How to Start Modern Calligraphy With a Nib, Ink, and Practice S

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Build a pointed-pen hand in eight weeks: tape your guidelines, train pressure on the downstroke, write lowercase letters in families, then address a real envelope.

Things you will need

- Nikko G nibs, ten-pack
- Zebra G nibs
- Oblique pen holder
- Straight wooden pen holder
- Bottled sumi ink
- Walnut ink or ink crystals
- Small glass ink caps
- Low-tack painter's tape
- Ruler and a 55-degree slant guide
- Smooth 32-pound bond paper
- Marker or layout paper pad
- Lint-free cotton cloths and a rinse cup
- Kneaded eraser and an HB pencil
- Blank envelopes and plain cards

Weeks 1-2: Assemble the Kit and Rule Your Guides

1. **Choose Two Forgiving Nibs and Buy Spares**
   Start with a Nikko G and a Zebra G, the two pointed nibs almost every teacher puts in a beginner's hand.
2. **Match the Holder to Your Writing Hand**
   A straight holder is a plain wooden or plastic shaft costing $8 to $20, while an oblique holder adds a small angled flange that the nib screws into.
3. **Pick One Ink and Learn Its Behavior**
   Choose either bottled sumi ink, about $6 to $12, or walnut ink, and use only that one for the first two weeks so you can tell a technique problem from an ink problem.
4. **Rule Guidelines at One-Eighth-Inch Increments**
   Pointed-pen practice is built on tape, not on an expensive printed pad.
5. **Set Up a Desk You Can Sit At**
   You need a firm surface, a chair you can lean forward in, and light reaching from the side opposite your writing hand so the shadow of the nib does not fall across the line you are drawing.

Weeks 3-4: Train Pressure, Angle, and the Four Strokes

6. **Hold the Pen Low With Both Tines Down**
   Keep the holder shaft between roughly 30 and 55 degrees above the paper: held too upright the tine tips dig and skip, and held too flat the belly of the nib dumps its reservoir onto the sheet.

7. **Press Only on the Downstroke**

   A pointed nib makes a wide line only when its two tines spread apart, and they spread only under pressure, so press on the way down and let go completely on the way up to leave the return travel as a hairline.

8. **Load the Nib Without Drowning It**

   Dip the nib far enough that ink covers the belly and stops about a third of the way up the blade, at or below the small vent hole, then touch the tip once to the rim of the cap.

9. **Drill the Four Building Strokes Every Session**

   Every letter you will write is assembled from four strokes: the entrance stroke, a light approach in from the left; the overstroke, a hairline arch; the understroke, a hairline dip; and the compound curve, the shaded S-curve that carries most of the weight.

10. **Diagnose Wobble, Blobs, and Scratchy Starts**

    Three failures account for most early frustration.

Weeks 5-6: Write the Lowercase Alphabet in Families

11. **Learn the Oval Family First**

    Letters c, a, d, g, o, and q all share a single oval, so build that one shape until it repeats.

12. **Add the Stem and Loop Families**

    Next come the straight-stem letters i, l, t, u, and j, which reuse the shaded downstroke you already drilled, and the loop letters b, f, h, and k, where a hairline overstroke crosses a shaded stem.

13. **Close the Alphabet With Arches and Angles**

    The arch family m, n, and r is three understrokes in a row, and it is where spacing usually falls apart, so leave a hairline's width of air between each stem, roughly one-tenth of an inch at this size.

14. **Check Spacing and Slant With a Ruler**

    Write the word minimum twice, then lay a straight edge across the stems.

15. **Practice With Short Daily Drills Not Marathons**

    Twenty to 30 minutes a day, five or six days a week, beats a three-hour Saturday, because fine pressure control consolidates between sessions rather than inside one long sitting.

Weeks 7-8: Move to Cards, Envelopes, and Tool Care

16. **Choose Paper That Lets the Nib Glide**

    Pointed nibs snag on toothy paper, so test before you commit to a format.

17. **Plan the Layout in Pencil Before Ink**

    Mark a light baseline and one or two slant lines with an HB or 2H pencil and a ruler, then judge the whole composition from arm's length before ink touches the sheet.

18. **Address an Envelope Without Ruining Ten Others**

    Work directly on top of your taped guide sheet, and rehearse the whole address once on a scrap of the identical paper so you feel the same drag before committing.

19. **Clean Nibs and Store Ink so Both Last**

    Rinse the nib in a cup of cool water at the end of every session, blot it dry, and never leave it wet, because standing water is what rusts even stainless steel.

20. Finish One Small Piece Every Two Weeks

Technique sticks when it produces something you want to keep, so every second week spend 45 minutes on one finished job: a name card, a set of four place cards, or a single addressed envelope.

Sources

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