

10 min of wales poetry **can't hear can't see** crown don't know their lines deadly serious household business in-jokes
missing people i know mumbling not respectful people talking down the back
rambling repetitive sitting on the ground standing in the sun too formal **too jokey too long**
tournament winners **unprepared** waffle i don't care about when i want to pack up
when i'm hungry

On Court

Kazimira Suchenko, Astrolabe, AS 48

I posed the following questions on several local mailing lists, following up responses either in private or on the list as the respondent did:

What makes Court fun/entertaining?

What do you dislike about Court (and if you avoid it, why)?

The responses fell into three main categories, with some overlap: Organization, Presentation, and Meaning. A successful (or unsuccessful) court is a complex stew, and I think it's useful to be able to break out the ingredients into categories like this because it makes the whole beast more manageable. A good court is a team effort, and individual team members are strong or weak in certain areas. Play to your strengths, delegate your weaknesses.

Organization

The vast majority of complaints about courts in this category were split fairly evenly between variations on "too long" and "disorganized". It would be easy to leave it there, and say that having more and shorter courts is the answer to "too long", and "plan better" is the answer to "disorganized", but there's actually rather more to unpack here.

On the whole, people prefer multiple smaller courts over the course of an event to one long epic court. With one or two exceptions, most people who mentioned it like courts during feasts, "When I have to sit still anyway" and presumably when there is food and possibly candles to play with as a distraction during the dull bits. There were mixed opinions about "flashmob" courts and war field awards – people really liked the theatre of them, but it could mean missing your friend getting a gong. One person suggested a camp crier be sent round immediately ahead of such courts to give more people a chance to attend.

Although plenty of people freely admit that they have the attention spans of goldfish, many of the specific issues with court length are external to court content, per se. People are extra sensitive to the length of a court when they are physically or psychologically uncomfortable: sitting on the ground, standing, out in the sun, hungry, wanting to pack up for the trip home, etc. If your site has a dedicated space for courts, make sure there is plenty of seating. If the

schedule calls for a court in an awkward place or time, keep those as short and snappy as possible, and save the longer business for a more comfortable venue.

On the subject of the physical trappings of court, the populace needs to be able to see and hear what's going on in order to have any hope of enjoying the experience. Alas, most venues are not going to have a raised dais, so try to avoid any business taking place at ground or waist level, as no one but the front two rows will be able to see. There should not be a huge gap between the people at the front and the audience – if the gap is there for groundlings, make sure the populace knows they're allowed to sit there. Try and determine ahead of time if the space has terrible acoustics, and arrange seating or wall hangings or whatever to mitigate. Make sure the people up front know they must project.

Of all the high-medieval flash and ceremony things we do, court is one of the most representative – the meeting of both the period and the romance side of the SCA coin – so please make the small effort to put a better cover on your plastic-covered ceremony book.

The "attention span" comment is itself a polite code for "you're boring me", and indeed more than one gentle indicated that longer courts are okay if they are engaging, dramatic, entertaining. There's more on that later on under the Presentation and Meaning headings, but fully half of the complaints linked "boring" not with the length of the court, but with how it is put together.

"Variety" came up frequently – mixing awards with business, weighty matters with lighter fare, etc. Don't put a lot of the same sorts of thing together – avoid repetitiveness by either batching similar items as one piece of business, or splitting them up between or within courts. The Royals can delegate to local representatives occasionally. An individual court should neither be "one long joke", nor "deadly serious" all the way through. There is a lot of room for variety even within similar items: not everything requires three cheers; it's okay – to be preferred, even – to depart from the "standard" wording of an award, and so on.

It should be noted that the succession of tournament winners – usually called up and presented at closing court, when everyone is itching to start packing – was a source of especial annoyance. Several people suggested that tournament winners be awarded at the end of the tournament in question, and that the obligatory court announcements be made into a simple list and given to a herald to pronounce with greater efficiency. The steward's (and sub-stewards, and sub-stewards' assistants, and... and...) thank yous were in this category as well.

People don't mind the odd gaff or glitch, and they're sympathetic to gentles who aren't natural orators, but too much faffing or checking the order is annoying, and they *hate* it when people get up there who obviously haven't worked out ahead of time what they're going to say, and proceed to ramble and waffle and umm and ahh and waste everybody's time. It should be determined ahead of time if gentles receiving awards are present or not – the "Shhh! Seekrit!" thing is embarrassing. There were suggestions that some sort of "So you're called up in court" guidelines for the general populace wouldn't go amiss, either, so that gentles being honoured have some idea when and how to bow, where to stand (slightly to one side) or kneel (on the cushions!), etc. Presentation training for the populace and heralds alike could include how to stand and project, how not to pace, gabble, etc.

In short, the ideal court should be well-choreographed, varied in content and presentation, and of a length appropriate to its content, venue, and audience.

