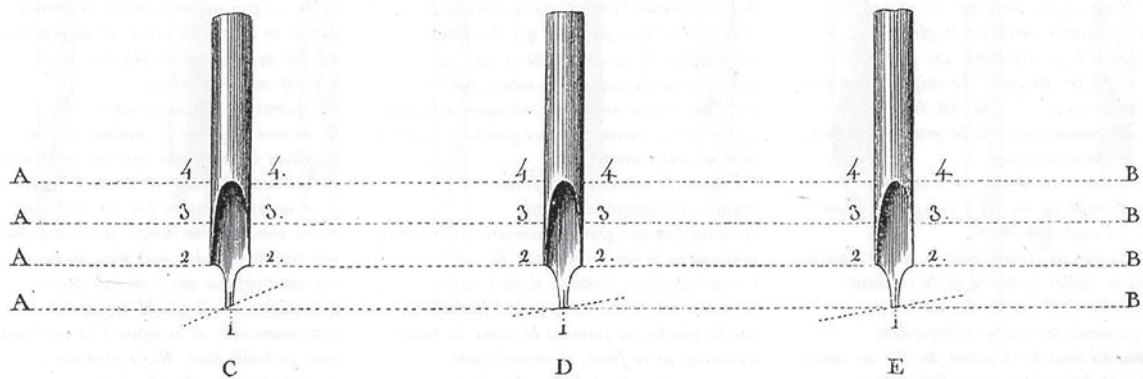


The Angles of our Better Writing:

The Oblique Vib

BY ANDREW MIDKIFF

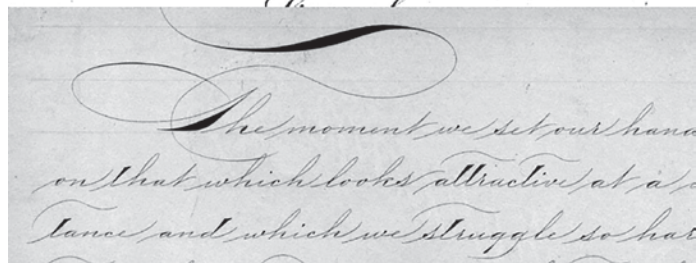
Proportions d'une Plume taillée.



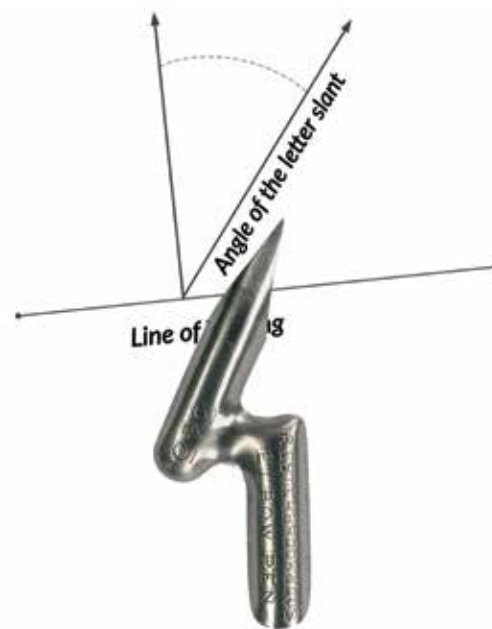
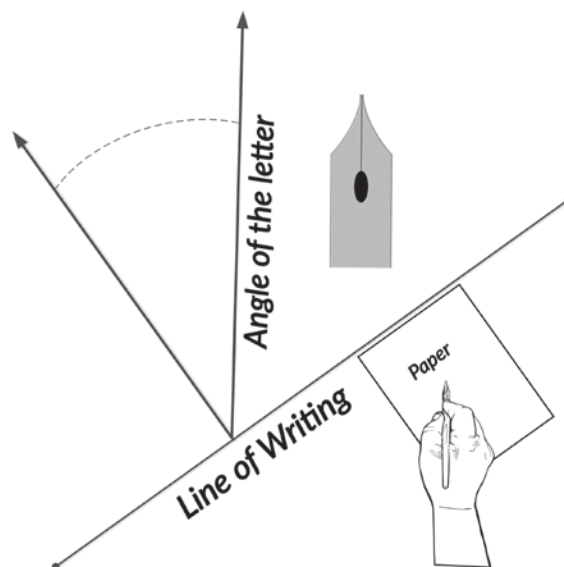
“Oblique: At an angle, neither parallel nor perpendicular”

