

A GUIDE TO BASIC BLAZONRY

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For Students at Level 1 of the RHSC Heraldry Proficiency Course



Illustrations by Gordon Macpherson

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GENERAL

Blazon is the language of heraldry. Although it may be archaic in form, it can describe an achievement much more precisely than can ordinary language. The objective of the heraldic blazon is to be clear and concise. While there may be more than one set of words available to create a proper blazon, an experienced heraldic artist should be able to draw the achievement from the words of the blazon and the guidance of the artist should be the primary intent in all cases. While a concise, neatly worded blazon can be a source of satisfaction, clever wording should never replace clarity of meaning.

This handbook is intended to provide the beginner with a *single* correct way to blazon a given achievement, not two or three alternatives, no matter how correct. It is not intended as a guide to heraldic design. Also, it is assumed that the student has done the necessary homework on shields, ordinaries, charges, etc, and that what is required here is a guide to describing them in proper form and sequence.

[A] THE SHIELD

THE NORMAL SEQUENCE

The Following provides the normal sequence for blazoning a shield:

1. THE FIELD

The surface of the shield is called the **field** and its colour, metal, or fur is the principal tincture of the arms. In a blazon, the field is mentioned first.

Colours and metals are customarily capitalized in blazon. The names of furs and the word "proper" are not capitalized.

- (a) **The Simple Field** We will start with a "simple" field – that is, where the background of the shield is of a single metal or colour (fig 1) or fur (fig 2). The blazon then starts with just the name of that tincture. In the case of Fig 1, this would be "**Argent ...**"

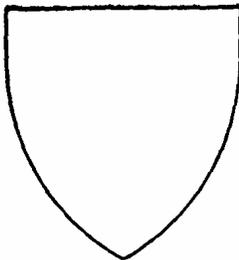


Figure 1

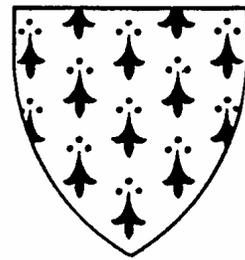


Figure 2

- (b) **The Complex Field** This is a term I use for a field that is other than simple, such as parted, banded, patterned or semy of small charges. Such a field is also named first, like a simple one. However, to avoid presenting the beginner with confusing detail before he has grasped the basic sequence of blazon, this subsection is placed as Paragraph 8, at the end of the main section on the sequence of blazonry.

2. THE ORDINARY

If there is an Ordinary on the field, it is considered the main charge and is mentioned directly after the field, with a couple of exceptions (see below). For example, “**Argent a bend Gules**” (fig 3). If there

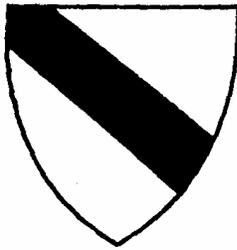


Figure 3

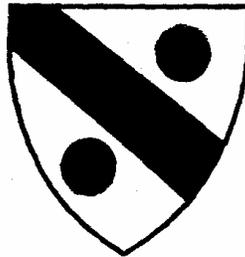


Figure 4

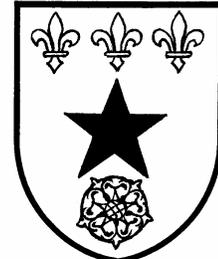


Figure 5

are charges on the Ordinary, to be mentioned later, say “on” before the name of the Ordinary (e.g. “Argent on a bend Gules....”).

Exceptions: These are the chief and the bordure, which are always mentioned after the other features of the shield. In the case of the chief, the main field starts below the chief. Where there is a bordure, the whole field (including a chief) is usually within the bordure.

3. CHARGES ON THE MAIN FIELD

(a) Where there is an ordinary

Where there is an ordinary, the other charges on the main field (*not* those on the ordinary itself) are mentioned directly after the ordinary, giving their position and tincture, and usually with a term like “between” indicating their relationship to the ordinary. For example: “**Argent a bend Gules between two pellets**” (fig 4).

