

# SCA Calligraphy 101

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September 26th, A.S. 37 (2002)

These tips and guidelines are based purely on personal experience and should not be considered a complete discussion of the subject. This information is intended to get beginning scribes started quickly. As the experience of the scribe increases, the scribe will naturally start to experiment and try other methods, materials, and techniques.

## References

Much of this information can be found in the Outlands Scribe Handbook. Every scribe should get a copy of this handbook, or print out the electronic copy which can be found at <http://www.rialto.org/handbook/scribesdraft.pdf>.

The best source book for learning historical calligraphy is *Medieval Calligraphy, Its History and Technique*, by Marc Drogin. This book is the "bible" of SCA calligraphy and should be obtained by each student. It's inexpensive and readily available.

## Supplies

For SCA calligraphy, you should use quality materials that are archival quality. You don't want your beautiful scrolls fading over time. For most scrolls, this is more important than worrying about "what is period." Here is a suggested shopping list of supplies:

1. Paper, a heavy, smooth, archival (acid-free) paper. Bristol is a good starting choice. You'll also want a supply of normal white copy paper as scratch paper.
2. Pen holder, to hold the metal nibs. Speedball holder works well.
3. Metal nibs, Mitchell is a good choice. Get a variety of sizes from 3 to 6. Also get an ink reservoir for each nib. Avoid Speedball nibs.
4. Ink, a permanent archival ink. Black Calli is a good choice. Avoid dye-based inks (found in most cartridge pens) as it will fade.
5. Pencil, mechanical with HB or F soft lead, or regular #2 pencil, sharpened.
6. A ruler, metal with a good edge and anti-slip base is useful.
7. Ames lettering guide, for drawing the guide-lines on the paper.
8. Eraser, a white eraser is good for removing pencil lines.
9. X-acto knife, for scraping ink to remove mistakes.
10. A magnifying glass, or head band, is useful to avoid eye strain with small lettering.

## Getting Started

For your first lesson, you'll want to use a piece of graph paper, and a calligraphy marker. Once you get the hang of using a calligraphy pen, then we will move on to using the metal nib pens that you'll use for actual scrolls.

Consult the attached samples of Carolingian (a rounded hand), and Gothic (a straight line hand) from Drogin. Some people find the rounded letters of Carolingian easier, while others find the square and straight-lines of Gothic easier. We'll start with Carolingian.

### **Carolingian practice**

1. Keep the paper straight.
2. Rotate your hand so your pen is at a 45-degree angle relative to the paper.
3. Draw a series of vertical strokes (like the letter 'l') across the first line of graph paper using your calligraphy marker.
4. Concentrate on making the strokes vertical (follow the guidelines on the graph paper), while keeping the pen at a 45-degree angle.
5. Try spacing the vertical strokes as evenly as possible.
6. On the next line, continue with vertical strokes, but now add the "serifs" at the top and bottom of the 'l'. Don't worry about fancy multi-stroke serifs, just add a little bend at the top and bottom of the letter.
7. On the next line, draw a series of o's.
8. Draw the bottom-left stroke first, swinging the pen from the 10-o'clock position, counter-clockwise, down to the 4-o'clock position.
9. Draw the upper-right stroke next, swinging the pen from the 10-o'clock position, clockwise to the 4-o'clock position.
10. Concentrate on making the letter 'o' circular.
11. Concentrate on making a thin line at the 10 and 4 o'clock positions, and a fat line at the 8 and 2 o'clock positions.
12. Try another row of o's, focusing on each letter, one at a time.
13. Finally, try a row of t's. Start with a horizontal stroke. To accent the start and end of the stroke, you can make a slight curve, like a ~ character if you want.
14. Below the horizontal stroke, add the lower-left stroke of the letter 'o' from the previous line.
15. You can also try drawing the round stroke first and add the horizontal stroke second to see which method feels more comfortable.
16. After you are comfortable drawing l's, o's, and t's, continue practice other letters from the Drogin example.

### **Gothic Practice**

If you found drawing the l's easier than drawing the o's in the previous practice session, then you might find the Gothic hand easier.

1. Start with another row of vertical strokes (l's). Again, focus on making each stroke vertical while holding your hand at a 45-degree angle.
2. Concentrate on the spacing between the vertical strokes. In Gothic, it's even more important to have nice even spacing between the strokes.
3. On the next line, draw the first stroke of the 'm' or 'n' character. Start with pulling the pen towards you at a 45-degree angle, then end in a vertical stroke.
4. Link a few of these strokes together to form the letter 'n' or 'm'. Focus on the spacing between the vertical strokes.

5. On the next line, try drawing a series of 'o' letters. Follow the example in Drogin to make a thin 45-degree line to the lower-left, then a vertical line, then a 45-degree line towards you to the lower-right.
6. Complete the 'o' by pulling the pen towards you at 45-degress, then making a vertical stroke, then making a thin stroke towards the lower-left.
7. Each 'o' is more like a hexagon. Each of the 6 sides is a straight line. Practice making another row of o's.
8. All of the other letters are variations on the same strokes. Practice a few other letters of your choice from the example.

## Using a Metal Nib Pen

Now that you are comfortable holding a pen at a 45-degree angle and forming letters, you should try using a metal-nib pen. Calligraphy markers are good for quick and easy practice to help your hand learn the strokes. But when making a real scroll, you'll want something that looks nicer than markers.

Some people are intimidated by nib pens. They start using cartridge pens instead, and end up frustrated. The problem with cartridge pens is that the ink is often dye-based, so it fades with exposure to sunlight. Dye-based ink is also often not as black as pigmented ink, and will look worse then using calligraphy markers.

You can use an empty cartridge and try filling it with pigmented ink, such as Calli. But the ink will be thicker and you'll constantly be fighting the pen to keep the ink flowing.

