

Behind the Nib - by Lou Metcalf

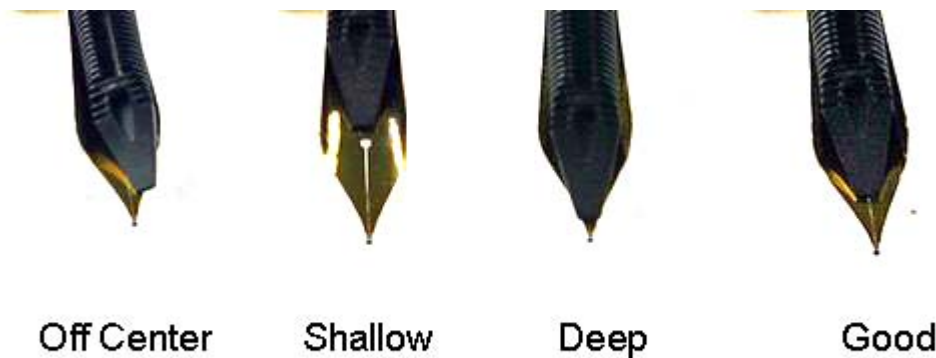
Installment #2

Prepping a New Nib

(Or "You can tune a nib but you can't tuna fish.")

Examine your nib, front and back, under magnification. Other than one side being convex and the other side being concave, what other differences do you note? The front of the nib has the fancy (or not so fancy) engraving, indication of precious metal (if any) and this is where any two-toning typically occurs. The back has the tipping, a small round bit of extra metal, at the point. This is where all of the action takes place! (Without starting a debate, this used to be the iridium tip or point. Anymore, iridium has been replaced.)

Before writing the first line with the nib, make certain that the nib and feed are properly aligned in the housing. Incorrect alignment is a common issue in problematic pens. The feed should be centered along the slit and should bottom out in the housing. The nib should also bottom out. If the housing is not specifically designed for the feed and nib, it is possible that the feed and nib may be out of alignment. You can adjust either one slightly until the feed lays comfortably along the slit, covering the heart hole and most of the slit without protruding beyond the silhouette of the nib.



Once you are comfortable that the nib and feed are properly aligned in the housing, you are ready to test the nib. The preferred method is to use bottled ink and dip the nib into the ink, up to the heart hole, for 1-2 seconds to allow the feed to pick up some ink. Write a few lines in flowing letters, some using tight curls and others using loose curls. Pay attention to any irregularities or scratchiness. If the pen writes smoothly and the ink flows well, STOP! Disassemble the nib feed and housing and clean thoroughly, then re-assemble. The pen is ready!

If the ink flow is uneven or if the feel of writing is scratchy, the nib needs some tuning. There are two primary areas of the nib which can benefit from tuning – the slit and the tip.

The slit is a place where imperfections love to hide. Buffing compound, small bits of metal from grinding and the like can collect here. Cleaning this out is simple. I use a small piece of brass (0.002" thick), sliding a corner between the tines and moving it from front to back such that the entire slit, from heart hole to tip, is cleaned out. Generally this is all that is needed.

Tuning the tip is only a bit more involved, but remember that this is not for everyone. This takes patience and practice. I use three different abrasives – Micro-mesh 12000, a 1-micron Mylar abrasive sheet and a .5 micron Mylar abrasive sheet. Some use more aggressive abrasives. In the hands of a nibmeister, that is fine. I am an amateur, so I choose to go slowly. Use of the three abrasives in the order above will allow you to achieve a highly polished surface such that writing is a pleasure.

There are two areas of the tip to focus on – the bottom or convex surface and the shoulders on the point. Using cool tap water as a lubricant and very light pressure, draw curved patterns over and over on the abrasive. This is the subjective part. Every 30 seconds or so, pull the nib along a sheet of high quality writing paper. If you still feel scratchiness, continue until the nib feels smooth. Move through the next two abrasive sheets in the same manner. When you feel you have a totally smooth surface, dip the nib in ink again and write lines of cursive and curled patterns. You should see a significant difference in the pre- and post-tuning lines and your fingers should feel like they are gliding ink onto the paper.

N.B. The brass sheet can also be used to clean the channels in the feed. This is a task best left to experts. I recommend Richard Binder if you choose to go that route.
www.richardspens.com

Materials can be purchased from <http://www.tryphon.it/catalogo.htm>