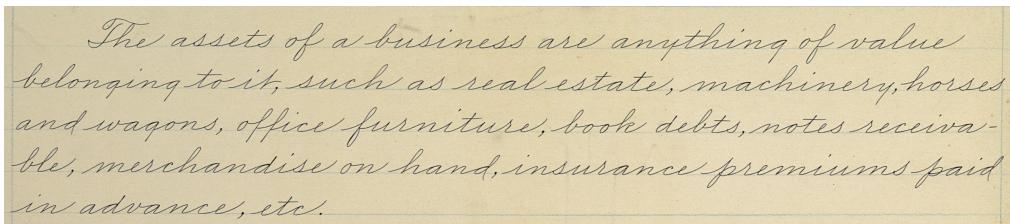


A Question of Practice

by Dr. Joseph M. Vitolo

I receive MANY emails asking for suggestions on practicing script. The following represents my own perspective on this important question and how it applies to the form of script I practice. This approach has served me well and may be applied to almost any area of penmanship and calligraphy.

Before I get into specifics allow me to digress for a moment. When I was younger I was very involved in competitive archery. My archery coach used to constantly tell me, "Joe, an entire day of practicing mistakes over and over is not worth 30 minutes of practicing correctly." That short phrase stuck with me ever since. He also said that the secret to consistently hitting the bulls eye was in the fundamentals of the shot, NOT in aiming at bulls eyes all day. Of course, practicing aiming was important but should not be the focus of a practice session. He would constantly say, "The secret, if there is one, is in the fundamentals!"



Cursive handwriting by Edward C. Mills (1872-1962)

For those who aspire to better handwriting or the shaded script forms like the pointed pen masters old, the question becomes, "How does one practice to attain this level?" First, in an area like Cursive Handwriting or for those seeking a shaded script, Spencerian script penmanship books are still in print that explains how this skill can be achieved. I am speaking about Tamblyn's Home Instructor in Penmanship currently published and sold by Ziller of KC. Tamblyn lays out the fundamentals very clearly and how to practice. Modern books like Michael Sull's American Cursive Handwriting book as well as his Spencerian script books are wonderful resources. For the purpose of this article I will limit my comments to script in the Copperplate style.



