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 (and commenting) the better. Commenters are needed to help the person(s) making the decision on the submission. Globally, they 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 or identify required modifications before registration.

Many aspects are common to internal and external commenting.

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, winnowing (and in certain cases triage) of what has been received by the Submission Herald and fulfills the administrative requirements (forms, payment, etc.). In the East, commenting is done in a OSCAR-type interface.

At that stage, the most crucial things that need to be checked are adherence to the Rules for Submission (RfS), 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 Ex: Is there some better documentation for that name? Does the blazon need to be improved for clarity? Can a letter of permission to conflict be obtained?

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 Sovereigns.

Commenting in external letters of intent: enters OSCAR

What is OSCAR? OSCAR is the acronym for Online System for Commentary and Response. It allows society-wide online commenting from authorized people.

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 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 OSCAR, all that happened during in-kingdom commentary is going to happen again, except that this time more people are going to examine submissions, and some of these people have specific qualifications that were absent at the previous step.

At this stage the commenters should essentially tackle the issues that were missed or could not be dealt with at the kingdom level.

Aspects common to internal and external commentaries

- What you need: primarily the RfS 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 RfS (this applies to names and armory), conflict (names and armory), documentation and research (mainly names) and style (mainly armory).

The good, the bad and the ugly

* 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. Treat it that way. Nobody is out to get you (maybe).

Take home message: Go forth and comment!

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
Rules for Submission: http://heraldry.sca.org/heraldry/laurel/rfs.html
Find your kingdom commenting list: http://www.ellipsis.cx/~liana/sca/ilois.html
SCA-wide LoI commenting: http://oscar.sca.org/
EK OSCAR: http://oscar.eastkingdom.org/index.php
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