

An approach to Documentation

Documentation is simply a word we use to describe demonstrating an understanding of what you've done, why and how your decisions were influenced by evidence from period sources.

It can be as simple as a 5 minute chat with someone in line at troll about an extant object you found and how the thing you made relates to that.

It can be a progress diary outlining what you did, why and how your decisions were influenced by extant sources.

All the way through to an in-depth, academically referenced and peer reviewed research paper, and anything in between.

And I want to stress this, all of these approaches have value and are important. Not everyone wants to spend months putting together a massive document, that's not necessarily how they enjoy A&S and research. Other people (myself included) secretly love essays and digging down to find all the little bits and pieces of a puzzle that help us understand how something was made or done.

So when we talk about documentation, what we're just trying to do is provide you with the opportunity to demonstrate what you've done, how and why you did it that way.

Now in this class I'm going to talk about how I like to approach my documentation. I'm going to show you a bunch of different ways that you can think about your research. Ways to make your doco more thorough or different approaches to a problem. But please, as I'm doing so, just keep in mind, that you can adopt as much or as little as you're comfortable with, and remember that this is all just about allowing you to demonstrate what you know, what you've done and why.

So. That having been said, here is a bit about how I like to approach my research and documentation. I am certainly no expert, but I have had a few people ask me about how I go about my research so this is what I do.

When I first decided to document something I wanted to make, I looked online at a billion 'how to do documentation' articles and blogs and put together a bit of a template that incorporated a lot of the things I found that I thought were relevant. From there I thought well that went down well, I'll draw up a template for people to use when they're documenting stuff and that'll be really useful!

Turns out, it wasn't useful at all... the reason being that every time I wanted to document something, it was a completely different thing, with vastly different tool and techniques and materials and parameters. Each time you do doco, the object you document will be slightly different, the evidence available will vary, as will the material types and context, in my research anyway these are constantly changing, so I have had to rewrite that template every time I want to do new research. So the template itself became redundant.

As a result, instead of providing you with a template on how to structure your doco, I thought it would be more useful to talk about how to approach your research and allow your research to provide a framework to structure your documentation.

That having been said, there are a few things that I think are useful to have in all documentation, and I'll discuss those as we go.

So now, I'll present to you how I tend to structure my research, then we will look at some things you want to document, take a couple of case studies and work through those together.

When Approaching Documentation, there are a few things that I think are very important.

- Firstly you want to clearly identify what it is you want to research and document or make, this will allow you to define the scope of your research and help you narrow down the resources you'll need to find. This will help you to stay focussed and not feel overwhelmed, or get distracted by fun but irrelevant tangents.
- Do your research BEFORE you start making your item, save yourself time, stress and frustration: this seems obvious, but I have seen a few examples of objects where someone has worked out what they wanted to make and then tried to make the evidence fit their interpretation, rather than the other way round, and ultimately this will result in something you won't be as happy with. I personally think that it is absolutely fundamental that you use the evidence to inform your theory, rather than trying to fit the evidence to a theory you have pre-determined. I have made this mistake and ultimately what I made was flawed as a result, and now I'm too embarrassed to wear it, after putting in all that hard work!

So If you're interested in documentation and authenticity, it's really important to do your research first, and allow that to inform what you make, rather than trying to wrangle the evidence to fit something you've already made. That way frustration and inauthenticity lies.

- By identifying your scope, doing the research and writing it up first, you have created for yourself a clear set of guidelines within which you can then work, this saves you time, stress and allows the actual making to be much easier and way more fun.
- For example, when I did my smokkr research, I tackled each aspect of the garment individually, looking at the evidence, putting forward a summary at the end of each section and then determined how the reality of making it in a modern context could fit within the evidence I outlined in the paper. AS a result, making it was a breeze, because I had almost step by step instructions on how each section was to be done! I'd already done all the hard work which made actually making the garment a much more enjoyable process and I wasn't second guessing myself all the time.

