

The Point of a Good Pen

A paper presented to  
The Athenaeum Society of Hopkinsville, Kentucky

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March 7, 2019

## The Point of a Good Pen

Winston Churchill said, “To sit at one’s table on a sunny morning, with four clean hours of uninterrupted security, plenty of nice white paper, and a [fountain] pen – that is true happiness.” Churchill may have never known the pleasure of this experience if it weren’t for an American by the name of Lewis Waterman.

The story goes that in 1883, Lewis Waterman sat staring at a ruined insurance contract. The culprit, a fountain pen that had spewed ink all over the document just before he and the client signed the agreement. Waterman scrambled to draw up a new contract, but before he could complete the task, the potential client, and the significant pay, had gone to another agent. That leaking fountain pen changed the course of Waterman’s life. Who would have thought that a puddle of ink on a failed contract would be the catalyst that would shape writing instruments for years to come? Lewis Waterman showed the world that the point of a good pen is indeed, an important issue.

Lewis Edson Waterman was born on November 18, 1837, in Decatur, New York. Waterman was a shorthand instructor, book salesperson, and an insurance agent. But his best-known contribution to society was his invention of the capillary feed fountain pen. Following the botched insurance sale, Waterman began to troubleshoot the fountain pen design, which he perceived to have a universal flaw, not limited only to his pen. The fountain pens of Waterman’s day did not have control over the flow of ink. The pens would sometimes not write and other times would burp ink all over the document and everything surrounding it. The problem, Waterman found, was the ink reservoir in the pen was not

properly vented. Temperature variations would cause pressure changes in the reservoir. If the pen was cold, any air in the reservoir would contract, creating a vacuum, and causing the ink flow to stop. As the pen was held in the hand, it would warm, causing the air in the ink reservoir to expand. The increasing air pressure would then expel the ink through the only means of escape, the point, technically termed, the nib of the pen. This resulted in ink blots being deposited on the page and the person. This design was another example of Murphy's Law. If anything can go wrong, it will go wrong.

Waterman and his brother, Elijah started experimenting with various tubes in attempts to properly vent the reservoir. They discovered, through trial and error, if air is let into the reservoir via capillary channels in the feed, ink would flow smoothly under the force of gravity, but slow enough not to cause a leak. On February 4, 1884, Waterman patented this design under his name and began assembling and selling the L.E. Waterman Fountain Pen. He backed each pen with it a 5-year guarantee and a no-questions-asked return policy. Sales were strong enough that he partnered with Asa Shipman in 1885 to form The Ideal Pen Company. The men parted ways shortly after and Lewis Waterman founded The Waterman Pen Company in 1887. The Waterman Pen Company set the standard for writing instruments until 1954 when the Waterman Pen Company was closed due to falling sales. The company was sold to it's subsidiary and eventually was bought out by Parker, who now owns the Waterman name and produces Waterman Pens in Paris, France.

Though Waterman's design made fountain pens much more reliable, the filling of the ink pen was still a potentially messy endeavor. It required one to unscrew a portion of the barrel and use an eyedropper to fill the reservoir. By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, other

companies began producing less tedious designs that included self-filling reservoirs. One would simply dip the nib into a bottle of ink and fill it by lifting a lever or twisting a barrel.

Moving beyond a brief history of the modern fountain pen, one may consider the question, "Why would a person want to use this vintage form of writing?" I think Brett McKay, founder of The Art of Manliness website, has some good suggestions concerning why writing with a fountain pen is a good option. McKay writes the following:

**It feels better.** Because you don't have to press down as hard to write as you do with a ballpoint pen, writing with the fountain variety is much easier on the hand. It allows for extended periods of writing without fatigue. It's easier to get in the flow, when using something that truly flows.

**It's better for the environment.** With a ballpoint pen, once you use up all the ink, you toss it into the trash. While you can buy disposable fountain pens, most fountain pens aren't meant to be thrown away. When you run out of ink, just refill the reservoir and you're back in business.

**It is more economical in the long run.** I don't want to think about the amount of money I've thrown away or lost in the form of half-used ballpoint pens. Because of their disposable nature, I'm pretty careless with them. If I lose one I can buy a whole new pack of 'em. There's something about a fountain pen that inspires you to take care of it. The hefty price tag of some models certainly has something to do with that. But the fountain pen's storied tradition provides an aura of timelessness and permanence that encourages the owner to safeguard it; it may even become a family heirloom.

**It makes cursive handwriting look better.** Besides reducing fatigue, the light touch and flowing hand movements that are necessitated by a fountain pen make your handwriting look more aesthetically pleasing.

