

## Chapter 1

# Doing Calligraphy Can Be as Easy as ABC

### *In This Chapter*

- ▶ Appreciating what calligraphy is all about
- ▶ Learning calligraphy
- ▶ Following a step-by-step approach
- ▶ Exploring the possibilities of what calligraphy offers

**C**alligraphy literally means “writing that is beautiful,” but saying that calligraphy is beautiful writing, really doesn’t give you the complete picture. Calligraphy truly is an art form, but despite what you may think, anyone can do calligraphy. It’s not difficult at all. Calligraphy just requires you to shift your thinking a bit. Given enough practice, patience, and eagerness to slow down from life in the fast lane, you can pick up the skills you need to do calligraphy.

You probably haven’t paid much attention to handwriting (meaning the actual formation of letters on paper), since your last lesson in handwriting way back in elementary school. You probably just jot down a list, dash off a note, initial a memo, and then rush off to the next thing you have to do without thinking about what your handwriting looks like.

One of the truly wonderful things about calligraphy is that it forces you to slow down. Calligraphy requires a slower pace. Calligraphy requires that you take time to look at small details. Calligraphy is all about taking something very commonplace — handwriting — and raising it to a higher level of appreciation. That’s one of the appealing things about taking up calligraphy. Indeed, calligraphy can be very therapeutic.

In addition to its therapeutic value, you can use calligraphy in an endless number of ways. The potential is tremendous. You can use calligraphy for anything from award-making to scrapbooking. Invitations, signs, posters, charts, plaques, labels, thank-you notes, and greeting cards are just a few of the uses for calligraphy. Anything that you can think of where elegantly penned letters will add quality is an opportunity to use calligraphy. Most of all, calligraphy can be a way for you to discover new talents and abilities.

## *You Don’t Have to Be a Rembrandt . . .*

So you’re really attracted to calligraphy and would love to create something beautiful, but you’re a little shy about taking it up. Below, I list some reasons you may be shying away from calligraphy, and I explain why these reasons shouldn’t stop you:

- ✔ **You lack the talent and ability to do calligraphy.** Calligraphy is an art form that requires little or no talent. Talent can be an advantage, but what is really most important in order to do well in calligraphy is patience and attention to detail. Because of

this, learning to do calligraphy is nothing like learning to draw or paint. Calligraphy is truly a skill that you hone through practice; talent isn't needed. Remember: With calligraphy, like every other skill, there are going to be some people who are better at it than others, but you have to please just one critic in this theater — yourself.

- ✔ **You're too old or young to learn calligraphy.** Age isn't a barrier in calligraphy. I've had students as young as second and third graders who have excelled in calligraphy, and on the other end of the spectrum, I've seen many seniors with a lot of "snow on top" (a group of which I'm proud to say I'm a member) do some truly impressive work.
- ✔ **You can't afford the equipment to do calligraphy.** You don't have to spend a bundle on art supplies. In calligraphy, you won't need to buy a lot of expensive materials like you would for many other forms of art. You only need a few supplies, such as pens, ink, paper, and a few basic drafting type materials such as a T-square, tape, pencils, and erasers. Plus, the pens can last almost forever and the things that you use up and need to replace, like ink, are really inexpensive.
- ✔ **You don't have enough space to do calligraphy.** You don't need an elaborate studio space to do calligraphy. A pen, some ink, a piece of paper, and a surface to write on are all you need. If you carry your pen with you, you can do calligraphy almost anywhere and at anytime.

. . . and, that's not all! (If I'm beginning to sound like an infomercial, I do apologize for my enthusiasm.)

The biggest selling point of all is how much fun it is to do calligraphy. Calligraphy is something where you can begin to see real accomplishment in a very short time. The more you learn about calligraphy, the more rewarding it can become.