Friend Haner:

Please accept my congratulations
on your recovery from your recent ill-
ness and my hearty good wishes for
the New Year.



The moment we set our hands
on that which looks attractive at a
distance and which we struggle so hard
done put quid tell double p
ble lotis battle huddle kirs
ia gently yesterday zone zest.



Most

fountain pen users are familiar with the particular form of stub nib with an angled tip called an “oblique”—“right” or “left oblique,” depending on which side is slanted.

This design is actually an old one. Charles Paillasson’s 18th-century treatise *L’art d’écrire*, includes the illustration seen in figure 1, opposite. In this engraving, Paillasson shows how to cut a quill to accommodate the three basic French letterform styles by trimming the end of the quill into a slanted, flat tip. This cut was described as oblique but only in the literal sense of it being slanted. The original French just said the quill was “cut at more or less of a slant.” In works of contemporary British writing masters, this was often just called a “French cut.”

The similarity of design between the quills of the 1700s and the fountain pens of today paints a misleading picture of continuity. “Oblique” had a very different meaning for the dip pens used during most of the 130 years between Paillasson and fountain pens.

A traditional pointed pen script, such as engrosser’s or Spencerian, is written at an angle to the line of writing ranging from around 40 to 60 degrees, depending on style and preference of the writer (Fig. 2).

No matter the angle, when writing with a flexible, pointed pen, you want to ensure that both tines stay evenly on the paper during the downstrokes, by drawing the pen down the line with equal pressure on both tines. If you exert

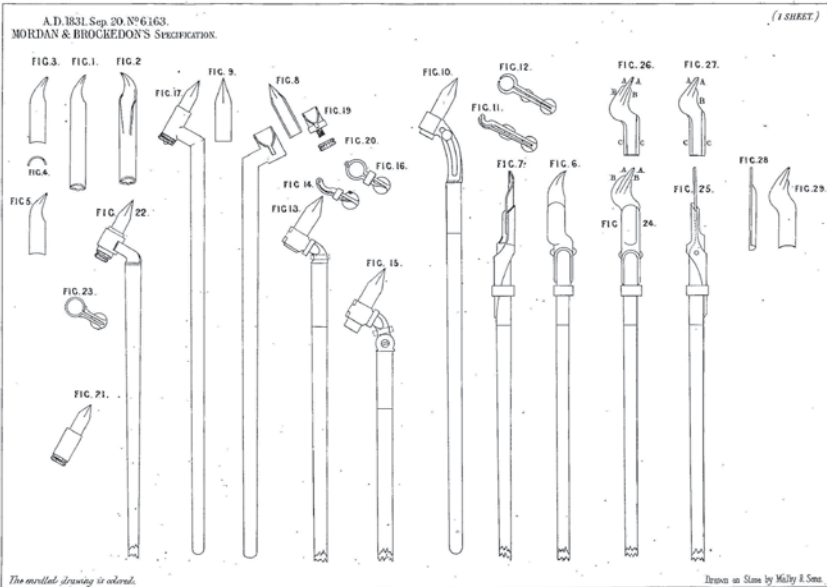
Fig. 1. opposite: From Charles Paillasson’s *L’art d’écrire*, 1785 edition ([Padua, Italy?]: Alessandri et Scattaglia, Directeurs), plate 4. The angle of the cut differs for the specific script you are using. C is for producing *ronde* script, a round hand;

D is for *bâtarde*, a French adaptation of an Italian book hand; and E is for *coulée*, which contains elements of the first two.

