

The ABCs of Letter Carving



Create elegant characters using two chisels

PALATINO: A SIMPLE BUT STYLISH TYPEFACE

The shapes of the letters make this font a good choice for carving. Chances are, the word-processing program on your home computer includes it. If not, photocopy this font at the size you need, cut the letters apart, and rearrange them.

BY T. J. McDERMOTT

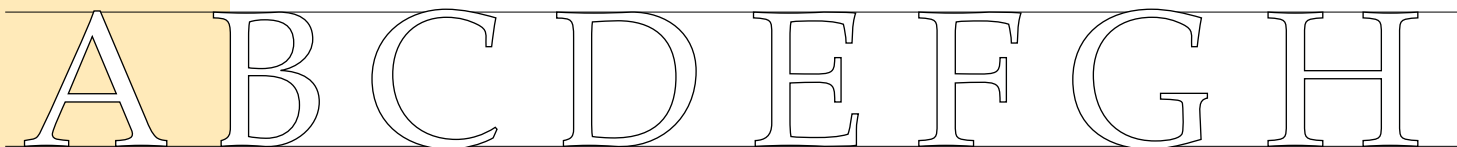
Letter carving is well worth learning because it transforms and personalizes otherwise ordinary objects. When someone receives a jewelry box or a piece of furniture that you've made and inscribed with their initials, they know they have an heirloom.

I began carving letters more than 30 years ago, while studying to be a boat-builder. An extraordinary craftsman who made bagpipes and did wood carving inspired me. I was awestruck by how quickly and effortlessly he could carve perfect letters. I began to practice sign carving myself, and in 1981, I carved a sign for Cole-Haan shoes when it opened its first

store in Freeport, Maine. That led to signs for Polo Ralph Lauren, Tommy Hilfiger, Gant, Calvin Klein, and others.

I've developed a simple and straightforward technique for letter carving that has served me well over the years. You can do most of the carving with a $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. bevel-edge chisel. The only other tool you may need is a #7, 14-mm gouge. Both are shown in the photo above.

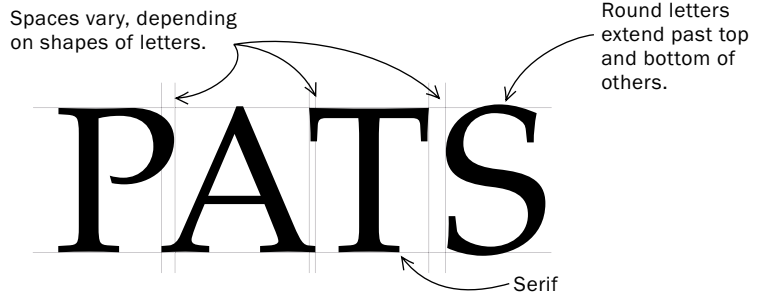
Good letter carving depends largely on learning to trust your eye and developing a rhythm in the work with a feel for how the chisels move through the wood. You'll eventually learn the most comfortable





Spend time on the layout

Adjust the letter sizes to fit the space. Take time to arrange the letters so that they look evenly spaced. Try moving letters like A, F, and T closer to their neighbors, and pushing letters like H and M farther away. Trust your eye to tell you when the spacing appears uniform, even if the ruler says otherwise.



Cut and paste. To achieve the best spacing, cut out letters and move them around. Use a straightedge to be sure the letters stay on the same horizontal line.



Transfer shapes. Use carbon paper to transfer the outline of the curved parts of the letters onto the wood. Don't try to trace the straight parts of the letters freehand.

way to hold a chisel, which chisels work best for you, and which woods work well for carving.

Good carving starts with good layout

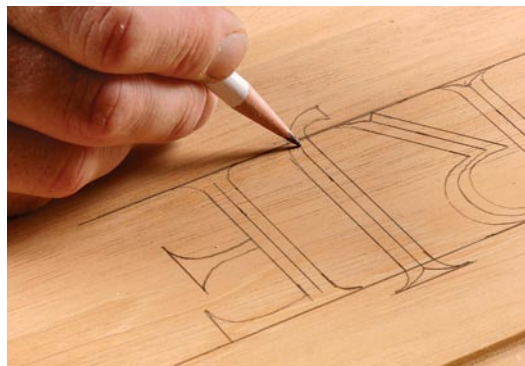
Any large bookstore will have books on letter styles, letter spacing, layout, and the like. For simplicity's sake, you might want to start with a typeface that's available on your home computer. The font shown here, usually called Palatino, adapts well to letter-carving and has some distinctive touches, such as the extralong curve on the letter J. Fonts such as Times Roman and Garamond are also good choices.

