

Introduction to Calligraphy

Master Iefan Colledig ap Dynfwal Abertawe

*“For it is a comoun sawe, and soth it is, Worde and wynde and mannes mynde is ful schort, but letter writen dwellith.”
-- The Holy Bible...by John Wycliff and his Followers, c. 1395¹*



Calligraphy within the Society for Creative Anachronism (SCA) is utilized for a variety of purposes. These include the production of original-artwork award scrolls, proclamations, letters, invitations, and flyers. In addition, calligraphy is often used for the placement of special signatures, such as the Royals or Kingdom Officers, on these, and other, documents. And, least we forget, calligraphy is further utilized in the reproduction of historic manuscripts.

During the production of most of these items, care needs to be taken to fashion the piece towards the intended audience or specific effect desired. For example, many SCA scrolls are not specifically “historical” in nature. SCA scrolls often utilize large amounts of “white space”, or blank areas, around the borders or within the body of the work. Additionally, in general, SCA award scrolls are usually larger than their historical counterparts. Also, with SCA work we have a little more flexibility in the creation of scroll (hence the term “Creative” in the organization’s name). Historical pieces, on the other hand, are very exact and, with consideration given to the technical ability and finances of the artist, are exact copies of the originals.

Therefore, in light of this, there exist a variety of ways that anyone can make use of scribe-art skills. Moreover, those skills do not necessarily need to be “master-level” competence! There are many scribes (and I’m one!) who will gladly share the task of placing names upon award scrolls or filling out various documents. In this manner, each individual can help complete the work more quickly and with less toil.

So, given that anyone of any skill level is definitely welcome help, I strongly urge you to make the most of whatever you may glean from this handout and the classes you may take to assist other scribes in their efforts to help make this Society a more enjoyable endeavor!

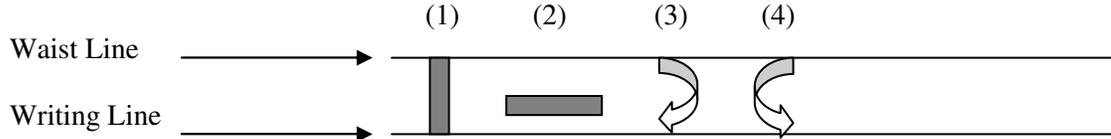
~ Iefan

The Basics

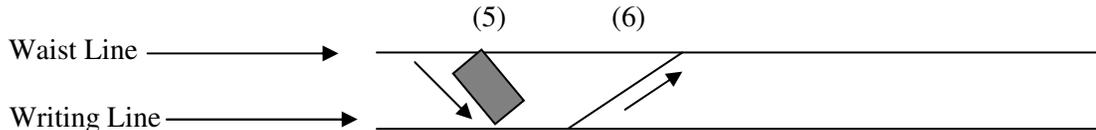
Okay, you've decided to try your hand, pardon the pun, at calligraphy. Well, below I've reviewed some essential basics. I hope this information helps you feel more comfortable with your endeavors.

First, remember that calligraphy, with very few exceptions, utilizes a "pull" stroke with the writing instrument (marker, cartridge pen, or "dip" pen). Get in the habit of pulling the pen towards you. Most of the letters are fabricated through combinations of five basic strokes. These include vertical, horizontal, right-curve, left-curve, and diagonals.

The first four strokes are fairly self-explanatory. Vertical strokes (1) are made parallel to the sides of the writing surface (paper) from the "top" to the "bottom". Horizontal strokes (2) are made parallel to the "top" edge of the paper from the "left" to the "right". Right-curve strokes (3) are drawn in a downward fashion in a clockwise motion. Left-curve strokes (4) are drawn in a downward fashion in a counter-clockwise motion.



The diagonal strokes consist of two strokes usually referred to as the "thick" and "thin" strokes. Drawing the pen in a downward fashion from the upper left to the lower right quadrant usually makes the thick stroke (5), for right-handed individuals. Drawing the pen in an upward fashion from the lower left to the upper right quadrant usually makes the thin stroke (6), for right-handed individuals.



The pen is "pushed in rare instances only. The strokes in which a pen is "pushed" are beyond the scope of this handout.

