

Calligraphy

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Background information

Calligraphy, as the Greek root words *kalli-* (beautiful) and *-graphia* (writing) imply, is the art of beautiful hand writing. The development of writing was a long and varied process, but what we think of as calligraphy, a style of writing distinctly artistic rather than simply functional, appeared in Rome sometime before the birth of Christ; per Mark Drogin (1980), the first datable example of something calligraphic rather than simply communicative appears around 55 BC.

The tool instrumental to this change was the broad-tipped reed pen. Many sorts of writing tools had been used before this, and many others would be used after, but somewhere in Rome, one bright day, a Very Clever Fellow noticed that cutting his pen a little broader than usual made quite a difference in the appearance of his writing, and from that, a handwriting revolution was quietly born. By the time of Christ's birth, monumental lettering was established, and by the fall of the Roman Empire, a variety of calligraphic hands had already come and gone. With the advent of the Middle Ages, beautiful writing became one of the most enduring and varied of all the arts of the era.

Tools and Materials

Calligraphy is one of the simpler arts in terms of the variety of tools one needs to practice. At minimum, one need only acquire a broad tipped pen, an ink, a measuring/lining tool, and something upon which to write. The job is easier with a larger variety of tools, but this is all you absolutely need.

Modern tools for calligraphy are, of course, considerably different than period tools in terms of their composition, but the forms and purposes remain the same, and even with nothing but good modern tools, a diligent student can learn to produce work as stunning as that of the best scribes of the past. Furthermore, in this day and age, thanks to the revival of interest in traditional tools, modern scribes can purchase many of the materials used by period scribes over the internet. The following table presents a generalized list of period tools and recommended modern equivalents.

Modern	Period
Bristol Board (4-ply or 100 LBS)	Vellum, Papyrus, Paper
Black Ink	Ferrogallic Ink, Soot-based ink
Pen holder with Broad Nibs	Quill Pen, Reed Pen
T-Square & Ruler	Straight Edge
Pencil	Scoring tool
Ames Lettering Guide	Pricking Wheel/Parchment Runner
Plastic eraser	Bread

Drawing Board	Writing Desk
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Before you can even begin writing, you must have an exemplar. Most calligraphy of the Middle Ages was done to produce books, and much of the work of the scriptorium came from making more copies of the same books. They had something to look at, and so should you. Know what you intend to write, and have an example of the hand in front of your eyes before you start. Even if you merely intend to write the lower-case letter "a" one hundred times, have an example of that lower case a right there as reference.

Once you have that, consider your materials. Amongst scribes, there is a great deal of argument about the best ink, paper, and nib combination, and the plain truth of the matter is that there can be so much variance between your work style, brands of materials, types of materials, and even weather conditions (humidity makes paper swell), that you will have to experiment a bit to find the perfect combination for you. The list of supplies provided herein represents a combination of materials that most beginners can easily obtain, have decent results with, and is a sort of minimum standard for scroll production.

PAPERS: 3 or 4 ply Bristol board with a slightly rough surface. I recommend Strathmore (Regular finish). I'm told Beinfang (vellum finish) is good. I know Canson bleeds, and I can't recommend it.

INKS: Going into the store and facing that vast array of inks is daunting. Higgins brand is widely available without being wildly expensive and comes in small bottles. I prefer Higgins Black Magic India; this is a waterproof ink, so make sure you clean your nibs well before putting them away. Avoid Speedball inks.

PENS: Many first-time calligraphers are a bit afraid to try "dip pens," that is, pens consisting of a pen-holder, separate nibs, and perhaps a reservoir to allow greater ink capacity. Ignore your fear.. Trust me: if you are serious about beautiful writing, skip the calligraphic fountain and felt pens and learn to use the dip pen. Mitchell brand nibs are generally considered the best; you can purchase reservoirs for them, but you don't really need them. They come in a variety of sizes. Lower numbers equal larger nibs. You want the "Roundhand" style, and you can purchase a package that has all nib sizes, a couple of reservoirs, and a penholder for about \$20. A similar kit from Speedball can do if you can't get Mitchell nibs. You want the "A" style or "C" style Speedball nibs or the LC style nibs if you are left handed.

