

The Progressive Questions

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Perhaps you've heard the terms *mainstream*, *farb*, *hardcore*, *authentic*, *stitch-counter*, or even *thread Nazi*. Most often these words are used as deprecations toward someone with whom the speaker has a philosophical difference in the manner of "proper" living history as a hobby.

My favorite label is **progressive**. It accommodates those at any starting level of accuracy: it is not so much a destination, as a mind-set and a process. A person with a progressive mindset endeavors to recreate, as closely as possible, the lives and circumstances of the past. This applies to material culture, as well as to internal knowledge, and it's a process, not an "arrival."

Being progressive doesn't mean being perfect—none of us can be 100% "authentic" because of the simple fact that we were born into, and our outlook shaped by, another century. Being progressive is trying to get close, and being willing to "upgrade" as needed.

The progressive mind asks questions. The answers she finds will dictate her course of action. No matter the topic, the questions are much the same:

The Progressive Questions

- ☞ *What did the people of the time do? (Or use, think, know?)*
- ☞ *Does this resource (or circumstance, etc) exist today?*
- ☞ *If not, can I duplicate or create it?*
- ☞ *What is the best alternative to meet my needs and the needs of the event?*

Application: Impaired Vision

1: What did they do? Glasses were worn in the mid-19th century. Those who could not afford glasses might go without. They might also find a pair of spectacles second-hand that improved their vision, without fully correcting it.

2: Can I find replicas? Yes! I can find a good reproduction frame, into which can be set my current modern prescription. (I must choose, however, whether I will use period-appropriate glass lenses, or substitute modern poly-carbonate lenses to reduce the weight and breakage factor.) I might opt for contacts, but that involves a lot of modern extras I don't want to fuss over. I have a third alternative, too:

There is a good chance that I would not really need vision correction for living history. There are no freeway signs to read, and my horse will be trotting slowly enough to ask directions from a passer-by. My vision is fine for close work (the majority of my work will be close), and at large tasks, like laundry, vision is not a major important factor.

3: I've no need to create glasses at home... I just have to choose what option works best for me.

4: What is my best alternative? I will search out period-appropriate frames for a modern prescription lens, and in the mean-time, will go without vision correction. Doing so will meet my needs for period-accuracy, and will not compromise my health or safety.

Application: Feeding Babies

I want to know how a mother in 1860 would go about feeding a newborn, if she could not breastfeed?

1: What did they do? Through research, I will learn that while bottle-feeding was possible, the safety of formulas and the sanitation of the bottle designs leaves a lot to be desired; babies died! Other non-nursing mothers secured wet-nurses for their infants, taught the infant to spoon-feed from birth, or used a "feeding cup" with pap, gruel, or animal milk.

2-3: Can I recreate this situation? I'm unwilling to risk my baby's health to a period bottle style or a period infant "formula." A wet-nurse may not be practical, either. And, my infant will not be happy if I try to substitute a spoon for his bottle three days at a time. I determine that I may not be able to accurately portray a non-nursing mother at all times.

4: What is my best alternative? For health reasons, I need to keep my baby to his regular feeding; I will choose to retire from any public view to feed my baby, and will have to accommodate the minimum "farb" of a modern bottle and formula preparation. In consideration for my fellow reenactors, I'll prepare bottles and feed out of their view as much as humanly possible, so they will not have to look at the modern accommodation. If an event does not have a "backstage" area, I may need to remove the event from my calendar.

Application: Diabetes

Another example: I am diabetic, and manage my condition primarily with diet and exercise. How should I handle this for events?

1: What did they do? Diabetes was an untreatable condition in the mid-century; many died, went blind, or suffered amputations and gangrene after mild injuries.



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2-3: Can I recreate the situation? No, not without serious medical harm. Being “progressive” does not include endangering my health or life. Diabetes is a “quiet” disorder, and would not be visible to the spectator or other participants normally—it may not be something I need to incorporate into an impression.

4: What is my best alternative? Health dictates I continue to manage my condition while at events. As “having diabetes” is an invisible illness during the era, I choose to not actively portray it, and manage my condition “behind the scenes.”

I will consult my doctor and dietician regarding my needs, and come up with a plan to meet those needs using period-appropriate foods and drinks that require no refrigeration. If I require insulin, I will plan for a small bag with freeze-packs to keep my medications at safe temperatures. This may be kept out of sight with my other medical needs, possibly disguised in a larger period-correct container.

I plan to maintain my daily level of exercise by taking walks while at events; if I will be participating in a moving immersion-style event, where I will be getting dramatically more exercise than I would normally, I consult with my doctor to find out what sorts of adaptations to my diet and fluid intake I will need to make.

I will bring the equipment I need to monitor my blood sugar levels, and will be considerate of my fellow participants by disguising the equipment as far as I am able, and using it in a discreet way. I will apprise my companions of my condition, and let them know what to look for, should I hit a spot of trouble.

Finally, I will select events to attend that will work within the limits of my health. Some events will not be able to accommodate my medical needs; I will be understanding of the fact, consulting with event coordinators to determine if there are ways to meet medical needs without compromising the planned scenarios; if there are not, I will plan to cheerfully attend other events that can accommodate my medical needs.

You can see that each situation requires thought, research, and effort to put the research into practice. One solution will not fit all!

My mother, for instance, will not have the option to skip vision correction unless she will undertake an impression as a blind woman, as she is dangerous without her sight.

My participation options with a formula fed baby may be temporarily decreased, until he can be taught to drink from an historically accurate mug or tumbler.

My diabetic friend will not be asked to risk her health by skipping her insulin or using a period “treatment”; she’ll meet her modern medical needs in as considerate and unobtrusive a fashion as possible, right down to modifying her corsets, petticoats, and dress pockets to accommodate access to her insulin pump.

This same question process applies when designing impressions, too: consider if your initial idea was actually done in the period, and if so, how? Match your impression details to actual historic details! You’ll find that many aspects of the past cross over from one impression to the next. Everything you learn will be useful in other scenarios, even if it’s only general background, and not specifically used for that event.

Application:
Designing
Impressions

I will attend an event with my daughter, at which I will work as a staff member at a functional historic inn. To create my impression, I will consider the questions:

1: What did they do? What actual accounts will I find of a woman alone with a child, working in a boarding house or inn? What does this tell me about such a woman’s life before the event, and what might she anticipate for her future? My initial research indicates that yes, a single woman might find socially-acceptable work as a servant, and her child may accompany her and work alongside in some settings. It would also be a viable option in the period to have my child working in another location, left with a foster family or relatives (with or without payment), or given to an orphanage as a “partial orphan.”

2-3: Can I recreate it? Yes. The event allows for my daughter to attend with me, and for us to work and lodge together. It will not compromise health or safety for either of us, as I am able to arrange with event organizers what work my daughter and I can expect, and verify before hand it will not be unsafe for either of us.

4: What is my best alternative? I can design an impression based on the concept of a widowed woman and her only child working for a living at an inn or boarding house, in exchange for room, board, and a small wage. To do so, I will not bring other details of my modern life into the impression: I will not mention my other children (who are not with me at the event), nor mention my husband in the present tense. I can round out my impression with correct clothing and personal belongings, and use a wide background knowledge of the era to fill in such things as past experiences, education, favorite hymns, etc. The impression for my daughter will incorporate as many details as possible that are similar to her everyday life, in order to make it easy for her to stay in character.

The Progressive questions can be used by anyone, whether they’ve had two decades in the hobby, or have just found it. Using this considered approach will improve the knowledge base regarding the era, and the accuracy base of the hobby as a whole.

