

The PENNANT

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*The Fun of
Flexible Nibs*



Measuring Nib Flexibility: A Proposal

Wahl, Sheaffer and the Race for Boston, Part Two

Look What the Katz Drug In

The 1948 Parker 21 Test Market Pen

THE FUN OF FLEXIBLE NIBS

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PHOTOGRAPHS BY HERBUS CASAMEERUS

What's flex all about? Why choose a pen with a flexible nib? And why do people pay more for a flexible nib?

Have you ever watched one of those Youtube videos of someone like Hamid Reza Ebrahimi, Antonios Zavaliangos, or Michael Sull guiding a line with a flexible nib pen? Or watched someone like Pier Gustafson, Tamara Stoneburner, Steve Brock, Leigh Reyes, Gurol Suel, David Binder, Mauricio Aguilar, Deborah Basil, Herald Grandstaff, Marco Avila, Rob Morrison, or Neville Bedford, who seem almost in a trance as they write? The line seems to carry them. They fall so still, for a moment they seem to become one with the line, the curves, the swells.

If you can slow yourself down enough to pay attention to the words, then the letters, and then how the hairline upstrokes lead to the heavier downstrokes, using a flexible nib pen may calm the racing times we live in.

For those who seek calm and peace, writing can act like a zen mantra.

On the other hand, with a smooth writing, flexible-nibbed pen you can really rip. A semi-flexible nib does that. The soft cushion one senses between it and the paper actually gives one confidence to go faster.

Many of us to whom music is an important part of our lives are naturally acoustic. Adding a beat when writing isn't a bad thing to do. The back beat of music or a metronome helps some flexinib pen writers give a rhythm to their writing.

THE GOLDEN ERA OF FOUNTAIN PENS

There's a reason we call the 1920s the "golden era." Not only did everyone write with a fountain pen and pay attention to the new pens, but





pen companies paid full wages to employees with remarkable metallurgical skills to temper and add flex to each individual nib they worked on.

Communication and life itself seem to have sped up since then. One way to slow it down now is by writing like they did then, not in haste but rather by sensing the tactile interaction of a flexy nib pen with ink and paper.

So much of our lives is circumscribed by rules and inhibitions. I suspect that the attraction of using a fountain pen has to do with experiencing its smooth flow. With a fountain pen we can sneak a flourish into a capital letter. Using a flexible nib pen, that flourish breaks boundaries, finding freedom in an otherwise sober script.

THE TERMINOLOGY

The terminology is descriptive. "Starting gate width" refers to the width of a line drawn without pressure. As the tines of a nib flex when pressure is applied against a firm surface, they move farther apart and the line of ink between the two tines gets wider. "Shading" or "line variation" refers to this effect that gives thickness to parts of a letter's line. "Rapid return," "responsiveness," "recovery," and "springiness" all refer to how quickly a nib springs back when pressure is released. "Hairlines" refer to the finest line a nib is capable of making. The term "upstrokes" refers to the part of a letter that one makes moving your instrument toward the top of the page, and "downstrokes," to the bottom of the page.

THE TECHNIQUE

NO TECHNIQUE IS NECESSARY to enjoy the soft feel of a pen with a flexible nib. You can use a flexy exactly as you have used any fountain pen. But the experience is different. The nib feels pleasantly more cushioned on the page. Having some "give" in the pressure you put on the pen relaxes the hand.

If you desire to begin shading upper case letters, more pressure is applied to the "downstrokes." Fun to do with your signature. Over time you develop a feel for the "upstrokes" and "downstrokes" of letters, applying pressure on the downstrokes (e.g. the vertical of a T) and easing pressure on "upstrokes" (e.g. the beginning of a lower case r as one moves the nib up the page before the horizontal stroke at the top of the letter).

SELECTING A FLEXIBLE NIB PEN

The best way to select a pen is to sense how it feels in your hand and how it writes on paper.

