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How to use calligraphy pens

Learn how to use a calligraphy pen, including how to insert the nib and ink it. Find everything you need to know about calligraphy pens, and which one is right for you. You'll find sources, step by step tutorials and even video instruction to make it so easy to learn. This post was originally published May 1, 2018 and is continually updated with fresh content. Current update was January 4, 2022. Today is a fun lesson in my new Modern Calligraphy series in collaboration with Alicia of On Three Designs. We are going to learn how to insert the nib and ink the pen! In fact, there is much to learn about these very special pens. Hopefully this answers all of your burning questions, but please feel free to comment below if I've missed anything! If you're just getting started, you'll first want to read more about which style of pen is right for you, below. Use the drop down Table of Contents menu for ease of navigating this post. First, a few basic questions and answers about calligraphy pens. You'll find a quick tutorial for inserting a nib, as well as a source section towards the end of this post. oblique pen Frequently Asked Questions What is the difference between straight and oblique calligraphy pens? There are two main calligraphy pens - a straight and an oblique. A straight is just as you would think - straight with the nib inserted into the top of the pen itself. An oblique pen has a flange that holds the nib and forces it to write at an angle. The flange allows you to write at an angle more naturally without having to adjust your paper. This post and the photos within it may contain affiliate links. If you purchase something through the link, I may receive a commission at no extra charge to you. What is the best calligraphy pen for beginners? That's probably one of the most common questions I constantly get. Instead of listing a bunch of popular calligraphy pens, I decided to create a comprehensive guide that will help you choose the right calligraphy pen for you. Before we get started, here is a quick overview of the things I'll talk about in this article - Understanding why the best calligraphy pen may vary (calligraphy pen categories)The best calligraphy pens for beginnersWhat other calligraphy tools do you need to get started A quick sum-up + final words Without any further delays, let's get started! If you prefer to watch, I also created a YouTube video - Understanding why the best calligraphy pen may vary (calligraphy pen categories) Imagine someone asks you - What is the best instrument for music? You would probably wonder, well, what type of music are we talking about exactly? That is precisely why "it depends" is the only answer I can give when someone asks me what is the best pen for calligraphy beginners. Think of calligraphy as an umbrella term with a whole bunch of different scripts (styles) sitting underneath it. The Calligrapher's Bible by David Harris The most common way beginners do this is to first pick up a cool/fancy-looking pen, then figure out what they want to learn. Well, what if the pen you picked isn't suitable for the style you want to learn and practice? It is precisely the reason that my recommendation is to reverse the process. First, you determine what sort of calligraphy script (style) you are interested in learning, and then based on your choice, you choose your calligraphy pen. Even though there are hundreds of different calligraphy scripts that you could learn, most of them can be created using the same tools. In fact, there are three main calligraphy pen categories to consider (unless you're trying to learn some weird unknown style that requires some weird and unknown tool) - Broad-edged calligraphy pensPointed nib calligraphy pensBrush pens Let's have a closer look at each of these categories. The best calligraphy pens for beginners In this section, I'll briefly go over these pen categories, and I'll give you my best recommendation for beginners, along with a few alternatives. Obviously, there are many more calligraphy tools available out there, here im merely making a recommendation for beginners. If you want a more in-depth look at the different calligraphy scripts (styles), I recommend checking out my other article on the calligraphy alphabets and their historical overview. Alternatively, I recommend getting the Calligrapher's Bible book by David Harris. This book features 100 different calligraphy scripts (styles) and a brief sum-up on how to do them. Let's begin with our first calligraphy pen category. Important note: I made a mistake when I started thinking that more expensive tools would help me write better. That's simply not the case, and you don't need to spend a lot of money on tools to get started. Best broad-edged calligraphy pens This is the largest calligraphy pen category. Meaning that by getting one broad-edged pen (flat tip), you'll be able to learn a whole bunch of different calligraphy styles. The most popular styles created using a broad-edged calligraphy pen are - Blackletter/gothic calligraphy Blackletter examples from the Speedball Textbook (25th edition) Italic calligraphy Italic exemplar from the Calligrapher's Bible book Foundational Hand Roman capitals Roman capitals examples from the Speedball Textbook (25th edition) Uncial calligraphy Uncial exemplar from The Art Of Calligraphy book by David Harris My recommendation for beginners is the Pilot Parallel Pen. The Parallel Pen is probably one of the most popular tools amongst calligraphers, and for a good reason. It's cheap, durable, and easy to use. The Parallel Pen is a fountain pen that uses ink cartridges in its reservoir. It provides a constant ink flow through the flat nib. This means