

Making a Period-Looking Document

Period written communications tend to be a far cry from the illuminated manuscript style of most SCA scrollwork, but can be just as satisfying. Letters Patent may involve illuminated capitals and careful calligraphy, but there are plenty of examples of everyday documents and letters that have messy handwriting, ink blotches, sloping lines and other real-life aspects which would be rejected by exacting writing-masters.

Whether looking at the high-end or low-brow of paperwork, there are some basic questions to be asked, and some things to be borne in mind. Here's a starter kit.

What characterises the document?

It helps to take a look at examples of extant documents to get an idea of how they were written and features of their layout, the language used from opening salutation to closing signature, how they were sealed, locked or delivered.

Some features are obvious: the cut toothmarks of an indenture; the bifolium folds of a letter; the large landscape orientation of a Letter Patent; the wide lefthand margins of most documents.

Other features are more subtle: the placement of a signature at the end of the letter; the terms used (or not used!) in the salutation; the size of the paper and the amount of white space left.

You can look for exact models – letters to a patron, passports, apprenticeship contracts, deeds of sale, inventories, journals – but the generally ephemeral nature of much of this material may mean an exact match can be hard to find, though the general approach for the kind of communication you're after is likely to be reasonably identifiable.

Try adapting something which has a comparable context:

- an ambassadorial appointment or a passport/safe-conduct for a letter of introduction
- an entry from the Master of Revels register for a listing of entertainers or Bardic Cup winners
- an inventory for a packing list or an event check-list
- a wager of law for a letter of intent to enter a tournament
- a sub poena to require an individual or an Order to attend Court for an elevation

And where do I find a period example?

There are plenty of archives, letter collections, exhibition catalogues and preserved documents available online, providing a wide range of document styles and covering many different purposes. Legal organisations and parliamentary records will often have collections, Special-interest groups such as the Richard III or Hakluyt Societies or the Folger Foundation can be rich sources for specific times or locations.

Make use of online utilities such as high resolution options, zoom, detailed database entries. It can be a lot easier to find text than the physical representation, but it can be worth asking. (And don't forget to acknowledge useful sources and helpful people!)

Online sources are great but they have their limitations. Nothing really substitutes for seeing and, if you're lucky, handling a real 400-year-old document. Check out your local university libraries and museums; talk to the librarians or curators.

Sometimes such things come up for sale online and are not too unbearably pricey – I bought four documents (indentures and deeds from the early 1600s) and was delighted to receive them folded up as they would have lain for centuries in someone's coffer. Handling them gave me a much better feel for how parchment should feel – a far cry from the stiff sheets I have purchased previously. And answered some questions about how knotted seal tags worked; being able to look at documents from both sides can be a rare treat.

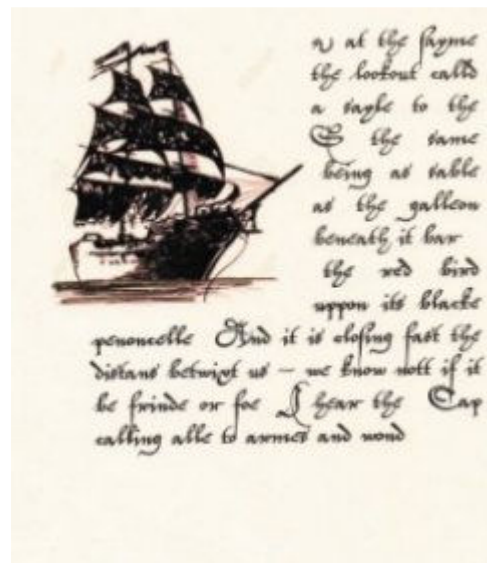
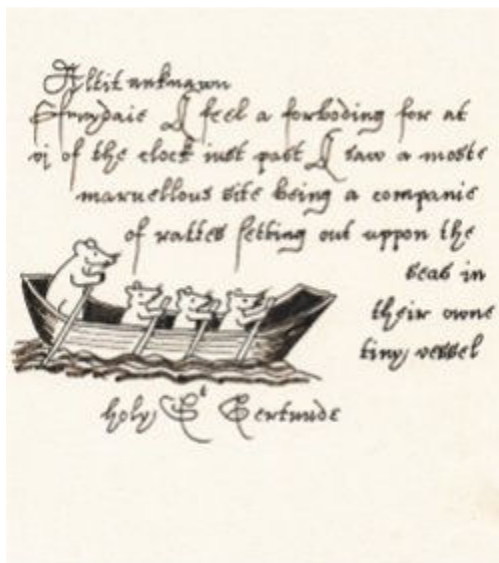
What kind of hand is appropriate?