Presentation

There is a certain overlap between Organization and Presentation, but in general "Organization" covers the things that can and should be worked out ahead of time, and that can be done by anyone with organizational skills – quite possibly by people who would not have thought of themselves as heralds, and/or wouldn't dream of getting up in front of an audience. "Presentation", on the other hand, is the part that's done by the people who *are* in front of the audience – the heralds, the Royals or the B&B, the presenters and people doing the business of the court.

Presentation is half of what makes a court really sing – the pageantry and ceremony, the dressing up and the display. Even handovers, reports, and site announcements can be entertaining and engaging in the hands of a talented performer. The best courts are a mix of good theatre and good setting: "entertaining and fun", with great performance and interplay, with the participants "playing their roles" and "engaged and enjoying themselves". It should not be "one joke after another", however, or "too much silly". Amusing heralds (and Crowns!) are appreciated, but so are the heralds (and Crowns!) with good gravitas. See above concerning the balanced mix of serious and light – a bit of fun is well and good, but it's the moments of gravity and drama that elevate and transport.

Annoyances include the careless mangling of names and not using full or proper names and titles – this stuff should be worked out ahead of time. Likewise the Crowns not knowing at least the bare basics, like the oath of fealty, etc. Even if speakers are not the greatest performers, they should at least be able to enunciate and project. Respondents complained over and over about "mumbling", "droning", and "not being able to hear." Being able to see and hear what's going on came up in the survey results *fully as often* as the comments on court length.

On that note, several people suggested that the populace and even the Royals/B&B should make more use of the voice heralds. Not a strong or confident speaker? That's what the heralds are *for*. Let them do your speaking for you. If someone who does their own speaking isn't perhaps projecting as well as they might, the herald should be encouraged (if not expected) to repeat their words, or otherwise to explain to the audience what's going on: "The Lady Such-and-So has presented Their Majesties with a linen Widget-Cover, embroidered by her own hands!" [displays item in question for all to see]. "Lord Wosname has reminded Her Majesty of the oath he took to build a Nardling Wagon before Midsummer Eve, or else forfeit a blah blah etc...."

Finally, the audience has a role here as well – people can excuse a child acting up a bit, because children do that, but a group of adults having a conversation down the back really gets up people's noses. The "disrespectful" category also includes the hokey "Ooh! Ahh! Pretty!" refrain when someone's hard work is on display.

TL;DR: Good court is good theatre, and even the audience has its role.

Meaning

Talking about the "meaning" component of court would seem to skirt perilously close to the "What's the purpose of the SCA?" abyss, and indeed praise of the medieval pageantry went along with complaints of "non-period goofery" throwing participants out of the groove. One respondent placed court squarely at the centre of what we do: "the Crown are a focus for us building a medieval world".

But the medieval presentation and theatrical organization are just the window-dressing: the meaning component of court touches the foundation of the SCA as both a volunteer organisation and social construct. When I asked people what they like and dislike about courts – what the *point* of court is – there was a strong current of delightful touchy-feely: "celebration", "honouring each other", "recognising efforts", "strengthening relationships", even "getting to know people". People love seeing their friends honoured (and hate missing it). Courts are where personal triumphs are shared, and individual victories become everyone's victories.

The flip side of this is that when court business *lacks* meaning, it can quickly fall back to the realm of "too long" and "boring". Private business, household business, "waffle I don't care about", and "in-jokes I'm not in on" were all grounds for grumbling, indeed "anything the audience is not involved with" makes court a trial, not a pleasure. Some respondents admitted that "other people's courts" – courts where they don't know anyone and have no context – can be deadly dull.

Now, court is not just a show put on for the audience – sometimes the business that needs doing is perforce private business, or household business, and the Crown may be indulged the occasional "private chat-fest". But...

But it doesn't hurt to consider what can be done to mitigate the above. *Does* your private business with the Crown really need to be done in public? Are there other, more inclusive ways to satisfy your need for everyone to see you do your boring stuff officially? Can that in-joke be presented in such a way that everyone else is brought in on the joke? (Some visiting Australians remarked on enjoying the Don Julio presentation at the last Canterbury Faire, so those presenters must have done something right.) Can that presentation be explained to the audience to give them the context to appreciate it? Yes, the explanation will make the court a few seconds longer – but people can put up with a longer court if it *engages* them. Instead of simply repeating a formula and presenting someone with an award, present *them* to the audience. Explain why they've been noticed, what they have achieved, why we all should treasure them.

With a little care and forethought, no court need finish as an "other people's" court.

So, that's some of what I learned when I asked people about court. It all seems really obvious when I read it back now, but I couldn't have articulated a third of it before I started talking to people. I think the biggest takeaway for me, though, is how a good court is so much more than just the tin hats and a herald or two, and just how many ways there are for people who would never have thought of themselves as "heralds" to ~~be conscripted~~ contribute.

awards celebrate ceremony **clear** speakers
engaging entertaining fun good theatre gravitas
honour interplay **let the heralds do more**
more frequent organized people i know
performance recognise short smaller snappy strengthen relationships
variety well-choreographed well-paced
when i can see and hear