Gunnlaugur SE Briem

Hand-writing repair

The italic approach

Gunnlaugur SE Briem

Hand-writing

The italic approach

repair

For conditions of use, please see the last page

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23 January is John Hancock's Birthday. It is also National Handwriting Day. To mark the occasion, Linnea Lundquist and Ward Dunham at Atelier Gargoyle in San Francisco asked me for this workshop. It was a pleasure.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over lazy dog

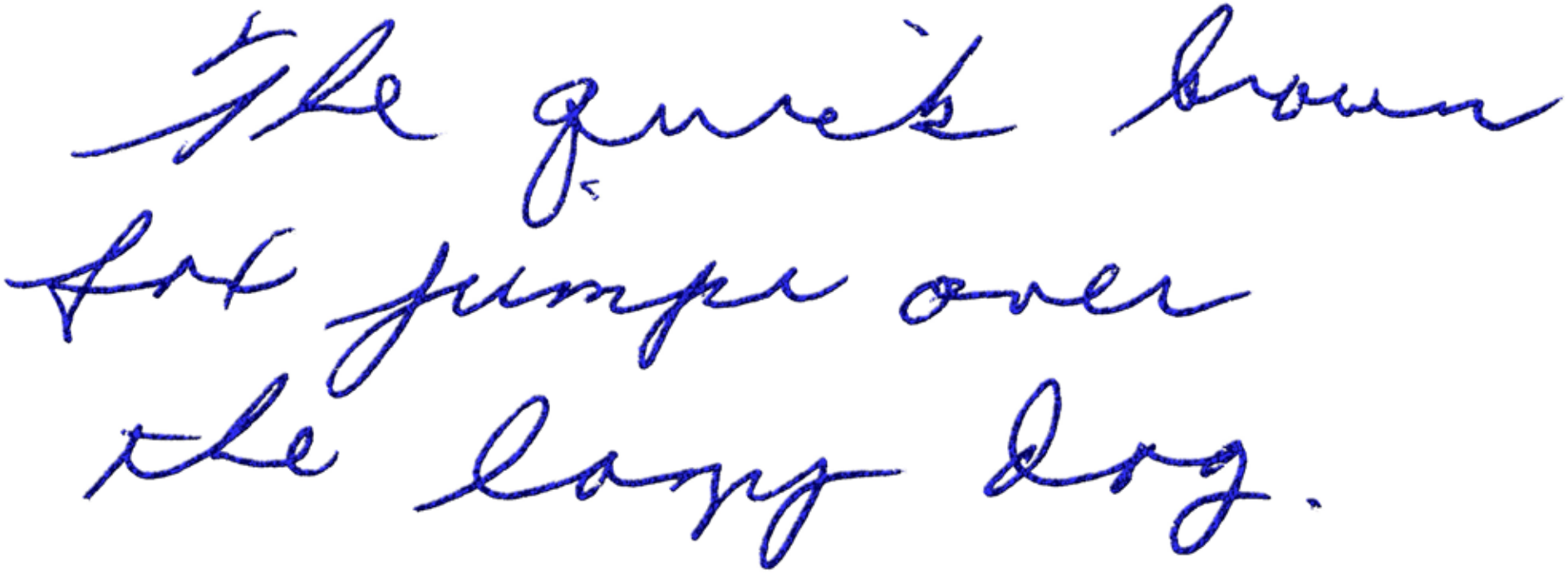
Photo: www.paullewis.co.uk

4

First of all, remember that you have a choice. The faster you write, the worse it looks. The simplest way to make it better is to slow down.

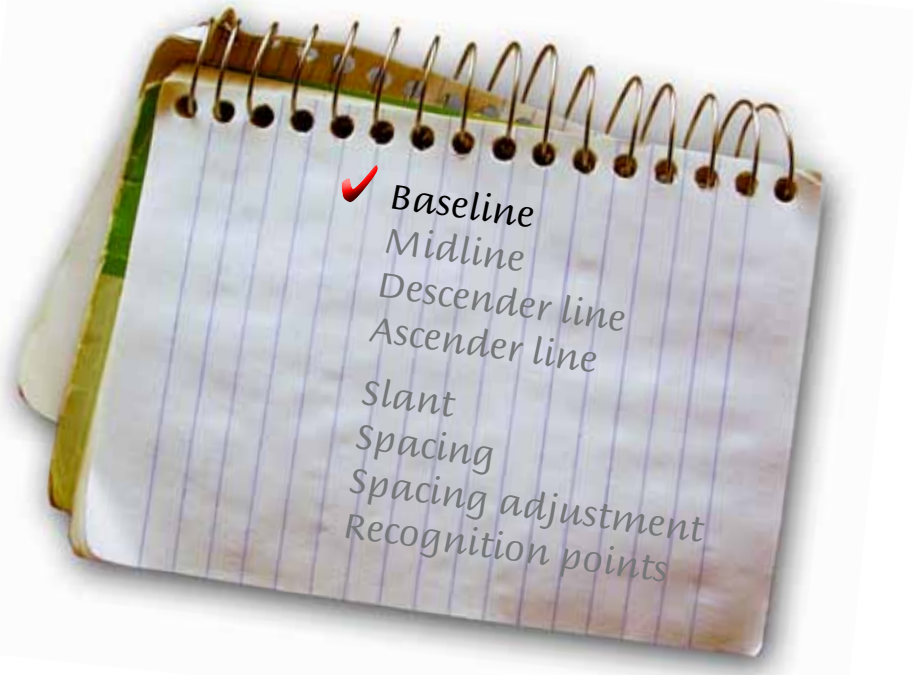
5

Ten easy steps will usually improve a scribble. They work with any style. Let me show you what I mean.



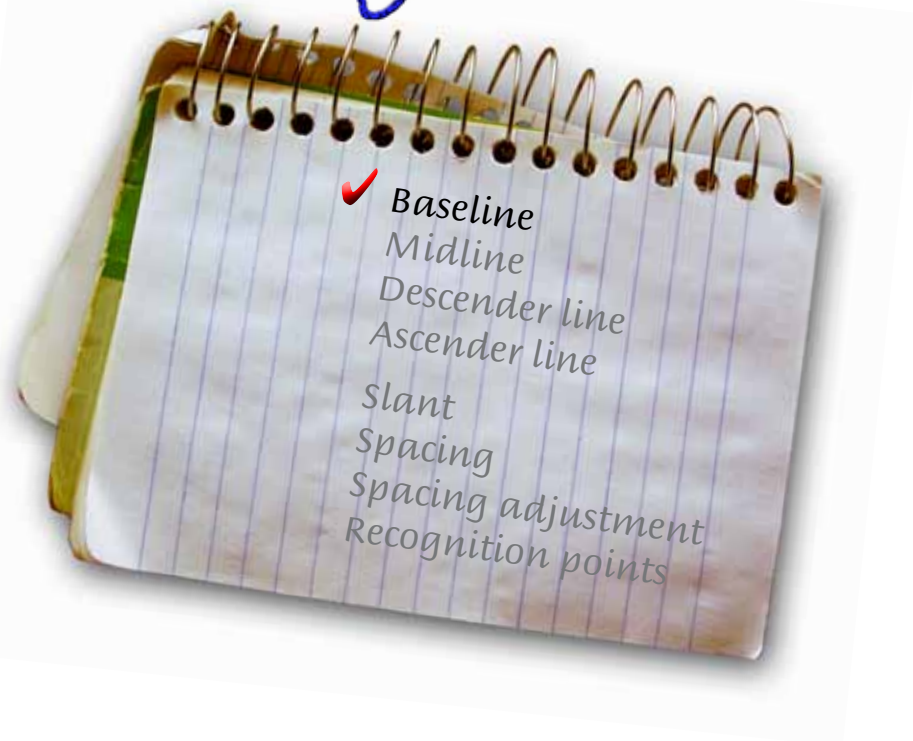
6 Nothing's wrong with this handwriting. It was written fast. The writer can read it.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



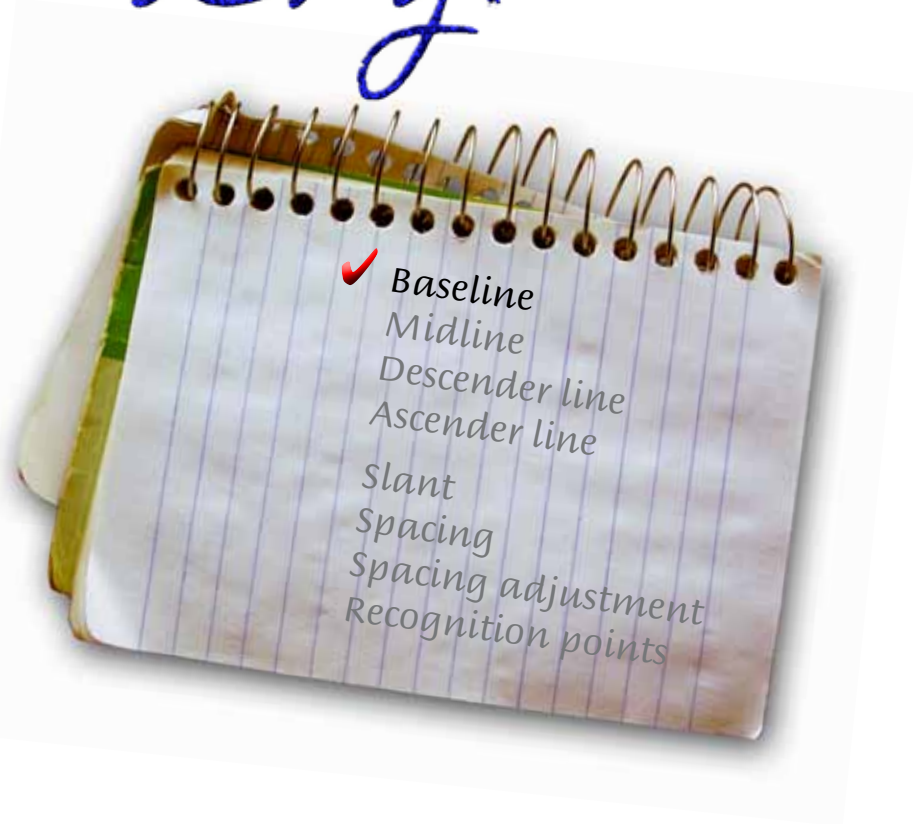
7 First, add baselines.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