(b) Where there is no ordinary

Where there is no ordinary, the principal charge or charges on the field should be mentioned directly after the field itself. If there is a central or main charge, it comes first, followed by any others. If there are a number of roughly equal-sized charges, they are described in sequence from top down and from dexter to sinister, giving location and orientation where it is not obvious. Examples: “**Argent a mullet Sable between in chief three fleurs de lis Azure and in base a rose Gules**” (fig 5); or “**Argent three fetterlocks in pale Azure between two daggers Sable**” (fig 6).

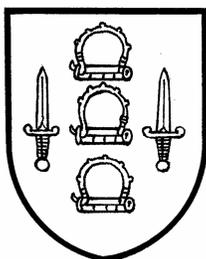


Figure 6

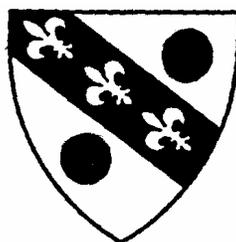


Figure 7

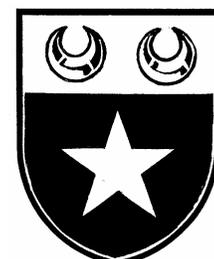


Figure 8

4. CHARGES ON THE ORDINARY

After describing the charges on the field, next mention those on an ordinary, if there is one. You should forewarn of this by the use of the word “on” before the name of the ordinary. For example, “**Argent on a bend Gules between two pellets, three fleurs de lis also Argent**” (fig 7). Note the word “on”, which tells the reader ahead of time that there will be a charge on the ordinary; and the comma, which, while not essential, is a useful way of readily distinguishing the charges on the main field from those on the ordinary.

5. THE CHIEF

Where there is a chief, it is mentioned after the features on the main field, followed by the charges upon it. For example, “**Sable a mullet Or; on a chief Argent, two crescents Gules**” (fig 8). The tincture of the chief usually (but not always) follows the colour-on-metal rule. Note the non-obligatory semi-colon, which I believe makes the blazon read more easily.

6. THE BORDURE

A bordure typically encloses all elements of the shield (including a chief, if present) and is usually mentioned last, followed by its charges. The positions of the latter should be described where they are not obvious. For example: “... **Gules a bordure Argent charged with six mullets Sable, three, two and one**” (fig 9).

7. CADENCY MARKS (if any)

Since these are normally added as an amendment to the original design, they are mentioned at the end of the blazon, even after a bordure.

To recapitulate, the usual sequence of blazon is:

- 1 Field
- 2 Ordinary
- 3 Charges On the Field
- 4 Charges On the Ordinary
- 5 Chief and its Charges
- 6 Bordure and its Charges
- 7 Cadency Marks

In blazonry, some latitude is permitted in the above sequence, where to follow it to the letter would result in confusion or excess verbiage. As in all things, common sense and clarity should apply.

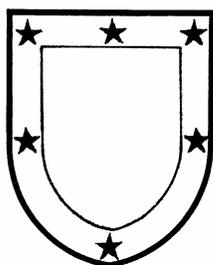


Figure 9

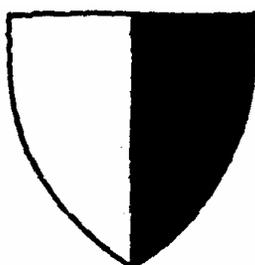


Figure 10

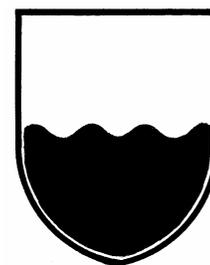


Figure 11

8. THE COMPLEX FIELD

Before we go on to describe the blazoning of charges on a shield, we will return for a minute to the field itself, the first element to be described. So far, we have dealt only with the simple field of a single tincture. However, the field itself may be somewhat more complicated. In this section, we will deal with the blazoning of these fields.

(a) The Parted Field If the field is parted, this is mentioned at the beginning, starting with the word “per” followed by the name of an ordinary, followed by the tinctures of the parts: e.g. “**Per pale Argent and Azure**” (fig 10). The partition line will divide two or more tinctures. Since neither of these is *on* the other,

they do not have to obey the colour-on-metal rule and may be a colour and a colour or a metal and a metal (see references under Parted Fields).

