

CALLIGRAPHY BASICS

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TOOLS

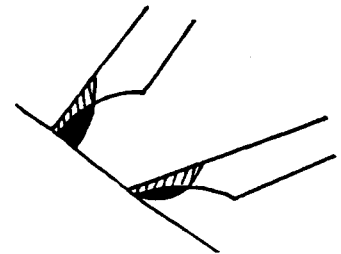
Pens

The most important tool for any calligrapher is of course the pen. There are a variety to choose from, depending on what you are looking for. One word of warning: **DO NOT** use *calligraphy markers* for doing scrolls! They are nothing more than fancy magic markers. The ink in them will fade. (I have seen scrolls that look like the Crown did not sign them because they used these markers to sign with.) Because these markers will continue to write no matter how horrible the writer's technique is, they will also teach you bad habits that will have to be unlearned when the writer tries to use a real pen.

The best pen for the beginner is the **dip pen** such as Speedball. These pens are cheap, portable, and unforgiving (if you do not use the pen as intended, it will let you know). With all-metal nibbed pens, make sure that the edges of the nib are square and that there are no burs on the edge to snag the paper. If you have a problem with burs, gently run the nib over a fine-grit sandpaper. The disadvantage of dip pens is frequently having to recharge the pen with ink. I would suggest that instead of actually *dipping* the pen in the ink bottle, use an eye-dropper or a paint brush to fill the reservoir on top of the pen. This will give you more control over how much ink gets in the pen, and will cut down on the ink blobbing all over the paper.

A step above the dip pen is the **cartridge pen**. This pen has a cartridge that attaches to the nib and eliminates dipping all together. These pens are more expensive than a dip pen and tend to leak ink if they are jiggled around a lot (e.g., inside your art box on the way to an event). It is best to remove the cartridge when transporting. Do not leave ink in a cartridge pen for extended periods of time because it will dry up in the nib.

Undoubtedly the most difficult pen to use is the **quill pen**. This period pen is made from the first five wing tip feathers of any large flight bird (e.g., goose, turkey). Quills must be stripped, cured, and cut. They also require a lot of maintenance to keep them sharp and a lot of skill to use. When using a quill pen, it is important to have your writing surface tilted 30–45° or all of the ink will flow down to the tip and blob on your paper (see the figure). As with the dip pen, quills require constant dipping, although inserting a metal reservoir in the shaft can help some.



Angle of quill pen

All of these pens require that you clean them regularly. Do so with warm water and soap, and dry them thoroughly to prevent rusting.

Inks

There are a variety of inks on the market, and it is best to experiment until you find one that you like. It is advisable to avoid waterproof inks, because these contain lacquer and will quickly clog up your nib and require a solvent to clean. A good basic ink is

nonwaterproof India Ink or a Sumi ink stick (with the ink sticks, you rub them on a stone and add water until you achieve the desired consistency). Commercial colored inks are usually too thin for our purposes. Shop around and experiment. It is often easier to mix your own using a thinned gouache (watercolor).

Parchment

In period, the most common writing surface was parchment (also called *vellum*) made from the skin of goats, sheep, or calves. It is very expensive, but a real joy to work on. Properly prepared vellum is very smooth, and the ink lays on the surface. What is sold in art stores as calligraphers vellum is actually a paper and not suitable for writing because the paper is very acidic and deteriorates very quickly.

Paper

While paper was not regularly used until late period (after the invention of printing), it is what most modern scribes use to write on. The best paper to use is an acid-free, 100% rag, although there are a variety of watercolor and drawing papers that will also work. Papers come in a variety of colors. Avoid antique colors that look “old”; choose a cream or white (the color that new parchment would be). Paper also comes in a variety of finishes. It must be sized (covered with a thin coat of glue) to keep the ink from bleeding into the paper. If there is too much size, the ink will pool. It is best to experiment with a variety of papers until you find one that takes ink to your satisfaction. Try using a fairly thick paper, between 90–120 lbs. (hot press), that won’t buckle from the moisture of the ink or paint.

Other Tools

Other useful tools include pencil, ruler, and compass.

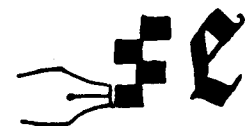
WHERE DO I BEGIN?

Layout

First find a period example you would like to emulate. This will give you some idea of margins, letter sizes, and illumination design. Layout a rough design in pencil. It is advisable to not get too terribly specific in laying out the illumination at this point. If you are going to REALLY mess up, it is probably going to be while doing the calligraphy, and there is the possibility that you may have to start over (it’s for this reason that most scribes do the calligraphy first).

Lining the Paper

Once you have laid out your basic scroll design, blocking off areas for illumination and text, start by using a pencil to line your paper. To determine how tall your letters will be, you need to know how tall they measure in pen widths. This measurement tells you how tall to make the lowercase letters without ascenders or descenders (also called the *x-height*; see the figure). By using your period example, you can compare this measurement to the space between lines to give you that measurement.



“X” height

Before You Begin Writing

You will find it easier to do calligraphy if the surface you are working on is tilted 30–45° (this is especially important if you are using a quill pen). Also note that different styles of calligraphy require that the nib of the pen be at different angles.

Fixing Boo-boos

There are several ways of fixing mistakes. The first is to **paint over the mistake**. If it is a small mistake that will require minimal work, such as writing the wrong letter, mix up paint the same color as the parchment. Paint over the offending letter and when the paint is dry, write the correct letter on top of it. If it is a large mistake that can't be easily corrected, you may want to consider painting a decorative bar over the top of it and then rewriting the word. The second method is to take a sharp knife and **scrape off the mistake**. This works best with parchment, but can be used on paper if you are sure to burnish the stop. Since you are also scrapping off the sizing that keeps the ink from bleeding into the paper, you may want to experiment with a scrap of the same paper to see if this works.