

Script in the Copperplate Style: Getting Started

by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo©

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In this article I would like to address the topic of getting started writing script in the Copperplate Style. I will cover pen points (nibs), inks, paper, penholders, guidelines and where to find instruction.

The first tool needed is a good penholder (Figure 1). For the right-handed calligrapher, using an oblique penholder will be helpful for the reasons covered in detail in the previous installment of this series. For modern penholder choices please visit the oblique Penholder Gallery on Zanerian.com

Figure 1. The Tysdal Rosewood Zanerian style oblique penholder.



The next item and perhaps the most critical is the nib (Figure 2A). The nib must have a sufficiently flexible point to allow for the formation of shaded down strokes by applying downward pressure to the pen. It should also be sharp enough to allow for fine hairlines to contrast the shades. An example of such a nib is the Leonardt Principal. While it is generally acknowledge that modern nibs are not as good as their vintage counterparts, there are still very serviceable modern nibs available. These include:

- Leonardt Principal
- Gillott 303 (Sharp), 1068A (stiff)
- Hunt 22b, 56

Those lucky enough to come across vintage nibs should keep their eyes open for and of the following:

- Gillott: Principality, 303, 404, 604EF
- Esterbrook: A1, 356, 357, 358
- Spencerian: 1, 2, 5
- Zanerian: FineWriter

This list is by no means complete but it should serve as a starting point. A good place to locate vintage nibs is eBay. However, the prices are another matter. Most notably a single box (144 nibs) of Gillott Principalities recently sold on eBay for nearly \$2,000. This same box when manufactured almost a century ago sold for \$1.75.

I would like to discuss how to prepare a new nib for ink (Figure 2). New nibs, whether vintage or modern, are coated to prevent oxidation (rust) of the metal. This coating tends to repel ink making the ink bead up (Figure 2B) rather than coating the nib and needs to be removed.

Figure 2. Preparing a new nib to accept ink.



There are several approaches to nib preparation. These include quickly flaming the nib and the use of solvents. Each of these methods presents potential problems. For example, flaming the nib with a match can alter the temper of the metal. The end result would be to alter the flexibility of the nib itself. This especially important to consider when preparing expensive and hard-to-find vintage nibs like the Gillott Principality or the 303. Furthermore, the use of solvents such as acetone or ammonia instead of flame can work; however, noxious fumes and potentially carcinogenic materials (in the case of some solvents) are best avoided.

It has been said that the penmen of old would simply pop a new nib into their mouth and suck on it to get it ready for ink. As a dentist, I consider this a bad idea. A very simple but effective method uses a dry Q-Tip with a small dab of ordinary toothpaste. Gently scrub the new nib in ONE direction starting from the end opposite the point and stroking towards the point. Use a light touch and be sure to treat both top (convex side) and underside (concave side) of the nib. Modern dental abrasives will not harm the nib but will effectively remove the nib's protective coating.

Once the nib is thoroughly washed and dried place it into the oblique holder using a tissue being careful not to touch the nib with your fingers since finger oil will repel the ink. Please refer to my previous article that discusses in detail how to place the nib into the oblique penholder and align it. Once inserted, moisten a paper towel with saliva and wipe down the nib top and underside and allow it to dry for a minute or two. The saliva will actually coat the metal with a protein pellicle that helps to render the metal hydrophilic (fluid loving). The ink should now adhere without any problem. Lastly, be sure the eyelet is cover after dipping the nib in the ink. A properly inked nib is shown in Figure 2C.

The next item we must consider is the ink. In pointed pen work, the ink can be a very critical factor. More importantly to those scribes familiar with text lettering, inks sufficient for broad pen work may not work well with the flexible pointed pen. If the ink is too thin, it will not allow shade formation. If too thick, it will not flow off the pen. Inks can be thinned (usually with water) or thickened (usually with gum Arabic) depending on the ink formulation. This can be tricky to reproduce from batch to batch. Preparations of stick inks or gouache can be used if diluted to the proper consistency. Don't be afraid to experiment.

At this point you're probably thinking, 'Ok Joe, what is the proper ink consistency?' Luckily, there are modern inks that are ready to go 'right out of the bottle'. This means they are formulated with the right consistency or viscosity. These inks include:

- McCaffery's Penman's Inks (all colors)
- Blot's Iron Gall Ink
- Walker's Copperplate Inks
- Norton's Walnut Drawing Inks