Fig. 2. Examples of different 19th-century formal writing styles.

Fig. 3. Nib and hand position using a straight holder and slanted writing styles

Fig. 4. Effect of using an oblique nib on hand and paper positioning



main benefit described in the patent was not to create decorative writing but to allow a pen to last longer, because both tines were now moving across the page evenly and would thus wear evenly.

The original Brockedon/Mordan oblique pens that were produced looked a lot like the top left example in the group of modern oblique pens shown in figure 6. Over the years, the oblique pen has taken on other shapes and styles, including some like the one seen at lower right, where only the tip is tilted.

Oblique holders also facilitate keeping the tines at the proper angle for slanted writing, but they do it by holding a regular, straight nib at the angle while the handle is pointed straight. These types of holders are very popular with calligraphers, because most of the best nibs for calligraphy are straight, not oblique. In the past, oblique holders were never very common except among professional penmen. Most holders were for everyday writing and kept the nib in line with the holder. You can see this in most catalogs, where dozens of straight holders are sold with maybe one oblique holder. In the annual list of who made what in the stationery business in 1916, only two U.S. companies are listed as selling oblique holders: Spencerian Pen Co. and Eagle Pencil Co.

Fig. 5. Drawing from the Brockedon/Mordan patent. From the British Library collection of British patents, provided by Dr. Emily Bell, Loughborough University.

Fig. 6. Four main types of oblique pens

Fig. 7. From top: Spencerian, Zanerian and Magnusson vintage oblique holders, all named for famous penmen. The Spencerian holder is the earliest known commercially made oblique holder (1860s). Courtesy of Christopher Yoke of Yoke Pen Company. From his private collection.

Fig. 8. Modern oblique holders made by Christopher Yoke of Yoke Pen Co.

Fig. 9. A list of the typical types of fountain pen nibs offered by a major manufacturer in 1916. From Nilas Oran Shively's *The U Book: Selling One's Self from \$10 a Week to \$100,000 a Year*. (Chicago: Stanton and Van Vliet Co., 1917), p. 241.

more pressure on one tine or the other, you can get a ragged edge on one side of the line. This is especially obvious on the broader lines made by pressing down on the nib. This uneven pressure can also damage the pen.

In order to achieve the correct pen placement with a straight pen holder, you must turn the paper to a rather severe degree, as well as hold your arms in tightly so that the pen faces more straight away from your body (Fig. 3).

Or you can use an oblique pen or oblique holder, which turn the point towards the angle you want, while still keeping your hand and holder pointed forward (Fig. 4). This allows you to keep your arms in a comfortable position, and you don't have to turn the paper to such a steep angle.

Oblique pens and oblique holders were first patented by William Brockedon and Sampson Mordan in 1831 (Fig. 5). The original patent claims as original all forms of holding and pointing a pen in an oblique manner, indicating that this was an original idea. The





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Though they were less common, oblique holders were made in a variety of sizes and shapes; many were “designed” by famous penmen and marketed under their names, such as the vintage examples seen in figure 7 from the collection of Christopher Yoke.

Current oblique holders are made in a dizzying array of materials and styles (Fig. 8), but all are made for the same purpose—to hold a nib at an angle.

It’s not known when “oblique” was first used to describe a fountain pen nib cut at a slant like the quills of the 18th century. What is certain is that we find references to left and right oblique points in fountain pen ads by 1917, and because the term is presented as self-evident, it is clear that it was around before that time (Fig. 9).

From French-cut quills to master penman to specialty fountain pen nibs, the oblique nib continues to help us cultivate the angles of our better writing.



9

Points

Fine.
Medium.
Stub.
Stenographic.
Manifold.
Bookkeepers'.
Postings.
Turned up.
Ball pointed.
Short stub.
Left oblique and right oblique.
There is a point to fit every hand.