One of the best "tips" I can give beginning calligraphers is an understanding of the quickest and easiest way to "line" a work. Lining a work consists of the temporary (or, in some instances, permanent) marking of the paper with the "waist line" and "writing line". Often, beginning calligraphers painstakingly place a ruler along the left and right margins of a piece of paper and carefully notes various distances such as $3/8^{\text{th}}$ or $5/16^{\text{th}}$. Often (more often than not!) this results in crooked and uneven lines. I have found one of the *easiest* means to solve this problem. I employ the use of an Ames® lettering guide. These instruments sell for approximately \$2.50 in most art-supply or drafting-supply stores. They have a "wheel" that is pierced with a specific series of holes. These holes, in combination with markings on the instrument, when used with metric nibs (such as Brause®) and a "T-square" easily produce even and correctly spaced lines. The instructions with the Ames® guide explain the use of the instrument fairly well; but, if I may endeavor, I hope the following is useful:

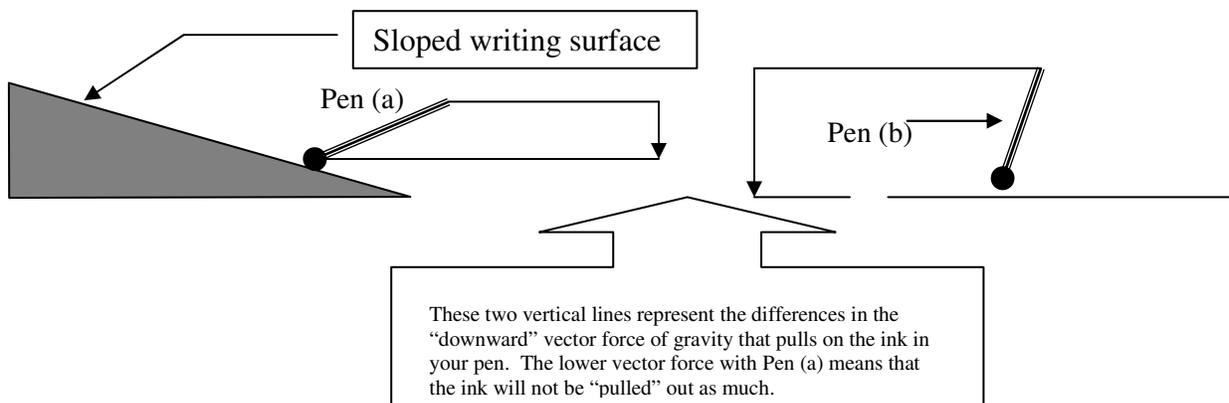
If you are using a 1.5mm nib and the hand (or script) you are writing requires/recommends a 4-pen-width line (the distance between the writing line and the waist line), you would simply multiply the nib size by the pen-width size ($1.5 \times 4 = 6.0$) to determine the marking point on the Ames® guide (in this example 6.0). Then, in combination with your “T-square” you would utilize specific holes on the guide and draw your lines! That simple! Glide the guide to the left and right across the top of your “T-square” and move down through the correct series of holes. Then, slide your “T-square” down so that the bottom line that you just drew is aligned with the top hole of the guide and start again! I have been able to fully line a large scroll in under 5 minutes using this technique!

I have always believed that the pain in the #@ things and the tedious things discouraged people from pursuing calligraphy. Well, here’s one pain in the #@* problem “solved”.*

Speaking of pains, two of the most common pains that scribes acquire are back and wrist pain. It is very frustrating to work on a project only to have to stop before you wanted to stop due to body pain. I recommend a sloped surface for calligraphic work with frequent short “wrist-breaks” to shake out tension in the wrist. It is like working at a modern computer. If you don’t take sufficient breaks the job gets to be more of a hassle and more uncomfortable.

“Wrist-breaks” are self-explanatory. You simply take some time to shake out the stiffness in your wrist. This is very important! Carpal-tunnel symptom is not just for typists.

The sloped writing surface is important for two points. First, as stated, it reduces back strain as you sit in a more up-right position. Second, however, it can assist you in producing better calligraphy! Specifically, if the writing surface is sloped... stick with me here... the vector force of gravity on the ink is reduced as the pen is held at a more horizontal plane... and the overall compound effect on the capillary action within the nib is thereby reduced... or, something to that effect. Basically, if the pen is held at a more level position, like when you are using a sloped surface, the ink can flow more slowly and smoothly out of the pen as there are less natural forces (there’s that scientific stuff again) pulling the ink out of the pen. So, in the simplest of terms, there is less likelihood that the ink will “blob” out of the pen tip. Hence, sparing you the hassle of corrections or starting over (another one of those painful problems avoided!).