Most SCA people are familiar with the blackletter/fraktura lettering which is typically used on an SCA scroll. SCA practise has seen these often take their model from illuminated manuscripts such as a Book of Hours, the Bible or some other codex, rather than from actual documents, so we tend to develop what can be a highly distorted idea of what period paperwork looks like. To achieve a more period form of communication (particularly 15-16th century), you might consider writing in secretary hand or the simple italics of late-period humanist cursive. You can personalise these or make them more persona-appropriate by using location/time-specific letter forms or fancy swashes and capitals. There are plenty of examples online of period writing manuals which were aimed at developing a cultured hand.

A fast, easy way to push out paperwork using the benefits of modern technology is to:

- do a draft layout using an electronic font to get the lettering and placement right
- lay out text on an A4 sheet and then position on an A3 sheet to provide the commonly seen wide margins and respectful white space
- use a lightbox (or glass coffee table) to trace over the lettering in ink

The free fonts available at PiaFrauss.com have detailed information regarding their source material from specific materials, and are highly recommended. The main disadvantage with most fonts is that they tend to lack connected ligatures or special letterings, but if you know what should be there, it becomes relatively easy to make those changes as you go through the text. Another advantage of this approach is that you can concentrate on your wording and, do it often enough, the hand will start to feel natural and you'll be able to ditch the crutch of the electronic and go stright for your pen.



The above pages (from a sea journal detailing some maritime adventures) may look similar on first glance, but the one on the left has my handwritten secretary script and a hand-drawn image; the one on the right is typeset in an electronic secretary hand font with a printed jpeg.

What's it written on? What is the paper like? What are the edges like?

Much in the way of surviving documents are on parchment, but paper was not uncommon by the mid-1400s on. The latter was high-rag, linen-based laid paper, regarded these days as very high end, and likely to be found in specialist art shops or paper supplies.



Various papers at top, sand-coloured 80gsm copier paper; a map on 120gsm goatskin "parchment"; white 110gsm cartridge paper at bottom; an actual parchment document wrapper at right.

Many formal SCA productions used parchmentine, a vegetable-based substitute for the real thing. It tends to be very stiff and somewhat greasy, but makes a nice and very durable change from paper. Hot-pressed watercolour paper is also commonly used but can be a bit fluffy for clear pen use.

Choosing a suitable paper makes a difference; keep away from the bright white bleached modern copy paper if you can. There are inexpensive papers available which are off-white and comparable to period paper; you don't have to use parchment vellum!

Paper with a laid finish can be useful to give the look of a handmade paper - that can be identified by checking for parallel lines running against the grain of the paper, used to simulate a handmade output (or, easier, check the label of the ream). Actual handmade paper is generally not so useful as these modern craft papers are often artistically "enhanced" with leaves and other rough fibres which is not that handy for pen and ink work.

Some people like the feathery deckle edging as a Ye Olde Worlde effect; but most quality paper would have been trimmed cleanly. The same holds for tea-stain antiquing or brown marbled papers labelled as "parchment". Unless you're wanting the Ye Olde effect, stick to a good quality paper of around 90-110gsm weight. The better paper you get, the easier it is to write on without blotches or dragging on the pen nib.