**It makes you feel like a “sir.”** I’ll admit it – one of the appeals of writing with a fountain pen is that it makes you feel awesome. There’s something about writing with the same implement that Teddy Roosevelt and Winston Churchill used that makes you feel like a true gentleman and scholar.

But let’s not take McKay’s word for it. I invite you to try it for yourself. You have on your table a fountain pen, a ball point pen, and a sheet of paper with the sentence, “The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog” written at the top. Both the ballpoint and fountain pens are entry level, inexpensive, disposable pens. Feel free at your leisure to write the sentence, which contains all of the letters of the English alphabet, with the ballpoint and fountain pens. If you are unfamiliar with a fountain pen, the following is suggested: post the cap, hold the pen at a 45 to 55 degree angle with the shiny side of the nib up, relax your hand, and without applying pressure, begin to write. I think you will find that using a fountain pen is synonymous with using a good pen. I personally do not consider a ballpoint a pen, but rather an ink stick. I believe Graham Greene, the English novelist, said it well, “My two fingers on a typewriter have never connected with my brain. My hand on a pen does, a fountain pen, of course. Ball-point pens are only good for filling out forms on a plane.” The point of a good pen though, is more than just understanding the history and mechanics of a fountain pen. Allow me to share my own personal experience.

The year was 1982. I was sitting in my 5<sup>th</sup> grade classroom desk staring at a document that had been utterly ruined. It was a handwriting page I turned in and had just

received back from my teacher. The only legible letter on the paper was written at the top. It was the letter F. That's correct. My penmanship was so bad that I completed, yet failed that assignment. But that's not all. I failed handwriting as a subject that grading period. I earned an F in handwriting for the fall grading period of my 5<sup>th</sup> grade year. That grade was a defining moment for me. I made a decision based on my experience. I decided, "I can't write." I decided that when I had to write I would print and not write in cursive, but I wasn't good at printing either. My penmanship never grew beyond what I achieved in the first grade using big fat pencils and chunky, brown, lined handwriting sheets. To make matters worse, being left-handed, I always smeared graphite or ink across the page as my arm and hand rubbed across the page following my freshly written sentences. Relief came as a high school student. I took a typing class. While in that class our teacher introduced us to a brand new technology called The Word Processor. With the rising use of personal computers, email, and digital forms of communication, I was finally able to communicate without writing. I didn't even have to spell correctly. The computer automatically corrected my flaws. I operated in this capacity through high school, college, masters work, and into my full-time career as a pastor. It wasn't until I began work on my doctorate that I was introduced to the idea that things could be different.

Dr. Donald Whitney was one of my doctoral professors. He is a tremendous professor, author, and speaker. Dr. Whitney is also a self-proclaimed "stylophyle." On the first day of class, I and the rest of my cohort noticed Dr. Whitney's penmanship. When he stepped to the board to make notes, his writing was masterful. He wrote with such ease. We noticed that when sitting at his desk, Dr. Whitney wrote with a fountain pen.

Someone in the group commented on his writing style. This opened up a discussion about fountain pens and penmanship.

Dr. Whitney opened the discussion with this statement. "I grew up thinking I couldn't write." He immediately had my attention. He talked about his poor penmanship and perceived inability to improve. His story matched my own in many ways. I raised my hand and asked, "Dr. Whitney, how did you learn to write like you do now?" He replied that he decided one day that he would start over and learn how to write. He said, "I ordered some handwriting sheets and started teaching myself to write again." I couldn't imagine Dr. Whitney sitting at his desk, surrounded by highly academic sources of learning, with a big fat pencil, slowly drawing letters on chunky, brown, lined handwriting sheets. But that was precisely what he did. I don't think he had the big fat pencil. Dr. Whitney also talked about the reasons he preferred a fountain pen to any other writing tool.

The seminary had a store that sold fountain pens, so during the next class break I purchased my first good pen. I purchased a Noodler's Ahab for seventeen dollars, on sale, and a bottle of black ink. I purchased the Ahab because it had a story behind it. The pen design is based on Herman Melville's character Ahab in his 1851 novel, *Moby Dick*. The clip is made to look like the back of a whale as it breeches the surface of the sea. The pen, with the cap un-posted, resembles a harpoon. The barrel is designed in same fashion as a peg leg. Finally the ink reservoir and filling mechanism is made to look like a bilge pump used on old whaling ships. I am a sucker for a good story. I had no idea that I would soon identify with Captain Ahab's angst and frustration.