that you don't have to worry about dipping your pen into ink or anything similar. Instead, you just pop it open, and you're ready to roll. The PPP comes in 6 sizes - 1.5 mm2.4 mm3.8 mm4.5 mm6.0 mm My recommendation is that you don't get anything under 3.8 mm. A larger-sized nib is more suitable for beginners, and you can easily expand your toolbox later on. The ink box included comes in 12 different colors giving you a wide range of choices. On top of that, you can combine these colors to make some cool gradients and even dip them in different kinds of ink to achieve other intricate combos. I couldn't recommend enough the Parallel Pen. I use it constantly, and I've been using the same one for more than 5 years. Perhaps the only downside to the PPP is the ink flow. Working with certain papers, the PPP is prone to bleeding and feathering. However, using the right paper, you don't have to worry about that. The papers I recommend using with the PPP are - Canson marker paper (or any other marker paper)Watercolor paperRhodia pads Broad-edged calligraphy pen alternatives Aside from the PPP, here are a few pen alternatives you can get for broad-edged calligraphy styles. Broad-edged markers These are solid felt-tip markers that are even easier to use than the Parallel Pen. You just pop the cap, and you're ready to go. No preparations, no maintaining, and they can work with a broader range of paper types. I placed them as an alternative to the Parallel Pen because, in my opinion, they don't provide such a satisfying writing experience. However, they're great for beginners, and you can just focus on learning the basics of a calligraphy style. Marker vs. Parallel Pen I still use broad-edged markers, and I enjoy working with them. The ones I recommend are - Whichever you end up taking, I would just recommend that you avoid getting chiseled tip markers like this one - They are not suitable for calligraphy. Broad-edged dip pens Broad-edged dip pens are the best tools for professional calligraphy (aside from quills). They're able to create strokes and hairlines like no other tool. Italic calligraphy example with Speedball's C-2 nib. In my opinion, dip pens are not really suitable for beginners for several reasons. First, you need to prepare the nibs (link), assemble them onto the pen staff, find the right paper & ink combination, clean and maintain these nibs and more. Combine all the other information you need to learn about other tools, scripts, etc. It can quickly become overwhelming. Don't get me wrong, it's not rocket science, but it definitely has a bit of a learning curve. Nonetheless, I realize that some of you might want to try them out, so that's why I included them as an alternative. The beginner's sets I recommend you start with are - Or Along with the set, you will also need some ink. For that, I recommend a bottle of black Sumi ink. It offers excellent value for the price. There is also a wide variety of different nibs that you can get. Once you have a nib holder, you simply swap the nibs. Paper recommended - Ok, that pretty much covers it for the broad-edged calligraphy styles. Next up we have - Best pointed (nib) calligraphy pens Pointed nib calligraphy styles have become extremely popular, and I would even dare to say it's the group of styles preferred by the majority of beginners today. Smooth, flowy, elegant lines are just some of the features that attract newcomers to these calligraphy styles. Some of the most famous calligraphy styles you can create with pointed nibs are - Copperplate Copperplate exemplar from the Calligrapher's Bible book Spencerian Spencerian examples from the Speedball Textbook (25th edition) Modern variations Modern variation examples from the Speedball Textbook (25th edition) Pointed capitals & minuscules Pointed minuscule exemplar from the Calligrapher's Bible book My recommendation for beginners is actually a regular pencil or even a smaller-sized brush pen. Let me explain. A dip pen with a pointed nib is the ultimate tool for these styles. There is no doubt about it. However, it would be foolish not to take into consideration the learning curve behind this tool. The argument is the same as the one I made for broad-edged dip pens. You already have your hands full with learning the basics of the script, and adding to that a tool that comes in multiple pieces that require preparations and maintenance can quickly become overwhelming. That's why starting with a pencil, or a small-sized brush pen is a more suitable choice for a beginner. You'll have a more pleasant learning experience. Faber Castell 5B pencil vs. Pentel Fude Touch Sign Pen Let me start with the pencil. The pencil is by far the most underrated calligraphy tool out there. It's cheap, it's durable, and it is incredibly versatile. Best of all, you probably have a pencil lying around your house somewhere. A pencil is a suitable tool for beginners because it works on the principle of pressure. The pencil I recommend getting is one with a softer lead, from a 2B pencil all the way to a 6B. Thick & thins with a pencil The pencils with a B lead will be soft enough for you to see the difference between the thick and thins without having to add a whole bunch of pressure. A quick modern-styled alphabet with a 6B pencil Smaller-sized brush pen Just like with the pencil, a smaller-sized brush pen is easy to use. It has a flexible tip that creates thick and thin lines based on the amount of pressure you add as you write. This allows you to get a similar look that you would achieve with a traditional dip pen and a pointed nib. The two smaller-sized brush pens I would recommend are - Tombow Fudenosuke (hard & soft tip)Pentel Fude Touch As for the paper recommendation - Dip pens with pointed nibs Finally, we get to