A3 is a good size. It approximates period-sized paper, so is reasonable for both large format items (ie unfolded for Letters Patent or indentures) and, when folded in half, for the common bifolium format of letters.

What do I do for a signature? Should other people sign?

Take a look at examples on documents from your time and place to get a feel for how people signed themselves. Consider what language or written script you would be familiar with. Or what abbreviations or variants were commonly used eg Jas for James, or Iames or Iago or Jaime.

Remember that Shakespeare spelt his name six different ways! Signs and shaky handwriting were a common feature of those not accustomed to writing, and not just the traditional X; initials, drawings, even word squares were not unknown. Or try finding a flourish you like to use on your initial capital.

For more signature information, with examples:

<http://webcentre.co.nz/kk/vickiimgs/HOSignatures.pdf>



This is my persona signature, based on a humanist cursive with some special characters typical of mid-16C Scottish handwriting: the "butcher's hook" h, the "theta" e, and the script r. I have always used lower case initials as that was a very common characteristic of women's signatures at that time, from marie stuart to katherine of Aragon.

As for other people signing, encouraging witnesses, where appropriate, is a nice way to get people involved. Typically in period you'd have two or three witnesses to things like deeds and indentures, often named within the text of the document. Royal signs manual would sometimes go at the top above the main body of text, rather than at the bottom.

What should I write with?

A quill, of course! But they don't tend to be readily accessible and are quite specialised in use. Ideally a dip pen with a broad nib and a good quality ink, most commonly black or brown/sepia, but coloured inks (eg shades of red, purple, green) weren't unknown. Iron gall ink is commonly recommended. It has a tendency to be alarmingly faint when first used, with the ink darkening up later; it can also etch away the writing material.

When starting out, a fountain pen helps you to concentrate on your lettering without having to fuss about with ink charging. As with many crafts, buy the best you can afford; if you can, find a specialist shop and ask to try out the nibs so you know you feel comfortable with your choice. Felt-tip "calligraphy" pens are not likely to give you the right look and can lead to poor writing habits, but the fine-point art pens have their uses eg Faber-Castell has a nice set of four PITI artist pens in sepia pigmented India ink.

As with any art, if you want to get good then practice, practice, practice. Try your pen, nib and ink on various papers; try flourishes. Get a feel for what the angle and weight does to your lettering. It doesn't have to be perfect or perfectly match the example, but it should please you.



My scribal box: from left: an inkpot; my KK seal and green wax; brass pins; inks; waxed linen thread on a bobbin-needlecase; a sealing wax spoon; a nib holder with a Speedball C3 nib; a leather penner.

What about sealing stuff?

Wax seals can be used as additional legal identifiers -- they preceded signatures in this regard -- as well as the more modernly-familiar security closure on a letter/envelope. These days there tends to be two kinds of sealing wax: (1) the traditional, somewhat brittle wax, often sold in sticks with or without cotton wicks, and (2) souple, or flexible wax which is robust enough to go through the post, often coming in stick or pellet form. The brittle wax works well for sealing letters you intend to be opened, as it will break; the flexible kind grips paper and is best for paperwork where you want the seal to survive.

Brass seals with wooden handles are commonly available, with letters, monograms, symbols or plain engrave [your mark] here. One tip is to sit your seal on an ice cube just before sealing; it will release the wax more cleanly. Also mark the edge of the seal with a scratch for "this way up".

The seals are attached in many ways depending on the type of document. Letters would be folded with seals across the outside edges or holding paper strips or floss in place. The wax could be used to hold internal paper security triggers, or to attach paper embossed seals. Legal documents, such as deeds and indentures, or Letters Patent, could have seal tags, with one or more seals attached to a slip of parchment threaded through the bottom edge. Sometimes these were attached with floss; sometimes they were slit and turned though to provide an open space for the wax to run through.

