

Judging Arts and Sciences Competitions

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At least as much as entering A&S, judging can be an intimidating experience until you become familiar and comfortable with the process. Below are some tips to help you get started. (These comments are largely directed at judging the physical arts. Judging performing arts presents unique challenges not directly addressed in this class).

Read the entry rules and the judging sheet

It is impossible to adequately assess an item without knowing the constraints that were put on the competition or the criteria you will be using to judge the item. Read these materials before you begin judging the entries.

Look at the item and skim the documentation

Take a quick perusal of the item and the documentation to familiarize yourself with it. You will be referring back to it in some detail, but here is a chance to get a basic concept of the intent of the entry, the level of the artisan, and the organization of the documentation. Make some general notes, particularly if there is anything you want to see explained in the documentation or any features that are remarkable in any way.

Assess your ability to judge the entry

Step back for a moment and assess the item and your ability to judge it. Do you know enough about this art to adequately judge the piece? Is the documentation sufficient to fill in holes in your knowledge if you feel you are borderline? Is it by someone you know and feel you will have a conflict of interest in judging (good OR bad)? Is the piece clearly in the wrong category? Either the wrong subject (armor instead of clothing) or the wrong level (novice vs. intermediate)? Is the entry out of the scope of the competition? If you have a serious conflict or question about the item, its classification, or your ability to judge it, this is the time to approach the coordinator and address your concerns.

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Determine the level at which you are judging

Just as the entrant should appropriately choose the category they enter, the judge must carefully consider the level of the entrant when deciding how strictly to judge the entry. Get down and dirty with uber-Laurels, but take a gentler touch with folks new to an art form. This likely will not change the numerical score given, but will guide the tone and the detail of comments you make.

Examine the item and documentation closely

Now comes the most time consuming phase of judging-the critical evaluation of the entry. Start by carefully examining the documentation-if it is only a few pages long, read it in its entirety. If it is a longer piece of documentation, at least read the key parts and the summary, if provided, and skim the rest. Evaluate how well the entrant explains the piece and their process, particularly any changes or substitutions that were made. Then examine the entry itself, looking closely at the workmanship of the piece and taking note of features mentioned in the documentation.

Comment

Start to solidify your thoughts about the entry by writing your observations and comments in the appropriate spaces in the judging form. Try to find at least one positive aspect in every category and likewise look for opportunities for constructive criticisms under each heading-even really great entries usually have a few places they could improve! Take care in wording your comments so that they are clear and non-judgmental-the purpose is to guide the artisan toward greater success in their art, never to belittle the level they currently are at. If you have any questions about the item, refer back to the documentation as needed. This may also be the phase where you realize you need to pull in some specialty assistance if there is an aspect of the entry you are unfamiliar with- do so if needed.

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Discuss the item with the entrant

If there is a face-to-face component of the competition, this is where you would pause in your judging to discuss the entry with the entrant. Have them present the item to you, then ask them any remaining questions you have. Give them the opportunity to explain anything that was unclear or unsupported in the documentation. Indicate areas that are excellent as well as those that need work. If you obtain a significant amount of oral information from the entrant, point out that such information should appear in the documentation or, if it is there, that it should be more clearly presented.

Enter Scores

Re-read your comments and re-read the scoring scale for the judging sheet. Carefully examine each component and assign a score based on your comments and impressions. If you have any remaining questions, again refer back to the entrant and/or the documentation. Be strict, but fair and compassionate. If you have to assign a particularly low score in an area, clearly explain your rationale, but try to balance it with praise for aspects that went well or carefully worded constructive comments. However, avoid the impulse to assign a higher than warranted score—such inflated scores simply mislead the entrant and do not provide appropriate guidance.

Discuss the scores with the entrant

If possible, meet briefly with the entrant to present the final scores and to explain why they were given. If you were able to meet for a face-to-face judging, this will likely not come as a surprise to the entrant. Allow them the opportunity to discuss their scores and try to keep the conversation positive, focusing on the things that went well and the opportunities for future growth, rather than what was “wrong” with the current piece. The goal is to foster the further growth of the artisan, not to chastise them for falling short of the perfect period ideal. If you cannot meet with the artisan, ensure that your name and contact information are on the judging sheet and clearly legible so that they may contact you later to discuss.

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Handling disappointment, tears, and anger

When judging, we make every attempt to make the experience one of learning through evaluation, but there will come times when an entrant has an emotional reaction to the feedback. If the entrant is disappointed or tearful, try to meet with them and explain why scores were given. If it seems it might be helpful, have someone the entrant trusts they are an impartial third party who, in absence of the emotional reaction, can better hear you and can help the entrant understand your rationale. Emphasize positives and offer to assist the entrant in future projects or offer to direct them to others active in the art. Anger can also be difficult to deal with from an entrant. Stay calm and composed and explain your decisions succinctly. Limit your comments to factual statements as much as possible and avoid value judgments. Consider asking the entrant to walk through the judging process with you and explain why they would have assigned different scores, supported by their entry and documentation. If an entrant is angrier than you are comfortable dealing with alone, ask the competition coordinator or a trusted and respected third party to mediate.

Happy Judging ☺