For someone trying one out for the first time I recommend a pen with a medium "starting gate width." It can be used like a rigid nib fountain pen. No knowledge about flexies is necessary. A fine or extra fine flexible nib has a sharper point that can be more easily bent or "sprung" and so requires more finesse, especially on an upstroke when the point of the pen can potentially stab into soft paper. It makes sense to get the feel of using a flexy medium before playing with an EF.

A common misunderstanding is that flexible nibs can be stressed by putting pressure on them. This may be true of modern nibs that are made to flex but vintage nibs were made to be used in this way. A vintage pen with a flexible nib is made to flex with the application of moderate pressure similar to the amount of pressure one would apply to a toothbrush against one's teeth.

The development of carbon paper and the competitive long term warranties offered by pen manufacturers are thought to be the factors responsible for pen companies making more rigid nibs after about 1940. Therefore, pens made prior to 1940 generally flex more than those made later. Manufacturers known



to have made pens with flexible nibs include Waterman, Wahl Eversharp, Moore, Mabie Todd/Swan, and Conklin as well as others.

One must look at a lot of pens to find the few still surviving with flexible nibs. Because of their growing popularity, their cost has been rising. But it is still possible to find bargains at a pen show by looking at a lot of pens. There, one can examine the nib and experience how it feels on paper.

Buying on eBay is challenging because describing a pen as having a flexible nib inflates the price. Not all eBay sellers are able to accurately grade how flexible a nib is. Even a semi-flexible nib can be pushed so hard in a photo to mimic a very flexible nib, though they are straining that nib to do it.

HOW TO DESCRIBE A NIB'S DEGREE OF FLEX

This is important if you are trying to assess a pen you cannot examine. On eBay, for example, a number of methods -- each of which leaves something to be desired -- are used to describe a nib's degree of flex these days. But no standard way has been accepted to describe this quality. Some grade flex with an

incremental system (2, 3, or 4 degrees of flex). Some specify the measured width of a nib's finest and fattest line (e.g. 0.3 to 0.8 mm). Some describe the number of unflexed widths a nib will maximally flex (e.g. a nib may flex 3x its finest line). Some describe this in more common terms (such as EF to BB). None of these takes into account a measure of how quickly a nib returns to its unflexed position. Additionally, none of these discriminates between someone who measures flex with a heavy or a light hand, which makes a big difference. A writing sample or a video of writing with a pen can help.

The most interesting new attempt at incorporating these variables into a reproducible measurement is being made by David Nishimura. He is developing a method that incorporates both a measure of degree of flex along with standardizing the force applied to the nib. His method is described in an accompanying article in this magazine.