I hurried back up to the classroom and cautiously filled my pen with ink, took my notebook out, and sat ready to take notes. I pictured myself writing with skill and ease as

Dr. Whitney continued teaching. As Dr. Whitney began his next lecture, I began to write. But instead of grasping the pen by the grip, I held it by the nib and feed. The ink didn't flow smoothly and the nib was scratchy on the paper. It didn't take long to realize that the reason the ink wasn't flowing onto the paper correctly was because it was flowing onto my fingers as I gripped and pressed harder trying to make the pen write correctly. As I did, the pen sputtered ink on my page and fingers. Fortunately I had a paper towel to use incase I spilled ink while filling the pen. I quietly wiped my fingers off, put the cap back on the pen, and picked up my ink stick to continue making notes.

While the Noodler's Ahab is actually a really good fountain pen, it is not a good beginner's pen. The pen was designed to be fiddled with and adjusted. There is a learning curve with the Ahab. In retrospect, I should have purchased a Lamy Al Star as a first fountain pen. It accepts prefilled ink cartridges or an ink converter, which you can fill yourself. It also has a grip that is formed in a way that helps you hold the pen correctly. One of the best things about the Lamy is that it is not finicky and offers a reliable writing experience. Once I had a reliable pen, I began to focus on my penmanship.

Jake Wideman, one of eleven master penmen in the world today, and the youngest to ever earn the title, shares the importance of penmanship. He said that increased skill in penmanship increases literacy in three areas. The first area of improved literacy is historical literacy. When you write, you record your own history. Your words last, they carry on. Think about the love letters written between couples of our generation that have been preserved for posterities' sake. We now live in a culture where the temporary nature of written communication is a high value. The second area of improved literacy is intellectual literacy. Developing penmanship develops the brain. The textile movements of



handwriting engages the brain in more areas and the information is engrained more than in the act of typing. Wideman says that studies done on the brain activity of children writing in cursive showed that areas of the brain used for higher reasoning were engaged. When typing, these same areas of the brain were dormant. Typing and keyboarding is an important skill. It is hard to function in our day and time without being able to type. But the skill of typing should not come at the expense of handwriting, especially cursive. The third type of literacy that increases with improved penmanship is that of creative literacy. Emotion, beauty, and unique creativity are all seen in handwriting. This is why your handwritten signature is important. It is as unique to you as your fingerprint. These are some of the reasons I decided to improve my penmanship.

Since Dr. Whitney taught himself to write, I thought if I could do the same and accomplish only a fraction of what he had, I would be satisfied. So I took his advice. I started over. I downloaded free handwriting sheets from the Internet, printed them out, and began practicing my cursive lettering. I was patient and persistent. I eventually improved. As I improved, I started looking for reasons to write and put my fountain pen to good use. The point of a good pen is about more than learning to write well. Ultimately it is about powerful and lasting communication.

Think about the power of a handwritten note. While I was in college, tapping away on my keyboard, I would also receive something very meaningful in my mailbox, handwritten letters from my grandmother. I loved receiving them. They made me feel loved, cared for, and gave me a sense of family connection. Of the thousands of words I typed in college, I don't think I have any that I could access right now. They are gone. But I still have a letter from my grandmother. Her words to me have carried on past her death

into my life. What I learned was that a handwritten note is the next best thing to a personal visit. If you can't be there in person, a handwritten note is the next best solution. I began to use this in my job.

As one of the pastors in a growing church, I found it harder and harder to keep up with people. I started identifying those who I felt could use some encouragement. I found that it took about ten minutes out of my day to write three handwritten notes to people in my church. I began doing it as a regular practice. But it wasn't until one Sunday when I was preaching to the congregation, that the necessity of a handwritten note became apparent. I was preaching a sermon about Heaven. I was expounding upon the truth that Heaven is a great homecoming for believers who have fought the good fight, slipped the surly bonds of this life, and stepped into the presence of the Lord, and all those who have gone before them. To illustrate the point, I told the story of a personal experience I had on a return trip from Israel in 2011.

My wife and I happened to be on the same flight as a group of soldiers returning from a long deployment to Ft. Campbell. We were on their international flight and their domestic flight into Nashville. It was incredible to see how people on each plane, when learning that the soldiers were on board would thank and applaud them. On each flight, people in first class gave up their seats so these war worn soldiers could fly and enjoy the comforts they had given up by fighting for our country. But nothing could have prepared me for the moment when those soldiers walked off the plane after landing in Nashville. The entire group walked off the plane through the gate, down the terminal, and into the arms of their families. There were squeals, tears, hugs, kisses, sobbing, and that was just me. Not really, but it was an incredibly powerful picture of what a heavenly homecoming must look

like. I was wrecked by the grace of that moment. And as I was sharing this story with the congregation, my eyes met the eyes of a young woman, in her early twenties, whose fiancé served in Iraq, and was killed in action. He didn't make it home. I could see the look in her eyes and immediately knew that I had touched on her deepest pain. I spent a good part of that Sunday afternoon and evening thinking about what I should do. I could not ignore it. I could not go visit her because she is a young single woman. I could not call her, for the previous reason, but also because I didn't know what to say to her. The next morning when I got to my office, I picked up my pen, took out a piece of stationary, and wrote her a note. It was succinct, heartfelt, and conveyed my sorrow for causing her pain. I put the note in an envelope, addressed it, stamped it, and put it in the mail.