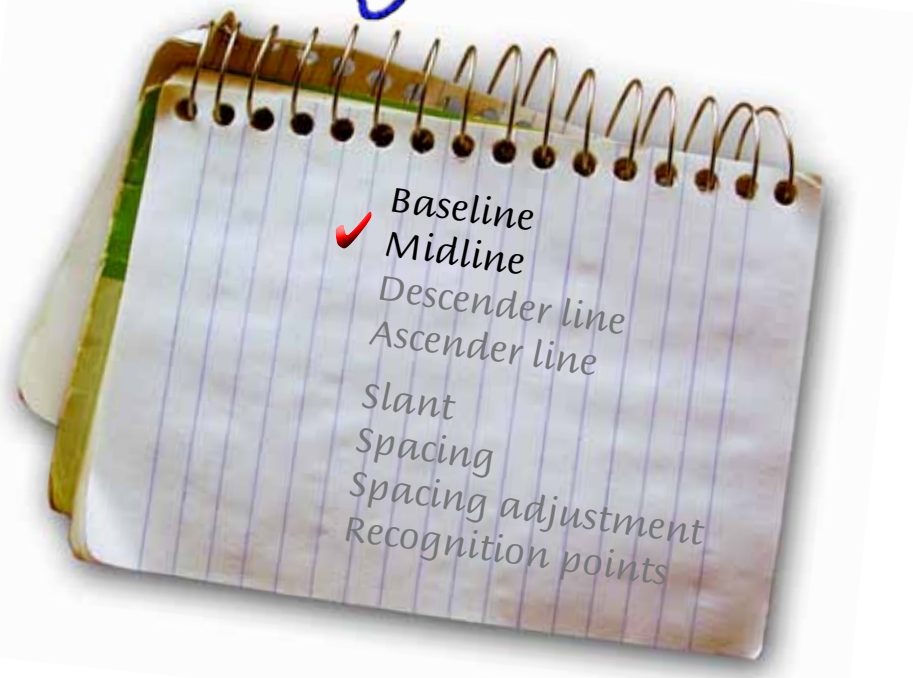
8 All the letters that are meant to sit on the baseline do it now.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



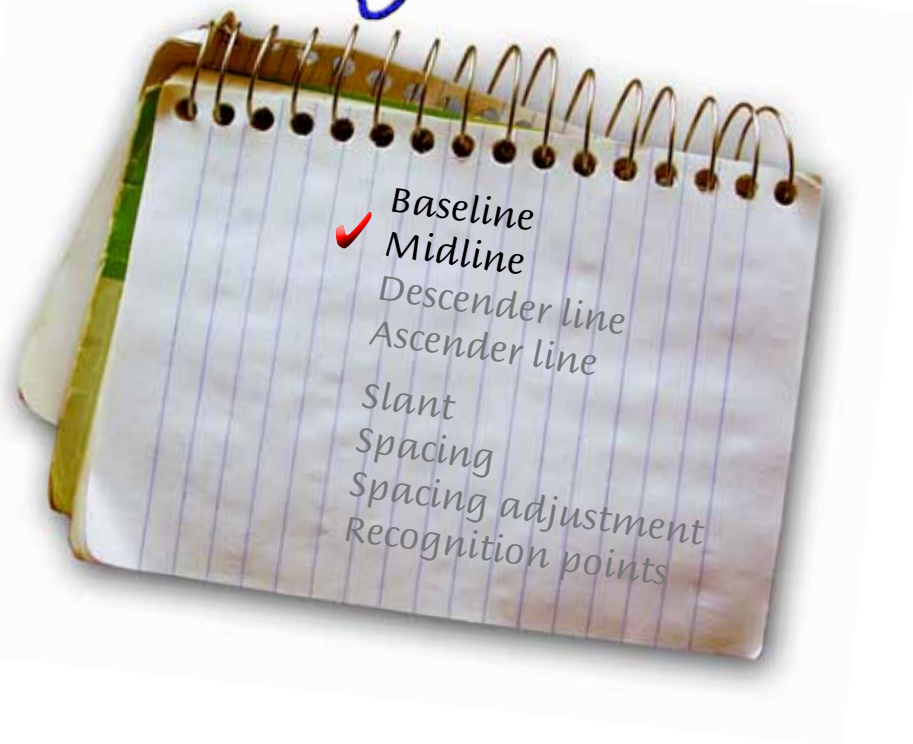
9 This already looks a little better than it did before.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



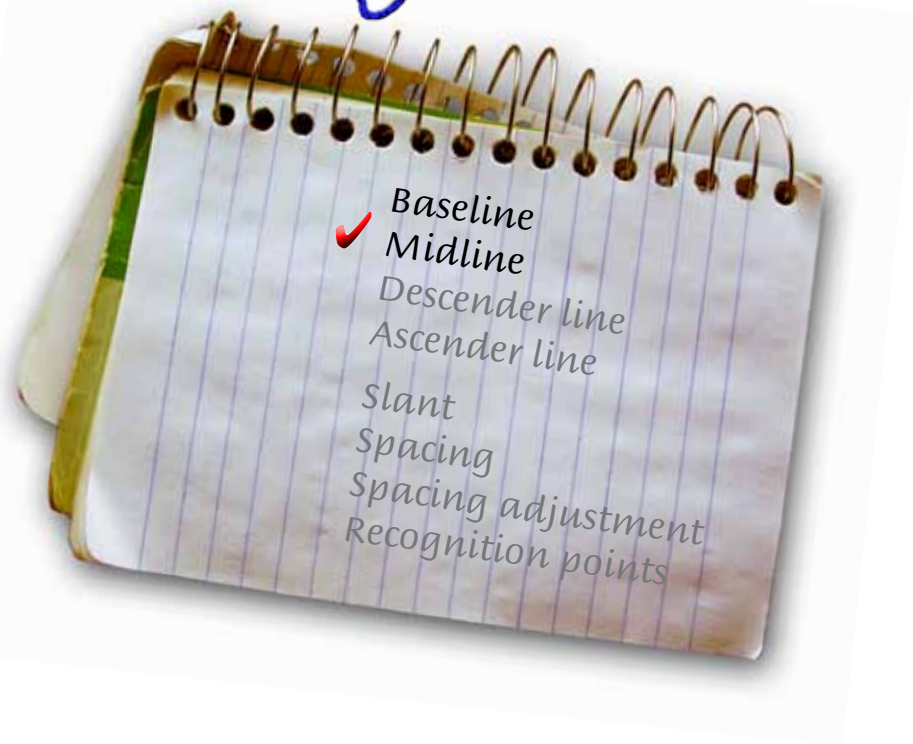
10 Second, add midlines to impose more order.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



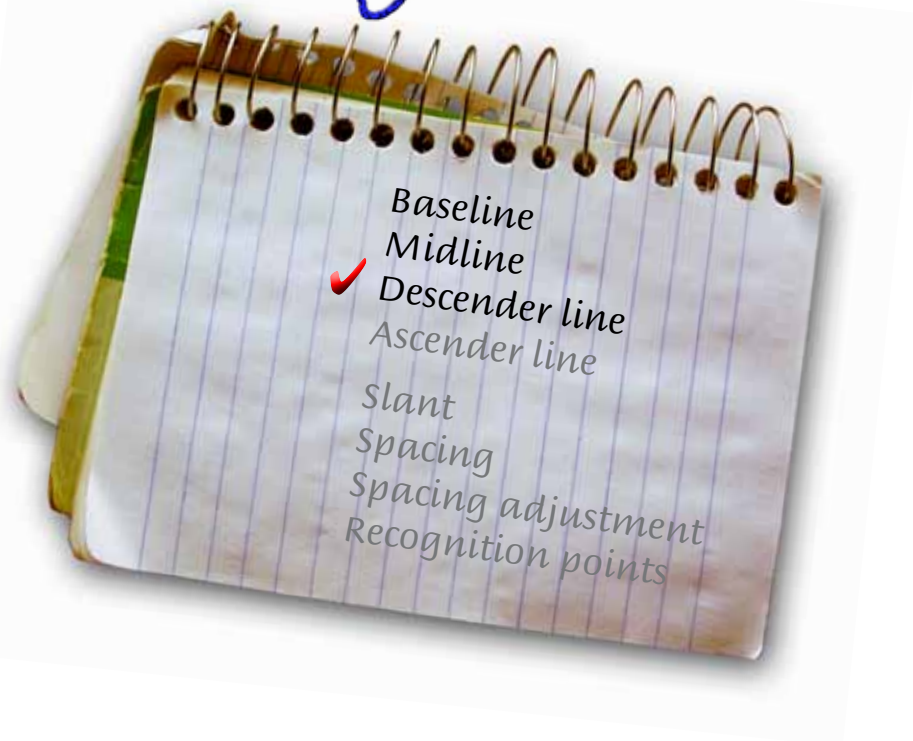
11 Here all the strokes that should reach the midlines actually do.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



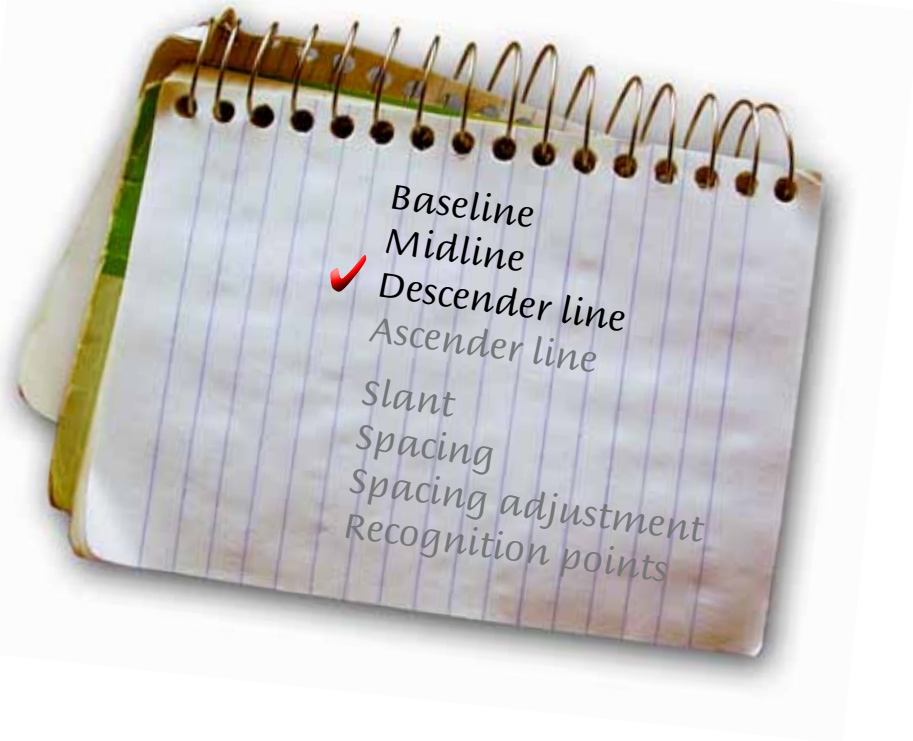
12 This is the result.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