Partition lines follow the shape of one of the Ordinaries. So, a vertical partition is called “per pale” and a horizontal one “per fess”, etc. Partition lines can follow the directions of the other ordinaries such as the bend, bend sinister, saltire, pall or cross. Per cross is usually called “quarterly”.

(i) Plain Line – If the partition line is plain, its form is not mentioned.

(ii) Formed Line – If the line is other than plain, its form is mentioned next. For example, “**Per fess wavy**” (see page 4, fig 11), or “**per pale indented**” (See References under Lines of Partition).



Figure 12

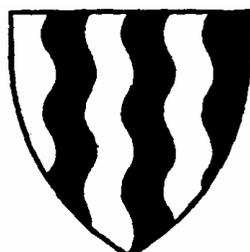


Figure 13

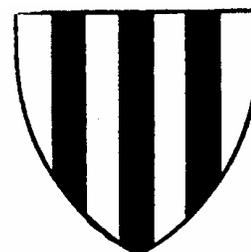


Figure 14

(b) **The “Banded” Field** A field showing an even number of bands or stripes of alternating tinctures is referred to, for example, as “paly” “barry” or “bendy”, depending on the direction of the bands. In paly fields, the first tincture mentioned is that on the dexter. In the others, it is the topmost one. The number of bands is always stated before their tinctures. A typical description would be: “**Paly of six Argent and Gules**” (fig 12). If the lines dividing the bands are other than plain, the fact should be blazoned, E.g. “**Paly wavy of six Argent and Gules**” (fig13)

(c) **The Field with Bandlike Diminutives** – for example, pallets, bars or bendlets. These may sometimes be confused with “banded” fields, above. (*This paragraph strictly belongs with “other charges”, not fields. However, it is included here because the beginner may be faced with a “striped” shield and have difficulty distinguishing between the two types*). The best way to distinguish the two is to count the total number of coloured bands. If it is an even number, the field is “banded” (e.g. paly, etc). If it is odd, the field has a number of diminutives charged on it (the bands of the lesser number are the diminutives; those of the greater number are the field itself). E.g. “**Argent three pallets Gules**” (fig 14).

(e) **The Patterned Field** – If the field is patterned (eg, “checky”, “lozengy”, etc), start with the name of the pattern then give the tinctures, e.g. “**Checky Argent and Gules**” (fig 15).

A checkered field starts in the topmost dexter corner, so a red and white chequered field with the topmost dexter square being white is called “checky Argent and Gules”. This applies to other patterned fields.

(f) **Semy**– A field is called “semy” if it is covered evenly with a number of small charges. It is said to be “semy of” such charges, and there are special names for particular examples, e.g. “**goutty**” (fig 16).

Special Names – eg Semy of fleurs de lis = “semy-de-lis”; semy of drops = “goutty”. The latter may be further distinguished by the colour of the drops: e.g. for azure drops the term is “Goutty de larmes (tears)”.

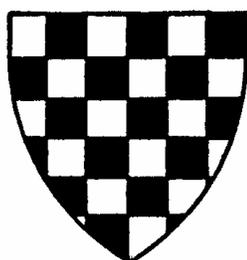


Figure 15

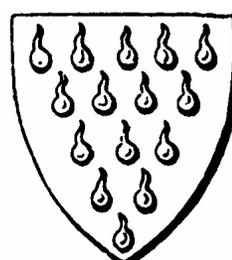


Figure 16

9. BLAZONING OF OTHER CHARGES

- (a) **Sub-ordinaries and Diminutives** In general, with the exceptions mentioned above, these do not present any particular difficulties in blazoning. The only challenges would be to know the special names of many of the roundels and the terms used where two sets of diminutives are combined on the field. The latter are tricky and will be covered in Level 2.
- (b) **Attitude** The attitude of an animal (and sometimes its head and tail) is described directly after its name and before its tincture. If the head is facing to the dexter, its position is not stated. These rules apply as well to birds, fishes and body parts (see the descriptions of these in the references). The attitude follows the name of the charge and appears before the attributes.
- ? **A lion statant regardant Azure** (fig 17);
 - ? **A dexter hand apaumy couped proper** (fig 18).



