How to write documentation for the SCA - Sisuile Butler

Our goal is to use a simple formula to help you write documentation for sca purposes. This is an absolute basic form, and is here to help you get started. The form is one that is likely familiar to you: the five paragraph essay.

A five paragraph essay has an introduction, three subject paragraphs, and a conclusion. Within this structure (and much of the reason it is drilled in American schools), is actually quite a bit of freedom. If you need more than three subject paragraphs, you can always have more!

Your introduction paragraph can be very simple: this is the object that I am talking about, a recreation or interpretation of (insert type or specific object), for (use, occasion, reason). The three body paragraphs you need are: what you wanted to do with the project, what was done in period (including what substitutions you made and why), and what you ended up with. Your conclusion is what you learned, and, if you did it again, what you would do differently.

If you are working on a multi-piece project, or a multi-stage project, then you can do all three things in the same paragraph, and separate by item/part, or, if it is involved enough, create a section of your documentation by parts, and give each part it's own set of 3 paragraphs. It is also important to include pictures of your intermediate stages, the parts that will not be visible when someone looks at the finished product. Many people also find pictures of extant examples or paintings or written sources to be useful.

So that is how we use the five paragraph essay structure to write SCA documentation. It's not so scary when it's something so familiar, and no one ever said you had to write a full research paper. Getting started can look very much like these 5 paragraphs.

For a refresher on the "rules" from elementary school: it needs three sentences to be a paragraph. Each paragraph needs a subject. These are training wheels to help you get started. They are not the be all and end all of all types of documentation, nor the only way to write documentation. This is very specifically for an SCA context - research papers and other types of formal writing have different rules and you need to pay attention to those. However, if you are facing a blank page and a deadline of having your documentation done for tomorrow's A&S competition, this is some guidance. (Rules are made to be broken, think of them more as guidelines.)

I find it extremely helpful to outline my documentation first, so I'm filling in the blanks as I go. Here are two example outlines that might help you figure out what yours needs to look like:

Girdle book
1. Introduction
2. Book block
    a. Paper
    b. Binding
3. Covers
    a. Wood v paste board
    b. Fabric v leather
4. Embroidery
    a. Materials
    b. Design
    c. Stitches/execution
5. Assembly
    a. Glue
    b. Shaping
6. Conclusion

In this one, it's a multi-stage project that I broke down into each successive stage, and did at least a sentence on each of the subheadings. The subheading paper was expanded to:

> *For this project, I used high quality 28# brochure paper that I then cut down*
> *and folded, so that the grain ran parallel to the spine. In the 15th c, it would*
> *have been hand milled fine rag paper, cut down similarly from folio sheets.*
> *That was outside my budget, so I used the modern equivalent.*

Do you see how I incorporated the form into those three sentences? I said what I used and how, what would have been used in the time period, and why I used the materials/method I did. I combined that with the four sentences I wrote on my binding and two progress pictures, and lo, I had finished the section. If you have more to say, you can say it!

Have another example, this one based around a multi piece project, where I wanted to keep track of my references so I could use them in my documentation:

1. Introduction
2. Shift
    a. Linen muslin -1534 ex
    b. Pattern
        i. PoF 4
    c. Embroidery/construction
        i. V&A blue work
        ii. Bath redwork
3. Undergown
    a. Wool
        i. QE UL
        ii. Woodcut
    b. Construction
        i. Brudges
        ii. DeHeere
4. Overgown
    a. Fabric
        i. Prin. Mary (H. Elder)
    b. Construction
        i. DeHeere
        ii. Mary & elizabeth woodcut
5. Conclusion
    a. Sewing machines suck
    b. Check your fiber content first

Since I do my project planning on paper (I have a specific notebook for it), as I find a reference I think I'll use, not only do I download the picture, I try to write something about it in the notebook. For example: the V&A's website has a notoriously bad search engine. Terribly bad. I write down item numbers as I find things, because otherwise I might never find them again. This makes actually doing my documentation easier at the end, because not only did I grab the picture, I also still have the artist and date. And the reason I threw it in this folder. The outline helps me to check off that yes, I remembered to mention that source, the conclusions I drew from it, and where I went from there. Also, did I include the picture?

Documentation is not a research paper, and does not have to be perfect. The point is to convey to the reader that you did the thing, you thought about your choices, and you learned something from it. So when you start muttering at your best friend because something is wrong, or when you get that eureka moment, write them both down. They can go into your documentation.