There's just one more thing that I'd like to mention before we get into the nitty gritty of what to research and how. And that's using qualified versus authoritative language. This is really important. When you're presenting your research verbally or in writing, you should always acknowledge what you don't know, identify when you aren't authoritative on a subject and you can do this best by using qualified language. This allows you to be clear about what are your theories, what are accepted facts. You can do this by saying things like 'to the best of my knowledge' or 'this theory suggests...' 'here are a number of alternate theories, I have chosen to support x. Another approach is to say I don't think this theory is accurate because of x y z and here is an alternate theory'

Trust me. You will sound MORE knowledgeable being clear in this manner, **especially** to those with an understanding of your area of research, than if you make broad statements or put forward unqualified theories.

Unfortunately newer people in an area of research can often find it hard to identify what is supported by the evidence, and what isn't because it's easy for blogs or facebook posts to sound authoritative, even if the evidence doesn't support their theory.

So by using phrases such as, to the best of my knowledge, or the evidence suggests, you not only sound **more knowledgeable** to those in the field, but ensure that newbies don't get the wrong idea.

Now that I've gone off on a tangent and you had identified what you want to research and understand the importance of doing that first, the next step is to work out exactly what it is you need to find out!

So it's good to break your research down:

So we start by looking at what you're studying

- What is the thing you're documenting?
- Why is it interesting and what do you want to get out of this research.
- What is the aim of your documentation? (I.e. to make a functioning machine, or to make a garment informed by the available evidence, or to make a beautiful piece of blackwork in the style of x y or z)

The object

- What is the object you want to make or study
- Where did it come from,
- What are the social and cultural contexts within which it was made and used? (Now this is really very useful and provides insight into how made and used), also helps you to further define your scope
- What do you know about it, what evidence is available? What extant sources are available? This may include images or iconography, extant object, parts of multiple extant objects, written sources, overall information, looking into what people have already written about this object in this context. So here you're getting into your primary, secondary and tertiary source material.

So now you know what your object is, where and by whom it was used, it's time to work out how it was made

- What materials was it made from
 - How were these made
 - Where did they come from
 - What does this tell us about the object
- What tools were used in its construction
 - Do you have access to these tools?
 - Can you make these tools?
 - What alternative tools available to you would be the most appropriate to use, or the closest approximation?
- What techniques were used to make it
 - General information about these techniques
 - Specific techniques used in the manufacture of this object

What else do you need to know to be able to make your interpretation?

- Break down how it was or will be manufactured, step by step and work out what you'll need to know to be able to do it
- From there you can do further research to fill in the gaps in your knowledge and skills

Then we get to start looking at your interpretation

- What materials will you use and how do these differ from extant objects or sources
- What techniques will you use and how do these differ from the original or originals
- Plan out your manufacturing methodology

Now you've done all of your research, and hopefully this has allowed you to put together your preliminary documentation, finally comes the fun part. You get to make it!!

I find it's valuable to take photos along the way to demonstrate:

- What you're doing
- Why you did it like that and compare this with the original/originals
- Explain your decision making process (this was how they did this thing, I can't do x so I did z which was as close as I could get to the original, it looked pretty)

Your photos aren't intended to be a step by step guide, unless that's what you intend to use your doco for in the future, they're intended to illustrate a point, explain a decision, show a process etc. However if you want people to be able to use your documentation to inform their own interpretations, then step by step instructions can be really valuable also.

Now, you've finished your research and laid that out for yourself, and you've finished making your thing and you've written up a process diary explaining what you did and how you did it, then comes the challenging bit, the analysis. Here you get to discuss:

- What did you do well
- How closely is it informed by your original/s, by your evidence or by your theories
- What could you improve upon next time
- How could you make it closer to the original/s, more justifiable from the evidence?

This bit sounds scary but it's actually great! It gives you the opportunity to talk about why you made the decisions you made and how you could improve upon them in future. It gives you the opportunity to really show what you know and how deeply you understand your subject material.

I also think it's always really great to include Acknowledgements, here you can mention who helped you and what they did that was great. This allows you to thank your mentors, partner or friends. It allows you to keep track of people with specific knowledge that is helpful for your research, and it helps others reading your doco to track down subject matter experts for their own research!

