Commenting on Letters of Intent

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Letters of intent (LoI) contain the name and armory submissions received during a determined time and on which a decision has to be made. They are produced during the submission process at two levels.

First, at the kingdom level, internal letters of intent are produced for in-kingdom commenting and initial decision. The exact process varies from kingdom to kingdom. Some kingdoms even have no internal commenting to speak of.

If the submission passes the first step, the Kingdom (External) Submission Herald publishes a new letter of intent (external letter of intent) to be commented at society level, on OSCAR.

Commentary is necessary at both levels to help with the decision process.

In theory, the more commenters are involved, the better. Commentaries are needed to help the person(s) making the decision on the submission. The commenters fulfill two main roles: checking that there isn't an issue preventing the submission from being registered and, in certain cases, providing additional information to strengthen the submission, allow it to be registered as submitted or identify required modifications before registration.

Many aspects are common to internal and external commenting.

Online Commenting: enters OSCAR

What is OSCAR? OSCAR is the acronym for Online System for Commentary and Response. It is an online platform that allows in kingdom and society-wide online commenting from authorized people. Because all the comments are in one place, it has eliminated the need of various mailings and rebuttals, and allowed to shorten the commentary phase, and thus the overall time between submission and publication of the decision.

Some people are required to be subscribed to OSCAR due to their office (Laurel team & staff, Principal Heralds, Submission Heralds). Other commenters need to be nominated or ratified by their Principal Herald or directly chosen by the Laurel team.

The Administrative Handbook (section VII) has some instructions about commenting: http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/admin.html#VII.A

In most kingdoms, internal commenting is done in the kingdom gardens of OSCAR (this is the section of OSCAR dedicated to kingdom-level commenting). Each kingdom gets to decide which criteria to use to allow (or not) outside commenters to comment on their internal letters.

In the next step, submissions that were approved by the decision-making authority in kingdom are sent for further, society-wide, commenting. This still happens in OSCAR, as a LoI.

Commenting on internal letters of intent

Internal letters of intent are the first step where the name and devices submissions are considered. It is the first phase of consideration, the winnowing (and in certain cases triage) of what has been received by the Submission Herald and fulfills the administrative requirements (forms, payment, etc.).

At that stage, the most crucial things that need to be checked are adherence to the Standards for Evaluation of Names and Armory (SENA), and the absence of conflict with something that is already registered. The most evident problems should be detected, and hopefully resolved, in kingdom commentary.

It should be also the time when these submissions are strengthened. For example: Is there better documentation for that name? Does the blazon need to be improved for clarity? Is a redraw necessary and feasible? Can a letter of permission to conflict be obtained to avoid a return?

The goal is to *give each and every submission the best possible chance to be registered or, if impossible, to discover it early enough in the process that the submitter does not have to wait for the Letter of Acceptances and Returns (LoAR) to know that there is an unsolvable problem.*

Good internal commenting also ultimately reduces the workload of the Laurel, Pelican and Wreath Sovereigns of Arms.

Commenting on external letters of intent

Once a submission is in the Laurel OSCAR system, members of the College of Arms will review the submission. Much of this review is similar to what happened in-kingdom (even more so now that most of the internal commenting is done in OSCAR already). During this step, the submissions are reviewed by additional knowledgeable and experienced heralds.

At this stage the commenters should essentially tackle the issues that were missed or could not be dealt with at the kingdom level. For example, some of the members of the College of Heralds specialized in some specific language or culture can lack the time to check submissions when they're in kingdom, and can have some useful input at this point. An additional round of conflict checking can detect some problems that were initially missed.

Aspects common to internal and external commentaries

- What you need: primarily SENA and access to the SCA Armorial and Ordinary.

- What is useful: knowing how to conflict check, knowing how to find information in the precedents (the collection of the decisions previously made by the College of Arms), access to some documentation (either online or paper-based, commonly shared or relatively unique)

- The types of comments: respect of the SENA (this applies to names and armory), conflict (names and armory), documentation and research (mainly names) and style (mainly armory).

