

Tips for calligraphers

These 28 tips were originally my “Hint for the day” for February 2014 on my Twitter feed. Follow me at @OakleafCallig if you’d like more!

1. Nib not writing well? It’s very often that it needs a really good clean. Use a magnifying glass to get a good look at it.
2. If you’re not comfortable and relaxed, it’ll show in your lettering. Try not to sit hunched, or in poor light.
3. Don’t waste your good lettering skills by working with cheap and nasty materials – your time is more valuable than that.
4. If you’re using gouache, mix it to one consistency – of thin cream (don’t leave a blob of unmixed paint in the palette).
5. If you’re working with metallic inks or paints, you’ll need to mix often, and clean your nib often.
6. If your nib has become damaged or excessively worn, it’s time to replace it – don’t tolerate a nib that’s far past its best.
7. Mix enough of the colour you want to complete the job - it’s a very difficult task to mix exactly the same colour again.
8. When you’re mixing colours, make sure you’re testing them on the paper you’ll use, and make sure they’re dry before deciding if they’re the right colour.
9. Gouache dries darker, watercolour dries paler.
10. Bought a large sheet of paper? Cut it into usable sized pieces, otherwise you might be scared of using it, and it’ll spend years under the bed!
11. Stick inks are really very easy to use, colours can be mixed and they dry waterproof.
12. Beware cheap stick inks – a good black stick will make black ink in a few minutes, a cheap one may never get beyond grey ink.
13. Take time to go back to basic letter shapes – there’s always more to learn.
14. Don’t practice the same letter again and again – more than 5 and your frustration grows faster than your skill.

15. Struggling with a letter? Write of words that use it - including words with the double letter in them.
16. Copying a manuscript or exemplar can be useful in revealing how letters were constructed – but don't stay copying forever.
17. Really want to learn a hand? See if you can see some historical examples of it, and look, look and look again.
18. If you can, you should visit Keep moving the paper into the area in which you do your best lettering – never tape it to your board.
19. the British Library and V&A - rooms full of inspiration, and free of charge!
20. Create real things, not practice pieces – you'll learn so much more, and have finished pieces to admire.
21. Ink flowing too fast? Try adjusting the reservoir (further from the nib edge) or a steeper writing surface, or a less absorbent paper.
22. Ink not flowing? Try adjusting the reservoir (nearer to nib edge), clean the pen or water down the ink.
23. Learn to fill your pen with a brush rather than dipping in the ink – it'll help you lettering and is less messy.
24. Try and practice every day – regular short stints are best.
25. When you've finished writing today, think about ruling lines and setting up for your next lettering session.
26. Cheap gouache can be good to write with, but can also be greasy or gritty. Winsor and Newton is generally very good.
27. When buying products, be wary of inks and papers that claim to be for calligraphy – they're not necessarily the best (and you might pay a premium too!)
28. Have felt tips and cartridge pens for quick sessions – but try dip pens too – the extra effort results in much better lettering.

If you've any suggestions I'd love to hear them at

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See more of my work at www.oakleafcalligraphy.co.uk

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