On the computer, type the characters you want to carve and enlarge them to the size you want. Take advantage of options that let you modify characters, making them bolder, for example, or stretched out. When you're satisfied, print out the letters.

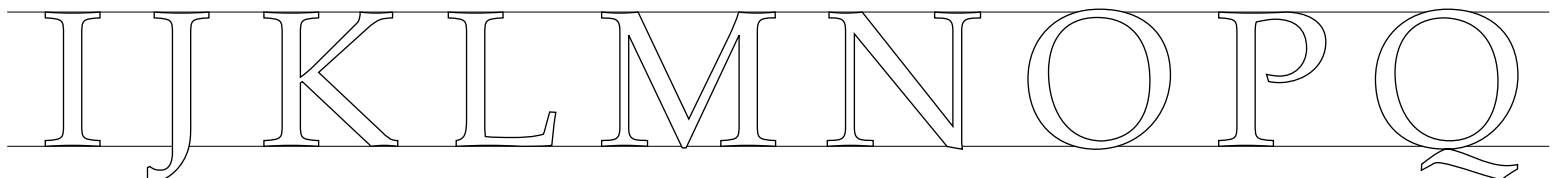
Draw a horizontal guideline across the bottom of the characters to help keep them aligned. Keep in mind



Finish with a straight-edge. Use a square or bevel gauge to draw straight, parallel lines connecting the curved shapes. If the top of a letter doesn't exactly match up with the bottom, split the difference and blend the lines together freehand.

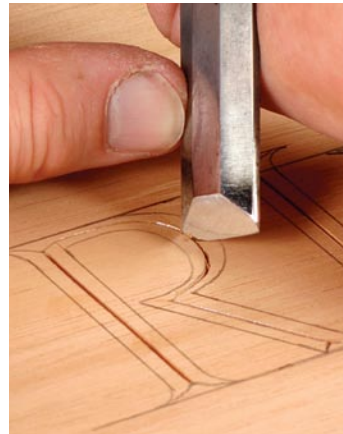


Mark the centers. Measure the exact center of each part of the letters. This line is critical because it marks the first place you'll carve, to set the depth of the letter. Use a straightedge to draw the centerline. Freehand the curves that join the points of the serifs to the centerlines.

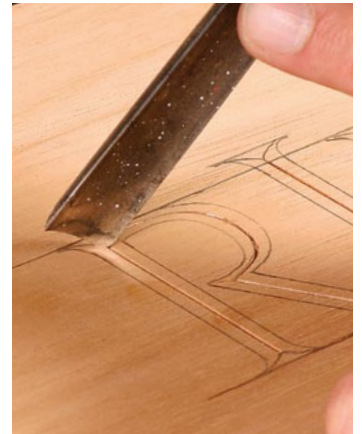


Start in the center

Use clamps or benchdogs to hold the work firmly in place. Push the point of the chisel into the centerline to establish the depth of the carving. You may need three or four passes to achieve the proper depth. Score the narrow parts of a letter only half as deep as the wide parts. You may want to use a mallet to score harder woods, but pounding the chisel into a soft wood will compress the fibers.



Straight chisel for big curves. It's easier to push the point of a straight chisel around large curves than it is to try to make a curved gouge follow a curved line with a different radius.



Use a sweep for serifs. A curved carving gouge makes it easy to connect the point of the serif to the center. Angle the gouge so that the shallowest part of the cut is at the point of the serif.

Score the centers.

Hold the chisel in one hand and use the thumb or a couple of fingers on your free hand to help push, pull, and guide it across the wood. Angle the chisel so that one corner does the work. Push down and carefully score the centerline.

that rounded capital letters (C, G, O, Q, S) will extend above and below the guideline. If they actually lined up with the others, they'd look too small.

Try positioning the characters so that they're centered left and right in the space you want to fill. Allow more space below the letters than above. If you don't, the letters will appear too low.