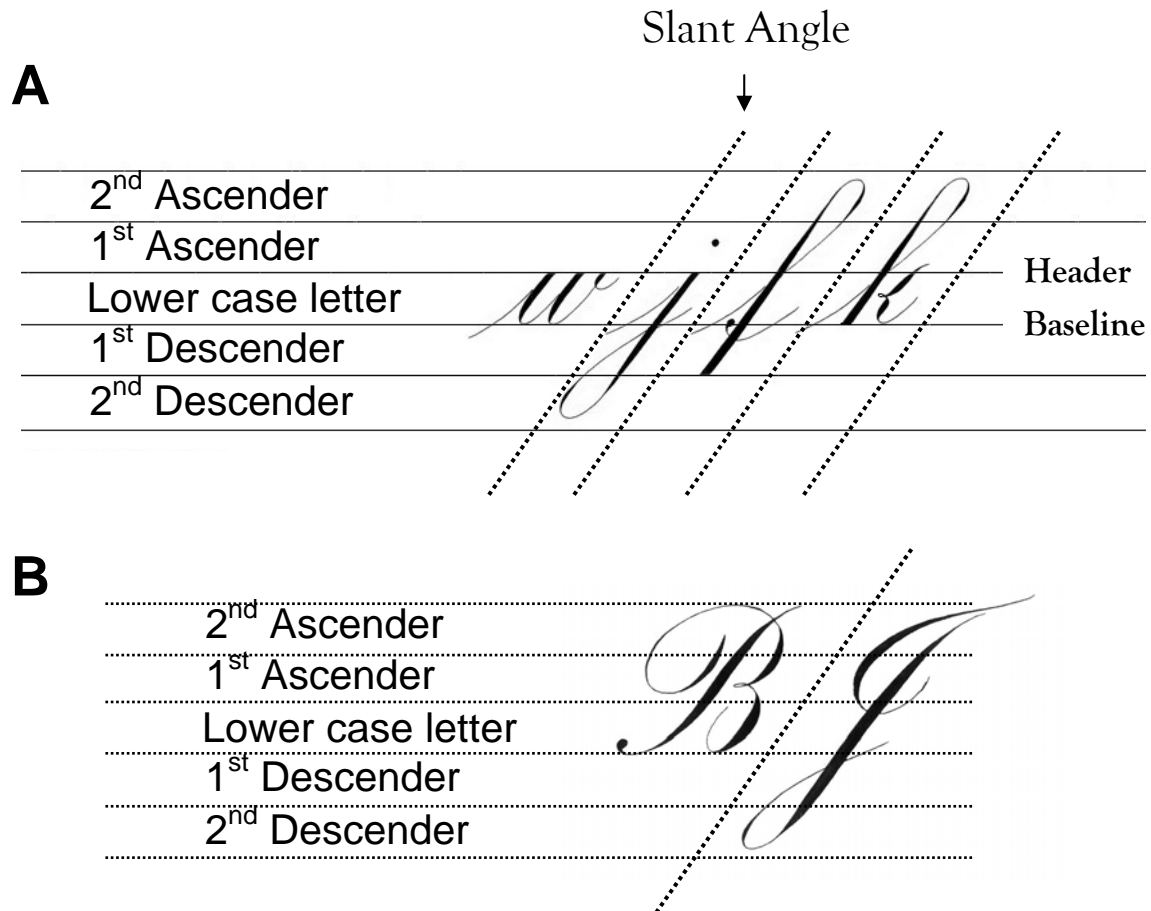
These inks will give you a good idea of the ink consistency necessary to produce fine script. In general, the faster the pen stroke, the thinner the ink should be. Past masters of ornamental script wrote with a speed and snap that necessitated the use of lower viscosity (thinner) inks. There are less than a single handful of pen artists practicing today who utilize/mastered that particular style of writing. The inks mentioned above are ideally formulated for the modern styles of script in the Copperplate style.

All of these carefully selected items will be of no avail if the paper won't accommodate the style. The broad pen can be used on a wide variety of surface textures. The pointed pen is much more finicky. Suitable paper characteristics include resistance to ink bleed from thinner inks. Meaning the paper has been properly sized. Smoothness of the surface is also important. It should be noted that the paper should not be too glossy. A little bit of tooth is desirable but not too much. Using a sharp nib like a Gillott 303, modern or vintage, on a rough paper can be a nightmare. Suitable practice paper that I personally use is Kodak's Brite White 24lb inkjet paper. Once again, experiment and find what works for you.

I highly recommend that you practice using a grid designed for this style of script. Line spacings should be between 3/8" and 1/2" with regularly spaced slant angles of between 52-55 degrees. The sample of my script shown in Figure 3 illustrates how these lines are used. The lowercase letter height (Figure 3A) is defined by the header and base lines that

are bordered by two ascender spaces and two descender spaces as indicated in the figure. As a general rule, capital letters like 'B' are approximately three times the lowercase letter height; however, the capital 'J' extends almost five full spaces (Figure 3B).

Figure 3. The Use of guidelines for script.



For those with web access, guidelines are available free for downloading on zanerian.com that can be printed directly onto your practice paper or used under alight weight paper. For the novice, they provide a sense of the letter proportions needed for fine script work.

Lastly, instructional manuals are very important when learning script. Those wanting to learn modern Copperplate script should consider *Mastering Copperplate* by Eleanor Winters. My own style is known as Engrosser's script (Figure 4). The best manual for learning this particular style is *The Zanerian Manual*. Zanerian.com contains many free pages of first rate script instructional material from past masters of the pointed pen.

Figure 4. Script in the Copperplate style also known as Engrosser's script.



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Author Bio:

Dr. Vitolo is the webmaster for both Zanerian.com¹ and the Yahoo Ornamental Penmanship Group². In 1999, he developed a passion for script in the Copperplate style, specifically Engrosser's script. Dr. Vitolo is also an avid historian of the golden age of American Ornamental Penmanship and an active member of The International Association of Master Penmen, Engrossers and Teachers of Handwriting (IAMPETH)³. He has written extensively on penmanship/calligraphy having published over thirty articles and lectured around the country on topics ranging from calligraphy to dentistry to science. Dr. Vitolo holds two doctorates: a D.M.D. (Dentistry) and a Ph.D. (Biochemistry).

¹<http://www.zanerian.com>

² http://groups.yahoo.com/group/Ornamental_Penmanship

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