The art of formulation can be a fascinating, wonderful, and exciting process that ultimately teaches the crafter a great deal about the nature of natural aromatic materials, how they effect and play off of one another, and how they affect the crafter on physiological, emotional, psychological, and spiritual levels. There are many methods used to craft blends. I’ve outlined two types of formulation techniques for you in this module, based off of crafting blends for both aesthetic purposes and therapeutic purposes. The method of crafting for fragrance and aesthetics is outlined in this handout.

The Art of Fragrance Notes

“Scents materialize, one after the other, volatilizing and disappearing as if out of the mists on the horizon. There is a vitality to this carefully orchestrated unfolding, that we might call the movement of scent.”

~Mandy Aftel

As I covered in the module 3 video, the classification of fragrance notes is a traditional method used for the formulation of incense, perfumes, and essential oil blends for aesthetic and aromatic purposes. It’s a way to categorize different aromatic materials based on the nature of their aromas and the “movement of their scent.” The three categories of fragrance notes are: top notes (head notes), middle notes (heart notes), and base notes.
The main aspect taken into account in the system of fragrance notes is the volatility of a plant’s natural essential oil content (which is the source of its aroma). Depending on many factors (essential oil density, chemical composition, reaction to temperature), different plants and plant materials release their essential oils at varying times in nature. Similarly, in the formulation of perfume, the essences of aromatic plants are also released at different times depending on many of the same factors. When exposed to air over the span of a few hours, different aromas within a perfume come and go, appear and dissipate, in a natural flow or orchestra of scent.

In incense, this process is also very similar, though condensed from a few hours down to a half an hour to an hour or so, depending on how much incense is burned, or for how long it’s burned. When you place a blend of incense on a hot charcoal, a magical process unfolds. At first, the lightest and most volatile essential oils within certain plant materials in the blend are released as the heat ‘opens the pores’ of the plants to release its aromatic oils. After a minute or so, new aromas come forth as other essential oils that are less volatile are slowly freed from their physical bonds. A minute later, another set of the least volatile aromas are released into the atmosphere.

How quickly an aroma is released or evaporates from its physical body or structure dictates what type of fragrance note that material should be classified and used as. For instance, top notes tend to be the aromas that are the most volatile, light, fleeting, and quickest to dissipate. Middle notes are usually aromas that have a mid-level volatility. And base notes are aromas that are heavier in their aroma, the least volatile, and tend to linger after the top and middle notes have vanished. The art to using the system of fragrance notes lies in the delicate balancing of these three types of notes.

**Top Notes:**
Top notes are the very first aromas you can sense. These aromas are most often the center of attention in a blend. The other notes are usually used to strengthen and prolong top notes. Top notes have the most volatile aromas of all ingredients. They’re usually a lot sharper, penetrating, more potent, lighter, fleeting, and more simple in nature. The common types of aromas associated with top notes are: camphorous, citrusy, evergreen, floral, fresh, minty, and spicy.

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Middle Notes:
Middle notes are the aromas that come after the initial top notes are released. In incense, top notes and middle notes usually blend into one another until the top notes start dissolving away. Middle notes are less volatile and are what help tie the aromas in a blend together. They also help round out the sharper edges of top note aromas. Middle notes are often softer, smoother, and more complex in their aroma. Common aromas associated with middle notes are: floral, fruity, green, herbaceous, rosy, and woody.

Base Notes:
Base notes are the least volatile of all aromas. They work together with middle notes to create the full ‘body’ of a blend. Base notes are what give a blend its staying power. These are the aromas you smell in a room long after an incense has burned out. Base notes tend to be thicker, heavier, rich, and smooth aromas that can be sensed in the background throughout the entire burning. Common aromas associated with base notes are: balsamic, earthy, musky, resinous, sweet, and woody. Base notes are not the same thing as ‘base ingredients,’ which were discussed in the handout in module 1. Though many materials used as base materials to help incense burn properly also have strong ‘base notes,’ they are two different things.

Each individual aromatic material can be classified under the system of fragrance notes based on its unique aromatic profile. Most materials are solidly placed in just one category, but some fit into more than one. For example, Galbanum makes a great base note, but it’s also an ideal middle. Lavender is light and can be intensely floral and fresh, making it an ideal top note, but it also has a certain sweetness and smoothness to it, making it a great middle note as well.