Figure 17



Figure 18



Figure 19



Figure 20

- (c) **Attributes** This term refers to an enormous number of variables, defined by Friar as “ the properties and appendages associated with an armorial charge”. These need to be learned from any good heraldic text. A couple will be mentioned here to illustrate how they are used in blazon. “**a hand couped**” (fig 18) or “**a lion’s head erased**” (fig 19) for animal parts, and “**a tree eradicated**” for trees (fig 20) are used to indicate the means of severance of the charge from its body or origin. In animals, these terms usually come directly after the attitude and before other attributes. “Attributes” may also refer to parts of animals, etc, that are of a distinct tincture, as in “**beaked and membered**” for birds, “**armed and langued**” for lions; or to the parts of charges like swords; e.g. “**hilt and pommel Or**”.
- (d) **Orientation** The orientation of individual charges and of rows of similar charges may be important. For **individual** long charges like swords and spears, the suffix “-wise” is appended to the name of an ordinary to indicate the charge’s orientation (e.g. fesswise = horizontal, palewise = vertical, bendwise or bendwise sinister = diagonal). For **rows** of charges, the word “in” is placed before the appropriate ordinary to show the orientation of the entire row. So, “in fess” means in a horizontal row, “in pale” a vertical row, and so on. These terms are frequently confused. Examples:
- ? **Three swords fesswise** (each sword horizontal) **in pale** (in a vertical row) **Sable** (fig 21).
 - ? **Three swords palewise** (each sword vertical) **in fess** (in a horizontal row) **Sable** (fig 22).

(That useful word “in” may be used for situations other than rows , as for objects “in saltire”, “in pall”, etc. These will be covered in Level 2).

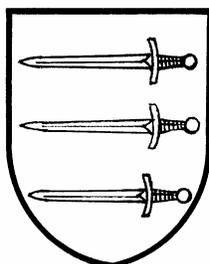


Figure 21

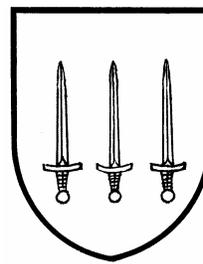


Figure 22

- (e) **Number** To avoid unnecessary repetition of a number, the words “as many” may be used when the same number is required on a second occasion. (e.g. “... **between three crescents in chief and as many mullets in base**”)
- (f) **Rows** When several similar objects are arranged in rows, the number in each row is stated (e.g. “**six crosses crosslet, 3,2 and1**”, to indicate three in the top row, two in the second and one in the third).
- (g) **Tertiary Charges** Minor charges located upon larger ones are usually indicated with the words “charged with” following the larger object and preceding the minor one (e.g. “**a lion passant Or charged on the shoulder with a maple leaf Gules**”).

(h) Overlying Objects

The terms for these are frequently confused and/or overlapping. The following is an attempt to provide the beginner with specific terms for specific depictions, intelligible to both blazoner and artist.

(i) **Charged with** When a smaller object is depicted upon and within the outline of a larger one, say that the larger is “charged with” the smaller; e.g. “**a maple leaf charged with a sword**” (fig 23).

(ii) **Surmounted** – A charge partly covered or overlaid by another (which usually overlaps its borders to some degree) is said to be “surmounted” with it; e.g. “**a maple leaf surmounted with a sword**” (fig 24). This does not mean “above” or “over” in the vertical plane, for which it is sometimes confused. To blazon the latter situation, say “ensigned with” (see below).

(iii) **Over All** – Where a charge overlies a number of others or a major part of the field, use the expression “over all”, the term being used before the charge; e.g. “**Argent three maple leaves in pale Gules, and over all a sword bendwise Or**” (fig 25).

(iv) **Debruised** – When a charge is overlaid by an ordinary or diminutive, say that it is “debruised” by it rather than surmounted; e.g. “**Argent a maple leaf Gules debruised by a bendlet Or**” (fig 26).

(v) **Ensigned** A charge with an object placed immediately above it (in the vertical sense) is said to be ensigned with it: e.g. “**a maple leaf ensigned with a crown**” (fig 27).



Figure 23



Figure 24



Figure 25



Figure 26

(i) **Issuant** When an animal or other charge is represented as rising up from an ordinary, part of the shield or another charge, it is said to be “issuant” from it.