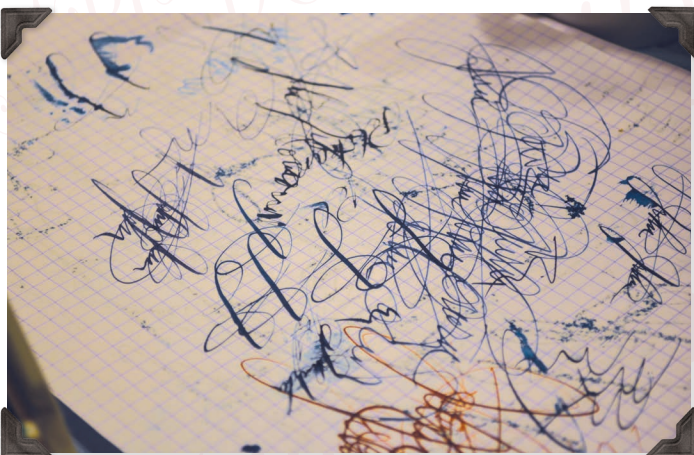
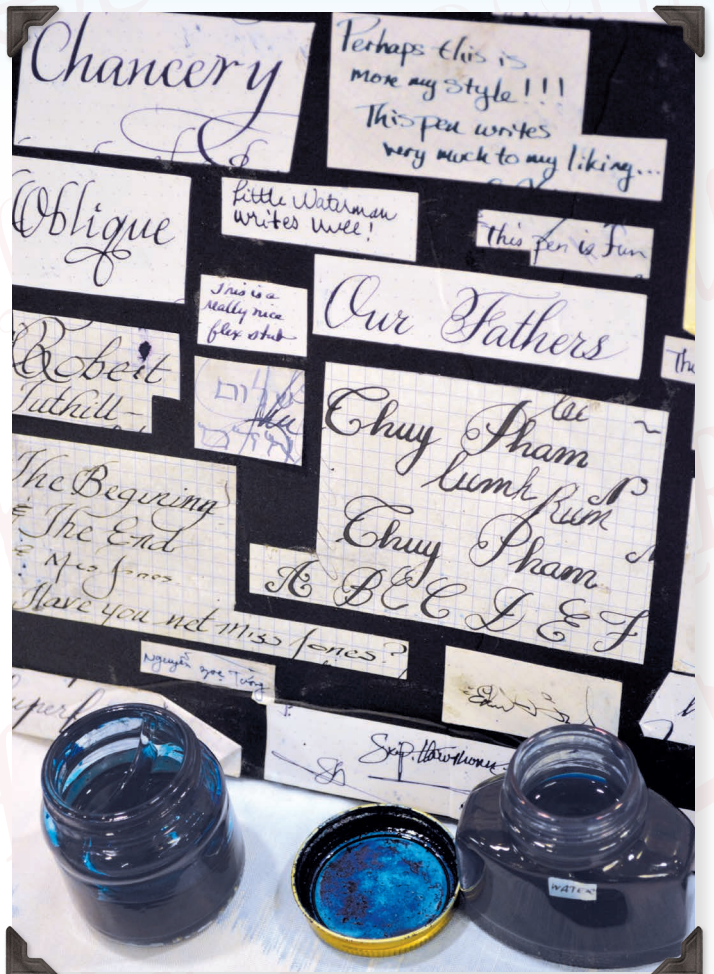
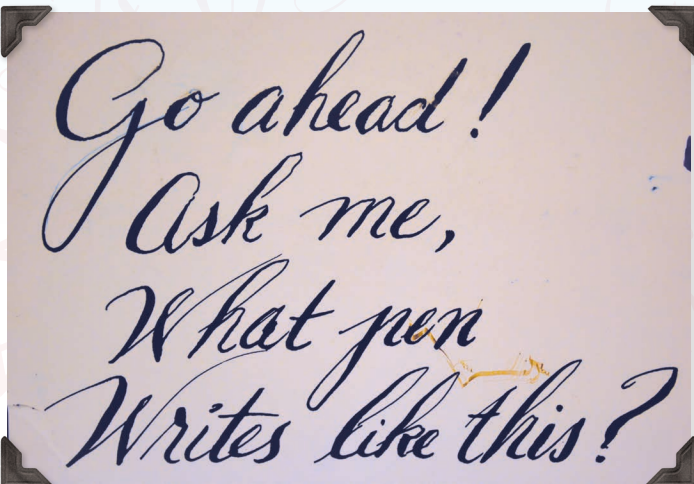
WILL USING A PEN WITH A FLEXY NIB IMPROVE ONE'S HANDWRITING?

I disliked my handwriting until I began using a pen with a flexible nib. I could never muster interest in practicing the form

of a letter with a regular pen. Not until my interest was piqued by the reward of paying attention to the details of a copper-plate letter's form, the shape of its hairlines, where the hairline transitioned to a thicker downstroke did perfecting through repetition the shape of the oval of an "o" or an "a" feel worthwhile. It became a form of play, of fun learning just one letter at

a time. I take a lot of notes at work which has become more fun forming letters with care and enhancing line thickness using a flexible-nibbed pen.

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Scenes from author John Corwin's display at the 2016 Baltimore Pen Show. Photographs by Jonathan Veley.