

HOW TO WRITE A CEREMONY

William the Lucky (August, AS XXI)

Occasionally you may be asked to write a ceremony -- for presenting a local award, acknowledging the winner of the local championship tourney, etc. This need not be an occasion for panic, even if you have never done anything like this before. Of course, it helps if you have lots of experience with ceremonies (from the SCA, from your religions background, from the theater, or wherever), but it is not really necessary.

STARTING OUT:

The first step is to get really clear in your own mind what the purpose of the ceremony is.¹ Since you have been asked to write it, talk to the individual who requested it. When you think you understand the reason (which may only take one sentence from them), repeat it back to make sure that what you understood is what they meant. (It seems to help to use several short sentences rather than one long one for this.)

Having gotten a clear idea of why the ceremony is being created, check to see if there is any particular bit of business which must be included, or any existing ceremony which is supposed to be used as a model (if so, try to get a copy). Find out who is supposed to be involved; a Barony or a Principality has a ceremonial figure-head, while a Province or a Shire does not. Find out what they are supposed to do.

STRUCTURE:

Lay out the basic structure of the ceremony. This is the skeleton on which you will hang the final product. It can be very detailed or extremely sketchy. As an example, here is a skeletal outline of the standard Kingdom knighting ceremony:

- The Chivalry and the candidate come before the Throne.
- The candidate swears fealty
- The Sovereign returns the oath
- The Sovereign dubs the new knight
- The new knight gets his belt and chain

Note that this leaves out some of the bits of business (fetching the candidate, the chain, the spurs, etc.) and has none of the language used. All it does is give the critical parts of the ceremony and the order in which they will occur. For a local award this will probably be very simple, e.g.:

- Herald calls winner
- Baroness gives token
- Cheers

If the ceremony is long or complex, you may want to expand the skeleton once or twice, to fill in the details of the action before you start adding the words. This is also the time to start thinking about blocking: where people will stand or kneel, who will be moving around, etc.

¹ Note that, by Corpora, Shire awards are unofficial. If you are in a Shire (as opposed to a Province, Barony or Principality) and they intend an official award, explain to them that this is not one of the choices.

LANGUAGE:

It also helps to put the language in in two stages. Stage 1: just say it, Stage 2: make it foresoothly. 'Just say it' helps to make sure that what you mean does not get lost in the effort to make it sound right. Take the oaths of fealty from the knighting ceremony again. The knight's oath is:

- State what is being agreed to
- List some specifics
- Give examples of how universal the circumstances
- State how long the contract runs
- Sign

The Sovereign's oath is:

- Acknowledge the knight's oath
- State who is covered in return
- State what is being agreed
- Confirm how long the contract runs
- Sign

Once you have what you want to say sketched in modern English, you can put in the actual wording. Take the knight's oath again:

- State what is being agreed to
"Here do I swear, by mouth and hands, fealty and service to the Crown and Kingdom of the West."
- List some specifics
"To strike and to spare, to speak and to be silent, to come and to go, to do and to let be"
- Give examples of how universal the circumstances
"in all matters which concern this Kingdom, in need or in plenty, in peace or in war, in living or in dying"
- State how long the contract runs
"Until the King depart from His Throne, or death take me, or the world end."
- Sign
"So say I, (name)"

And the Sovereign's oath:

- Acknowledge the knight's oath
"This do We hear,"
- State who is covered in return
"and We, for our part, swear fealty to this knight of the West and to all his household,"
- State what is being agreed
"to support, protect and defend them against every creature with all Our power,"
- Confirm how long the contract runs
"Until We depart from Our Throne, or death take Us, or the world end."
- Sign
"So say We, (name), King of the West."

The same sort of process for a Baronial Champion:

- Herald: call winner
- Baron: You are the winner
You will be protector of our Barony
Your term is one year
(Gives token)
- Herald: call for cheers

Then:

- Herald: call winner
“Let (name) come forward.”
- Baron: You are the winner
“You have been given victory over the field this day.”
- Baron: You will be protector of our Barony
“and so become champion of our Barony of Grand Pismire, and to protect us and lead our forces into battle”
- Baron: Your term is one year
“for the next year. Accept, therefore, this favor of the Barony.”
(Gives token)
- Herald: call for cheers
“For the new Champion of Grand Pismire: Hip, hip!” (etc.)

REVISING AND POLISHING:

Unless you have enormous aptitude for this sort of thing (and probably not even then), you will probably find that what you have at this point is not quite what you want. Let it sit for awhile (as a day or two). Read it aloud to someone else from beginning to end, to see how it sounds. Have someone else read it over. Fiddle with wordings. See if you have used a perfectly good word, which has acquired unfortunate overtones in the modern world.² A thesaurus is useful.

STYLE:

There are varying preferences in style. Some like ceremonies as elaborate as possible; others like them as simple as possible. Some feel a short ceremony has more impact; others feel a long ceremony enhances the importance of the occasion. Primarily you should be guided by your own taste and the preferences of those for whom you are writing. It is well to remember, however, that few of our members are professional actors, and therefore they are unlikely to be able to memorize long speeches and rattle them off at need.

² On seeing the newly built St. Paul’s Cathedral, the King of England pronounced it “Awful, pompous, and artificial.” By which he meant that it inspired awe, that it was full of pomp and circumstance, and that it was a great artifact -- in short, he liked it a lot. But what would be the instant reaction of a modern audience such as you could expect at a Society event?

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