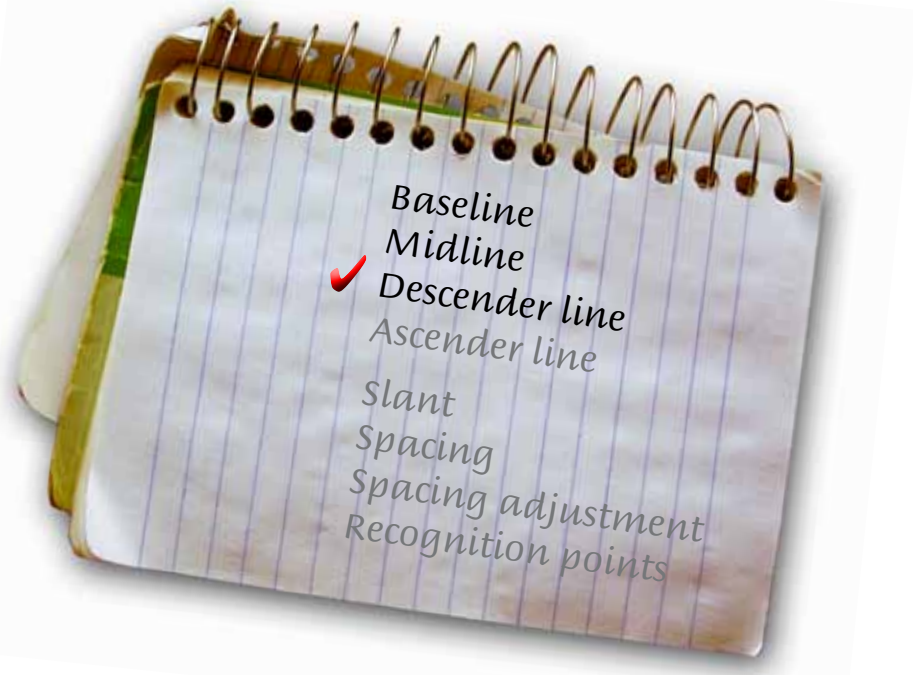
13 Third, let's add a descender line.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



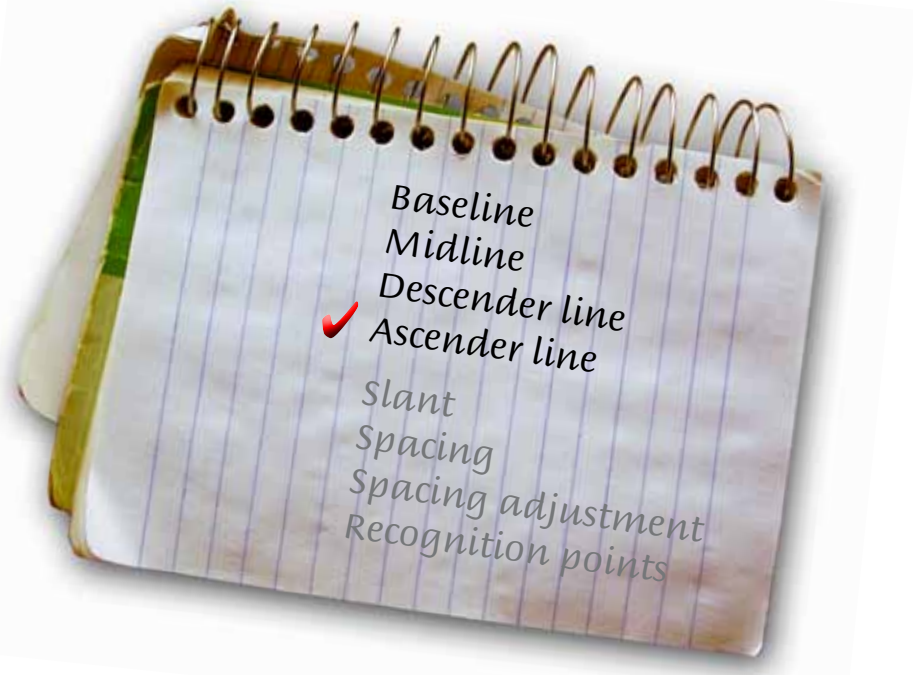
The descenders all reach it and not one goes over it.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.



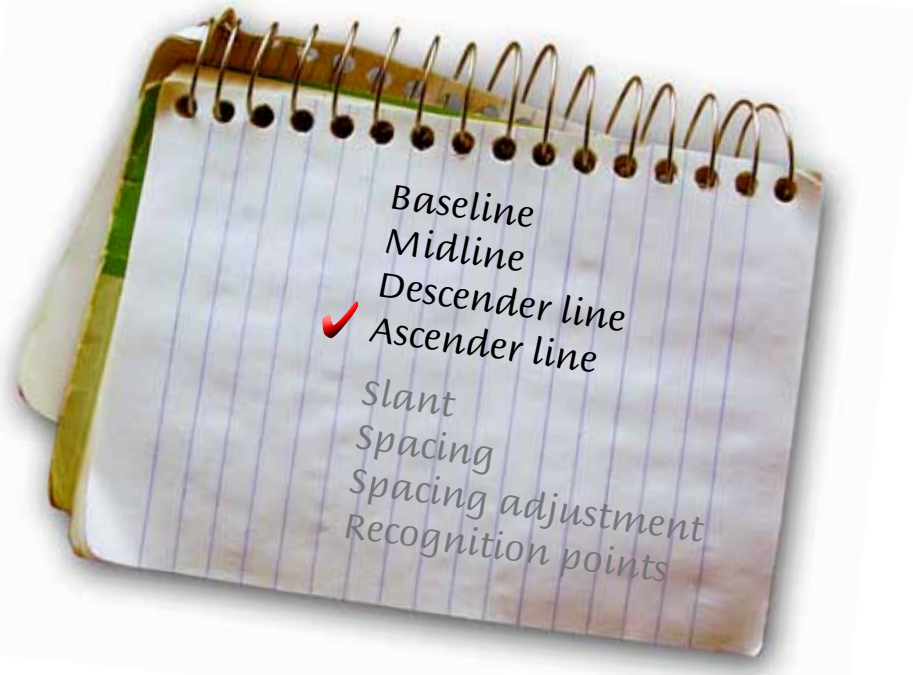
This is what they look like when they're all lined up.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.



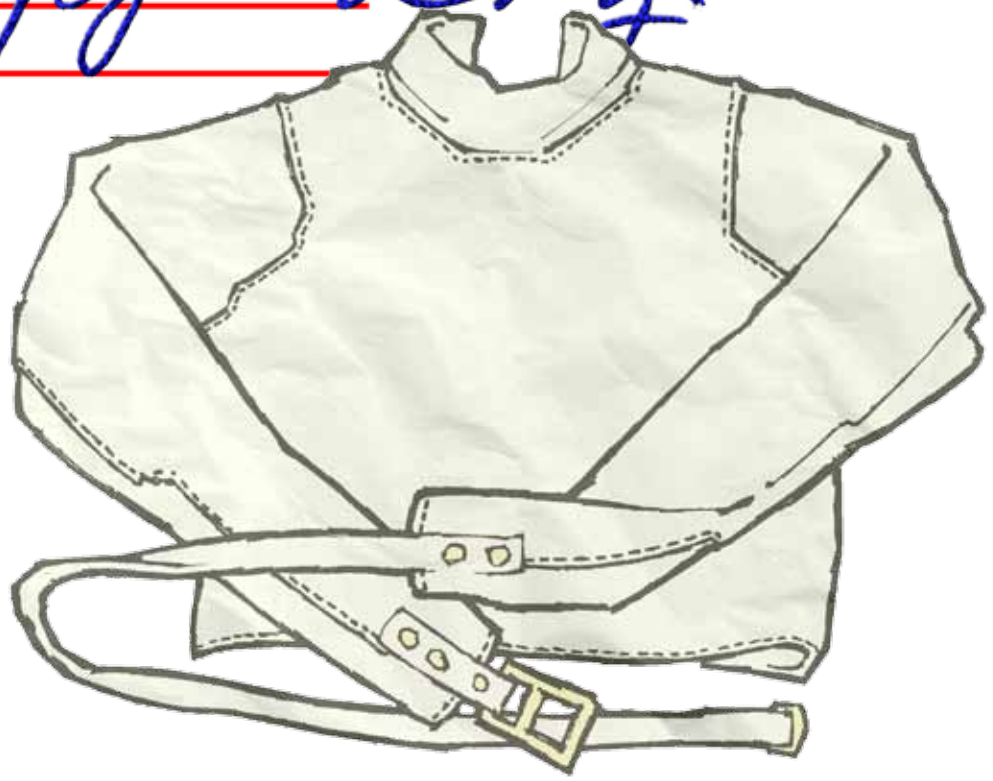
16 Fourth, we add an ascender line.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.



The ascenders are all lined up here, and if you think ...

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.



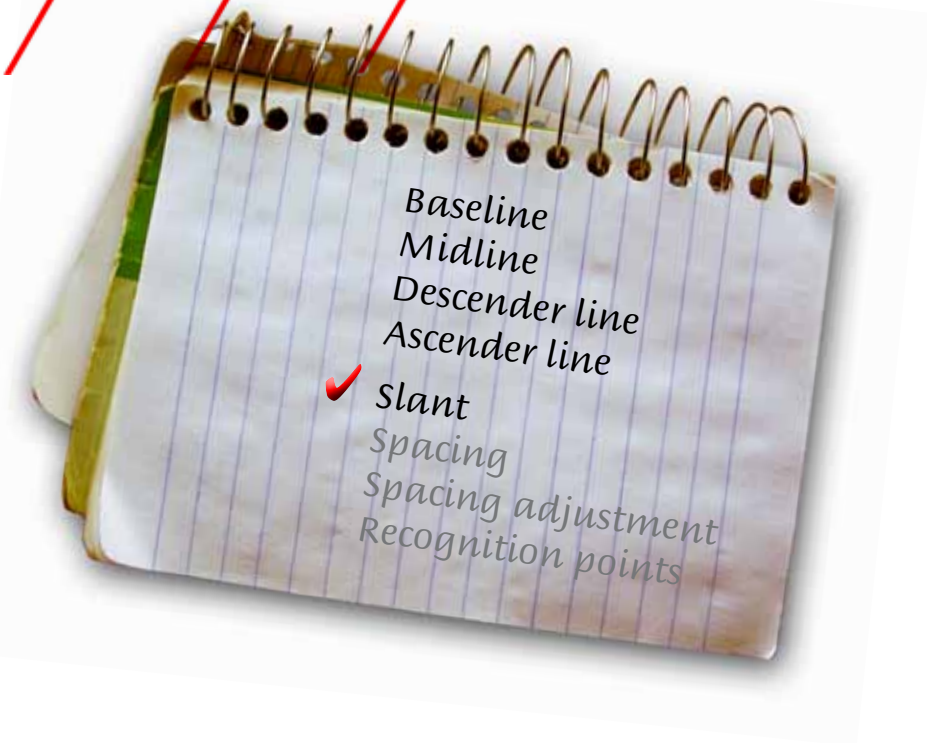
18
175

... that's a straitjacket, you'll be interested to see
how handwriting was taught in the nineteenth century.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.