You can purchase rather inexpensive “portable” drafting boards (writing tables) at art supply and drafting supply stores. The savings on your back, wrist, and work (in my opinion) are well worth the investment.

Supplies

Inks: Usually, you will either use homemade inks (your own or purchased) made from period recipes or commercially manufactured inks (e.g. Speedball, Higgins, etc). If you use homemade inks, presume that they are *not* waterproof (this can help prevent accidental damage). If you purchase manufactured inks, try to obtain waterproof varieties. If you use waterproof varieties and the finished work gets damp or rained upon there is less of a chance of damage. If you use non-waterproof ink even the oils and sweat from you hand can cause the ink to smear. However, due to the base substance used in waterproof inks, always clean the nib immediately after use or the nib may become clogged.

Paper (see also, *Parchment*, below): “In the mid-eighth century, the Arabs learned techniques of paper manufacture from the Chinese. The oldest Greek paper manuscripts were produced during the ninth century. Paper (*carta* or *charter*) was made in Muslim Spain beginning in the late eleventh century. During the twelfth and thirteenth centuries, it was used in Italy and the Mediterranean for merchants’ notes and by notaries for registers; from the thirteenth century on, paper was actually manufactured in Italy. During the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, production spread to Switzerland, the Rhineland, and France. In England there was limited production in the fifteenth century; only in the mid-sixteenth century was the paper making industry permanently established.”²

- (a) *Acid Free:* This type of paper is a “must” for your work. Acids in non-acid-free papers react to the oils in your skin, elements of the ink and paint, and general air-borne compounds. This reaction leads to the degradation (“yellowing” and cracking) of the paper. Acid free paper will retain color and pliability.
- (b) *Cold Press:* This type of paper has a “rougner” finish. It is superb for illumination as the surface absorbs the fluid of the paint more readily. However, for calligraphy, this type of paper can promote “bleeding” of ink and will wear down pen nibs more quickly.
- (c) *Hot Press:* This type of paper has a “smoother” finish. It is superb for calligraphy as the surface does not facilitate “bleeding” or “gripping” of the pen nib. Hence, it is easier to obtain crisp lines and strokes (cleaner lettering). However, if you use this type of paper for illumination with gouache or other water based pigments, paints take a longer period to dry so make sure that you allow each paint to fully dry prior to adding another paint adjacent to, or upon, the first.

Parchment: “In the true meaning of the word, any animal skin processed by soaking in lime, then scraped and dried out under tension, is a parchment.”³ Vellum [Middle English *velim*, from Middle French *veelin*, an adjective meaning of a calf, from *veel*, a calf]⁴ was originally the term for parchment made from calfskin. However, in modern definition⁵, vellum is any fine-grained unsplit lambskin, kidskin, or calfskin prepared for writing on or for binding books. In many modern uses the term parchment is now reserved for the product manufactured from the inner split of a sheepskin.⁶ Some parchment is finished (smoothed) on one side only (usually identified for use in writing) while other parchment is finished on both sides for use in books.⁷

Pens:

