

Medieval Lettering

Lesson by Jeremy Fowler-Lindemulder

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Vocabulary and terms for further study

Ascender
Calligraphy
Descender
Majuscules
Minuscules
Uncial

Materials

- paper, parchment, or vellum as needed
- calligraphy pens (felt tips, fountain, or nib in holder)
- ink or thin paint as necessary
- light pencils (#3 or 2B or lighter)

Modern calligraphy has many roots in traditional writing, but with our recent computer fonts, we often forget that once there were fewer choices of how to create basic letters. During medieval times, writing was not generally practiced by common people. Monks, and later scribes, would have been the chief writers, using their quills with highly practiced strokes. It is also doubtful whether King Arthur would have ever learned to read.

The normal lettering style of the day is now known as Uncial (un-CHUL). It combines standard Roman block letters with the curved strokes of commonly written Greek. Unlike our modern alphabet, there was no lower case (miniscule) version until some time in the ninth century. In the Roman tradition, there was also little or no space between words either, creating an even flow of letters without interruption.

Please note that the uncial alphabet shown here is a modern variation with more letters than would have been present to a Roman scribe. The “i” is not dotted, while the “y” is to help avoid some confusion with other symbols used by scribes. Some of the letters are taller than the main body of the others, these are called ascenders. Some letters go below the base line, these are called descenders. I have placed these letters on graph paper to show the difference in height and size.

The height of the main body letters is dictated here by the width of the pen nib. Turned at a 90 degree angle, the height of four pen widths dictated how tall the letters would be. The letters themselves are written with the pen tip held constantly at about a 35 degree angle. Some of the flourishes do require that the pen be turned while writing, but usually the angle remains constant. Some later variations of the uncial hand used a pen at a flatter angle of ten degrees or less, giving the letters a wider feeling. Also, notice how the strokes are diagramed in pencil. Since scribes would be using often highly flexible quills with which to write, they found it important to use measured strokes in a generally downward arc. Pushing up on a pen could easily cause ink to splatter and ruin the rhythm and beauty of their writing.

Suggested lesson:

Using calligraphy pens, have students learn the Uncial alphabet

- 1) Copy practice sheets with lightly printed lines measured at the proper height (4 pen widths). Have the students practice letters and strokes in whatever order they like for half an hour or so. You will want to show some completed examples of modern and or medieval calligraphy as an example. Alternately, graph paper may be used if the pen nib is of the proper width that 4 pen widths can be measured.
- 2) Provide premeasured line guides once again, this time with dark guide lines and one inch margins. Show the students that by placing the dark lined guide under thin copy paper, they can practice without having guidelines on the completed paper. Have each student complete a selected quote of 25 or more letters, respecting the margins and using proper spelling. Let them restart as many times a necessary.
- 3) Provide more practice time as needed. Plan on an extended practice period with sudden spurts of calligraphy insight by students.
- 4) Talk about illuminated letters (see lesson on illumination) and have students illuminate a personal poem, book passage, or quote of 50 or more letters. They will need to measure out their own margins and guidelines using a ruler and a light pencil. They can carefully erase the guides after the work is completed. Try this with an enlarged initial letter, illuminated with a picture that describes the passage. Use black ink with tempera paint for color.

Letter height is dictated by pen width.