19 As we got everything lined up, the slant became irregular.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

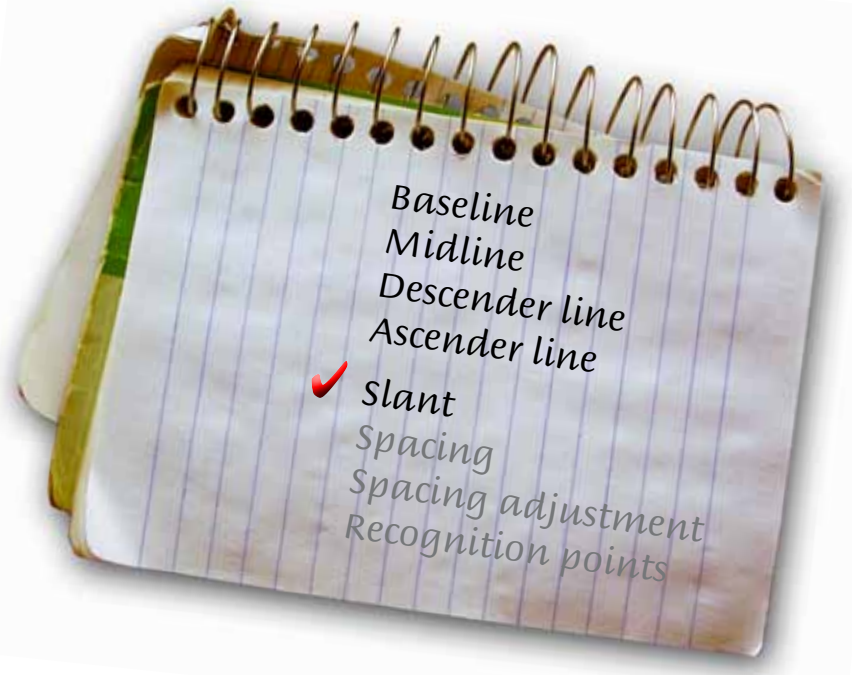


20 Guidelines for slant will take care of that.

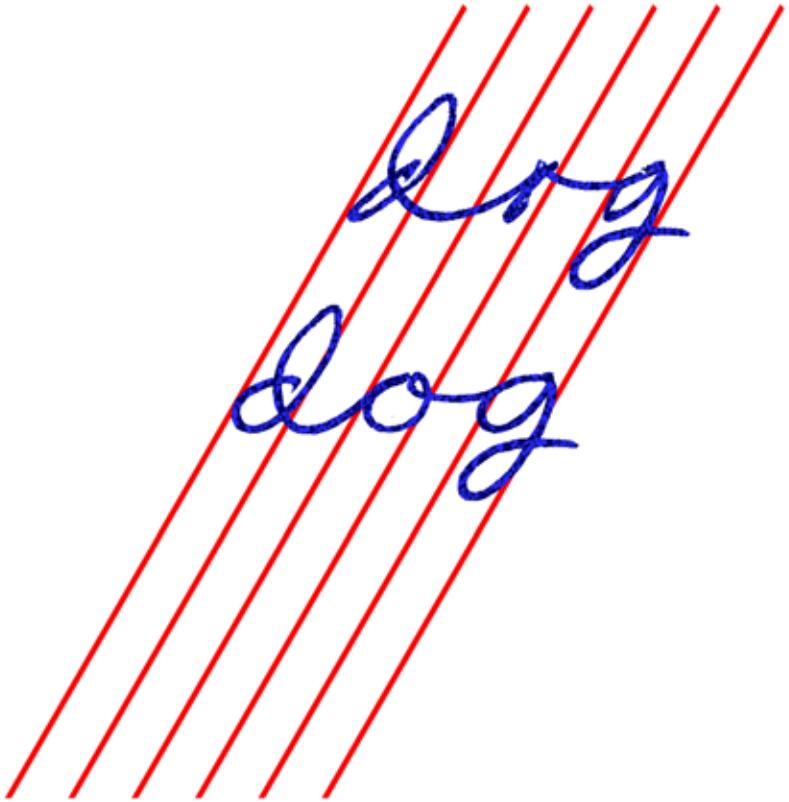
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

21 We have tilted these letters so they all lean much the same to the right.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

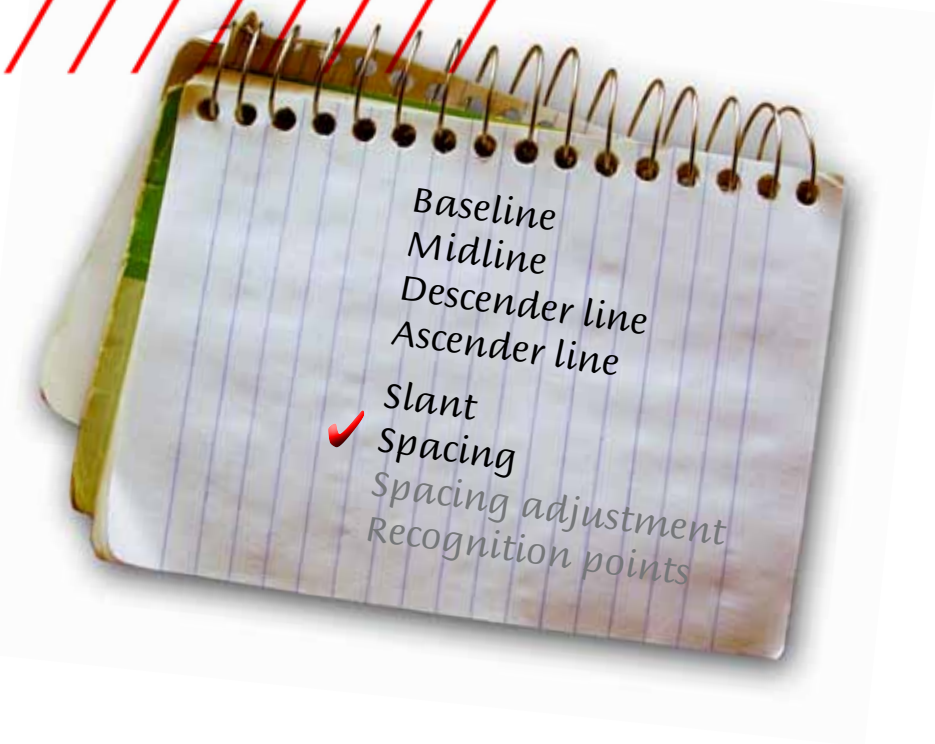


22 Now that they are more even than they were when we started, we can see that the spacing is lumpy.

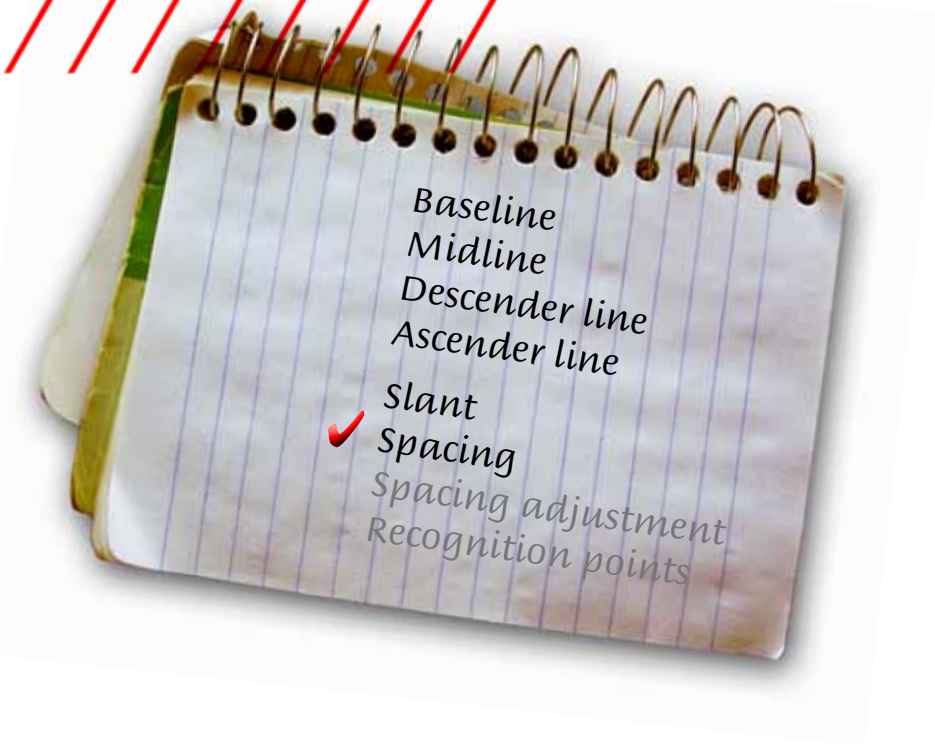


This is how it works. As a general rule, all the stems should be the same distance apart.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.



So we apply spacing lines.



25 These letters are more evenly spaced.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.

27 The red markers show wide gaps and the green marker points at a narrow gap.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.

28 The spacing is now acceptable.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

29 Most of the letters are even and legible.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.

30 But this letter s would be hard to identify out of context.

The quick brown
fox jumps over
the lazy dog.