- (a) *Calligraphy marker pens:* These are wonderful practice tools for beginners. Purists will object to this advice. But, I have found that calligraphy markers are extremely easy to use and portable (which means you can keep one with you to practice whenever the moment presents itself). Obtain a medium width marker at the onset. If a marker is too big it is difficult to practice, as the letters are huge and you need numerous large sheets of paper. If the marker is too small it is difficult to practice, as the letters are too small to practice “clean” strokes. Try a “3.5” size pen as a starter. Be careful not to press too hard as you can compress the felt tip and ruin its calligraphic edge. *However! Do not use marker pens for scrolls or other works as marker ink readily fades, the ink often bleeds, and the consistency of pen strokes is poor. They should only be used as a tool for practice.*
- (b) *Cartridge pens:* Once you feel comfortable with the “thin” and “thick” strokes and the proper way to hold a pen to form these strokes, try using a cartridge pen. These types of pens have a small replaceable tube of ink within the pen handle. They are very useful as you get a feel for the use of fluid ink but you do not need to “reload” the ink unless the cartridge runs dry. Therefore, you can get practice using the various types of paper and see how the ink sets upon each paper. Cartridge pens are produced by numerous manufacturers and come in various sizes. Try holding as many of the different sizes prior to purchasing one to see which is the most comfortable for you. Also, if you purchase a set that comes with numerous colors of ink and you change the cartridge, store the open cartridge “up” to prevent ink seepage and, also, prior to using it on your work make numerous strokes with the pen to get the “new” ink into the nib and draw the “old” ink out.
- (c) *“Dip” pens:* These pens use metal nibs that have an ink receptacle that holds a small amount of ink. It is best to *not* “dip” the pen into the ink, as a small amount of ink will usually pool outside of the receptacle. Often this extra ink will flow off at an inopportune moment and damage your work. It is best to “charge” the receptacle (fill it) through the use of a dropper or brush. A brush may be dipped into the ink and stroked against the side of the receptacle to transfer the ink into the receptacle. However, the brush often dries out and stiffens too much (damaging the brush). A dropper, my preferred method, allows a controlled amount of ink to be transferred into the receptacle. Some brands of ink, such as Higgins, have a dropper incorporated into cap.
- (d) *Quills and Reeds:* I do *not* recommend these for a beginner. If you decide to use a quill or reed, make sure you read about how to properly make them and the means of keeping the writing edge correctly cut. Proper hand pressure is extremely important when using these and many calligraphers, including experienced ones, do not take the time to learn the proper techniques and ruin their work.

Remember that all of these supplies are useless unless you practice. Start with the basic strokes and then work on individual letters. Then, try to form individual words and groups of words. Then, try sentences. Utilize any particular material to practice with when you begin your work. It doesn't even have to be SCA related or medieval (I used to use Time magazine!). But! No matter what you do make sure you keep practicing and trying your best to get a feel for the strokes, the letters, the spacing, and the composition. Before you know it, someone will be asking for your help filling out scrolls! And, I have the confidence that anyone can learn this and do well. So, have faith in yourself and go practice.

~Iefan

Definitions

*Abbreviations*⁸: These generally were used to save space or to fit words within limited areas. There were generally three categories: *suspensions*, in which the end of a word is abbreviated, signaled by the use of a horizontal bar or other graphic symbol; *contractions*, in which part of a word is abbreviated through the use of a graphic symbol; *abbreviation symbols*, used for whole words and often derived from shorthand systems of writing (example: the ampersand “et”, Latin for “and”).

Ascender: Letter stroke above the body of the letter (b, d, f, h, k, l, and t usually have ascender components; in some scripts the letter s has an ascender component).

Ascender Line: Upper most of five guide lines generally used in calligraphy. Ascender strokes rise to this line.

Body: The main portion of a letter, between the writing line and the waist line.

Capital Line: The second highest of five guide lines generally used in calligraphy. Capital letters rise to this line.

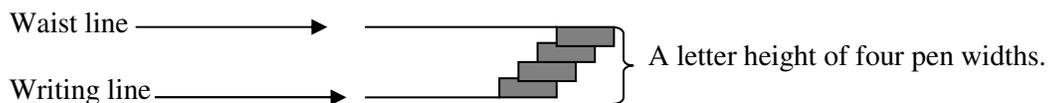
*Corrections*⁹: Corrections to a text were undertaken by a variety of individuals (the original scribe, another member of the same scriptorium, a stationer, etc). They take various forms including interlinear or marginal insertions, erasures made by scraping with a knife or pumice, cancellations indicated by crossing out, or expunctuations (in which points placed beneath a letter or word marked its deletion). Some corrections resulted from the comparisons of different texts or different copies.

Descender: Letter stroke below the body of the letter (f, g, j, p, q, and y usually have descender components).

*Hard Point*¹⁰: A pointed implement of metal or bone used for ruling, drawing, or annotation. A hard point leaves a ridge-and-furrow effect on the writing surface rather than a graphic mark.

*Lead Point*¹¹: Also known as *plummet*, is a piece of lead alloy which could be used for drawing, annotation, and ruling. Lead point began to be widely used in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. Graphite, derived from carbon, was not generally used before the seventeenth century.

Letter Height: The height of the body of the letters. The letter height is usually a specific height determined by a certain number of pen widths placed above each other. As:



Ligatures: The combination of two or more letters through the use of single pen strokes such as the following combination of the letters “a” and “e” in “æ”.

