites like LiveJournal have many communities relating to particular interests that you can join.
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.

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.

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?

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 through out the whole of SCA time and space.

**And Finally....**

Remember that research can 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.

**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.


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


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

Internet Medieval Sourcebooks - [http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/](http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/)

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

Project Gutenberg - [http://gutenberg.net.au/](http://gutenberg.net.au/) or [http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page](http://www.gutenberg.org/wiki/Main_Page)

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