(j) **Tincture** The tincture is named after the charge to which it refers and a tincture refers back to all charges mentioned since the preceding tincture. For example: “**Gules a bend between in chief a rose**



Figure 27

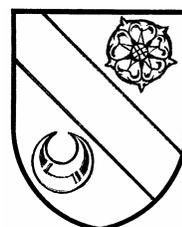


Figure 28

and in base a crescent Or” (fig 28). In this case, you would be indicating that the bend, rose and crescent are all Or, since they are mentioned after the preceding tincture, Gules. Bear in mind, however, that this economy of language should be avoided if the result is to cause confusion.

(k) Prepositions The prepositions “on”, “between” and “within” are employed, and the clauses so arranged, as to shorten the blazon as much as possible without confusion.

The above discussion, while it does not cover all situations and allows for some exceptions, should enable the student to blazon successfully about 80% of all shields likely to be encountered.

[B] THE CREST

This section will include the helmet, mantling and wreath as well as the crest.

HELMET In British blazonry, mention of the helmet is often omitted if it is that of an esquire or gentleman. In Canadian blazonry, it is customarily mentioned, but its style is not usually described, since the latter (other than that of royalty) has no implication of rank in this country. The blazon will typically start, “*Upon a helmet ...*”

MANTLING This is mentioned next, the outer tincture followed by the lining, in the form “*... mantled (Gules), doubled (Or)*”. Usually, the outer tincture will be of a colour, the lining of a metal or fur.

WREATH The wreath is the next item, usually introduced by the word “within” or “upon”, referring to the crest that follows, in the form “*... within a wreath Or and Gules, this crest:*” Note that the dexter fold of the wreath is always of a metal, the next a colour, so that the sequence is typically opposite to that of the mantling. Sometimes, for conciseness, the tinctures of the wreath are omitted and replaced by the term “*... of these colours...*”, referring to the mantling. However, difference in sequence must be kept in mind.

CREST-CORONET Where a crest-coronet is part of a crest, it is mentioned next after the wreath, in the form (Helmet), (Mantling) “*... upon a wreath Argent and Gules, this crest: Issuant from a coronet composed of a rim set with three maple leaves Or alternating with two roses Argent, ...*” followed by the remainder of the crest (fig 29)



Figure 29



Figure 30

CREST

The best way to discuss crest blazons is to consider typical crest subjects.

(a) Animals and Demi-animals These are by far the most common subjects for the crest. The attitude and head position are noted as for the shield. Rampant is, so to speak, the “default” attitude and will be assumed if no other is mentioned. In the demi-animal, the line of severance is normally concealed

within the wreath, so it is not necessary to say “couped”. If the creature is **erased** from his lower body, it will be obvious and should be so stated.

In many cases, an animal will have something on its head, around his neck (**gorged**), be charged with something on shoulder, body or flank, and/or be holding, grasping or supporting other objects with his paws. The sequence of blazon is head, neck, body, dexter paw, sinister paw, in that order. An object held in a paw should have its attitude noted if it is not obvious. The entire blazon of a rather over-elaborate animal crest might then read as follows:

“Upon a helmet mantled Gules doubled Or, within a wreath Or and Gules, this crest: Issuant from a coronet composed of a rim set with three maple leaves Or alternating with two roses Argent, a demi-lion rampant Or gorged with a plain collar Azure, charged on the shoulder with a maple leaf Gules and grasping with the dexter fore-paw a spear point downwards of the last, the sinister paw resting upon a tower Argent masoned Sable”. (Figs 29 & 30).

(b) Birds and Demi-birds Birds are also commonly used as crests. Again, the attitude (e.g. “displayed, “close”, etc) is first noted, followed by objects on the head, charged on the body or wings, or held in a claw, in that order.

(c) Arms, Forearms and Hands These are frequently employed as crests, usually holding some object. They should normally be identified as dexter or sinister – although assumed to be dexter unless otherwise stated.

