

The Quill Pen

Often, when colonial children had learned to read, they were finished with their literacy training. Some, however, would become adults who needed to keep account books and write documents about their trades, so it was necessary for these children to learn how to write as well as read. In the 1700s and well into the 1800s, people wrote with quill pens. Such writing was not easy, and skill came only with lots of practice.

On the following pages are instructions for making a quill pen and suggested procedures for having students practice writing with them in the classroom.



Improper and proper posture from *New Spencerian Compendium of Penmanship* (1887)

Making a Quill Pen

The special merit of a quill pen is its ability to produce a fine line with none of the harsh qualities common to a steel-tipped fountain pen.

Materials

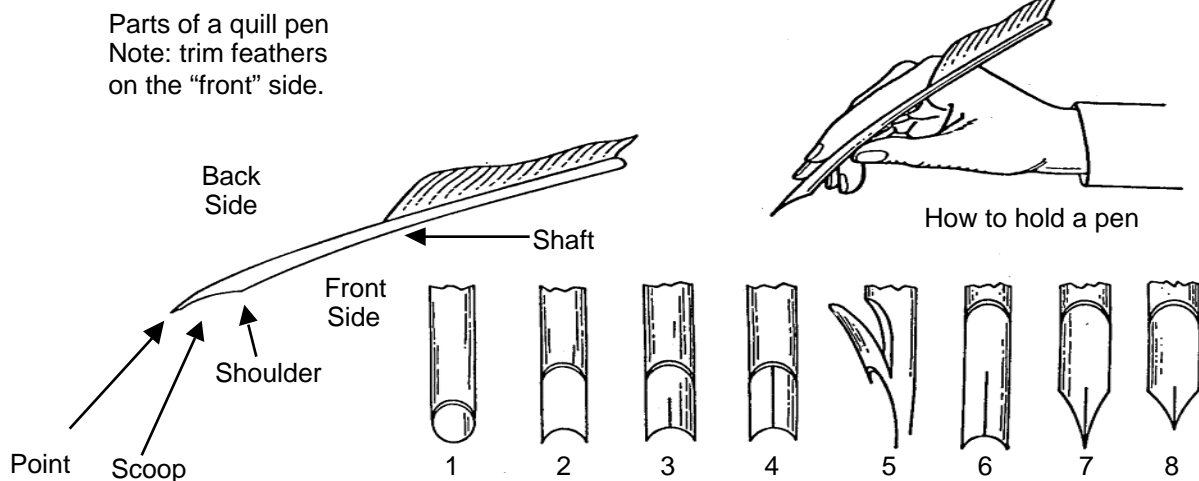
- Quills (goose, swan, or turkey are best)
- Penknife (like a small jackknife)
- Block of wood (to serve as a cutting block)

Preparation

Tips of the fresh shafts must be hollowed out before cutting to remove all oil or fatty material, and then the quills must be thoroughly dried. A quick drying method is to stick the ends into hot sand (140°) for a few minutes.

Shaping the Point (figures 1-8)*

1. Cut a quarter inch from the back of the quill.
2. Cut half an inch off the front.
3. Make a short slit in the center of the back of the quill.
4. Increase the slit. (Support the quill on a surface.)
- 5 & 6. Cut away the front of the quill (called the cradle piece) to form the scoop.
7. Cut away the sides of the quill to form the point.
8. If the slit is too long, the pen tip will be too soft; if too short, the pen tip will be too hard. Cut away more from the sides, or lengthen the slit to solve these problems.



Writing with a Quill Pen

This activity gives your students a chance to learn one of the things that educated people needed to do to get along in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and gives them some basis to appreciate how the technology of writing has changed.

Materials

- Turkey feather quill pens or sharpened chopsticks or make your own (See “Making a Quill Pen.”)
- Washable ink
- Paper towels for blotting and cleaning up
- Paper
- Dixie cups
- Oversized shirts to wear over students’ clothes
- A stopwatch or clock

Procedure

- Using pencils or ballpoint pens—and their best penmanship—students should write the alphabet, the days of the week, the months of the year (all total 100 letters). Time them.
- Demonstrate quill pen writing technique and review class rules for using ink.
- Distribute feathers or chopsticks.
- Pour ink into cups half way.
- Let students practice writing the alphabet, etc., using their quill pens. Time them. Make sure to have plenty of paper towels on hand to blot out splotches.
- Ask students to figure the number of seconds that it took them to create each letter they wrote using a pen or pencil. Then ask them to do the same using a quill pen. The fact that there are exactly 100 letters in the exercise makes the computation easy. The formula is letters/minutes. For example:
 - 100 letters in 10 minutes = 10 letters per minute
 - 100 letters in 15 minutes ≈ 7 (actually = 6.67) letters per minute
- Discuss differences between writing with a pencil and with a quill pen. Also discuss how improvements in technology have helped people write with greater ease. Ask for examples, e.g. pens, typewriters, word processors, email—or electric light vs. candlelight for that matter.
- For extra credit, students may wish to write the preamble of the Constitution or the beginning of the Declaration of Independence.

* Instructions for cutting a quill pen follow those in Martin Billingsley’s *The Pens Excellencie; or the Secretaries Delighte* (1618); the illustrations follow those in Denis Diderot’s *Encyclopedie ou Dictionnaire Raisonne des Sciences des Artes, et des Metieres* (1777). The direct source for the illustrations is unknown.