You will need to round out your kit with a few drafting tools: an Ames lettering guide and T-square for lining the paper, a ruler for measuring margins, a vinyl/plastic eraser (leaves no marks, doesn't damage paper), a pencil (get a mechanical one), and a drawing table.

The drawing table doesn't need to be extravagant. I started out with a NASCO Tote Sketching Board (essentially, a 24"x26" clipboard) propped up on books, and now, more than a decade later, I still use portable drafting tables that I prop up on books to

achieve an angled surface. Any decently-sized sturdy, flat surface that you can use comfortably will do.

How to begin

So, you gather all your things. You prop up your drawing board to achieve an angled surface. You make sure you have good lighting; try to position your workspace so that your body doesn't cast a shadow on your work. First things first: prepare your paper.

You'll need margins. The most useful ratio of margin is 1:1:1:2, where the number represents the unit of measurement, and the doubled measurement is the bottom of the page. If your "unit of measurement" is 1.5 inches, then draw a 1.5 inch margin along the left, top, and right sides of the paper, and a 3 inch margin along the bottom.

You next need lines to write upon. There are a variety of ways to get guidelines on paper; my favorite is the combination of a t-square and an AMES lettering guide. The lettering guide is a weird looking little drafting tool that consists of a movable circle within a sort of lopsided rectangle. It comes with instructions for use.

Now, assemble and load your pen. Place a nib into the holder. Slide the reservoir on to the back of the nib, pointy end of reservoir along the pointed end on the nib. You can adjust the flow of ink by moving the reservoir up and down the nib. Load the nib with ink; if you've purchased the Higgens ink, you can do this simply by using the dropper to squeeze a drop of ink into the opening between the nib and the reservoir. Make a few practice strokes on a piece of scratch paper to get the ink flow started; if the ink is not flowing after 5-7 strokes, dip the tip of the nib into a little water, just enough to let the nib wick up the water to the ink, and then try again.

At this point, you should be able to begin writing. Your pen will run out of ink eventually; reload it and keep going. This is an art where practice pays off, and the only way to get good results is to practice, practice, practice.

The scope of this paper is entirely too short to provide all the tips, details, and tricks that can help you achieve beautiful handwriting, but there are plenty of very good books and websites that can assist you. A short list of them follows.

Resources

Asplund, R. (2001) *The Middle Kingdom Scribes Handbook*. 3rd ed. Self-published, available as PDF at <http://www.randyasplund.com/browse/mkshb/mksb.pdf>

Boucher, E. *On Illuminated Manuscripts*. <http://www.merouda.com/oim/>

Brown, M. & Lovett, P. (1999) *The historical source book for scribes*. Toronto:U. Toronto Press. ISBN 0-8020-4720-3

Drogin, M. (1980; reprint with corrections, 1989) Medieval calligraphy: its history and technique. New York: Dover. ISBN 0-486-26142-5

Harris, D. (1995) The art of calligraphy: a practical guide to the skills and techniques. London: Dorling Kindersley ISBN 1-56458-849-1

Studley, V. (1991) Left-handed calligraphy. New York: Dover ISBN 0486267024

Glossary:

Broad Nib Pen: in calligraphy, a pen that has been cut so as to produce a line that is thick or thin depending on how the pen is held. Most modern pens are pointed nibs that produce an even line; broad nibs are necessary for all pre-1600 styles of calligraphy.

Exemplar: in calligraphy, an example of a hand used as a visual reference. This is not the same thing as the *ductus*, which is the order in which the strokes of the letters are made. All good books of calligraphy provide exemplars, but only some provide a ductus. The above referenced books all provide both.

Hand: in calligraphy, a term that describes the style of writing. For instance, the *Book of Kells* is written in *Insular Majuscule*, the *Rohan Hours* is written in *Gothic Textura*, and *The Psalter of Henry VIII* is written in *Humanist*.