

Writing a Scroll

By Sir Ogami Akira

In Medieval times, the scrolls that were presented to indicate an elevation of status were legal documents, and they sounded exactly like any legal document composed by a modern lawyer. They were exact, precise, complex and dry as a mummy.

When composing text for scrolls to be given in the SCA, it certainly would be a correct and period thing to write in 'legalese'. However, by our custom and by the preference of the populace, our wording is more on the side of 'the middle ages as it should have been'.

One of the difficulties of SCA wording is blandness. "We award you this award" is hardly interesting, and it really doesn't do justice to the person who is receiving it.. As much as the illumination and the calligraphy is an art, so should be the text you compose.

There are several elements you need to consider when writing your text. First and foremost, you should try to make it meaningful to the person who receives it. To do this you have to get as much information as possible on the recipient. Persona, what they've done to get the award, colors they wear, etc. Baroness Una has developed a form for this, and it's made life easier for us.

When you know the person, life's a beach. But most of the time you won't know who they are at all. This makes things tough, and that's when you need to get creative.

The purpose of composing the text is to be laudatory (of course), but it should also be designed to make the recipient proud and pleased. By using rich, dense language and careful phrasing, this can be accomplished fairly easily.

The key is editing your text and using evocative words. It must flow easily, but it must also be as compact as possible. There is rarely a large amount of space on a scroll for text, and remember that the calligraphers may not love

your words as much as you do. But by the same token, you must care about your text. It's your writing, and you have to put yourself into it. Frankly, if you don't care about what you do, it will show. Remember that good writing is good writing, regardless of the arena (novels, letters, and even advertising), and that writing is a skill. The more you practice, (hopefully) the better you'll be.

One thing to be very careful of is using "forsoothly" language. It rarely sounds right, and very often words are used wrongly, as in:

Methinks the fair lady doth flitter like a fleak. ('Fleak' being a medieval term for a nasty slut.)

In addition, the herald who reads it in court might decide to do so in the pseudo-medieval renaissance-fair cockney accent, and that's just too horrible to even contemplate.

There are two primary styles of scroll wording you can work with, not counting legal (as I mentioned above): linear and narrative.

Linear text simply and plainly outlines the award, but it needn't be dry or tedious. For example, this is a simple Silver Alce text I composed:

Far and wide are praises sung of the strength and prowess of Our subject (XXX). So great is his skill, courage, and dedication to the fighting arts of Our kingdom that We are comforted in knowing that Our lands will be well defended for many years to come. Moved as we are by his courtesy and chivalry, it is our will that he be recognized, and by Our hand on this (XXX) day of (XXX) at (XXX) we create him a companion of Our Order of the Silver Alce.

It's pretty straightforward, but the text has been decorated a bit. You'll note that in it I refer to his strength, prowess, skill, courage, dedication, courtesy, and chivalry. In addition, I say that the king is comforted by him and relies on him for the future of the kingdom. (All of this, I might note, is in three sentences, and it was for someone I've never met and had never even heard of.)

One can certainly be more elaborate with linear text, using historical and mythological references or analogies as in this example I wrote for a White Horn:

The mighty centaur stands peering from the woods, his mouth agape and his eyes filled with wonder at the perfect melding of horse and man wrought by Our (XXX). Knight and steed join as one as his lances shatter against the breast of his foes, throwing them against their tall cantles and causing them to curse their fates.

We know full well the skill and the heart of Our puissant knight, and We know of his efforts in training himself and others. It is with glad and open heart that We, (XXX) and (XXX), King and Queen of Aethelmarc, do bestow upon him the order of the White Horn. Done by Our will this (XX) day of (XXX), A.S. (XX), at (XXX) in the Barony of (XXX).

Narrative text is different. Narrative text is essentially a short story with an award stapled to the end of it. . I love narrative text because it's challenging, and doing it well requires real skill and ruthless self-editing. There are two forms. The first is a story about the person, or what they do, usually in the present tense.

No fainting flower is Our Beloved (XXX)! Astride her mount her heels dig in and she fearlessly flies across the field, her mare soaring like fabled Pegasus over stream and hedge. Hooves strike like thunder and great circles of sod are thrown as she urges her mare even faster, demanding more from it as well as from herself. Yet as she dismounts her gentleness comes to the fore, and she stokes its flanks and muzzle even as she takes the time to instruct those who hope someday to ride as well as she.

Of such as Mistress (XXX) is Our Peerage made, and it is in Our minds to thank her for her skills, her efforts, and her advancement of the equestrian arts in Our realm. Therefore do We, (XXX) and (XXX), King and Queen of beloved Aethelmarc, bestow upon her

membership in the Order of the White Horn this (XX) day of (XXX), A.S. (XX), at (XXX) in (XXX).