Making it legible is just a matter of adding a recognition point. But after all this,

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

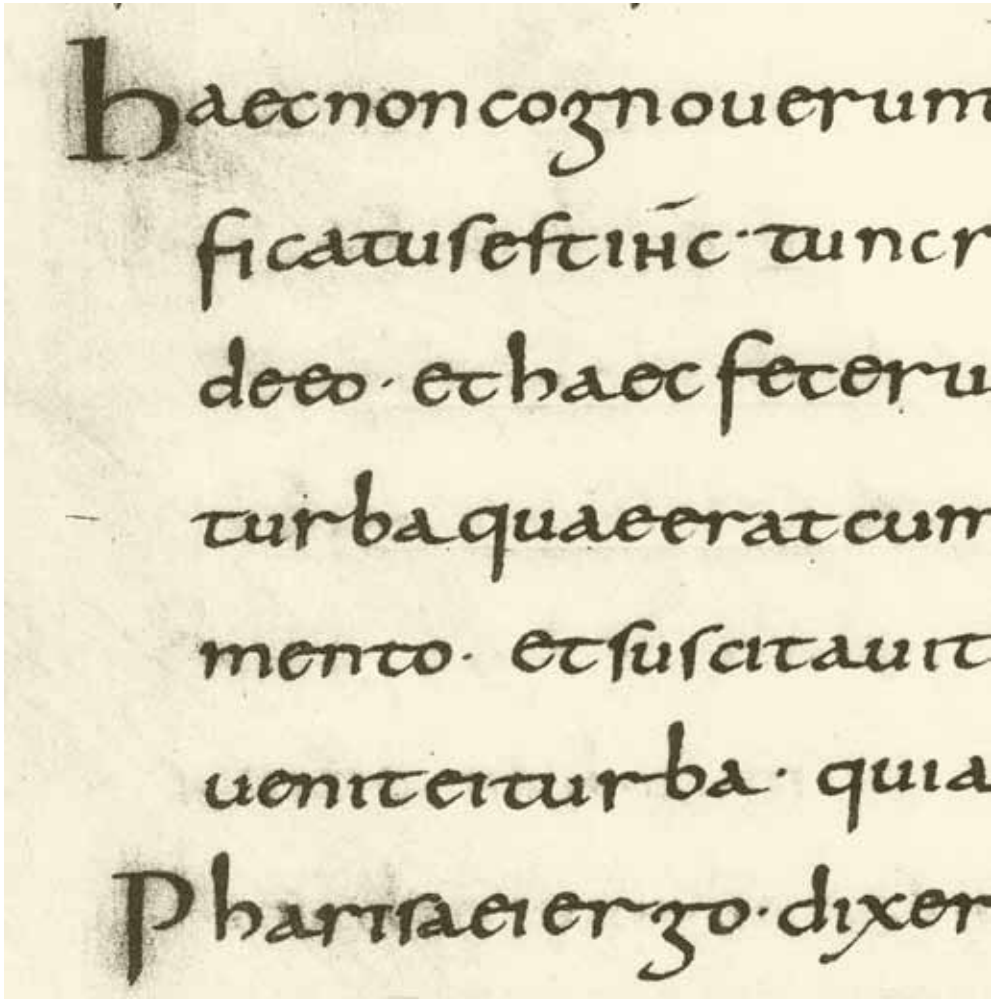
This text was sent down a USB cable and printed out. It's a typeface that has been used to make model sheets in Iceland for over twenty years.

This is how it looks when it's written with a broad-edge fountain pen.

Even when you use a pencil, it's respectable. You may notice that the captial letter T is lower that the letter h that follows it. There's a reason for that. Italic is slightly modified historical style.

In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the ascenders were highers than the caps, and that's how they are today. And back then the letter t was only made high enough not to be mistaken for the letter c.

First aid
What is italic, then?
Zigzags and markers
Hand control
Pen hold
Your tools
Circles and rectangles
The print script disaster
More history
Lefties
Model sheets
Summary
Worksheets

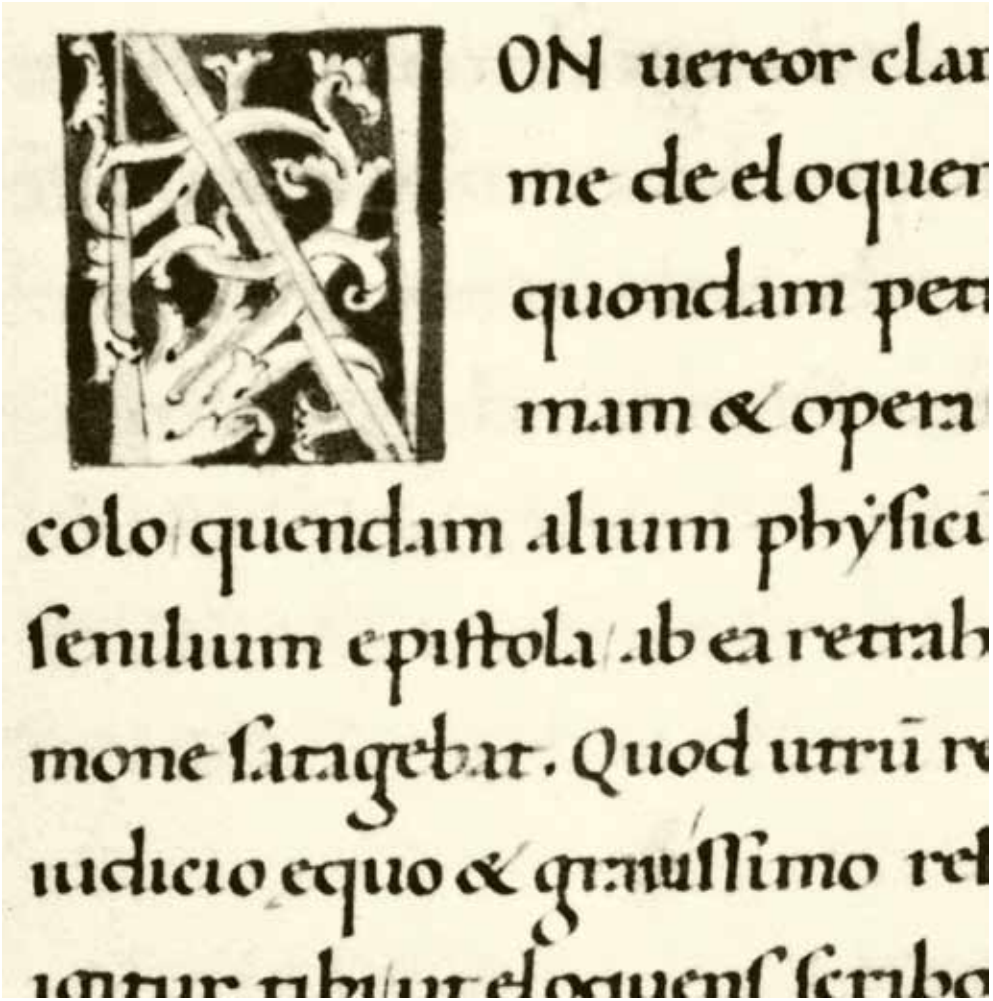


9th–10th century, France

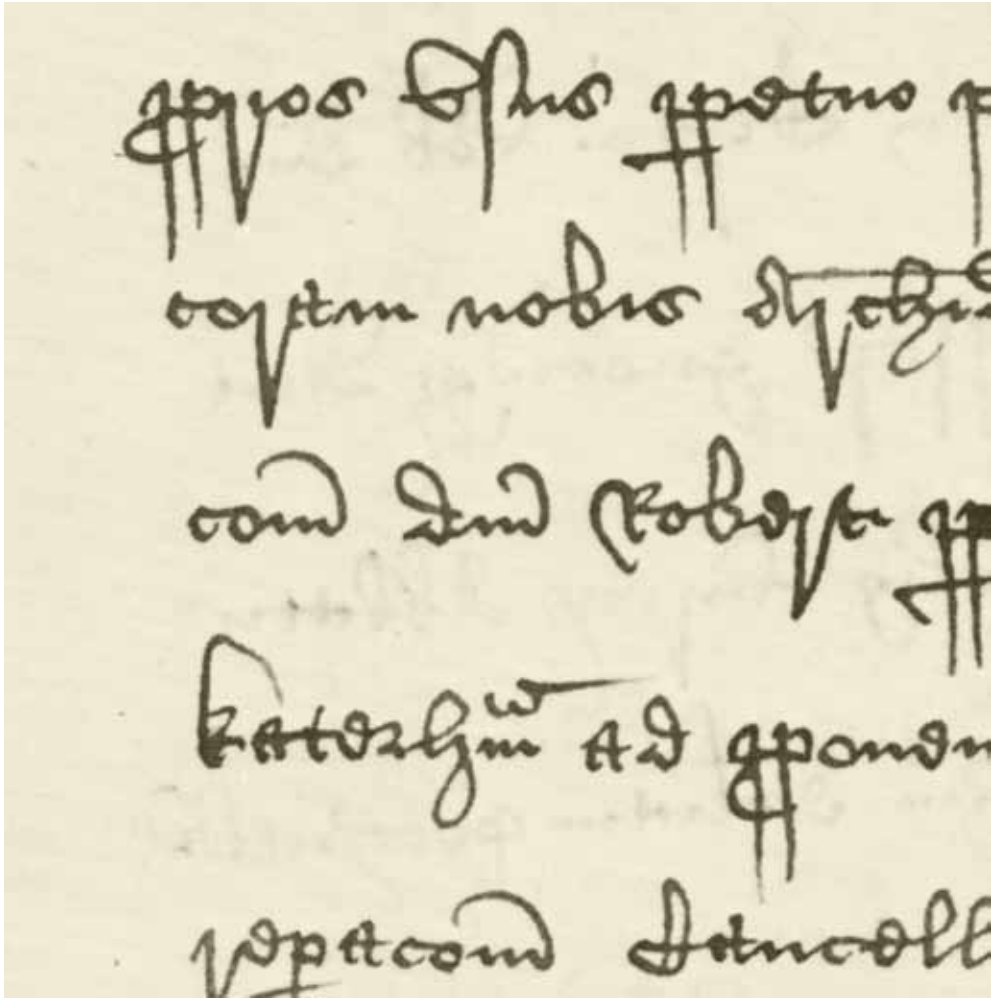
In the fifteenth century, scholars in Florence really liked the look of some recently discovered manuscripts. Most of them were written in the Carolingian style.

1st century BC. Roman caps

They added capitals, the best of Roman display letters.