In addition to having a dominant overall note, or essence, most aromatic materials are also comprised of all three top, middle, and base notes when burned or smelled on their own. For example, when you place a piece of frankincense resin on a hot charcoal, a magical process takes place. A series of...
aromas unfolds in a time sequence from the first moment it touches the coal until it burns away completely. Within this sequence, you’ll find that it in fact has its own distinct top, middle, and base notes (as you’ll discover for other materials in the homework assignment for this module).

What you’re looking for when you experience the burning of a single aromatic material is which of its notes sticks out to you the most; its dominant aroma; the real essence of it. That dominant aroma, or dominant note, is how we classify each material in this system, and ultimately how we use it in our formulations when we’re utilizing the system of fragrance notes.

**Fragrance Chords:**

Next I’d like to explain what are referred to as ‘fragrance chords’ in perfumery. Of course you can use a single material as a top, middle, or base note in a blend, but based on the dominant notes of various materials, you can also choose to combine multiple similar notes together to create a *chord*.

For instance, when you blend multiple aromatic materials classified as having strong base notes together, such as Patchouli, Sandalwood, and Labdanum, you’ll have yourself a base chord made up of the three. When you combine a few different materials that are sharp top notes, you’ll have yourself a top chord. There’s no limit to how many materials you have in any chord, and a blend can be a mixture of various fragrant note chords, or single material fragrance notes.

... 

The art behind the method of fragrance notes is to formulate a blend that’s a harmonious combination of all three fragrance notes: base, middle, and top. The key to successfully formulating using this system is learning to balance your proportions of ingredients. Usually your top note (either a single material or a chord) will make up anywhere between 20-40% of a blend; the middle will make up between 10-40%; and the base between 30-70%. Though it really all depends on what you’re trying to accomplish in your blend. These percentages are simply a general rule of thumb.
Keep in mind, there’s no right or wrong way to formulate incense. Ultimately, your blends are your own, and any way you experiment will result in you learning how to do it better next time. Don’t get too caught up with the quantities listed above. I suggest simply using them as guidelines to help you get acquainted with this system. You can use this method as a starting point and go anywhere you want with your formula.

You can use as many or as little ingredients as you like in a blend. You could even work with 2 or 3 materials for a while, testing and changing their combined ratios in many variations to learn about their unique qualities and aromas. Eventually you’ll find a perfect balance between them and learn a heck of a lot about them through the process. Crafting incense is like painting; you’re essentially a blossoming fragrant artist, and I’m not here to tell you what to paint, but share guidance on how to use the tools to your advantage. Experimentation, following your nose, heart, and intuition, and having fun with the process are all requirements of this fragrant art.

The following chart is a classic categorization of the main groups of scent and where they’re generally best suited when used as fragrance notes. It’s important to understand that certain types of scent are often used as more than one type of fragrance note. For example, different spicy scents are often used as either top or middle notes.
### The Do’s and Don’t’s of Incense Formulation

- **Don’t** make the mistake of getting too stuck on numbers, percentages, or proportions when creating blends. The formulation methods shared in this module should act as guidelines if nothing else. Allow them to help you understand the art of formulation, but don’t allow them to limit your creativity, intuition, or adventurousness.

- **Don’t** use dangerous, toxic, or potentially poisonous materials in your formulas. Be sure you study each material you choose to work with thoroughly.

- **Do** your best to listen to your intuition, heart, and nose when formulating and crafting incense. It will serve you greatly and often leads to some of the most amazing and pleasant results.

- **Do** your best to learn the major types of scent and what they’re best used for as notes. Ex: sweet aromas often make great base notes, camphorous aromas make great top notes, etc.

- **Do** your homework of learning the subtleties and complexities of each individual aromatic you work with by experiencing it first-hand many times. This will help you understand how to formulate with it as one of the aromas on your fragrant palette.

- **Do** take notes, *detailed* notes, on your test batches to make sure you know how to recreate blends that turn out amazing. I guarantee you’ll want to make them again and again, and learn to perfect them over time. I keep an incense journal of all my creation sessions that contain variations in recipes with detailed notes to go along with each one.

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<tr>
<th>Top</th>
<th>Middle</th>
<th>Base</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
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<td>Sweet</td>
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