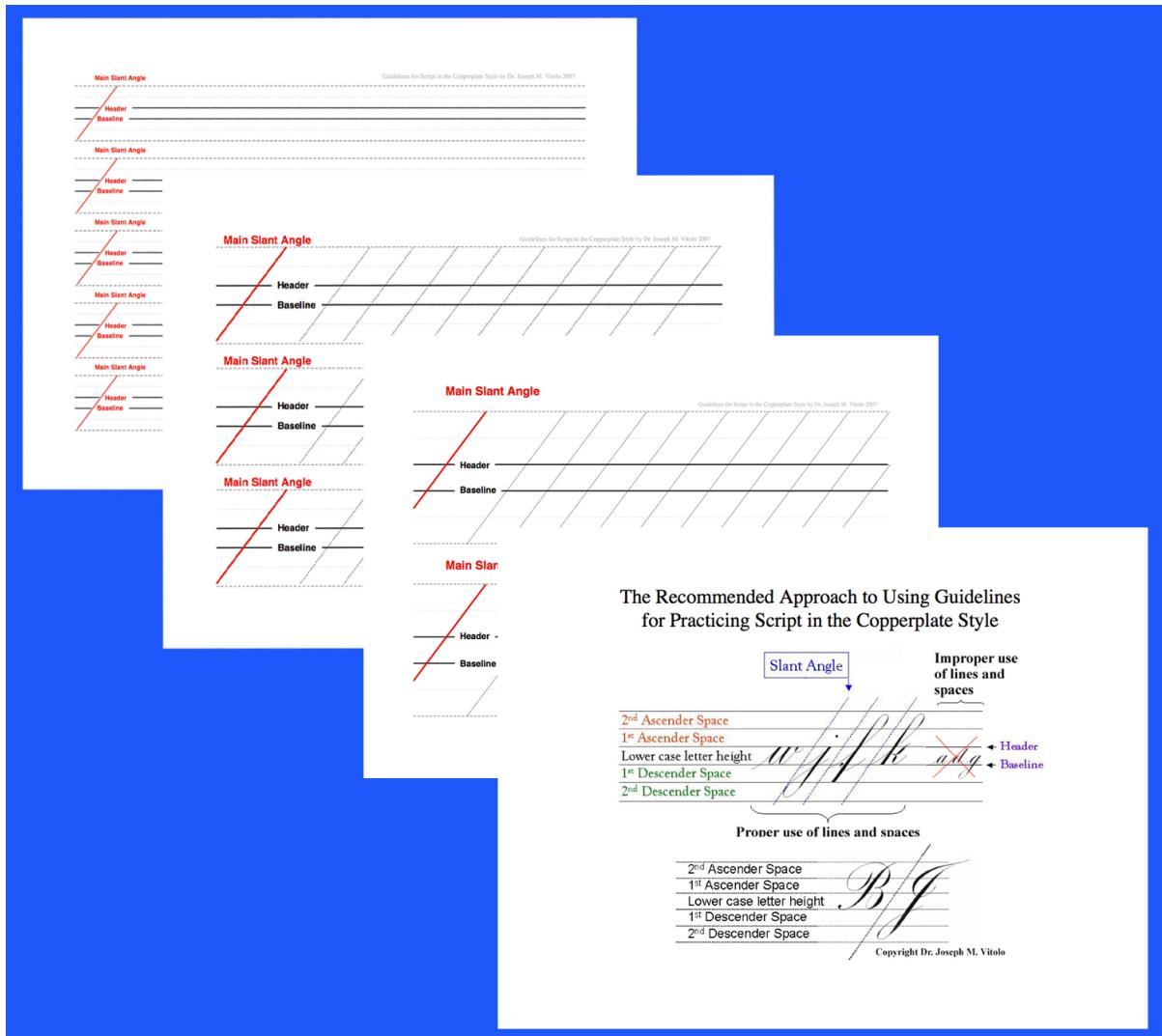
Engraver's script by Willis A. Baird (1882-1954)

My personal approach to practicing script is very simple, "practice the fundamentals!" This translates into fundamental forms such as ovals, compound curves, transition angles, etc. I have written EXTENSIVELY on these topics in articles published in print and online. These must be understood and revisited often. These include but are not limited to familiarizing one's self with the subtleties of nib movement, an absolute understanding of the letter forms, studying curvature, ovals, etc. One of the most important areas in your practice and development is using the FINEST exemplars you can find such as those of the masters posted in my Zanerian.com gallery, in the Zanerian Manual or even older historical records such as Bickham's The Universal Penman. Whatever skill I possess in script is in part due to an intensive study of the first twenty or so pages of the Zanerian Manual.

