

41 Things I've Learned About Calligraphy

by Fritzi Harry

A quote I like concerning calligraphy is by Howard Glaser. He said, "There's more to it than just wiggling your fingers and out come the letters".

Is there ever! Much more I've learned, sometimes a discouraging amount. But while traveling the fascinating, but often rocky road of my calligraphic journey, I've learned things which have smoothed the way. Herewith, in no particular order, and with thanks to many who have shared with me, I offer the following gleanings with the hope that they will be of help with your calligraphic addiction.

1 Drawn flourishes aren't illegal. Never have been. I was just led to believe so by the attitudes of visiting instructors, and even more so by my own doubts and insecurity. The idea at all times has been to make beautiful (or attractive or meaningful or effective) letters. How you do it is not an issue. Turn the paper upside down, use a marker for fine lines, make a curve in several strokes, draw letters and fill in; anyway you can accomplish it is not only permissible, but desirable. Why make it more difficult than it already is to produce good work? After all, we are judged on the final piece, not on how it was accomplished. Which brings us to...

2 The teachers don't show us their failures. Why should they? But they do have them. They offer us instruction on what they do best, just as we would in their place. But because they do it with ease doesn't mean it didn't come without painstaking work, nor that they haven't done it a hundred times alone in their studio before taking their act on the road. The trick is not to be intimidated by the skill they display, but rather to realize that they are further along in development.

3 You learn as much from the students in a workshop as from the instructors. Well, nearly. Well, not as much, but a great deal. I've yet to take a workshop that I didn't learn of a tool, pick up a shortcut or get an idea from other students. Often all of the above.

4 Don't waste workshop time. Realize that you have paid money and are spending precious time. Utilize both to your advantage. Go armed with quotes you wish to commit to finished form and, unless assigned a specific task, work on the quote. Make sure it's something you can use later as a thank-you note, Christmas Card, business card or show-

piece. A workshop is time free from ringing telephones, household chores and family obligations, and offers resources with instructors and fellow students for problem solving.

5 If you do poorly in a workshop, and many people do, admit it and go on. The important thing is to learn for later and not get down on yourself.

6 Review your notes from all past workshops and classes at least once a year. Each time you learn more. Take copious notes in workshops. Your memory is fallible and a thought that meant little to you when stated can have meaning for you at a different stage of your calligraphic development.

7 Take regular lessons if at all possible. At least if you procrastinate as I do. It speeds growth by a) discipline and direction; b) stretching you with assignments you would never consider on your own; c) allowing you to practice on something worthwhile; d) giving exposure to fellow students. We are fortunate in Houston to have calligraphy teachers on par with nationally known instructors, and should take advantage of their expertise.

8 Do all of every class or workshop assignment, even if you have to finish or adapt it at home. The people who do, progress faster.

9 Edward Johnston said "Practicing teaches practice". He said to always make "things" rather than put letters on a page. Booklets, cards, letters, gifts, showpieces, bookmarks, recipes, etc. I find that if other eyes will see the results, I make far more effort. I said I was lazy, didn't I?

10 Try to do at least 20 minutes a day with a pen or brush. It's better than once a week of 90 minutes. Doing something is better than doing nothing, even practice.

11 Keep copies of completed work and date it. Photograph everything you create before it leaves your hot little hands. When learning a new alphabet, number practice sheets and keep them. Referring back will encourage you as to how much you've progressed.

12 Enjoy "breakthroughs" as they occur. You've earned them.

13 A permanent set-up place to work is a must. The dining room table just won't do it unless you never need to feed anyone. This makes a tremendous difference. You can do far more in much less time. Even a corner of a room behind a screen will suffice, but it's a necessity.

14 Better tools make better work. The problem is knowing what works for you before committing big bucks to it. Sometimes borrowing can help here. Books are also important, but be selective in choices. Our Houston Calligraphy Guild library can aid immensely.

15 Use better paper for all your work, even practice. Computer paper has no value so neither will what you put on it. Using expensive paper will result in half the work done twice as well.

