

Basic Flourish Strokes

The most complex calligraphed designs are often much simpler than they appear. Almost all flourishing can be broken down into a set of simple strokes that have been combined and repeated. Many of these strokes do not have official names, but they all work together to create simply stunning flourishes.

Mastering these movements will result in much cleaner, more attractive flourishes, so resist the urge to start with more complicated designs. You'll thank me later! If you find you are struggling with a particular stroke, try doing a whole page of them. You'll be surprised how much you improve by the end of the page. Don't forget to start by tracing the exemplar with a pencil, and go slowly!

You'll notice that some of the exemplars on the following pages are in monoline. Monoline flourishes may be easier to learn than flourishes that have contrast between thick and thin. Being able to do both will give you options later when it comes time to draft more complicated pieces. In my own practice, I almost always choose monoline flourishes because I like the hierarchy it creates between the lettering and the flourishing. This choice is especially suited to pieces that call for simplicity or a light touch. They also enhance legibility, as the eye is less likely to confuse monoline flourishes for letters. Start with monoline and move on to flourishes with thick and thin variations when you are ready.

Once you've got a good feel for these movements, revisit them often. The more you practice them, the better your flourishing will look. Do a page of the basic flourish strokes any time you pick up your pen. They're a great warm-up and will always benefit your practice.

Ovals. Many flourishes are based on the oval shape, and this movement is often considered one of the trickiest to master. Starting at the cap height, transition early from thin to thick as you move your pencil or pen in a downward motion. At the baseline, do the same, transitioning to thin, after which you will bring your pencil or pen back up to the cap height. This is done in one continuous motion, with the beginning and end of the stroke joining seamlessly. Don't worry if your ovals don't look quite right in the beginning. Unless you are an established brush-letterer, this will be a tough movement to get the hang of. Everyone feels a bit overwhelmed when they first try ovals! Keep practicing, go slowly, and don't give up. Try filling a whole page of ovals, practicing them in both directions. With repetition, you will find yourself creating lovely ovals in no time!

TIP: Some letterers like to start their ovals in the middle of the downstroke. As your pencil or pen comes around the top, you can hide the transition inside the downstroke! Others like to begin the oval at the 2 o'clock position of the upstroke. Try a few variations, and pick the strategy that works best for you.

Italic Ovals. Practice giving your ovals a bit of a forward lean, as sometimes this adds a nice stylistic touch to a flourish.

Horizontal S-curves. Also known as “swells,” these lines feature a gentle curve in a subtle s-shape. Notice that s-curves start and end as a hairline but feature a robust center. Conversely, s-curves can also be made entirely as a hairline stroke, with no contrast between thick and thin.

Vertical S-curves. S-curves are mostly used in horizontal applications, but occasionally a vertical s-curve will be called for, especially when it comes time to attach flourishes to letters. Try it in both directions so you will be ready to use it when you need it.

Single Spirals. This is a basic move that will form the basis of the flourish work to come. Try single spirals that start on the outside edge (the biggest part of the spiral) and some that start in the center (the smallest part of the spiral). I’ve included spirals going in both directions, so you can move confidently in both directions when it comes to creating more complicated designs.

Double Spirals. Take the single spiral one step further with a double spiral. Here you will start in the middle of the first spiral, then create a gently curving line before creating a second spiral that turns in the opposite direction. Be sure to try it moving in both directions. Add an embellishment in the middle for a whimsical touch!

Stretched Double Spirals. Here the focus is a long, slightly curved line bookended by small, tight curls on each end.

Horizontal S-curve with Oval. Start with an s-curve, then move your pen upward to the cap height before finishing in an open oval shape.

Hooks. A hook is just a truncated spiral. Start at the top of a spiral, ending it before you complete the second internal spiral. Make sure you try it in both directions.

Spiral with Horizontal S-curve. Start with a simple spiral, then exit it with a horizontal s-curve. Practice it in both directions, as it is a common flourish shape.

Underturn Loops. These looping strokes feature a similar underturn stroke to those in your warm-ups. Do a few loops in a row and then lift your pencil or pen and start again!

Overturn Loops. Continue making loops, this time with an overturn direction. Try creating them larger and smaller and work in both directions.

Overlapping Loops. We'll explore overlapping flourishes in a future section, but now is a good time to try slightly overlapping your loops. Try to keep the overlapping bits even across the loops.

Italic Loops. Try giving your loops an italic lean, as this gives a different feel to some flourishes.

Stretched Loops. This time create a smaller loop with long, stretched-out connecting strokes.

Horizontal Open Figure 8s. This stroke is really just two s-curves that are attached. Unlike the classic figure 8 or infinity symbol, leave the end open.

Descending Figure 8s. This is a similar shape as the previous one, but this time the loop is repeated below the first.

Repeating Vertical Figure 8s. Similar to a script letter S in brush-lettering, this stroke can be repeated for a while before lifting your pencil or pen and starting over. Position your pencil or pen at the baseline, do an s-curve upstroke that goes up to the cap height, curve it back over, and do a vertical s-curve back down to the baseline. Repeat a few times, then lift your pencil or pen and start again.

Tear Drops. Also known as petals, these shapes will become very familiar when you start attaching flourishes to letters. Practice them in different sizes and orientations so you will be ready to add them to your future work.

TIP: Lift your wrist off the page to allow for fluid arm movement through the entire stroke.

All the strokes on the following practice pages will work together in different combinations to create intricate, stunning flourishes in the next sections. Before you move on, spend some time really mastering these movements. Don't fret if some movements don't come easily—everyone feels overwhelmed in the beginning! Keep working at it. Repetition is key to building muscle memory that will help you execute future flourishes with control and finesse. Once you're adept at these strokes, you will move on to some classic, standalone flourishes that will make your lettering work look spectacular!

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