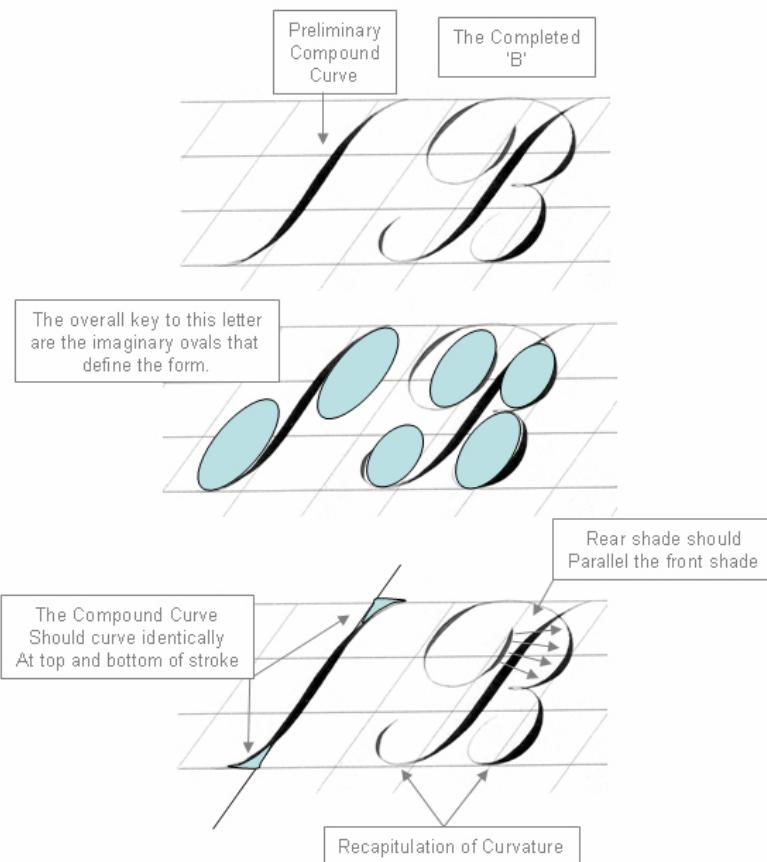
Remember, if you start with high-grade exemplars and you fall short your script will still be good. However, start with poor to mediocre exemplars and the best you can hope for is poor to mediocre results. Go ahead and compare a modern Roundhand (commonly called Copperplate) instructional book to the forms in The Universal Penman and judge for yourself. Yes, the Universal Penman forms are engraved samples but the comparison is still fair for the basic forms. Consider that the carved Trajan column is still a standard for some broad pen forms after all these centuries. I will stop there with this broad pen discussion since I am really out of my element. Back to the realm of script writing!

When I practice, I ALWAYS use guidelines. I will write directly on them or use them under my practice page. This will help your hand and eye develop a sense of letter proportion while maintaining consistent letter height and slant angle. The guideline sheets that I use in my free instruction videos are available for free online at:

<http://www.zanerian.com/VitoloScriptGuidelinesFromVideoClips2014.pdf>



I would work on basics like ovals and compound curves. In addition, I will also work on optimizing a single letterform. For example, if I were working on a cap 'B' I would first find the 'B' that was most appealing to my eye which usually means ANYTHING from a past great such as WA Baird's letterforms in the Zanerian Manual. His specimen on page 12 of the manual is, in my opinion, the finest page of Engrosser's script ever written (see last page of this PDF). Remember that finest does not mean perfect, just the best the human hand can do.

