

## ***Spencerian Penmanship:***

Named after Platt Rogers Spencer (1800-1864), Spencerian Script, a uniquely American form of ornamental penmanship, became an important part of business and personal life in the United States. Born near Poughkeepsie, New York, Spencer was a dynamic individual whose vision and boundless energy were responsible for ushering in a major period of economic and artistic endeavor in America. The *Golden Age of Ornamental Penmanship* lasted from approximately 1850 to 1925, and resulted in perhaps the most elaborate penmanship ever written by the human hand.

### **Q. Why is good handwriting important?**

There are many reasons. As human beings, our ability to think, to show emotion, and to share our feelings with another person are truly blessings from God! Handwriting is the marvelous key that allows us to do this: to communicate our thoughts with friends, family, business colleagues with anybody we choose. Unlike e-mail, which is produced by a machine, the aspect of writing by hand allows us to truly have a written conversation with our correspondent. The wonder of our thoughts and emotions comes through to the recipient in a most personal manner through our handwriting. And yet, poor handwriting is not easy to read, is certainly not pleasing to the eye, and can even give the impression that little thought or care was put forth by the writer. Poor handwriting often gives the impression that the writer did not think the recipient was important enough to put any time or care into the action of corresponding. Not a nice feeling!

Good handwriting says a lot about the writer. It shows that the writer values both the recipient and the act of corresponding. It's also an indication that the writer is a person of good self-esteem who cares about communicating in a pleasing fashion, so that his/her written conversation is a reflection of their regard for the recipient. Even in this computer age, handwriting is still a necessary life skill. To be able to write legibly not only means that you possess this skill to a high degree, but that you can communicate in a more pleasing and attractive manner.

### **Q. Why was the teaching of Spencerian discontinued?**

Spencerian Script was discontinued because it was supplanted, or replaced by a more contemporary style of handwriting developed by A. N. Palmer. This occurred around 1900. By that time the steel penpoint was readily available throughout America, and the use of quill pens had all but vanished. Palmer felt that it would be easier for children to learn handwriting without the vintage shaded letters and (he felt) excessive loops and curved lines. Basically, he streamlined Spencerian to make handwriting instruction more compatible with the booming Industrial Age of the time.

**Q. What is the difference between Spencerian and the writing used by our Founding Fathers?**

Although our founding fathers were Americans, their educational heritage had strong ties to the English school curricula, for as a pioneer land of English colonies and then a fledgling country, the United States had not yet developed its own system of handwriting. Thus our colonial patriots had been taught the English Roundhand Script, or Copperplate Script, and they used this style for the writing of important documents.

Copperplate is a style characterized by letters being made with a combination of separate, individual strokes using finger movement. All lowercase letters are shaded, letters are written quite close together, curves are based on rounded forms, and the action is fairly slow and deliberate.

Spencerian is uniquely American. Letters are based on elliptical curves and are made with a graceful, swinging motion using a combination of muscle groups (finger, wrist, arm). Furthermore, Spencerian is not fatiguing, is rapidly written, has fairly wide letter-spacing, little shading, and is quite spontaneous in action. Spencerian also lends itself to embellishment far more readily than Copperplate does.

**Q. What skills should a child have before learning Spencerian?**

Prior to their teenage years, children should only use standard writing tools when learning Spencerian. Therefore, the basic skills required are the ability to grasp and control basic writing tools and the mental capability to learn, recognize, and practice the concepts of movement, letterform, and proper use of muscles.

**Q. You suggest starting a child out writing Spencerian with a pencil. Do you recommend a particular type of pencil? At what age (or what other criteria) would it be appropriate to switch to a pen?**

A regular No. 2 or N. 2 wood pencil is fine, but it should have a sharp point. Because of this, it would be helpful for students to have a portable pencil sharpener with them as they practice. By age 10 a child should be able to understand how to control their pressure upon the pencil as they write (so they don't press too hard on the paper). Thus, at age 10 children can begin using mechanical pencils with a 5 mm lead. I recommend that children do not switch to a steel pen until they are 12.

**Q. When was the oblique penholder invented and what benefit does it offer over a traditional pen? Is the oblique penholder useful for lefties?**

The oblique penholder design was patented by two English engineers, Sampson Mordan and William Brockedon, on November 16, 1831. It never became popular in England, and in the United States its popularity did not surface until the late 1850s. It has several marked advantages over the straight pen. An oblique penholder holds the penpoint in such a position that it closely aligns the point with the slant of the letters. This allows the actual act of "inking the paper" as you write to be much smoother than it would be with a straight pen.

With an oblique penholder, it is easy to make smooth-edged shaded strokes, which is difficult to do with a straight pen. It is also easier to actually see the penpoint as you are writing when an oblique holder is used; this "clearer view" of the writing area is a distinct advantage. It is also much easier to make large arcs and curved strokes (such as in capital letters) with an oblique pen than a straight holder. Your wrist is the pivot point for such strokes, and the angle of the penpoint in an oblique holder makes this an easy task. With a straight holder you are drawing the inked line across the axis of the penpoint; it is a more coarse, scratchy movement.

Most left-handed people write by holding their pens in a mirror-image fashion to the way right-handed people write. That is, although they do hold the pen in their left hand, they position the paper in the same perspective to their left hand as a right-handed person does to their right hand. For these lefties, the standard oblique penholder is often still useful and most frequently employed for writing Spencerian. Nonetheless, some lefties find that using a straight penholder works well for them. I would recommend trying both and determining for yourself which one is better.

For lefties who write with their hand in the "hooked" position—that is, with their left hand writing in a position arched over the top of the paper—Spencerian is more difficult (but not impossible). This difficulty centers around making the shaded strokes while you are writing. Since shaded strokes can only be made by pressing down on the pen while you are moving the pen towards the baseline of writing, a lefty must place their paper in a position relative to their hand. This way, when the fingers contract to make a "downstroke" toward their own palm or wrist, the letters will rest on the baseline in a normal manner. This re-positioning of the paper is not difficult to do, but it may take a bit of getting used to. Like anyone else, the degree of progress a left-handed person makes is in direct relationship to their interest, determination, and diligent practice.

**From *Learning to Write Spencerian Script* by Michael R. Sull and Debra E. Rapp.**

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