

WRITING AND READING IN THE 18TH CENTURY



Alice T. Miner Museum
Chazy, New York



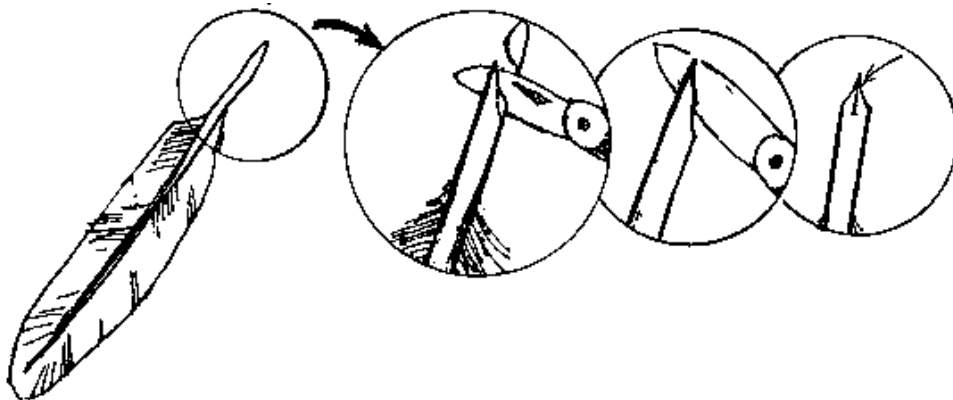
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How to Make a Quill Pen

From the Middle Ages until the early 19th century, quill pens were the most common writing instrument. The wing feathers of a goose were thought to make the best pens—Thomas Jefferson even bred special geese to keep himself in quills!

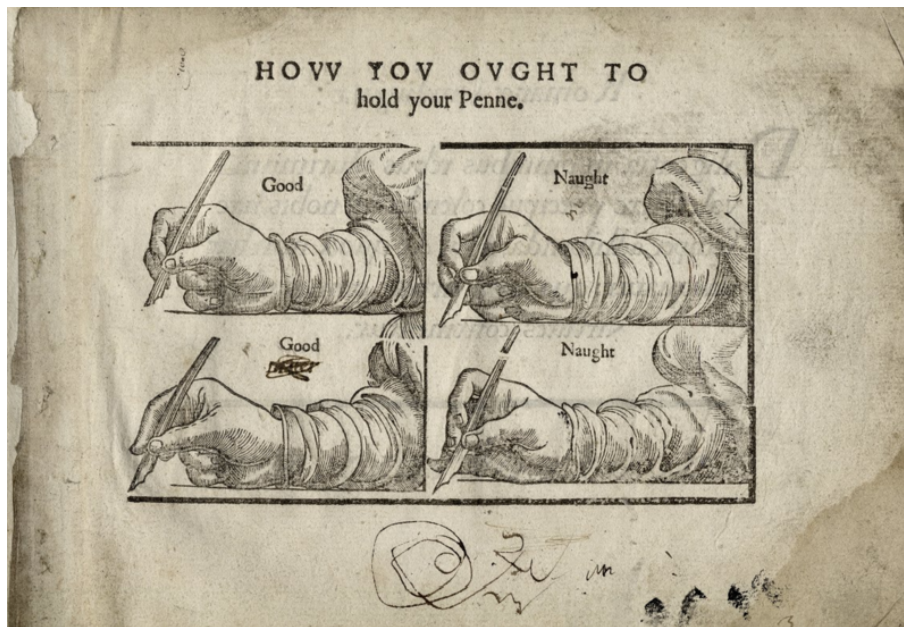
In order to write with a feather, a point had to be cut with a small *penknife*. The writer would trim the quill to his or her preference, and it had to be re-trimmed every few pages. A quill might last a week for someone who did a lot of writing.

1. Select your feather. You need a feather long enough to hold comfortably, with a sturdy shaft (the spine of the feather). You can leave the feather as is, or trim the sides of the feather for several inches, to leave more room for a better grip.
2. Follow the natural curve of the feather. You want your writing point to aim downward.
3. Take a marker and make a dot at the point where you'd like the writing tip to be. Place your marked feather on a cutting board. With a knife or scissors, cut the end of the quill at a slant less than 45 degrees.
4. Cut a small slit through the middle of the point. This helps the ink flow to the nib of the pen.
5. Dip your new quill pen into some ink and try writing! How is using a quill pen different from a modern pen? How does it affect your penmanship?