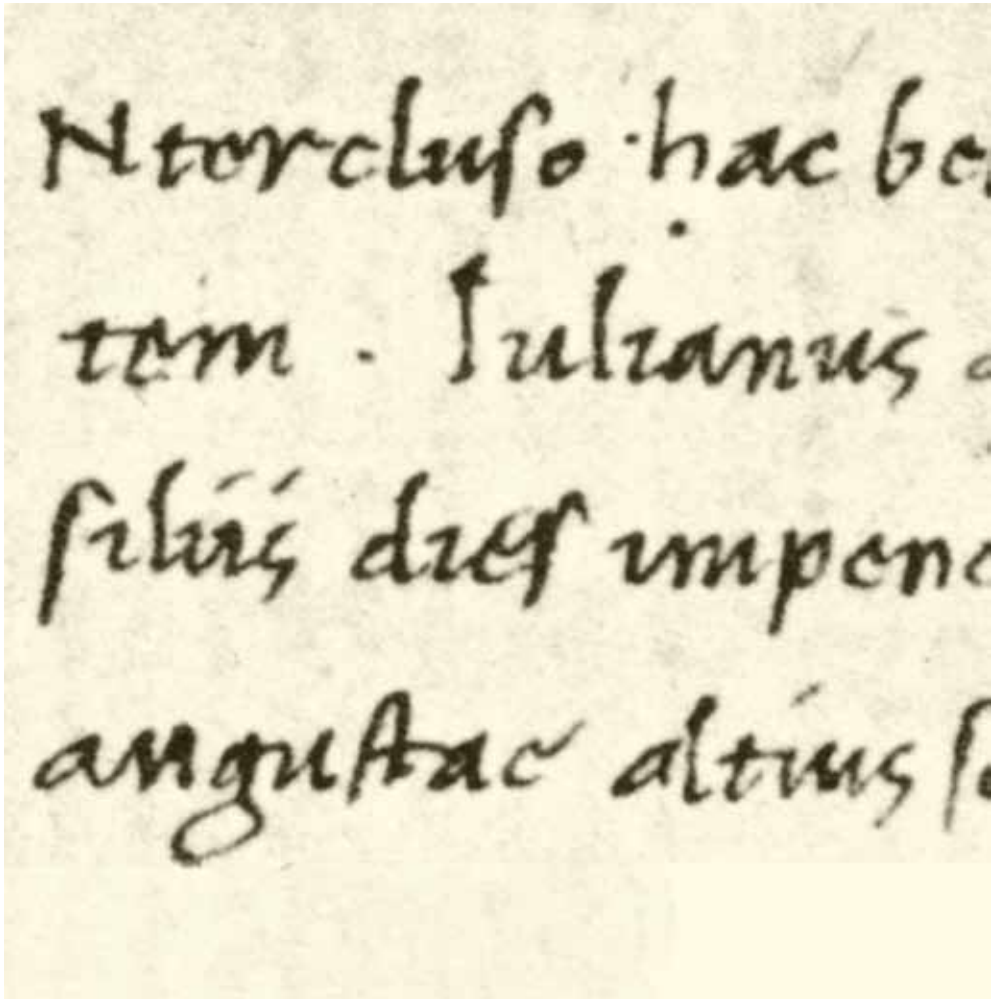


1402–3 Poggio Braccolini



1334 London

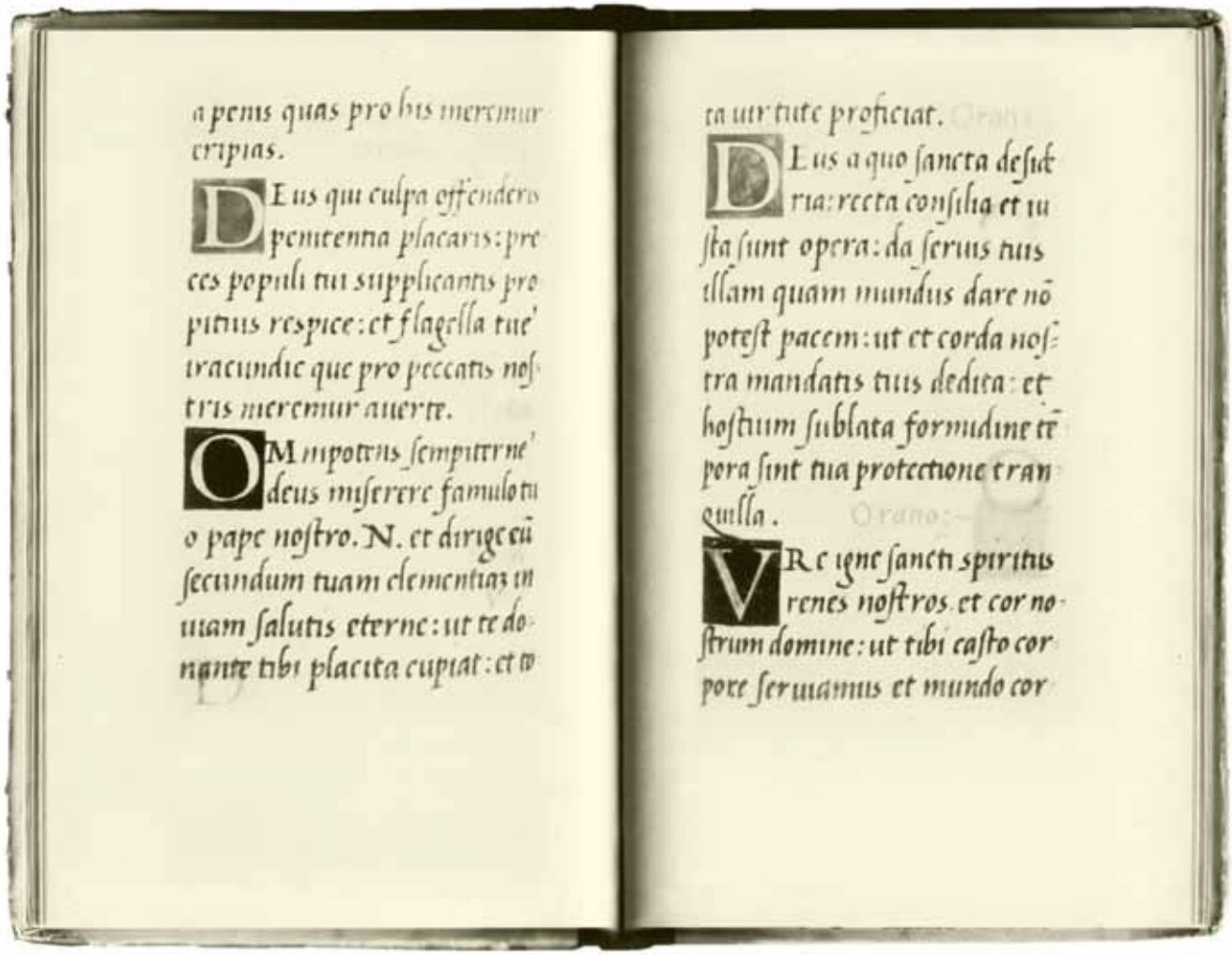
The look of the new style was combined with the movements of blackletter cursive.



1423 Niccolò Niccoli

1522 Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi

This model alphabet was printed from a woodcut a century later, when the style had already peaked.



a penis quas pro his meremur
eripias.

DEus qui culpa offenderis
penitentia placaris: pre
ces populi tui supplicantis pro
pitius respice: et flagella tue
iracundie que pro peccatis nos
tris meremur auerte.

OMnipotens sempiterne
deus miserere famulo tu
o pape nostro. N. et dirige eũ
secundum tuam clementiaꝫ in
uiam salutis eterne: ut te do
nante tibi placita cupiat: et to

ta uirtute proficiat.

DEus a quo sancta desid
ria: recta consilia et iu
sta sunt opera: da seruis tuis
illam quam mundus dare nõ
potest pacem: ut et corda nos
tra mandatis tuis dedita: et
hostium sublata formidine tẽ
pora sint tua protectione tran
quilla.

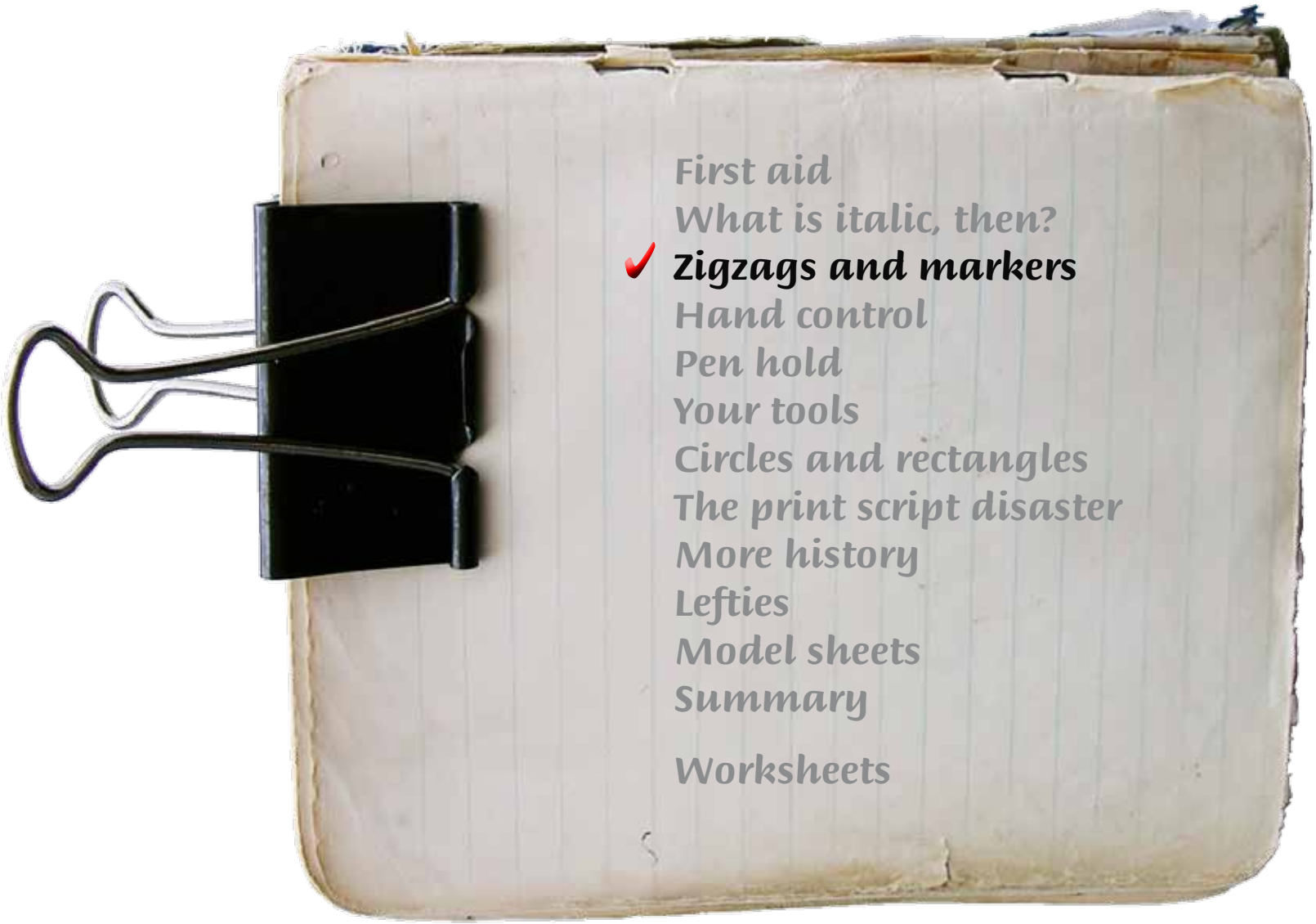
VRe igne sancti spiritus
renes nostros. et cor no
strum domine: ut tibi casto cor
pore seruiamus et mundo cor

16th century. Ludovico Vicentino degli Arrighi

The press couldn't capture the subtlety of Arrighi's handwriting. This is what it looked like when he wrote with a pen.

