

Conflict Checking 101: Theory

What is conflict checking?

In short, conflict checking is the process of determining if two pieces of armory are so close that they would indicate the same person or a close blood relationship between the two owners.

What does that mean?

Both medieval and modern heraldry use various systems of cadency to differentiate arms between fathers and sons and cousins, and so on. The exact differences vary from time to time and culture to culture, but the general principle is that the child has their parent's arms with one thing changed.

Within the SCA's period, this was fairly straightforward – literally going forward as people had children! In the SCA, however, we are working *backwards*; rather than trying to show close familial relationships, we're trying to avoid them! In a generalized sense, if two pieces of armory have more than two differences, the two owners would not be related. We call these differences "Distinct Changes" or "DCs". Additionally, some changes weren't typically/ever used for cadency; if two pieces of armory have one of these changes, the owners would not be related either. We call these differences "Substantial Changes" or "SCs".

How do we decide which set of cadency rules to follow?

Since the exact rules of cadency do vary, Laurel has had to come up with a single set of rules that we can apply consistently. In general, the current rules reflect typical cadency later in our period.

Where do I get these rules, and is there anything else I need, like obscure heraldry tomes?

When it comes to doing any kind of book heraldry, you'll want to have handy the Standards for Evaluation of Names and Armory (SENA) and the Administrative Handbook. Even experienced heralds consult SENA for the exact details – especially the Appendices. You'll also want to have access to the SCA's Ordinary and Armorial, containing all the registered items your potential submission might conflict with. On occasion, you might want to look at the Letters of Acceptance and Response (LoARs) for precedents interpreting SENA (and its predecessor, the Rules for Submission).

Well then, how do we tell if things conflict?

The basic principle in determining if two items conflict is to go through SENA sections A.5.E through A.5.G. Sections A.5.E and A.5.F, if they apply, make them immediately clear of conflict (no counting!). Subsections of A.5.G, if they apply, give DCs – two DCs makes them clear of conflict. Just remember – even if they are technically clear of conflict, they may still be visually too close under A.5.D.

Where do I start? Checking against everything ever registered would take forever!

True enough! You don't start by having two things to compare – you start with a submission and want to know if it conflicts with something already registered. The way to work is backwards – the details of how this works are coming up later on.

So, I just search for bits of the blazon?

I do *not* recommend using a blazon pattern search. For example, consider that all dogs are considered to be the same for conflict purposes, so a blazon pattern search for 'dog' will miss all the talbots, wolves, greyhounds, and so on. I recommend using the categories in the Ordinary. The categories of the Ordinary have all of "dogs" of all sorts lumped under Beast-Dog.

Oh, that does sound like a bad idea, then. What’s the better way?

First, look at what you have. Is there a primary charge group? How about secondary charge groups? How about tertiary and overall charge groups? List all details you can about each of them – the types of details that you can get difference for, rather than artistic details or maintained charges.

While it often looks like experienced heralds just dive right into a Category (or the Complex Search Form), this is because they’re able to do this first step in their heads almost instantaneously – as fast as most of us could calculate $2+2=4$. It’s especially important to properly identify the primary charge group, since some changes to the primary charge group count as Substantial Changes (under A.5.E).

Appendix I of SENA talks about charge group theory, including primary, secondary, tertiary, and overall charge groups and how to deal with sustained and maintained charges. When you’re just starting out with conflict checking I do recommend doing this step “out loud” until you get the hang of it.

Example 1: *Argent semy-de-lys, on a fess gules three escallops argent.* Here’s how it breaks down:

Field: *Argent*

Primary charge group: *fess, 1, gules, plain line, charged*

Secondary charge group: *fleurs-de-lys, semy (6+), gules, uncharged*

Tertiary charge group: *escallops, 3, argent, on the primary charge group*

Example 2: *Per fess wavy Or and vert, two mullets and a lion counterchanged and overall a bend azure, mullety Or.* This one is a little more complicated. Here’s how it breaks down:

Field: *Per fess Or and vert, complex line (wavy)*

Primary charge group: *mulletts and lion, 3, multicolor neutral (half vert, half Or), two-and-one (default on per fess field), uncharged*