<u>The good, the bad and the ugly</u>

* The good, what to do:

From the administrative handbook: *"The most valuable comments consist of reasoned arguments, preferably backed by period evidence or Laurel precedent. Sources need to be clearly identified in the comment."*

Or, in the words of Aryanhwy merch Catmael, *"For OSCAR commentary, cite your sources! Cite your precedents! The more information you provide, the easier it is for the sovereigns to cut and paste from commentary into decisions, and the less time it takes them to write up their decisions, and the less time it takes to get from the Sovereigns' meetings to publication of the LoAR"*

In short, any information or opinion you give, to be useful, must be backed up with some reference:

- When you find a (potential) conflict, remember to mention what the conflict is with and why you think it conflicts. Additionally, explaining why you think a submission does not conflict with something already registered is often informational too.

- When you find a (potential) rule issue, cite the rule and/or precedent.

- If you are not sure that one of the above problems exists: express your concerns. Somebody who could have an answer might have overlooked it.

- Remember that you never know who is going to read your comments. Be clear. Be complete. Be constructive. Be nice.

* The bad and the ugly:

- Commentaries not backed up with sources are essentially useless.

- Opinions are a good thing. They are, for some questions, crucial. Stylistic opinion should express concerns based (documentably) on period practice. Personal taste-based ones are irrelevant and should be avoided. Or, to quote Tanczos Istvan, *"We are heralds, not art critics"*.

- Avoid personal attacks whether on submitters, commenters or any other person. Different persons will have different opinions and interpretations of some rules. This is an opportunity to discuss, maybe to lead to a clarification that will be useful to all later and learn in the process. Treat it that way. Nobody is out to get you (most likely at least).

<u>Take home message: Go forth and comment!</u>

Remember first and foremost that commenting is needed for all the submission process to run. If you are not already, get involved first with your kingdom commenting. Your Kingdom Submission Herald(s) will be very thankful for that. Even if you don't yet feel comfortable enough to comment, reading other people's comments is a wonderful learning tool.

Links of interest:

Administrative Handbook: http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/admin.html
SENA (rules): http://heraldry.sca.org/laurel/sena.html
SCA-wide LoI commenting: http://oscar.sca.org/
Kingdom level (gardens) commenting https://oscar.sca.org/index.php?action=217
Search forms for the SCA Armorial, Armorial and Ordinary in Soft Copy: http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/OandA/index.html
Precedents of the SCA College of Arms: http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/precedents.html
On summarizing documentation: http://heraldry.sca.org/loar/2000/04/00-04cl.html

This part stolen fair and square from Tanczos Istvan, former Wreath King of Arms

What, as a new herald, can I do to help?

1. Flesh out citations, especially of the type of armory called as a conflict.
2. Dig for extra documentation on a name, if the name is not sufficiently documented.
3. Comment on style questions
4. Comment on the recognizability of charges
5. Double check blazon versus emblazon
6. Double check that the citations (web/book) say what the submitter says they do
7. Verify that documentation links work
8. Verify that charges are still registerable
9. Verify that charges have been registered before
10. Search for documentation for charges which have never been registered
11. Conflict check names
12. Conflict check armory
13. Run through the Argent-Snail insta-boing checklist on each submission
14. Check that a submitter who is submitting only armory has their primary name registered.
15. Check that a submitter has not hit the registration limit
16. Check that a submitter who is submitting a device does not already have a device registered
17. Check that the submitted name is not the name of a famous person. If it is, mention whether you think it meets the criteria in "Beyond the Encyclopedia" (See the January 2003 Cover Letter)

Style
1. Avoid ad-hominium, rude, profane, or otherwise offensive or off-topic comments.
2. Concise
3. Clear
4. Back up your statements. Citations!
5. Finish the item. Discuss everything, not just the first thing.
6. Draw a conclusion! (This armory should be returned, because...)