1964 Bent Rhode

Early in the twentieth century, Alfred Fairbank devised a beautiful italic that swept many people off their feet, myself included.



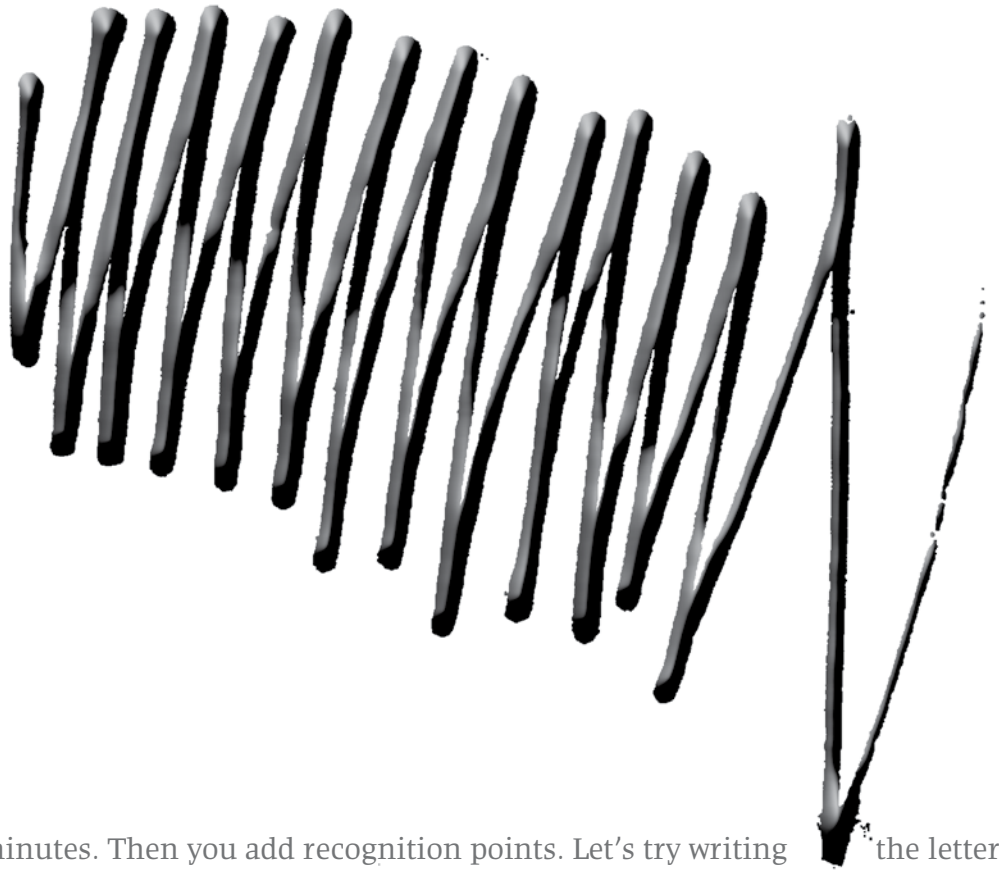
I will now show you one way of getting a grip on italic. It's about movement.

uuu

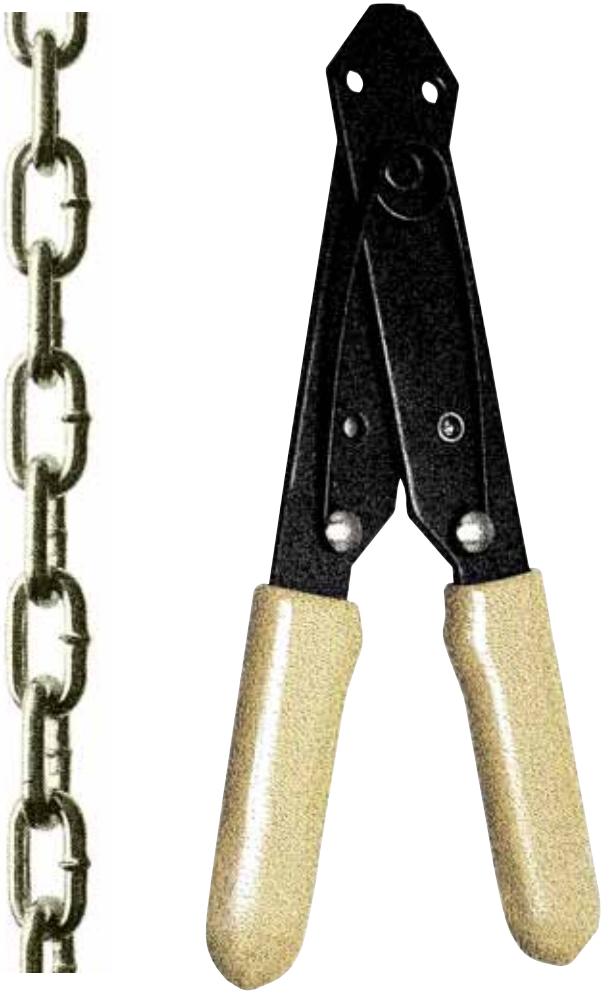
uuuu

uuui

uuuii



Most people can learn the movement for italic in twenty minutes. Then you add recognition points. Let's try writing the letter u three times. Then add dots over the third and sixth stems, and you have the letters ui twice. But first of all, you need a zigzag.



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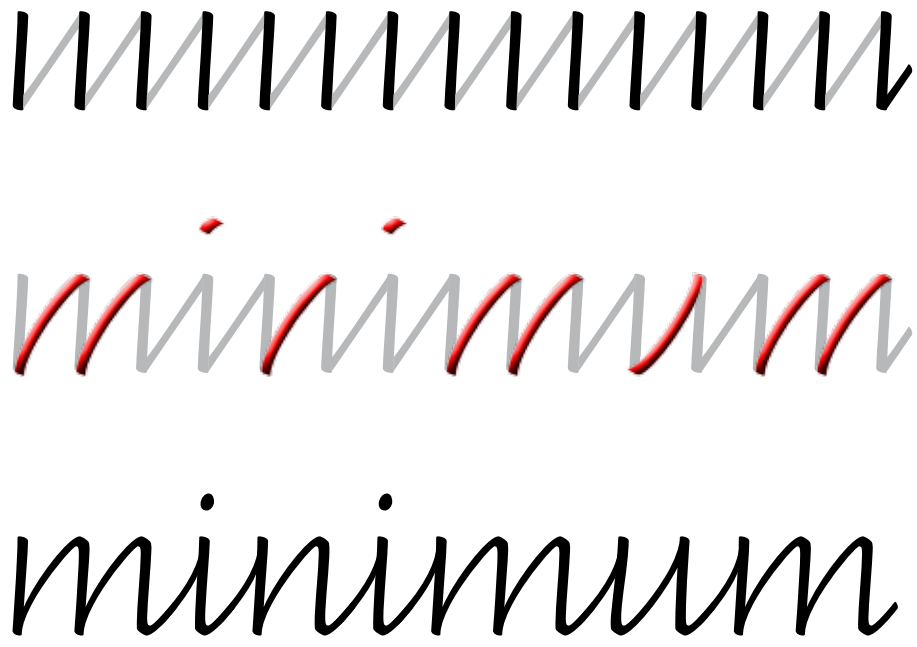
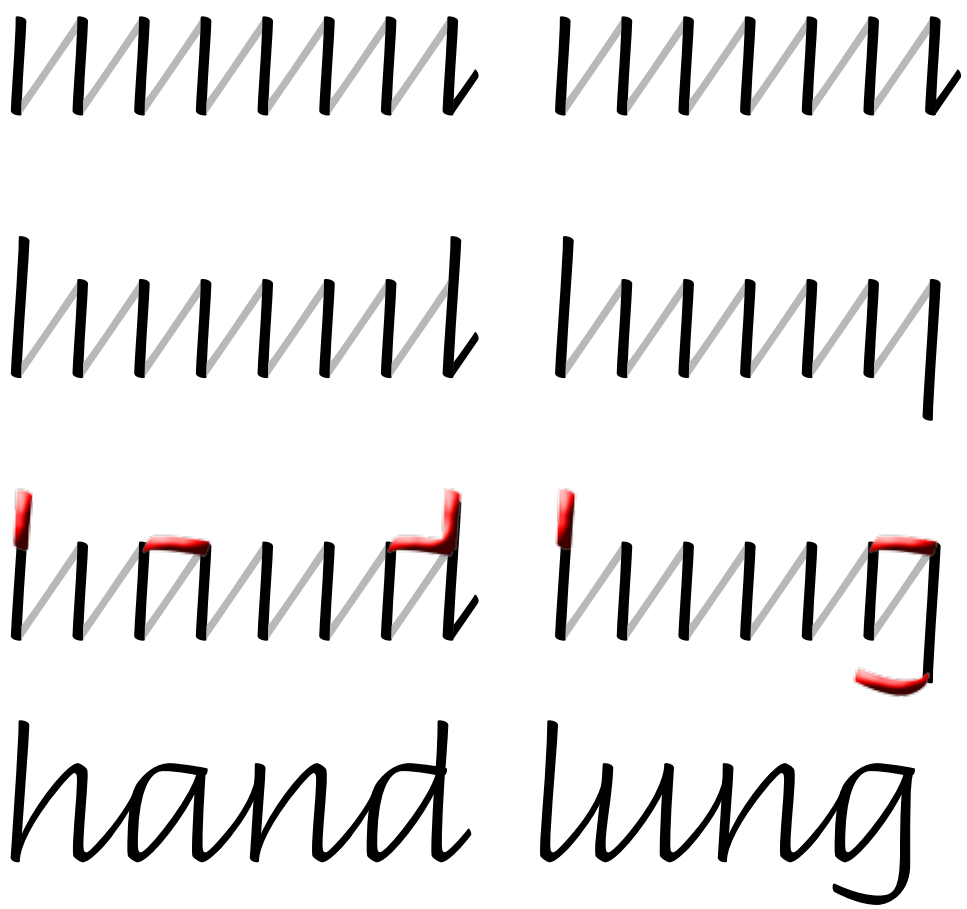
People are capable of extraordinary things when they don’t know what they’re doing. For the moment, I’d like you to cut all links to handwritten letters as best you can, and concentrate on movement.