the real deal. Again, although I don't think that a beginner should start with this tool, I understand that some of you would like to do so. Before I give you my recommendations, I would just like to point out that there are two main types of pen holders - The straight holderAnd the oblique holder The main difference is that the oblique holder has a flange sticking on its side, making it easier to write at certain angles. So if you are interested in getting started with pointed nib calligraphy, here is my recommendation. Moblique (2 in 1) nib holderNikko g nibSumi ink The Moblique Pen Holder by Louis Creations is a fantastic 2 in 1 pen holder. It's an oblique holder, but you can easily take off the flange and transform it into a straight holder. On top of that, you can untwist the body, which will reveal a hidden compartment where you can store your nib - very clever. It comes in different colors, and it just feels great to write with it. I love it, and I use it for my broad-edged nibs as well. The Nikko G nib is one of the most popular nibs. Easy to work with and with medium flexibility. This is one of the best nibs to start with. At least the one I liked to work with the most. With time, you'll start to experiment with different ones and notice the differences in the nibs. As for the Sumi ink, as mentioned earlier, it's an excellent value for the price. This holder+nib+ink combination might be slightly more expensive, but I really do think it's worth it. Especially considering you won't need to get two separate nib holders. In case you want something more affordable that includes the needed parts, Manuscript has you covered. Straight pen holder with pointed nibs - Manuscript Nib Pen Set includes a straight holder, 5 different pointed (flexible) nibs, and a small bottle of black ink. Oblique pen holder with pointed nibs - Paper recommendation - Best brush pens for beginners The last category I wanted to cover in this article is brush pens. The reason for including brush pens as a separate category here is because brush lettering (aka brush calligraphy) has become extremely popular in recent years. There are many different brush pens available on the market today, and they all differ from each other. They differ in aspects such as - SizeNib flexibilityInk flowColors, etc. I created a separate in-depth review of my top 10 picks for the best brush pens for calligraphy. If you prefer to watch, I also made a YouTube video on the same topic. What other calligraphy tools do you need to get fired? Ok, now that we have a general overview of the best pens to start, I want to share a few additional tools you will need to get started. Aside from the writing tool that you have chosen based on the calligraphy script (style) you want to practice, you will also need - A ruler A pencil An eraserPaper Here is a quick overview of each one of them. The ruler You need a ruler so you can draw calligraphy guidelines. Guidelines are a crucial part of learning and improving your calligraphy. I wrote a whole separate article that covers everything you need to know about calligraphy guidelines. Or, if you prefer to watch, I also made a YouTube video - You can use any ruler you have at hand. However, the best ruler for creating calligraphy guidelines is the Rolling Ruler. It's like a regular ruler, and it just has a rotating cylinder on the backside that allows for rolling on the surface (hence the name). With the rolling ruler, you'll be able to quickly and effectively draw straight parallel lines. I use it constantly, and I highly recommend the rolling ruler to anyone who practices calligraphy or lettering. The pencil The pencil is the most fundamental tool for both calligraphy and hand lettering. It should be a part of any artist's toolbox. We use the pencil mostly to draw calligraphy guidelines, but it can be super helpful for sketching or even practicing calligraphy, as I previously mentioned. There are different types of pencils you can get, and they mainly differ from the mark they leave on the paper. When it comes to calligraphy, I mostly recommend getting a pencil that leaves a light mark that can be easily erased - an HB pencil. The one I like to use is this mechanical pencil - The eraser I mean, we all make mistakes. Like with the other tools, you'll find a variety of different types of erasers out there. You can pick and use whichever eraser you have at hand. The paper This will depend on the calligraphy tool you have chosen to practice with. Not every paper will work well with every tool. If you scroll above, you will see that I made a paper recommendation for every writing tool. Quick Sum-Up + Final Words Ok, so let's have a quick recap of the whole story - The best calligraphy pen depends on the style you want to practice. First, pick the style and then the calligraphy pen suited for that script (style).Think of calligraphy pens in three main categories - broad-edge, pointed pen, and brush pens.You don't need expensive calligraphy tools - they won't help you improve your skills.I recommend sticking to the fundamental tools and, with time, expand your toolbox.Consider the learning curve of a tool if you are just getting started.Some calligraphy tools need specific types of paper.To get started, you will also need - a ruler, a pencil, and an eraser. If you want to get a calligraphy tool but are unsure if it's the right thing you need, feel free to reach out via email or social media. I will be happy to help and share my thoughts. I'm curious to hear what your favorite calligraphy pen is. Do you like more broad-edged pens or pointed ones? Is it maybe brush pens? Let me know by dropping a quick comment below. Until the next one, Stay AWESOME! Fin me!

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