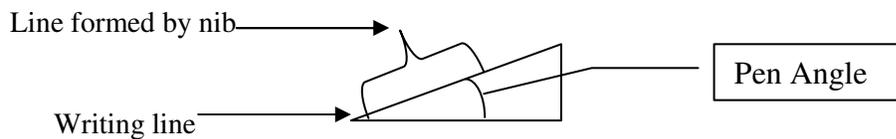
*Marginalia*¹²: Latin for “things in the margin” referring to writing or decoration in the margins of a manuscript which could be part of the original work or secondary in nature (including glosses, annotations, and diagrams).

*Metal Point*¹³: A writing implement, made of metal and used for annotation, drawing, and ruling, which leaves a trace element on the writing surface. The mark varies according to the metal (ferrous points leaving brown, silver and lead leaving silver-gray, copper leaving gray-green). The marks are more discreet than those made with ink but more visible than marks made with hard point. Metal point increased in use from the eleventh century onward.

*Pounce*¹⁴: A substance such as chalk, ash, powdered bone, bread crumbs, or pumice (powdered volcanic glass) that is rubbed into a writing surface in order to improve it. Pounce can reduce the greasiness, raise the nap, and whiten parchment.

Pen: The handle that holds the pen nib.

Pen Angle: The angle at which the pen nib is held in relation to the writing line when the nib is pressed against the writing surface and the narrowest line is made with a stroke. As:



Pen nib (or “nib” or “point”): The metal (usually) insert for a pen that has an ink reservoir and is designed to spread the ink smoothly across the writing surface to the width of the nib. Various brands include Brause, Speedball, Mitchell, and others.

Pen, or Nib, Width: The width of a pen when the widest stroke is taken (perpendicular to the nib as it is placed on the writing surface). Note: There are *specific* pen nibs for right- and left-handed calligraphy.

*Pricking*¹⁵: The marking of a page by a point or knife to guide the ruling of the page.

*Rubric*¹⁶: A title, chapter heading, or instruction that is not strictly part of the text. Red ink was often used to distinguish such elements (hence the term which derives from the Latin for red, *rubrica*).

Titivillus: Patron demon of calligraphy. Born in the minds of medieval monks.¹⁷ He noted the errors of scribes and monks and presented these to the Devil who would use them on the Day of Judgement.

*Versals*¹⁸: Enlarged capitals lettered in color.

Waist Line: Middle of five guide lines generally used in calligraphy. The tops of lower case letters without ascender strokes rise to this line.

Writing Line (Baseline): Second lowest of five guide lines generally used in calligraphy. The bottoms of lower case letters without descender strokes rest on this line.

¹ Whiting, Bartlett Jere. *Proverbs, Sentences, and Proverbial Phrases – from English Writings Mainly Before 1500*. Cambridge, Mass., 1968; as taken from: Drogin, Marc. *Medieval Calligraphy Its History and Technique*. Dover Books. 1980.

² Brown, Michelle. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts, A Guide to Technical Terms*. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995

³ Child, Heather (editor on behalf of The Society of Scribes and Illuminators). *The Calligrapher's Handbook*. Taplinger Publishing, 1985.

⁴ *Webster's New Collegiate Dictionary*. G. & C. Merriam Company, 1980.

⁵ Ibid.

⁶ Child, Heather (editor on behalf of The Society of Scribes and Illuminators). *The Calligrapher's Handbook*. Taplinger Publishing, 1985.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Brown, Michelle. *Understanding Illuminated Manuscripts, A Guide to Technical Terms*. The J. Paul Getty Museum, 1995

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Ibid.

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ *Oxford English Dictionary*. Oxford. 1971

¹⁸ Drogin, Marc. *Medieval Calligraphy Its History and Technique*. Dover Books. 1980.

Ne dicas... 'Quia bene scribere nescio, iccirco exusatus sum,' sed scribe ut potes et nichil a te amplius exigetur.

[...you have no right to say "Please, excuse me, I do not write well." Write as well as you can; no one can ask more.]

~~~Abbot Johannes Trithemius of Sponheim, in his *De Laude Scriptorum* ("In Praise of Scribes"), 1492; from Arnold, Klaus, ed., *Johannes Trithemius --- In Praise of Scribes (De Laude Scriptorum)*. Lawrence, Kansas, 1974; as taken from Drogin, Marc. *Medieval Calligraphy Its History and Technique*. Dover Books. 1980.