Finally, my favourite bit, if you've decided to do written documentation, it's really important that you include your References.

- Now you can do this in the style you're most comfortable, whether that's Harvard, APA, footnotes, Chicago whatever, just make sure it's consistent
- Even if you're using footnote referencing, it's important to have a reference list at the end, so others can check your references to see if there are sources they can use in their research.
- I also think it's really valuable to annotate your references, just a quick line talking about what was helpful or rubbish about each source. This is great for your own records as it helps you to hone in on the most useful sources for your next research adventures!

So now I've gone through the process I like to use when I'm researching or documenting something, let's talk through some of your projects and what sorts of things you might like to think about when you're researching. As I said, I find templates are often less helpful, so let's nut out some documentation approaches.

Does anyone have something they'd like to research and we can brainstorm things you might like to consider in your research?

An Approach to Documentation: Notes for participants to take home

Documentation can be a 5 minute chat, a peer reviewed academic paper or anything in between. It's simply an opportunity for you to demonstrate what you've done, why and how you did it and how your work is informed by period sources. Put simply: This is your opportunity to show off what you know and the awesome things you're doing.

Key points:

- Clearly identify the scope of your project or research, to help you stay on track.
- Do your research first! Then if you want to do written documentation, you can use this to inform how you make your object or do your thing. After making your thing, you can develop a progress diary of your process to include in your documentation if you wish.
- Remember to use qualified language, it's easy to fall into the trap of presenting theories or interpretations as facts, be careful not to do this unless you know something for certain!

Some things it's valuable to include in your research and/or documentation:

Introduction: A brief introduction into what you've made and why, to orient the reader or listener

Scope: clarify the scope of your research, I am specifically looking at this kind of object, in this/these time/s and place/s.

Context: Cultural context, when and where was it used/made and by whom? How do cultural contexts impact upon aspects of the object or thing?

What materials was it made from: How were these made, where did they come from, what does this tell us about the object

What tools were used in its construction? Do you have access to these tools? Can you make these tools? What alternative tools available to you would provide the closest approximation?

What techniques were used to make it? General information about these techniques, Specific techniques used in the manufacture of this object

What else do you need to know to be able to make your interpretation?

Break down how it was manufactured, step by step and work out what you'll need to know to be able to do it, from there you can do further research to fill in the gaps in your knowledge and skills

Your interpretation: What materials will you use and how do these differ from extant objects or sources. What techniques will you use and how do these differ from the original or originals
Plan out your manufacturing methodology

MAKE IT! Take photos along the way to demonstrate:

- What you're doing, why and compare this with the original/originals

- Explain your decision making process (this was how they did this thing, I can't do x so I did z which was a close approximation, it looked pretty)

Analysis

- What did you do well
- How closely is it informed by your original/s, by your evidence or by your theories
- What could you improve upon next time
- How could you make it closer to the original/s, more justifiable from the evidence?

Here is your opportunity to talk about why you made the decisions you made. It gives you the opportunity to really show what you know and how deeply you understand your subject material.

Acknowledgements: Who helped you and how?

References.

- In the style you're most comfortable, just make sure it's consistent
- Even if you're using footnote referencing, have a reference list at the end, so others can check your references to see if there are sources they can use in their research.
- Annotate your references, just a quick line talking about what was helpful or rubbish about each source. This is great for your own records as it helps you to hone in on the most useful sources for your next research adventures!

Handy hints:

- Always think clearly about why you're doing your documentation, is it to help you clarify your process before you make something, is it to help teach others how to do/make something, is it to justify an interpretation or theory using available evidence. Work out why you're documenting something and allow that to inform how you write.
- Who is your audience? Are you trying to teach someone a basic set of skills? Or are you trying to justify a theory that challenges current thinking on an object or idea? By knowing your audience you can tailor your writing style to your intended audience.
- Label your images/photographs so people know what they're looking at
- Page numbers help for longer pieces of documentation!
- Don't assume that your audience will know all about the thing you're writing/talking about. Be clear and comprehensive in your explanations.