A few days later I was scrolling through Facebook and there on my newsfeed, was a picture of the note I wrote to her. She put the picture up with a post talking about how appreciative she was that someone realized the grief and pain she had been going through and cared enough to write. It meant a lot to her. I learned that the point of a good pen is ultimately about powerful and lasting communication. Isn't that what we desire in our communication? What we say matters because words are powerful. The words we write have an enduring power because they do not diminish with the memory of the original hearer. It would behoove us all to increase our communication skills and grow in the methods by which we do so.

In conclusion, let me encourage you to give the fountain pen a try. Who do you know that would benefit greatly by a word from you written in your own hand? Through the point of a good pen you can improve your penmanship, increase your literacy, develop your brain, woo your wife, encourage your friends, and create a lasting legacy. I'll leave you

with a quote from the prolific fountain pen user Mark Twain, "None of us have as many virtues as the fountain pen, or half its cussedness; but we try."

120. STATIONERY,  
Fountain Pens

2119  
741  
~~87~~  
98,647  
7046

(Model.)

L. E. WATERMAN.

FOUNTAIN PEN.

No. 307,735.

Patented Nov. 4, 1884.

Model  
735  
CLASSIFICATION  
DIVISION,

Lewis E. Waterman's  
Fountain Pen

Fig. 1.

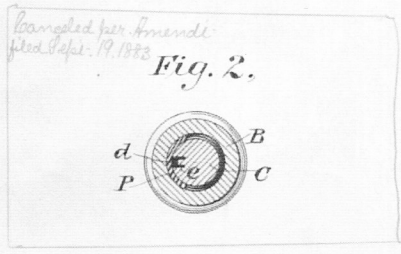
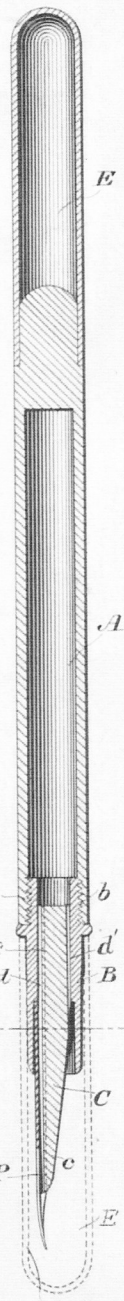
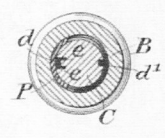


Fig. 2



307,735. FOUNTAIN-PEN. LEWIS E. WATERMAN, Brooklyn, N. Y.  
Filed June 20, 1883. (Model.)

Claim.—1. An ink-duct for a fountain-pen, consisting of a groove in a bar on the side next the pen, extending throughout its entire length on the same plane, and communicating with the ink-reservoir for conducting the ink from the reservoir to the point of the pen.

2. An ink-duct for a fountain-pen, consisting of a groove in a bar extending throughout its entire length in the side which is to be next the pen and on the same plane, and communicating with the ink-reservoir, and of gradually-decreasing depth from the end which enters the reservoir to the end near the point of the pen.

3. A fountain-pen consisting of a barrel or reservoir having a bar in a tubular piece in the extremity of the barrel, said bar having a longitudinal groove in its side which is to be in proximity to the pen, and an additional longitudinal groove on the other side, whereby air may be admitted to the reservoir independently of the ink-conveying groove, substantially as hereinbefore set forth.

