

THE POINT AND WHEN TO CHANGE IT

by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo©

<http://www.zanerian.com>

It has been said that the majority of pointed pen calligraphers do not know when to replace their nib. Direct manifestations of this problem include difficulty executing pen strokes and ultimately poor script. Anyone who has ever spent hard-earned dollars on pen points, especially the vintage nibs, knows the anxiety of throwing that precious nib into the garbage after wearing it out. The anxiety turns into a full-blown nightmare as you dip into your supply of unused vintage nibs thereby effectively decreasing the number of remaining nibs by one. I get nervous just thinking about it! Feeding this sense of dread is the fact that most legendary pen points are exceedingly scarce. Therefore, having the money to buy more of them does not quell the fear of parting with that beloved nib. It is my intent with this brief article to address some of the factors that effect point life and when to reach into that hallowed nib storage box to grab a replacement.



Figure 1. *The Legendary Pen Points: (From top to bottom) Gillott Principality, Gillott 604EF, Gillott 303, Musselman Perfection, Spencerian No. 1 and Zanerian FineWriter.*

The legendary vintage nibs (Figure 1) include, but are not limited to the Gillott Principality, Zanerian Finewriter, Musselman's Perfection (a relatively obscure nib that is my personal preference), Spencerian No. 1 and the Gillott 604EF. There was a time long ago when an entire gross a Gillott Principalities cost approximately \$2.00! In the last few years a single gross box of Gillott Principality nibs sold for as high as \$2000! The result is that several penmen use nibs long after the point should be discarded. I am guilty of this myself.

At this point you should be asking, "Ok, so when should I change my nib?" Unfortunately, there is no simple answer. Short of an obvious sign like metal fatigue

resulting in a nib tine breakage, determining when to change your nib is personal decision influenced by your own personal requirements. Someone who makes their living with a pen may go through many more points than someone who practices an hour everyday.

An important factor influencing the point at which the nib should be discarded is the penman's level of skill. A master of script writing has an absolute requirement for a fully functioning nib. He/she can instantly tell if the nib is not 'responding' to his/her touch. Let us consider the fine hairlines of a legendary master like Louis Madarasz (<http://www.zanerian.com/Madarasz1.html>). Achieving work of such quality requires the harmonious interplay between artistic skill, pen point, ink and paper. A scratchy nib or one that has lost its springiness could easily affect the quality of the work. In contrast, a modern day pointed pen calligrapher that is just beginning his/her 'quest' for script may not be capable of producing superfine hairlines or sharp crisp shaded strokes of great heft. Therefore, nib wear may not be discernable. This does not mean that they need not worry about nib wear. In fact, poor and worn out nibs can actually hinder progress.



Figure 2. *The Script and ultra fine hairlines of Louis Madarasz who likely used a Gillott Principality to pen this specimen.*

**Note Madarasz's hanging 'dot' on the lower case 's'. No hairline connects the half dot to the main 's' shade. This gives the illusion of a ridiculously fine hairline.*

The person making their living writing wedding invitations may not require Madarasz-like precision and the finest hairlines. Therefore, a nib that starts to lose the ability to produce delicate hairlines might be less of an issue than one that becomes excessively scratchy. This is especially true if the nib begins to slow down the volume of the work produced. For the person using shaded strokes of great heft, as those necessary for large Engrosser's script (a form of script in the Copperplate style), the chance of permanently deforming the nib increases. An obvious sign would be nib splaying. In other words, the tines lose their 'springiness' and are unable to properly come together. If your nib starts to have difficulty laying down ink, clean it off and check to see if the nib tines are splayed out. If so it is time to change the nib. While it is common for a nib to 'soften' over time, or 'wear in' as some call it, the tines must be in contact.

Another problem facing your nib is acid etching of the metal surface by the ink. Many types of ink are acidic in nature and will etch or ‘pit’ the metal surface over time. The amount of etching will vary with the acidity level of the ink and the proper cleaning of your nib after use. Even fountain pen inks can be acidic as well as the very popular Walnut Inks. The consequence for the nib over time is more than just a slight color change. The metal becomes rougher as pitting on the surface of the metal increases. The result is a nib that becomes progressively scratchier. In extreme cases, acid induced fatigue leading to nib tine fracture can result (Figure 3). These are just a few of the potential causes of a nib becoming scratchy over time. Nib tines bending or splaying from regular use can also have the same effect. Regardless of the cause, once the point becomes scratchy, it is time to change your nib.

*The Nib and When to Change it!
OR the Tale of my poor, poor
Musselmen's Perfection Nib*

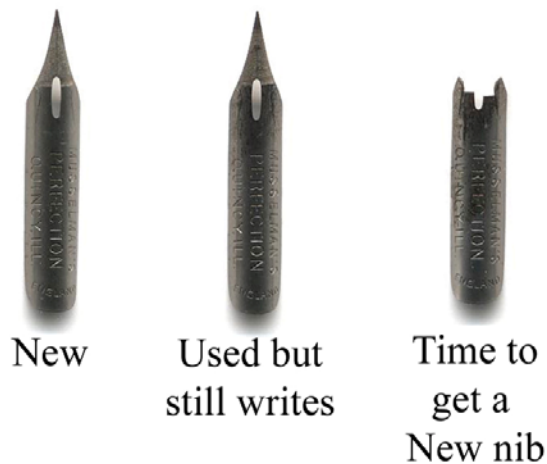


Figure 3.

Another common problem to look for is thickening of hairline strokes. This problem can result from several possibilities including mechanical wear from repeated writing on paper or a slight splaying of the tines. If you notice that your hairlines are no longer thin regardless of how much gum Arabic you put in your inkbottle, consider changing your nib.

I would suggest that you take special care to note the writing properties of your new pen point over time. Record a few sample letters a record book every so often for a comparison. Once you get accustomed to judging the state of your nib you can dispense with taking notes. While you cannot set a time limit on nib usage, you can get an idea of how long your nib should last with average use. In closing, the bottom line is that a worn out pen point will have an adverse effect on your script. Be diligent about evaluating your nibs and dig out that new one when necessary.

©The contents and images contained in this article may not be used without the consent of the author.