First half: *mulletts, 2, vert, uncharged*

Second half: *lion, 2, Or, rampant (default), uncharged*

Overall charge group: *bend, 1, azure, plain line, charged*

Tertiary charge group: *mulletts, semy (6+), Or, on the overall charge group*

This may seem like a lot of work, but it’s critical to be sure you’re comparing apples to apples when conflict checking. It also helps you cut right to the Categories in the Ordinary that you need, because they’re broken down into the kinds of things you can get difference for in SENA – type, number, tincture, arrangement, posture, type of lines, etc. Just for reference, here’s some thumbnail versions of SENA A.5 and the two sections you’ll want to look at most often – A.5.E and A.5.G:

SENA A.5 - ARMORY CONFLICT

- A. Definitions and General Principles – explanation of cadency
- B. Armory Protected from Conflict – “everything registered on an LoAR and in the O&A”
- C. Comparisons of Armory – compare apples to apples, oranges to oranges; what “half” means
- D. Standards for Visual Conflict – when technical difference is not enough
- E. Standards for Difference Through Substantial Change to the Primary Charge Group
- F. Standards for Difference Through Substantial Change of Field for Field-Primary Armory
- G. Standards for Difference Through Two Distinct Changes
- H. Registration with Permission to Conflict – how you *can* claim relationship with someone willing

SENA A.5.E - Substantial Changes to the Primary Charge Group (only need one! no counting!)

1. Adding/Removing the Primary Charge Group – just what it says; mostly for clearing field-primary armory from armory with a primary charge group and vice versa
2. Substantial Change of Type – must affect the *entire* primary charge group
3. Substantial Change of Number – 1, 2, 3, 4+/semy *only*
4. Substantial Change of Arrangement – limited cases *only*; forced changes don't count
5. Substantial Change of Posture – limited cases *only*; must compare apples to apples; roundish inanimate charges can't be compared for this

SENA A.5.F - Substantial Changes to Field-Primary Armory (beyond the scope of this handout)

SENA A.5.G - Distinct Changes to Any Charge Group (need two DCs)

1. Changes to the Field – tincture, direction of lines, style of lines, number of pieces (up to 4), fieldless
2. Adding/Removing a Charge Group – secondary, tertiary, or overall
3. Change of Tincture – tincture, direction of lines, style of lines, number of pieces (up to 4)
4. Change of Type – some type changes are a DC but not an SC; style of line for ordinaries is part of their type
5. Change of Number – 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6+/semy (more options than for SCs!)
6. Change of Arrangement – more options than for SCs; forced changes still don't count
7. Change of Posture – more options than for SCs; still must compare apples to apples; roundish inanimate charges *may* be compared for this if they have an obvious top/bottom

This is all well and good, but how do you actually go about conflict checking?

Remember, we want to think about it backwards. That means we want to figure out what *would* conflict and see if it exists. Take the armory in hand and figure out how narrow a focus you can get by applying A.5.E. Within that narrow focus, keep everything identical except for one thing and see if anything out there matches. It's useful to see it all written out once (but probably only once), to wrap your head around the idea, so here's an example alllllllll written out.

Example 3. *Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules.*

First, here's the breakdown:

Field: *Per pale azure and gules, plain line*

Primary charge group: *lion, 1, Or, rampant*

Secondary charge group: *chief, 1, Or, indented line*

Tertiary charge group: *escallop, 3, gules, in fess*

Let's start by going through A.5.E. to see what things we *don't* have to consider at all. That is, how much of the Ordinary can we *completely ignore* for this conflict check? Let's do this cumulatively - what does the primary charge group *have* to be so that we don't ignore it?

1. Adding/Removing the Primary Charge Group – this means we can ignore anything that has no primary charges (including *Per pale azure and gules, a chief indented Or*)
2. Substantial Change of Type – this means we can ignore anything that doesn't have *lion(s)* in the primary charge group (that's a **lot** of the Ordinary!)
3. Substantial Change of Number – this means we can ignore anything that doesn't have *one lion as the entire primary charge group* (whittling it down more!)

4. Substantial Change of Arrangement – with only one charge, there’s no arrangement to speak of, so we’re still only ignoring anything without *one lion* as the entire primary charge group
5. Substantial Change of Posture – this means we can ignore anything that doesn’t have *one lion in a posture comparable to rampant as the entire primary charge group*. As lions are quadrupeds, this is “*rampant, segreant, salient, sejant erect, sejant, and the contourny versions of these*”.

That does cut it down a lot, doesn’t it? However – once we get there, what things might this conflict with? For that, we want to think about A.5.G and DCs. Since we need *two* DCs to clear a conflict, anything that’s exactly *one* DC away will be a conflict. So – what’s one DC from *Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules*?