(i) Arm: The entire arm is typically shown (and blazoned) as “**embowed**”. The attitude is usually assumed to be upper arm issuant from the wreath, elbow to the dexter, unless otherwise mentioned. Other positions should be specified. If “**in armour**”, this should be stated as such (although the less accurate “vambraced” is sometimes used – strictly, the vambrace protected only the forearm). E.g. “**An arm in armour embowed Sable holding a baton Or**” (fig 31). An arm wearing a sleeve is said to be “**habited**” of a certain tincture. The arm is assumed to include the hand, so it is not necessary to say “**the hand** holding ...” an object;

(ii) Forearm: This is typically shown in the vertical, palewise position, often rather shorter than full-length, and referred to as a “**cubit arm**”. It is occasionally difficult to distinguish a rather short cubit arm from a hand, which it sometimes resembles. Again, one should note dexter or sinister (as shown by the location of the thumb). If in armour, it is said to be “**vambraced**”. Otherwise, blazoning is as for the arm, the hand being included as understood; e.g. “**A sinister cubit arm habited Gules holding a closed book proper**” (fig 32).

(iii) Hand: Again, dexter or sinister. It is usually shown bare, but may be “**gauntleted**”.

(iv) Objects: Objects held by the one of the above must have their positions indicated where they are not patently obvious, and whether points of weapons, etc, are upwards or downwards. Remember, an artist cannot read minds, and the blazon is the only thing he has to go on.



Figure 31

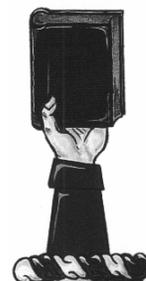


Figure 32

(d) Trees A tree may be just a generic tree, but more commonly is identified by shape (pines, firs) or leaves (oaks). A tree may bear recognizable fruit, such as apples or acorns, and is then said to be **fructed**. If the roots are illustrated, it is said to be **eradicated** (see Page 6, fig 20).

(e) **Other Objects** A great many objects may also be employed as crests, of which the following is but a sampling: **Human figures or heads; animals' heads; wings; ships;** and occupational symbols, such as **lamps of learning, scales of justice, garbs** and so forth. In general, these are blazoned exactly as they would be in the shield and present no special features in the crest.

[C] SPELLING

It will be noted that in the words of blazon used above, a number of descriptive terms ending in the letter -y have been used in place of the corresponding spellings with endings in -é or -ée (e.g. semy, goutty, etc). These spellings are the ones, in general, preferred by Friar. This has been done:

- (a) for consistency with terms like fleuretty, gyronny, bendy and dancetty, for which the original French endings have largely disappeared;
- (b) because it avoids the rather silly choice between the masculine -é and the feminine -ée endings, which are meaningless in an English text; and,
- (c) because it avoids in most cases, the use of the e-acute, which is awkward in ordinary word-processing and almost impossible in English-language E-mail.

For the benefit of those who prefer the French endings, however, it is noted that the e-acute can be obtained in MS-Word by using Ctrl-apostrophe followed by e. Terms deriving from *modern* French, like érablé and sapiné, should of course use the -é ending.

[D] PRONUNCIATION

Since a few people insist on pronouncing the English terms for the heraldic tinctures as if they were French – thus producing neither good English nor good French blazonry – the list below is intended to clarify matters. Despite their French appearance and origin, the words used in English for the heraldic tinctures have long been given an Anglicised pronunciation, as indicated below.

- Or** – same for English and French
- Argent** – Ar'jent (“-gent” as in “gentle”)
- Gules** – G-you'lls.
- Azure** – As the English word.
- Vert** – Virt (not “vair”, which means something quite different). *The French blazon for green is “sinople”, so “vair” would be incorrect in either language.*
- Sable** – Sa'bul (as in Sable Island).
- Purpure** – Purp-yer

Possible Subjects for General Study (Level 2)

Other variations of the field
Marks of cadency
Badges and standards.
The heraldry of the cross

Possible Subjects for Advanced blazoning (Level 2)

Quartered arms – blazoning
Gyronny;
Lozengy, Vairy, Potenty – which tincture first?
Ordinaries superimposed on partition lines
Combinations of diminutives (barry-bendy, paly-bendy, etc)
Charges in cross, in saltire, etc.
Impalement and dimidiation;
Two ordinaries combined;
Counterchanging;
Charges in orle;
Humetty and Entire
Canadian ordinaries, lines of partition, coronets, etc;
Supporters and compartments;
Elegance and economy of language in blazon.