16 Keep a notebook of alphabet exemplars in plastic covers for quick reference. Likewise, keep a morgue of individual letters from periodicals, mailings, billboards, etc. Even professional calligraphers rely on exemplars so as to be prepared for the suddenly elusive letter. This is particularly important with a seldom-used alphabet.

17 Keep a file for art ideas and borders – things you never know you'll need but always do sooner or later. Flowers, animals, clothing, food, or whatever interests you.

18 Organization of papers, supplies and “stuff” is ALL important.

19 Don't expect calligraphy to improve your handwriting. It won't. It has to be done deliberately. This can be done one of two ways – total immersion in which everything is changed at once; or gradually in which you conquer one thing at a time. Either way, make sure to retain some of your own individuality as you do it.

20 Be thankful for deadlines. Without them, how much would you ever get done?

21 Accept “freebie” assignments from friends, family, office and church cheerfully. You might as well – they have to be done, and you may learn something since...

22 You learn something from everything you do.

23 Keep a “Nearly “ or “Rejected” wall. Hang a piece, stand back and look at it. Leave it overnight (or a week) and return. Often you wonder why you refused a piece of work. Or the problem with it solves itself on second look because...

24 You can nearly always correct something if your eye can see it.

25 Color can cover a multitude of sins. Less than perfect work executed neatly in colored ink on good colored paper, and then matted and framed attractively will improve any effort.

26 Likewise, good taste can go a long, long way calligraphically.

27 Conquer watercolors if you haven't already. It is needed in work today as we have progressed in design.

28 You must hear things at the appropriate time to absorb it. Often a thing you've heard for years will suddenly make sense because you are now ready to accept it. It suddenly comes together. Getting the right teacher at the right time is the best way, but it's almost a miracle.

29 There are no shortcuts. Would that there were. I've certainly tried hard enough to find them.

30 Be patient. It takes years to gain control of the pen. Sheila Waters says five. Don't be so hard on yourself; it's more fun than you think.

31 Realize that nobody learns control of the pen easily. It perhaps comes easier for a few, but usually it's just that they work harder. Likewise, wishing won't make it so – you must physically do the work. Peter Thornton says, “why should it come easily for you when it never has for anyone else?” And he's right. This may sound like a contradiction of #29, but it's not. At least not to me.

32 Know thyself calligraphically. Give some thought to what works best for you and then work that way. For instance, at what time of day are you most creative? Morning, afternoon, evening? Do what relaxes you as you work. Do you prefer silence or music? Soft, rock or classical? Do you enjoy the TV or radio while you work? Before putting the final draft on paper some people find that relaxation exercises help, even deep breathing. Does reading scripture or poetry relax you? If so, do so.

33 Go with your strengths. Do what you do best. Use the alphabet you have a “feel” for. Work tiny, or huge, if one or the other is best for you. Everyone can't be good at the same thing, fortunately.

34 The focused worker accomplishes the most. Not the same as #32, though similar. By sticking to one thing,

whatever that may be and adapting it, if necessary, you can become accomplished at it. Examples may be Celtic letters with the charming beasties, or the brush or folded pen. By using a tool often you will become very proficient at it.

35 “Work on quotations which are meaningful to you”. - Nancy Culmone. Somehow it is easier.

36 “I’m hooked on calligraphy because when things go right and I create something beautiful, it’s like a religious experience”. - Cindy Haller.

37 “The most difficult thing I do calligraphically is put myself into the chair”. - Ieuan Rees.

38 “Just do it”. - Nancy Culmone.

39 “Everything, make that EVERYTHING, takes longer than you think”. - Anonymous.

40 “Do the best work you can on any given day and be happy with it”. - Ieuan Rees. There comes a time when you just have to relinquish a piece, even if it doesn’t measure up to your vision of what you’d like it to be. Be content that you did your best with the time and ability you have that particular day.

And finally...

41 Remember, it should be pleasant and FUN!

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