WITNESSES

Wm A. Shink  
Carrie E. Ashley

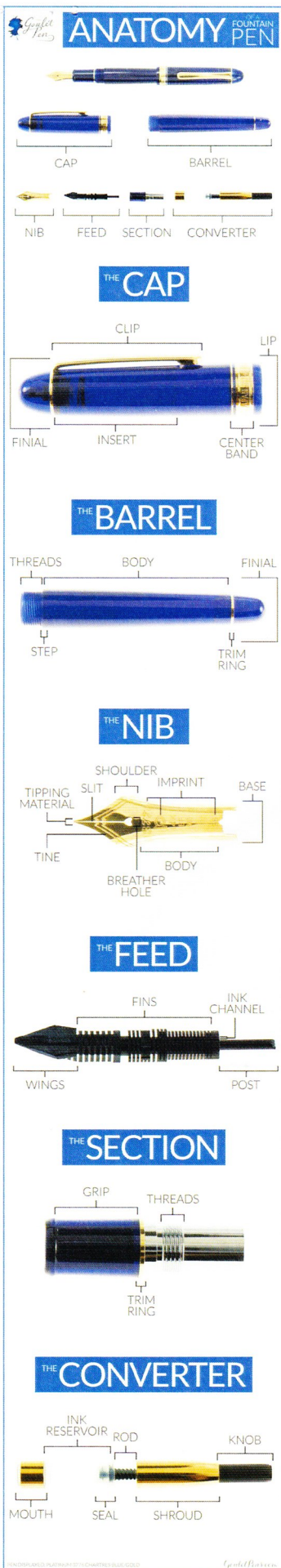
INVENTOR

By his Attorneys  
Lewis E. Waterman,  
Pope Edgcomb & Butler.

Sept. 8, 1888, Reg.  
Oct. 6, 1888, Letter.  
Rejection, May 23, 1884.  
Rejection, June 20, 1884.

Oct. 15, 1883, Intf. dec. with  
H. Fisher No. 98597.  
Mar. 20, 1884, Dec. add.

Passed to Exam Oct. 16, 84



**Cap:** the part of a pen that covers the nib and attaches to the pen body.

**Clip:** the metal doohickey usually attached to the cap that holds your pen in your shirt pocket

**Finial:** the top of the cap, sometimes decorated with the maker's logo.

**Centerband:** the metal decorative ring that is usually placed near the bottom of the pen cap for decorative purposes, or perhaps to provide reinforcement to the cap threads.

**Lip:** the open end of the cap, where the threads of the body fit to close the pen.

**Barrel:** the long part of the main body of the pen which houses the ink reservoir.

**Threads:** thin grooves cut into a pen to hold parts together, especially pen caps to the pen body.

**Step:** the part of the barrel where the threads 'step up' to the body, which can matter when holding the pen.

**Body:** the length of a pen barrel that typically houses the ink reservoir.

**Trim Ring:** ornamental accents that serve an aesthetic purpose.

**Nib:** the metal tip of a fountain pen that actually touches the paper.

**Tipping Material:** a small bit of hard-wearing metal (usually some sort of iridium alloy) that is welded to the end of a nib and ground to a specific intended size.

**Slit:** the very thin cut running from the breather hole to the tip of the nib that carries the ink from the feed to the tip.

**Tines:** the two front parts of the nib that taper to the tip.

**Shoulder:** the widest part of a nib, where it starts to taper towards the tip.

**Breather Hole:** a hole in the nib, at the end of the nib slit, that allows air to assist in the ink flow, also called a vent hole.

**Imprint:** the engraving or impression left on the face of the nib that shows the brand, model, or nib size.

**Body:** the part of the nib that is typically imprinted.

**Base:** the bottom end, or reverse end of the tip, where the nib fits into the section of a pen.

**Feed:** the piece of plastic or ebonite (usually black) that hugs the back of the nib and acts as a vehicle for ink delivery from the reservoir to the nib.

**Wings:** the widest part of the feed that matches up to the nib shoulder. Sometimes nibs will slide on and grab onto the feed wings.

**Fins:** the small, thin pieces on the feed that allow ink to saturate into the air channels. These act as an ink regulator for consistent flow when writing speed varies.

**Ink Channel:** a very thin slit in the feed that hugs against the back of the nib and provides a route for the ink to travel through the feed. This is what helps to provide the necessary capillary action required for ink flow.

**Post:** the back end of a feed that goes into the ink reservoir and feeds ink into the channel.

**Section:** the part of the pen where the nib fits in and attaches to the pen barrel.

**Grip:** the front of the section where you hold where the nib fits in, sometimes called just a 'section'.

**Trim Ring:** ornamental accents that serve an aesthetic purpose.

**Threads:** thin grooves cut into a pen to hold parts together.

**Converter:** a small filling mechanism (usually a screw-piston type) that fits onto a pen that also accepts a cartridge. This allows you to use any brand's bottled ink instead of relying on limited proprietary ink cartridges.

**Mouth:** the opening that fits onto the feed post to hold the converter in place.

**Ink Reservoir:** a cavity inside a pen that holds ink.

**Seal:** the 'working' part of the converter piston that creates a vacuum in order to draw ink into the reservoir.

**Rod:** the threaded portion of the piston mechanism that causes the seal to move up and down when the knob is turned.

**Knob:** the part of the converter that you turn to move the piston seal up and down (and thus fill the converter).