Rather than using non-archival ink, or getting frustrated with a cartridge pen, I have found that it's just easier to learn how to use a metal nib pen from the very beginning. With a bit of practice, you'll learn to avoid ink blots and learn how to properly hold the pen to keep the ink flowing smoothly. Once you get the hang of it, you'll never want to use a cartridge pen ever again!

I prefer Mitchell nibs because the reservoirs are removable for easy cleaning, and the reservoirs hold the ink below the nib. This helps the ink flow more slowly because of the angle. Take a minute to think about gravity works and how it will pull on the ink. Hold your pen vertically...it is easy for the ink to flow straight down, so the ink will flow too quickly. Now hold the pen more horizontally. When the pen is horizontal, gravity cannot pull the ink from the pen, so the ink doesn't flow much at all. Often, a sloped writing surface is used to encourage a shallow pen angle so that the ink flows slowly.

Learning to dip the pen is the first trick. There is no need to carefully fill the nib with a brush or eye-dropper as mentioned in some books. Simple dip the metal nib into the ink jar. That's what they did in period! Dip the nib so that about half of it goes into the ink. Try not to dip it too far...don't get ink on the nib holder. As you remove the pen from the ink, brush the two sides of the nib against the inside edge of the ink bottle to remove excess ink. You can also brush the top of the nib (the side without the reservoir) against the bottle. Avoid brushing the part of the nib with the reservoir since you might bump the reservoir out of position.

After dipping the pen, try a few test strokes on some scratch paper. You should always do this after dipping since the first few strokes will be heavier than you want for the scroll.

After you have gotten the ink to flow, try repeating some of the previous practice steps using the metal nib pen instead of the calligraphy marker.

If you pause too long between letters and the ink starts to dry or the ink stops flowing, use your scratch paper to get the ink flowing again. Sometimes it is useful to turn the pen upside down and drag it along the scratch paper to get the ink flowing. Sometimes you'll just need to dip the pen into the ink again. With practice, you'll be able to write more than a line of text before refilling the pen.

## **Layout of a Scroll**

Graph paper is great for practice, but doesn't make a very attractive scroll. On the archival paper that you'll use for a scroll, you can use a pencil, ruler, and lettering guide to quickly and easily draw a series of evenly spaced guidelines for your letters. Once the ink is completely dry, you can later erase these guidelines. Guidelines were used in period, and many times, the guidelines were not erased (or could not be erased easily).

Before making guidelines for the letters, you need to draw the margins on the page to determine where the letters should go. You will need to leave enough margin around your letters for both the illuminated border and the empty border around that. Typically, you want the outside empty border to be at least one inch on the left and right, with 1-1/2 inches on top and 2 inches on the bottom. Then depending upon the illumination design, you'll want to leave another one or two inches all the way around. On a 11x17" paper, this often leaves a width of about 6 inches for your calligraphy.

While you can draw a series of parallel lines using just a ruler and pencil, an Ames lettering guide is useful for drawing a large number of parallel lines quickly.

The spacing between the lines is set by the size of your metal nib, and the size needed for the specific calligraphy hand you plan to use. For example, the Carolingian guide specifies a letter height of 3 to 5 pen widths. The Gothic guide specifies 4 to 5 pen widths.

So, to determine the height of your letters, draw a series of horizontal strokes with your nib pen. Draw between 3 to 5 strokes and then set the Ames lettering guide to match that height. Turning the circular ring in the lettering guide will increase or decrease the distance between holes. Turn the circular wheel until the spacing between holes matches the desired height of your letters.

Then, place the lettering guide against your ruler, place your pencil into one of the holes, and use the pencil to drag the lettering guide across the paper, while keeping it against the ruler. When you get to the end of the line, move the pencil to the next hole and drag it back across the paper. Keep going back and forth and you'll end up with several evenly spaced lines.

## **Practice makes perfect**

Your calligraphy will improve with practice. One way to practice is to do the calligraphy for a scroll twice. Yes, twice! This is supposed to be fun! If you practice the actual text of the scroll on scratch paper first, using the proper nib and line spacing, you can then determine how many lines of text is required for the scroll. This can help you decide where to start the text on the paper, and can also help in determining the best place for line breaks.

To help avoid making spelling errors, or leaving out words, I often print the text of the scroll, with the actual name of the Crown, recipient, dates, etc. using a large font on the computer. Having a large, easy to read, copy of the scroll next to your work surface will help you avoid making mistakes. Or, if you don't make any mistakes on your practice paper, you can use that as your guide for the real scroll.

Don't worry much about making mistakes. Some mistakes are easy to correct using a sharp knife to scrape away the dried ink. If you leave out a letter, you can often just write it above the word. Mistakes are period! If you look at real manuscripts, you will discover many creative ways mistakes were corrected, or incorporated into the design of the document. One document shows the correct letter being hosted into position using a crane-like pulley system as part of the illuminated border!

However, even though mistakes are period, be sure to spell the name of the Crown and the name of the recipient correctly.

## **Conclusion**

Calligraphy takes patience and concentration. Many people are so used to writing quickly using modern handwriting that they can get frustrated trying to slowly write each letter one at a time. Other people find the process easy and mechanical. If you take it one step at a time, practice, and try to stay focused on each letter, you'll achieve wonderful results. Don't be afraid to ask for help, and don't be afraid of mistakes. Being relaxed, while still concentrating, is the best, although this is sometimes easier to say than to do.

Remember that the best illumination still looks horrible with sloppy calligraphy, so quality calligraphy is the centerpiece of any good scroll. It can take long hours of practice and work to create a nice scroll, but if you are like me, seeing the face of the recipient light up when they receive the scroll in court is well worth the time and effort.