

Creative Quill Pens

An ancient tool takes on a contemporary design

(art + literature)

The quill was the principal writing tool used for more than 1,000 years in the Western hemisphere. Medieval transcripts, Shakespeare's sonnets, and the United States Constitution were all penned with a quill pen. Made from a bird feather — usually a goose, but also from swans, turkeys, crows, and other strong fowl — the first feathers from the outer wing are considered the best because they curve outward away from the hand.

Skilled quill pen makers prepared feathers by first removing any barbs or small feathers from the lower end of the barrel, then polishing it with sand or a stone to make it smooth. They heated the barrel of the feather to strengthen it, then cut it with a sharp knife to shape the point so it would hold and dispense ink. Because quills wear out quickly, they needed reshaping, sharpening, or replacing on a regular basis.

In the 19th-century age of industrialization, metal nibs began to be mass-produced and surpassed the feather quill in popularity. The metal nib retains its point much longer and can be made with different properties for different lettering purposes. However, some fine-line metal nibs are still named for the bird feather quill they most closely imitate, such as the crow-quill and the hawk-quill nibs. Quill-making is still practiced by fine calligraphers and scribes who appreciate its beauty and nostalgia.

This project creates a hybrid writing instrument — a combination of a quill barrel and a metal dip-pen nib — that can be designed and painted to be a work of art in itself. Imagine the stories, poems, drawings, and sketches it will make!

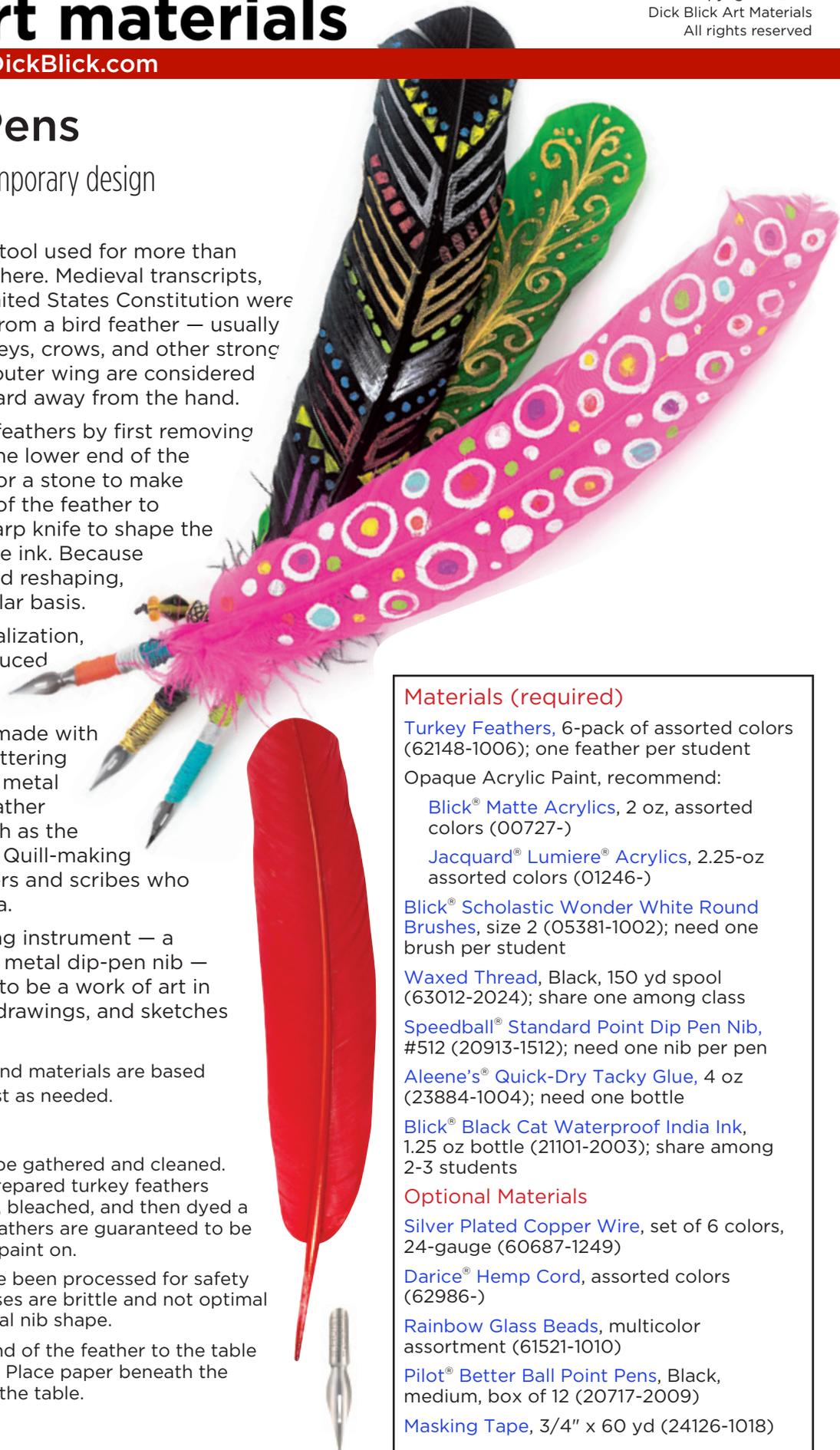
GRADES 3-12 Note: Instructions and materials are based upon a class size of 24 students. Adjust as needed.