Tips for writing with a quill

- **Don't use too much ink:** scrape off the excess on the edge of the ink bottle before writing. Better to re-dip than get blots on your page!
- **Position the nib at an angle:** This will ensure thin, manageable lines. If your nib faces straight up or down, it will produce lines that are too thick to form legible words.
- **Keep a light hand:** modern pens require a lot more pressure than quills. Keep the pressure light when you're writing with a quill pen to avoid damaging your pen.
- **Keep it steady:** try not to lift your pen or change writing directions when writing with a quill pen — you'll end up getting ink everywhere. Instead, imagine you are drawing a fine, continuous line



Advice from a 1602 writing manual
<https://folgerpedia.folger.edu/>

Writing a Letter

In the 1700s, people depended on written correspondence to keep in touch, share news, and conduct business. Learning how to write a good letter was an important part of young people's education. Follow these rules to write a proper letter:

- ❖ Address your correspondent according to their relationship to you: Friend, Sister, Cousin, Uncle. Children were often advised to address their parents as "Sir" or "Madam."
- ❖ Note if you are replying to a previous letter, and if so, when that letter was written. In the 18th century, writers sometimes used the abbreviations "inst." to indicate the current month, and "ult." for the previous month. (For example, "Yours of the 16th inst. received" would mean "I received your letter dated the 16th of this month.")
- ❖ Inquire after the health and well-being of your correspondent and his or her household.
- ❖ Show respect for the reader of your letter by writing neatly and using correct spelling and grammar. If you are making a request, be polite but come to the point directly.
- ❖ Conclude your letter with a respectful closing, such as "Your most obedient servant," "Your dutiful nephew," or "Your most affectionate and obliged sister."

Advice to Letter Writers

What if you needed to write a letter but weren't quite sure what to say? In the 1700s, you could turn to a letter-writing manual, a book of sample letters that you could use as the model for your own. These books covered a wide range of situations: how to reply to a request to borrow money, how to accept or reject a marriage proposal, expressing gratitude for a favor or condolences for misfortune, giving advice to a child or young relative, and so on.

These letter-writing manuals didn't just tell you what to say in a letter—they also told you how to behave in any given situation. They were advice books and guides to good behavior as much as they were books of writing instruction.

Here is an example from W.H. Dilworth's *The Familiar Letter Writer*, published in England in 1758:

A Son's Letter at School to his Father.