The second form is a mood piece which reflects either the meaning of the person's work or their passion for it. Mood pieces are essentially short stories, a slice of life that's given drama and significance. Mood pieces are the most difficult, because, like comedy, they either work or they really don't.

The day grows old and the night comes softly creeping, but the brush is wet with pigment and the vision in her breast still burns. A candle is lit and the vellum is doubly illuminated. She bends to her task, and stroke by tender stroke a scroll is carefully brought to life. Each image that flows from her brush is another tiny step she takes in the perfection of her art. She has studied the old ways and learned from the new and has found a way of her own, giving the unheralded gift of her talent and her heart to every page.

We, (XXX) and (XXX), King and Queen of Aethelmarc, know very well the work of Our beloved XXXX XXXX We know of her flawless scholarship and We know of her gift for teaching others her hard-won skills. We know that by her quiet and joyful efforts Our Kingdom is enriched. It is on this (XX) day of (XXX), A.S. (XX), at (XXX) in Our Barony of (XXX) with pride and gratitude that We do by Grant give her leave to enter into Our Order of the Sycamore.

The above text could be easily shortened to, "She works hard and stays up late because she wants to finish her scrolls, so We're giving her this award." In four sentences I attempted to create a scene that would make an impression in the recipient's (and the listener's) mind. I wanted to evoke a sense of quietness, of an artist completely dedicated to her task. (And I confess I really liked the "doubly illuminated" phrase.)

It's a good idea to let several people read your mood piece before you submit it. Don't brush off any criticisms. Consider them before you decide. You could be wrong, or they could be wrong. Go with what you feel is right.

Poetry can be used, of course, and may be either linear or narrative. Simple rhyming couplets like A,B,A, B can be used, as well as more complex ones. The difficulty is in the rhythm of the wording. Your syllable count has to be right, or the entire thing falls down. I'll note here that this is my weakest form or writing, though I've done Japanese Tanko (like haiku, but longer) as well as the Norse saga style for different texts.

A kettle of iron, a mortar and pestle of stone,
three bunches of herbs and her knife finely honed.

The oven is hot and the haunch is now boned,
the loaves of bread brown, and the hall smells of home.

Mustard and rosemary are rubbed in the stag's flesh,
she thrusts in the skewer and then prepares a swan's breast.

The feast time is nearing, with much left to be done,
for cooking is her art and her pride drives her on.

The work of her day is consumed in an hour,
and then at long last, may she take rest by the fire.

Tomorrow's fresh challenge awaits her, she knows,
but tomorrow must wait, for her eyes slowly close.

(XXX) is an example to all Her research, her passion, her devotion, her kindness and her poise have called Us to recognize her for the Peer of the Realm she is and has been. Therefore, on this XXXX day of XXX, A.S. XXX, at XXXXXXXX in the Barony of XXXXXXXX do We, (XXX) and (XXX), King and Queen of the East, induct her into Our Most Noble of the Laurel.

Once you've done a dozen or more scrolls, you'll start to run out of ideas. Don't be afraid to re-use what you've done before, as long as it's in a different context and you don't quote yourself. For example, I used the "learned from the old" concept (as in the first mood piece example) in this Baronial-level scroll for a Japanese persona:

Ground, water, fire, wind and void are the stages of the sword. Becoming one with the sword is to have no sword, and the true strategist knows this. He finds himself by losing his self and thus the circle is completed. The Way of the Sword is the way of life, and the way of life is found only by releasing all things and accepting death.

So it was practiced and taught by masters of old, and so it is practiced and taught by (XXX). We value his art as we value his skill, and on this sixteenth day of (XX), A.S. (XX), it is our wish that all may know. So we, (XXX) and (XXX) at this (XXX), recognize (XXX) with our Marshall Award.

Funny scrolls are a problem. Yes, they're easy to do, but funny doesn't last. First of all, the circumstances that make it funny will change, and having to explain it to people makes it un-funny. Secondly, the third time you hear a joke, it's just not funny anymore, much less the three-hundredth. Avoid doing a funny scroll if at all possible.

Now, an unpleasant word about editing. Not yours, but someone else's. Nothing makes me angrier than someone telling me, "I cut out a few things because there wasn't room." To put it in context, how would an illuminator feel if someone said, "I cut off the left border because it didn't fit?"

This is **your** work, **your** art. If there's a problem, they should contact you and discuss it. Your words are just as important as the pretty picture and the fancy lettering, and you need to defend them.

Finally, here's what not to do:

Let it be known to all that (XXX) has shown chivalry and honor in the lists. It is for his many talents that We, (XXX) and (XXX), King and Queen of (XXX) do award him the (XXX). Done on this (XX) day of (XX), A.S. (XX) in (XXX) at (XXX).

My feelings on this kind of writing are (XXXXXX).