Hypothetical armory	The one DC comes from:
- <i>Per pale [tincture not azure/gules/Or] and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and [tincture not azure/gules/Or], a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i>	A.5.G.1.a Changes to the Field
- <i>Per pale [complex line] azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i>	A.5.G.1.c Changes to the Field
- <i>[Any other division] azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>[Any other division, plain or complex line, with any other tinctures], a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>[Any plain field], a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i>	A.5.G.1.b OR A.5.G.1.d. Changes to the Field
- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion [between any charges of any tincture] and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules [either half/all semy of charges of any tincture], a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, on a lion [any number of charges of any tincture] and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion Or and a chief indented Or [no escallops]</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion, on a chief indented Or three escallops gules [and overall a charge of any tincture]</i>	A.5.G.2 Adding or Removing a Charge Group
- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion [argent, ermine, erminois, or multicolor neutral/metal] and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion Or and on a chief indented [argent, ermine, erminois, or neutral], three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops [color or neutral]</i>	A.5.G.3 Change of Tincture Within a Charge Group
- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a [different peripheral ordinary, any kind of line] Or, three escallops gules</i> - <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on [one secondary charge somewhere on the field] Or, three escallops gules</i>	A.5.G.4 Change of Type Within a Charge

<p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief [plain line or a complex line not in the same group as indented] Or, three escallops gules</i></p> <p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three [non-escallop charges] gules</i></p> <p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, [a non-escallop between two escallops] gules</i> [half the tertiary charge group has changed: A.5.C.2.d]</p>	<p>Group</p>
<p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, [any other number] escallops gules</i></p> <p>Changing the number of lions would be an SC, not a DC; there can be only one chief</p>	<p>A.5.G.5</p> <p>Change of Number Within a Charge Group</p>
<p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, [other placement on the field] a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i></p> <p>It would be pretty difficult to change the arrangement of the escallops.</p>	<p>A.5.G.6</p> <p>Change of Arrangement Within a Charge Group</p>
<p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion[contourny, or posture equivalent-for-conflict to rampant contourny] and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i></p> <p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion[any posture other than rampant [contourny]] and on a chief indented Or, three escallops gules</i></p> <p>- <i>Per pale azure and gules, a lion and on a chief indented Or, three escallops [inverted] gules</i> [escallops are compact inanimate charges, but have a distinct top and bottom, so inverting them is a DC: A.5.G.7.c]</p>	<p>A.5.G.7</p> <p>Change of Posture or Orientation Within a Charge Group</p>

Those are a lot of possibilities, but I think I get it. Where do I go to check for those?

Once we have this list, go to the Ordinary and Armorial and go to the “Index to the Ordinary”. There, we want to ignore every category except ones that match what we figure out earlier: *one lion in a posture comparable to rampant as the entire primary charge group*.

Note: the Ordinary category pages contain all armory which matches that charge description, even if it’s not in the primary charge group. This means that it will contain many items we can skim past quickly!

In that category (which may be a couple of categories in the Index), we first want to look to see if there’s an exact match for the armory we have in hand ... or one heraldically equivalent. If that’s not there, we want to look at each item to see if it matches any of those hypothetical conflicts above.

This may seem overwhelming (particularly in the Beast-Cat category!), but with some practice it goes pretty quickly. For each item you look at, start counting DCs as you read the blazon and stop reading as soon as you get to two. Remember that the vast majority of items will have a different field and therefore get that first DC immediately.

Can you show that again in slow motion?

The best way to learn is to give it a try yourself. On the last page of this handout are some examples for you to try as potential submissions against the other handout, the Amazingly Excerpted Ordinary. Rather than using the whole Ordinary, this excerpted one makes it easier to get a handle on conflict checking armory using SENA.

Exercises for the student

This is how you get good at it, so show your work – give a breakdown of this armory (the primary, secondary, etc. charge groups). Then, note which categories of the Ordinary you want to check. Last, for each item you compare it to, note which SENA sections give you an SC or DC, how many DCs you get (if you get one SC, stop!)... or if it conflicts.

1. Azure, a lion contourny between three mullets Or.
2. Vert, six mullets argent and on a chief Or, three spoons vert.
3. Per fess gules and azure, two mullets and a rabbit statant argent.
4. (Fieldless) An ermine spot per pale azure and argent.