

# Beginning Calligraphy

*by Mistress Ygraine of Kellswood*

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Calligraphy is the art of beautiful writing. If you have ever had an interest in learning calligraphy and have been too overwhelmed by the amount of material available or too intimidated by the talent of others to give it a try, I hope to help you! My goal is to get interested people started off in a non-discouraging fashion, and to provide enough basic information that you will know what to do with the many other tools you are likely to come across if your interest continues.

## Materials:

My teachers' opinions have differed as to what type of pen beginners should use. Some believe you should start with a pen you dip into ink, so that your understanding of how to use the flow of ink grows along with the rest of your skills. Others feel that a more convenient pen form frees you to concentrate on learning to form letters correctly, since you have fewer things to "mess with" and you aren't fighting your tools. For introductory classes like this, my own philosophy leans to the latter approach. Since I hope to get you "hooked" by helping you succeed with your first attempts, and I don't feel anyone should sink a lot of money into something until they've had a chance to try it, I bring a supply of felt-tip calligraphy markers to loan.

When you're ready to buy your own supplies, please consider the following:

Markers -- are a fun way to get started. They are inexpensive (about \$2.00 each) and available in a wide variety of colors and widths; they're great for informal notes and doodling; they are portable, so you may have more opportunities

to practice. They have a relatively short useful life since they tend to dry out quickly. Also, you should not use markers on any work you hope will be permanent, since the colors are not fade-resistant over time.

Nibs and holders -- are the most widely used tools. Holders usually cost about \$1.00 each, and nibs range from \$0.50 to \$1.50 each. You can choose from holders made of wood or plastic with round, square or three-sided shafts -- pick what feels comfortable to your hand. (Some scribes recommend unfinished wood holders because they won't get slippery as you work.) Nibs which are readily available are the Speedball "C" series and the Mitchell Roundhand series. As these tools require you to dip into an open bottle of ink, you need to be careful where you work and how you carry the ink and clean-up supplies.

Fountain or cartridge pens -- are a convenient but more expensive solution. Such pens are portable if handled with a bit of care. Rotring art pens are highly recommended, but run between \$18 and \$25 per pen; an ink cartridge filler is available for about \$8 which enables you to use a wider variety of inks.

Cut your own! -- Truly traditional writing implements can be made from feathers and reeds. By using a sharp knife (a real "pen" knife or an Exacto knife) and instruction from a written source or experienced friend, your writing implements can be both period and free.

Ink -- There are many brands of ink available and you will probably try many before settling on a favorite. Higgins, Speedball and Pelican

are popular. For easy clean-up, choose a water-soluble ink. India or other permanent inks require pen cleaning solution or ammonia for clean-up, but are more resistant to fading. Follow manufacturer's recommendations in choosing ink to be used in fountain or cartridge pens -- some inks can ruin these pens!

**P**aper -- Try your chosen tools on whatever paper is available to you. This will give you a feel for what type of surface is comfortable for you to write on. Some scribes prefer a smooth or "plate" finish, others like a surface with more "tooth" or texture. For practise, copier paper or computer paper can be satisfactory, and they are often thin enough to place over a sheet of guidelines. For work you want to keep, choose paper which is described as "rag" or "acid free" as these are less likely to deteriorate over time.

### Your work environment:

**C**hoose a comfortable seat or knee-chair and a table or desk which give you a writing surface slightly higher than your waist. If you are right-handed, your light source should be to your left so you aren't writing in your own shadow; put your light on your right if you are left-handed. For added comfort, give yourself an angled writing surface -- a fixed or portable drafting board, a flat board propped in an open desk drawer, or an empty wide 3-ring binder will serve. If you're using a bottle of ink, set it on a dish (large enough to catch spills) with a paper towel (for blotting your nib) within easy reach from your work surface but not in the way of your elbow!

### To begin:

**E**xercises and writing styles (called "hands") are shown in most teaching books using what are called ductus sheets. Once you know how to translate the symbols used, these pages make

learning a new hand just a matter of practice. They generally contain the following:

**N**ib size -- a mark showing the actual width of the nib used to write the ductus sheet, this is the widest stroke you will see used in the exercise or hand illustrated.

**P**en angle -- compared to the writing line, the angle at which the flat edge of the nib will be held while you write. For the hands you are likely to learn with, this angle must stay the same through every stroke to obtain the proper thicks and thins.

**W**riting angle -- the angle of the vertical strokes to the writing line. This angle must remain constant through every stroke. For some hands this angle is perpendicular or at 90 degrees to the writing line (ex: Gothic and Chancery). For other hands, it may be from 85 to 70 degrees (ex: Italic) or even parallel to the writing line (ex: Celtic Half-Uncial).

**L**etter size -- the size of the letter bodies and ascenders and descenders, shown as a multiple of nib widths. In some hands, the tall strokes (ascenders) or tails (descenders) will extend the same height as the bodies of the letters (ex: Chancery and Italic); in others, they will be longer (ex: Batarde and Legende) or shorter (ex: Gothic and Celtic Half-Uncial).

**S**trokes -- the separate strokes used to form each letter, usually indicated by arrows which are sometimes numbered.

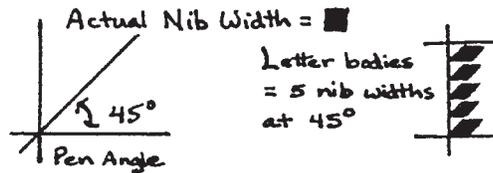
**B**egin with a page of pen manipulation exercises. With each type of stroke, do two or three and then STOP. Compare your most recent stroke with the original you are copying. Identify differences between your strokes and the original, so you don't keep practicing an error repeatedly.

- \* If the beginning or end of your strokes isn't sharp, or if the sides of your stroke are jagged, the whole edge of your nib wasn't touching the paper through the whole stroke.
- \* If your stroke tapers off or widens, the pen angle wasn't kept constant through the whole stroke.
- \* If your strokes are consistently thicker or thinner than the original, check your pen angle, writing angle and letter size.
- \* If your stroke felt bumpy as you made it, or if you got a spatter, you may have been making a stroke in the wrong direction; most strokes are pulled down or to the right, not pushed up or to the left.
- \* If your ink is forming puddles, you may be bearing down too hard as you write or you might need to blot some excess ink from the nib.

When you have tried a whole line of each exercise and most of them look consistent, give yourself a pat on the back (!) then, select a hand to begin learning. Chancery is a good period hand to begin with, since the pen angle is a constant 45 degrees, the writing angle is perpendicular to the writing line, and the ascenders and descenders are equal to the letter bodies. I wish you much enjoyment in your scribbling, and may Titivillus never cause you grief!

See the "Do It Yourself" page at:  
[www.kellswood.com/krafts](http://www.kellswood.com/krafts) for current copies of  
all my handouts.

# exercises



Thins:	
Thicks:	
Thicks and Thins:	
Verticals:	
Horizontals:	Used in "z" and as embellishments and borders.
Ascenders and Descenders:	Tails strokes and tails are often twice the height of bodies.
Serifs:	Originally used to get the ink flowing. Lead into stroke and flick out of it. Used in "i".
Curves:	Used in "u" and "w" and others.
More Curves:	Used in "n" and "m" and others.
Rounds:	Used in "c" and "e" and others.
Diamonds or Dots:	Used in punctuation, embellishments and borders.