## . . . But You Do Have to Be Circumspect

So, what does it take to become a good calligrapher? Glad you asked:

- ✔ **Patience:** Calligraphy is definitely not something that you can rush through — it requires a slow pace. Calligraphy is something where there are never any medals given for speed.
- ✔ **Control and precision:** All the emphasis is upon the control and precision with which the letters are formed. You can find hours of enjoyment in practicing the letters as you acquire the control and precision needed to do calligraphy.
- ✔ **Practice:** You won't gain patience or control and precision without a little practice. I've given you many opportunities in the alphabet chapters to practice basic strokes, letters, and words, but you can find even more practice in the appendix.



Good calligraphers are students of the history of the alphabet. They have a knowledge and appreciation of how the written letters have evolved over centuries. They also have a knowledge of the tools and materials that have been used for writing. They see themselves as the latest generation of scribes in a long procession of men and women who have practiced this art. They see themselves both preserving the traditions and craftsmanship of the past as well as breaking new ground for the future. Although it's certainly beyond the scope of this workbook (or the scope of any one book for that matter) to present a complete history of writing in all its various forms, I do give you some brief historical notes for each alphabet. Plus you can find many excellent books on the subject and numerous Web sites (like mine — [www.studioarts.net/calligraphy](http://www.studioarts.net/calligraphy)) where you can find nuggets of information. For additional information, a good book to begin with is a classic, *Writing & Illuminating & Lettering* by Edward Johnston, who is considered to be the “father of modern western calligraphy.” This book should be a part of the library of anyone who is at all serious about calligraphy.

## You Can Really Do Calligraphy!

Do you have doubts whether or not you can do it? Let me give you a test. If you can pass this test, you have all the ability you need to succeed. To take this test, all you'll need is a regular ballpoint or gel pen.

In the Figure 1-1, there are three boxes. In the first box there is an X drawn in black. In the middle box is the same figure drawn in gray. The box on the right is empty. Now here's the test — trace over the X that's drawn in gray so it looks like the one that's black. Then in the empty box copy the same shape again.

**Figure 1-1:**  
Try to make  
all three  
boxes  
look alike.



How did you do? Do the X's in all three boxes look about the same? If you can do this, then you can do calligraphy.

This simple trace and copy exercise introduces the main idea of how this workbook is set up. With each alphabet, you'll have the opportunity to trace and copy the letters first individually and then in combination in words, plus you can find extended practice exercises in the appendix.



The best way to use the trace and copy practice pages in this workbook is to photocopy them so you can practice over and over again.

## Strike a Pose

No, I'm not about to take your picture to put on your official Calligraphy Member ID. Instead, I discuss in the sections that follow two important postures to focus on when doing calligraphy: your physical posture and how you hold your pen.

### Getting your posture right

The position in which you sit when you write has a big influence on your ability to control your pen or pencil. If your posture is cramped, you won't have the complete control and freedom of movement in your writing hand that you would have if your posture were not cramped.

What is the best way to sit? Figure 1-2 is an example of the kind of posture that is most conducive to control and freedom of movement. Keep it simple and follow these tips:

- ✔ Sit in a way that makes control and precision possible.
- ✔ Sit comfortably with both feet on the floor and lean slightly forward over your work. Be careful not to lean too far forward as this inhibits arm movement.

- ✓ Your desktop should be tilted so that your paper can be positioned straight up and down and not canted to the side. Using a lap board is an easy and inexpensive way to have a slanted work surface.



**Figure 1-2:**  
Correct  
posture.

## *Holding your pen*

Just as important as your posture is how you hold your pen. Although Chapter 3 covers in depth the best way to hold the pen, I give you the basic idea in this section.

Essentially, the best pen hold is one where you don't tire. Many people today have acquired the habit, unfortunately from using ballpoint pens, of gripping the pen so tightly that they get what is called "writer's cramp." Many of them have a callus on one or more of the fingers of their writing hands.

If you get "writer's cramp" and/or you have a callus on your finger, those are sure signs that you are gripping your pen too tightly. Doing calligraphy may help you eliminate that bad habit. The pen does not have to be squeezed tightly. It is possible to write without suffering from writer's cramp.

Is it possible to break old habits and learn to hold your pen differently? I believe it is. My own experience shows me it is.