Preparation

1. Stiff, naturally shed feathers may be gathered and cleaned. However, we recommend using prepared turkey feathers that have been cured for strength, bleached, and then dyed a variety of brilliant colors. These feathers are guaranteed to be clean, safe, and strong enough to paint on.

NOTE: Because craft feathers have been processed for safety and to add brilliant color, their bases are brittle and not optimal for cutting into a traditional, natural nib shape.

2. Use masking tape to secure the end of the feather to the table and hold it in place while painting. Place paper beneath the feather to prevent paint stains on the table.



Materials (required)

Turkey Feathers, 6-pack of assorted colors (62148-1006); one feather per student

Opaque Acrylic Paint, recommend:

Blick[®] Matte Acrylics, 2 oz, assorted colors (00727-)

Jacquard[®] Lumiere[®] Acrylics, 2.25-oz assorted colors (01246-)

Blick[®] Scholastic Wonder White Round Brushes, size 2 (05381-1002); need one brush per student

Waxed Thread, Black, 150 yd spool (63012-2024); share one among class

Speedball[®] Standard Point Dip Pen Nib, #512 (20913-1512); need one nib per pen

Aleene's[®] Quick-Dry Tacky Glue, 4 oz (23884-1004); need one bottle

Blick[®] Black Cat Waterproof India Ink, 1.25 oz bottle (21101-2003); share among 2-3 students

Optional Materials

Silver Plated Copper Wire, set of 6 colors, 24-gauge (60687-1249)

Darice[®] Hemp Cord, assorted colors (62986-)

Rainbow Glass Beads, multicolor assortment (61521-1010)

Pilot[®] Better Ball Point Pens, Black, medium, box of 12 (20717-2009)

Masking Tape, 3/4" x 60 yd (24126-1018)

Process

1. Using small brushes and opaque acrylic paints, create designs on the plume of the feather. Both sides of the feather may be painted, but the bottom side (the side that curls under as the pen is being held) is naturally more textured and repellent, so it will not accept the paint as readily as the top side. Allow the paint to dry.
2. Glue a metal nib to the lower part of the feather's barrel. Position the nib so the end of the feather is in the curved portion of the nib and not interfering with the nib's point.
3. Wrap thread, hemp cord, or colorful wire tightly around the nib and barrel of the feather to secure the point and to provide a place for gripping the pen. Suggestions:
 - Waxed thread sticks to itself, so it is very easy and effective to use.
 - Bright and light-colored threads will show ink stains and dirt from fingers, so use it with caution. You may want to use these threads further up the barrel where fingers won't be touching them as much.
4. Dip just the point of the pen into the ink and enjoy writing or drawing. Use a wet paper towel to clean off the nib after each use, then wipe it dry with a towel.



Step 1: Use opaque acrylic paints to create designs on the feather.



Step 2: Glue a metal pen nib to the end of the feather's barrel.



Step 3: Wrap the barrel of the feather with thread, wire, or cord.

Options

- Tie small glass beads onto the top of the wrapped area for decoration.
- The feather and wrapping may be sprayed with a clear acrylic sealant, such as Krylon® Crystal Clear, to protect it. Read and follow all safety precautions on the product label.
- To make a quill with a ballpoint nib, remove the plastic barrel and nib combo from an inexpensive stick pen. On the underside of the feather, secure the barrel to the feather by wrapping with waxed thread, leaving the ballpoint exposed.



National Standards for Visual Arts Education

Content Standard #1 — Understanding and applying media, techniques, and processes.

K-4 • Students use different media, techniques, and processes to communicate ideas, experiences, and stories.

5-8 • Students select media, techniques, and processes; analyze what makes them effective or not effective in communicating ideas; and reflect upon the effectiveness of their choices.

9-12 • Students conceive and create works of visual art that demonstrate an understanding of how the communication of their ideas relates to the media, techniques, and processes they use.

Content Standard #6 — Making connections between visual arts and other disciplines.

K-4 • Students identify connections between the visual arts and other disciplines in the curriculum.

5-8 • Students compare the characteristics of works in two or more art forms that share similar subject matter, historical periods, or cultural context.

9-12 • Students compare characteristics of visual arts within a particular historical period or style with ideas, issues, or themes in the humanities or sciences.