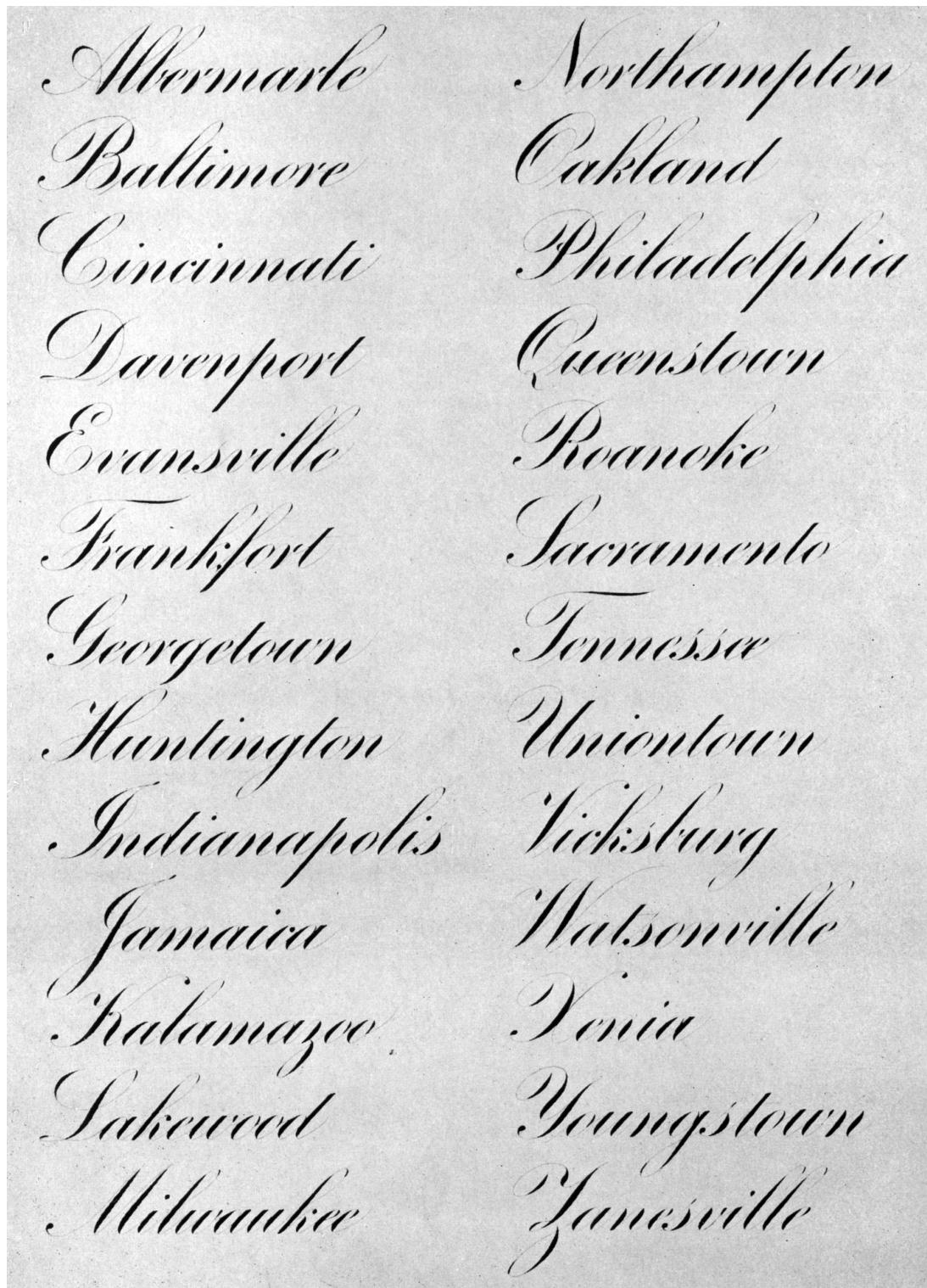


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Before I attempt to practice writing a letter I would first examine the components by breaking them down on paper. For example, how many ovals can my eye pick up in his cap 'B'? What is the orientation of each oval to the slant angle and to each other? How many compound curves are present in the letter? Which stroke is the primary shade (thickest)? How many accessory shades are there (shades of less heft)? Can I discern how the letter was formed? This is important because sometimes a shade will be present on what appears to be an upstroke. Of course, a shade on an upstroke of the pen is next to impossible since the point will likely dig into the paper's surface. This implies that either a down stroke used or the shade was placed afterwards (retouched). Therefore, practicing a 'B' is much more than simply writing it.

Once you have acquired a sufficient level of skill and can write like the masters of old than what?! Is any more practice necessary beyond simply writing script??? I would argue that the answer is yes. I regularly revisit the fundamentals to maintain my script. You may get to a point where you notice a particular letterform or shape (i.e. compound curve) starting to slip. Of course, implicit in this is the ability, and

more likely the willingness to critically evaluate your script. This is a perfect chance to revisit your fundamentals practice and retouch your skills. I view the fundamentals as 'honing tools' for maintaining a fine edge on your script.



Page 12 from The Zanerian Manual penned by Willis A. Baird (1882-1954)