Years ago, before I took up calligraphy, I have to confess that I had developed the bad habit of holding my pen with an iron grip. After writing for any length of time, my hand would ache so much that I would have to stop periodically and shake it out to relieve the pain and stiffness. I also had a big callus on a knuckle of my middle finger.

Today I have none of these problems. Forming the habit of holding a pen in a more relaxed grip has been a really positive side effect of practicing calligraphy. Over time, the old habit of gripping the pen tightly has been replaced by a new habit of holding the pen in a more relaxed and less tiring manner. Hopefully, if you have the same bad habit I had, you will see a similar change.

## *Trace and Copy: A Sure-Fire Approach to Picking Up Calligraphy*

In this book, I show you how to do six alphabets which can be expanded upon to make virtually thousands of variations. My purpose is to help you build a strong foundation from which you can expand your calligraphic skills. However, I'm not going to assume

that you know anything about calligraphy. Instead, I guide you step by step through the complete process from the simplest stuff to the more challenging projects.

When guiding through each alphabet, I use the time-tested method — trace-and-copy — in this workbook. The trace and copy method is simple and powerful and is used to teach young children to write. The reason I've chosen to use this method is simple — it works. This *trace-and-copy method* works just as it sounds: You trace letters and then copy them freehand in the space provided.

To make the most of your practice in this workbook, follow these guidelines:

- ✔ **Don't write on the practice pages in this book.** Photocopy the pages or place paper over them so you can trace. That way you will always have a clean master from which you can make as many copies as you need. You can repeat a practice lesson as many times as you want.
- ✔ **Don't ignore the tracing.** When you do the practice pages, if you're like most people, you'll like the copying part more than the tracing. Copying is more fun; tracing might seem pointless. I have seen some students skip over the tracing altogether and do only the copying. Tracing is important because it's almost as if I'm there beside you, guiding your hand to show you how it's done correctly.
- ✔ **Practice the exercises as written.** For example, if a practice exercise alternates between tracing and copying, please do the exercise just that way. Don't do all the tracing and then all the copying. I purposely designed each exercise to maximize your practicing and skill building. Here's how they're designed to help:
  - Sometimes you'll see gray letters with blank spaces in between where the letters can be copied. This means to alternate tracing and copying. This serves an important purpose when you are beginning to learn the letters of an alphabet. Every time you trace in between copying, you have a little review of the correct way to draw the letter. Tracing between copying aids in seeing any mistakes you might be making. To give you even more practice, I often add a blank line under the tracing.
  - Other times you'll see an entire line of letters or words to trace with a blank line underneath for copying. A line of tracing above a blank line allows you to practice the words and spacing.
- ✔ **Follow the guidelines.** What do guidelines look like? Think back to the paper you used when you were little and you first learned to write. Remember how there was a bottom and top line and a dotted line running through it? Those were your guidelines. Although calligraphy guidelines look different from that, the same idea applies. You need to draw letters, not inside the guides, but so that the letters touch the guides. Doing so ensures your letters are straight and even. In Chapter 3, I show you how to draw your own guides.
- ✔ **Keep a positive attitude.** You are embarking upon an exciting journey — you could even say, an adventure. Keep that in mind. As an artist, I have experience working in many media and styles from sculpture to painting and printmaking, from abstract to realism. I have worked as a portrait painter and have owned an art gallery and frame shop. But, of all the things I have done as an artist, the most rewarding has been calligraphy. Calligraphy has given me more personal satisfaction and has opened more doors for me than anything else I have done in art. Those rewards are available to you too.

## Taking Your Skills Further

Although I take you through the six basic alphabets in this book (from which you create endless variations), I also give you a chance to dabble with some more complicated

alphabets and projects. You can do several things with calligraphy other than just weddings (although I cover wedding ideas in Chapter 18). You can create quotations (see Chapter 14), posters and signs (see Chapter 15), as well as certificates (see Chapter 16). Take a peek in Chapter 17 to find inspiration and ideas for an assortment of projects you can try with your new calligraphy skills. If you're wanting to check out something a little more lighthearted, try the ten fun alphabets in Chapter 19, and if you're ready to make some money with those skills, Chapter 20 helps get you started.