I've seen many signs done by supposedly professional sign shops that suffer from bad letter spacing. You can make adjustments on the computer, but the best approach is to cut the letters apart and move them until the spacing looks right. Be sure to keep them aligned on their guideline, and tape them together.

FineWoodworking.com

Visit our Web site to watch a video of McDermott carving the letter R.

Transfer from paper to wood

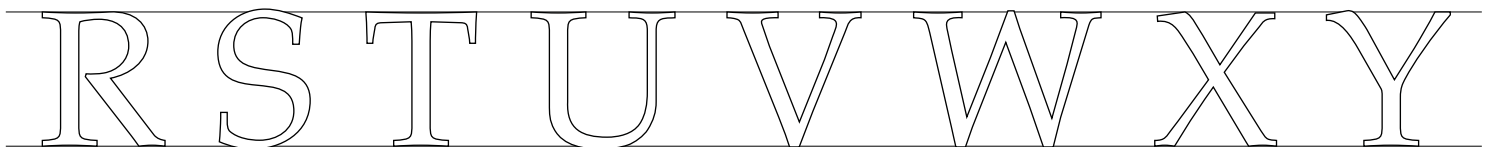
Carbon paper is best for transferring designs onto wood. You also can use graphite paper, available at most craft-supply stores. Begin by tracing all the curved parts of the letters with a pencil. Some typefaces, including Palatino, have serifs that are squared-off (see the sample below). While you can copy that feature, it's simpler to fair the serifs out to a point.

Next, use a square or a bevel gauge to draw in the straight parts of the letters, connecting the curves. Be aware that seemingly straight lines in some typefaces actually have a slight curve in the middle or a slight taper from bottom to top. You'll have to blend the straight lines into the curves by eye. Finally, measure the center of each part of the letters and draw in the centerlines. Freehand a curve from the points of the serifs down to the centerlines.

Get in a rhythm for carving

Begin the actual carving by scoring the centerline of each letter with a corner of the chisel. It's better to make multiple passes to score the lines, so you can develop the right feel. These scoring cuts set the depth of the letters, but don't carve very deeply or you can spoil the look. For the letters shown on the opening page, I went only about ¼ in. deep.

Be sure your work area is well-lit. I use a drop light with a 100-watt full-spectrum bulb, positioned about 45° to the left or right of the work and 2 ft. to 3 ft. above the bench.



Carve methodically

Work from one side to the other, cutting the same parts on each letter—all the straight sections, all the curves, all the serifs. That makes it easier to get a feel for how the chisel moves through the wood and sets up a rhythm for the work.



Carve one side. Hold the chisel bevel-up, place it on a penciled line, and push down and toward the center. Start with a shallow cut, gradually increasing the angle and depth until the side of the letter meets the scored centerline.



Be careful on the curves. When carving curves with a straight chisel, keep it bevel-down, and be sure you're aware of the grain direction. You can easily blow out part of the carving by pushing the wrong way. Remove just a little wood with each pass.



Lighten up on narrow parts. Try to get a feel for the depth of cut, so you can apply light pressure to the chisel on narrow parts of a letter and gradually increase the pressure for wide parts.

Rather than completely carve one letter at a time, do the same parts of all the characters. That helps you develop a rhythm and ensures that you'll make consistent cuts from one character to the next. So, score all the right-hand serifs, then all the left-hand serifs, and so on. Carve one side of all the letters, then flip the workpiece and carve the other side.

Keep yourself and your chisels sharp

Razor-sharp chisels are a must for good carving. I sharpen mine with a 1x48 Delta narrow-belt sander (a worn 220-grit belt works fine) and a felt buffing wheel. As soon as I feel signs of resistance or sticking from the chisel, I touch it to a soft felt wheel charged with compound.

Carving letters is an intense and deeply focused pursuit. For the best control, stand at the bench and lean over the work. Remember to move around, walk away for a while, or stretch. You'll come back relaxed. □

T.J. McDermott is a sculptor and wood-carver in Freeport, Maine.



Flip the work to finish. When you've carved one side of all the letters, flip the workpiece and carve the other side. You always carve in the same direction, making it easier to get uniform results.



Clean up carefully. Gently erase stray pencil lines, then give the workpiece a light hand-sanding. Use a sanding block to avoid rounding the edges of the letters.