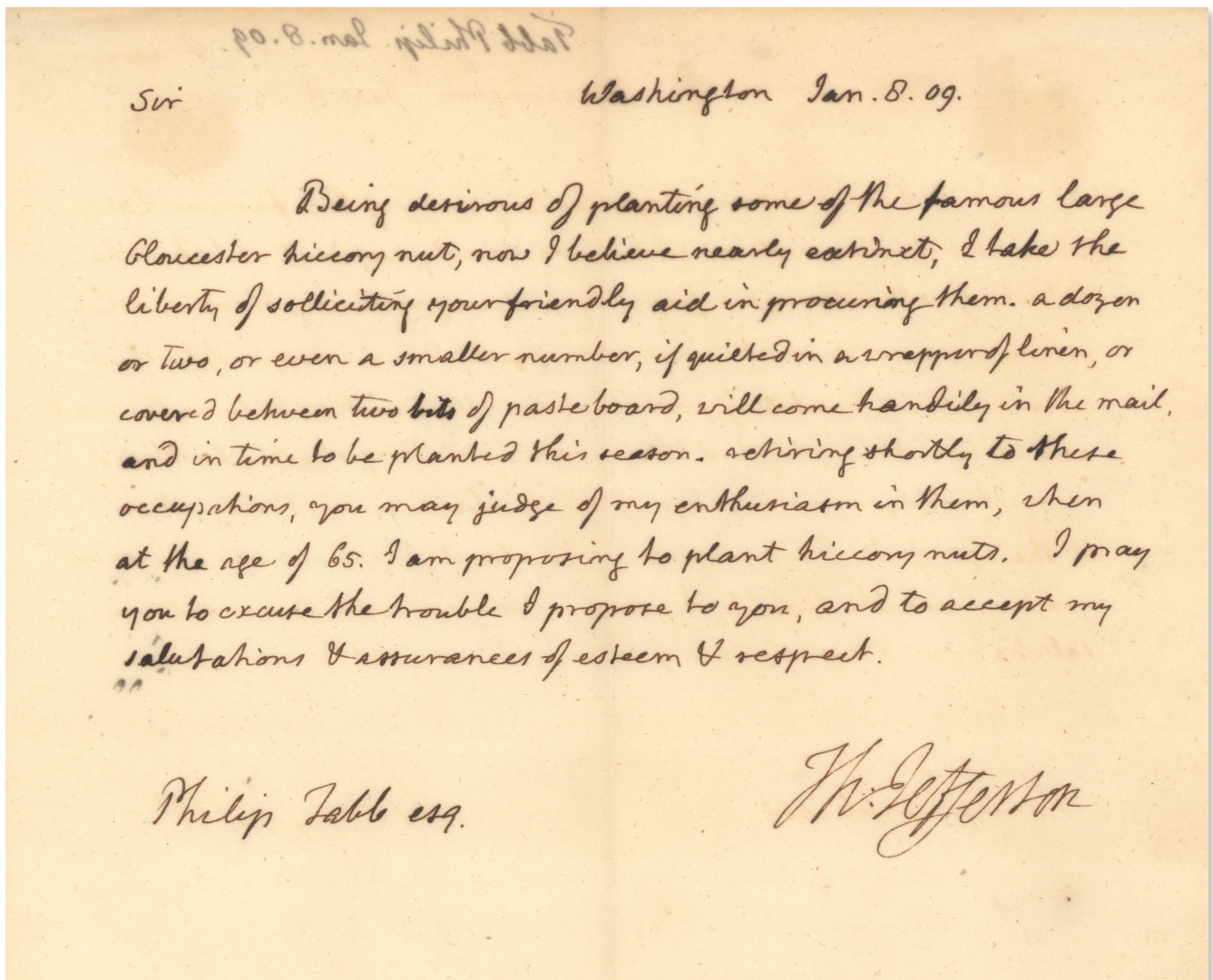
Honoured SIR,

I am greatly obliged to you for all favours; all I have to hope is, that the progress I make in my learning will be no disagreeable return for the same. Gratitude, duty, and a view of future advantages, all conspire to make me thoroughly sensible how much I ought to labour for my own improvement and your satisfaction, and to shew myself, upon all occasions,

Your most obedient,
and ever dutiful son,
ROBERT READ.

Practice Reading a Letter

Reading hand-written documents from the 18th and 19th centuries takes practice! See if you can decipher this letter from the Alice's collection. It was written by President Thomas Jefferson in 1809.



Visit http://dohistory.org/on_your_own/toolkit/writing.html for tips on how to read early American handwriting.

See the next page for a transcription of the letter and the reply!

Jefferson's Letter...

Washington Jan. 8. 09.

Sir

Being desirous of planting some of the famous large Gloucester hickory nuts, now I believe nearly extinct, I take the liberty of soliciting your friendly aid in procuring them. A dozen or two, or even a smaller number, if quilted in a wrappper of linen, or covered between two bits of pasteboard, will come handily in the mail, and in time to be planted this season. Retiring shortly to these occupations, you may judge of my enthusiasm in them, when at the age of 65 I am proposing to plant hickory nuts. I pray you to excuse the trouble I propose to you, and to accept my salutations & assurances of esteem & respect.

Th. Jefferson

Philip Tabb esq.

...and Mr. Tabb's Reply

"To Thomas Jefferson from Philip Tabb, 21 January 1809," *Founders Online*, National Archives.

Toddsbury Jany 1809

Sir

I am sorry it is not in my power to send you as many of the large hickory nuts of this country as you wished to plant, very few of the best trees are now left & they produced less than usual the last year & were soon consumed five only were left by accident which I now forward...

Accept Sir my best wishes for your health & hapiness

Philip Tabb