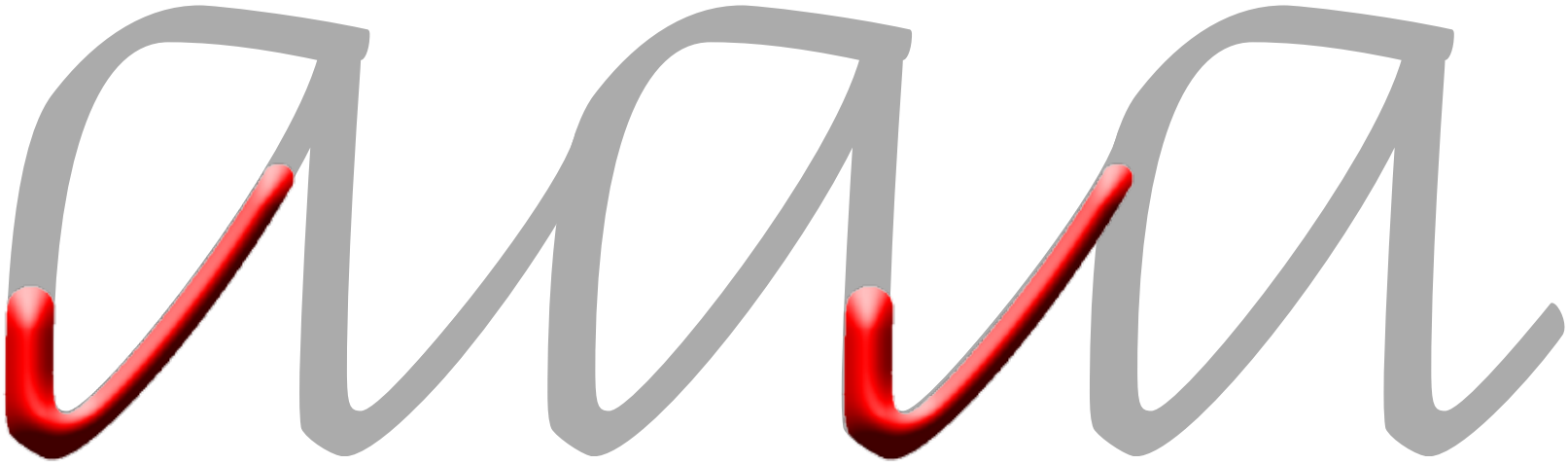


Let’s start with a simple movement pattern, a zigzag. Add a few recognition points, and you have a word. As we begin, I have three suggestions.

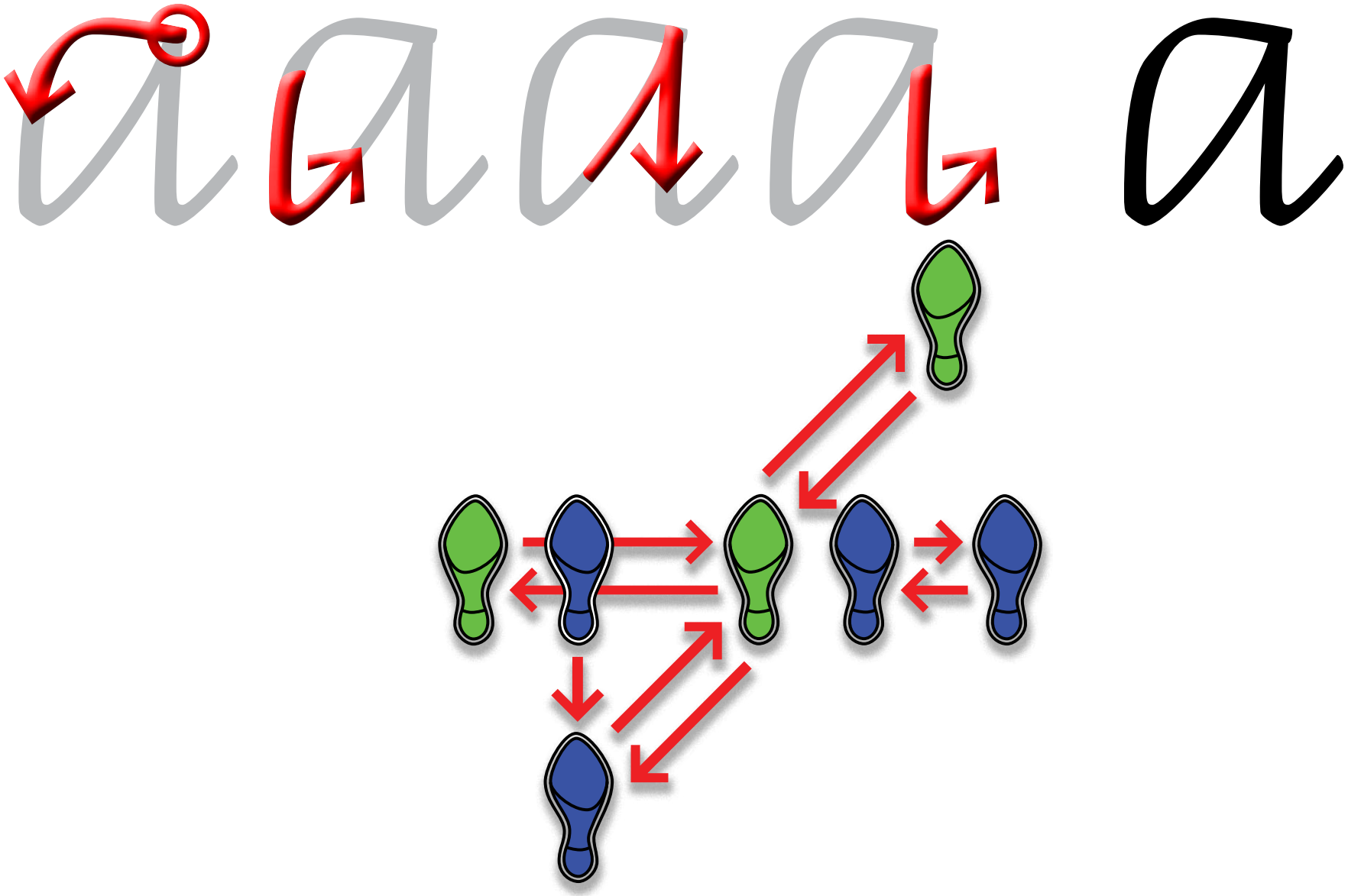


One. Keep the distance between the stems as even as you can. Two. Remember to use exit strokes. Three. As you add recognition points, try your very best to think of all this as movement, not writing.

The zigzags are your foundation. Get them right, and your lettershapes are easy.

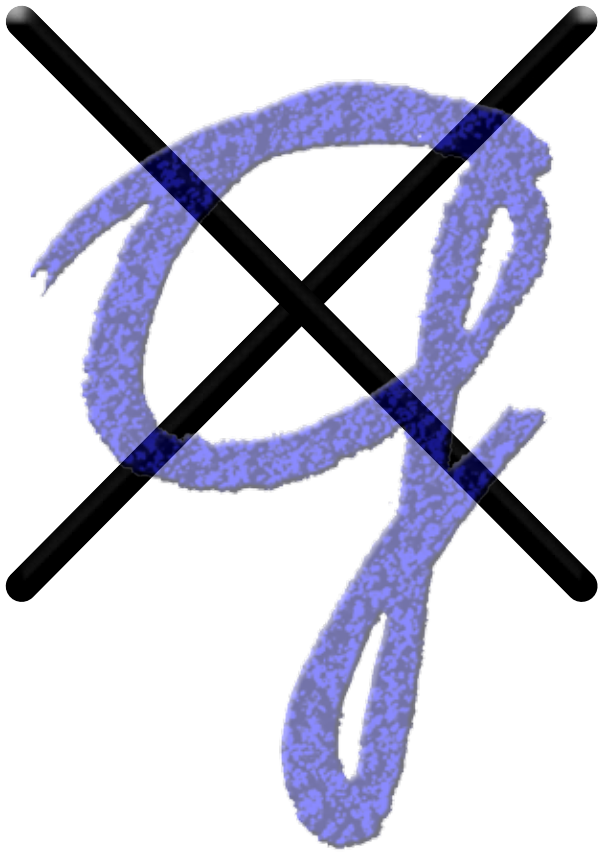


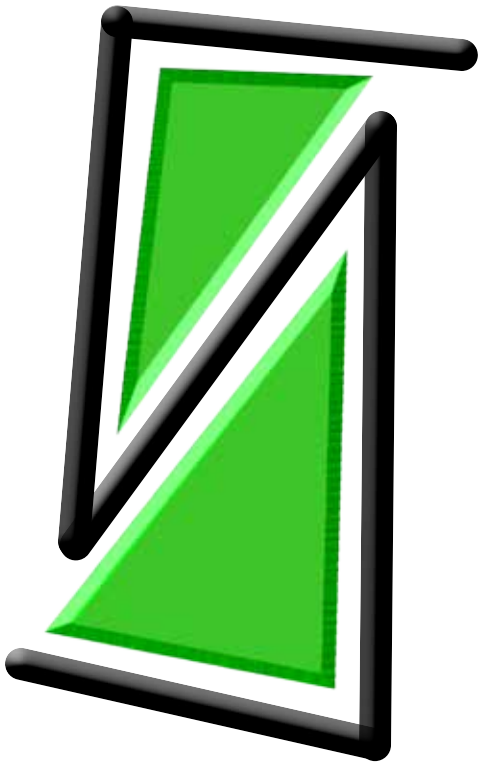
When your zigzags turn into letters, you will notice that you repeat a few shapes over and over. The upswing in the bowl of the letter a, for instance, is the same as the exit stroke.

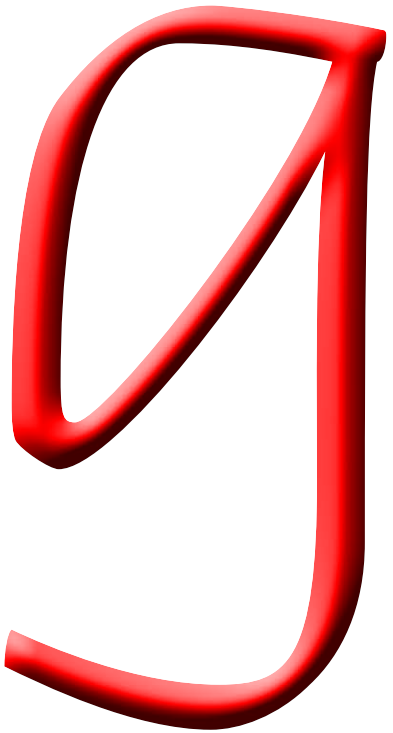


The letters have a starting point. They have a fixed path, and they have an exit. Moving the pen in the right way through the lower case is important. (The diagram, as you may have recognized, shows a woman's dance movements in cha-cha-cha.)

Once you've learned the movement for the letter a, you have a good start on six more. Below is one way of ending the letters g and y. Take the stem almost down to the descender line. Think of a spot below the first stem. Take the pen there in a shallow curve.

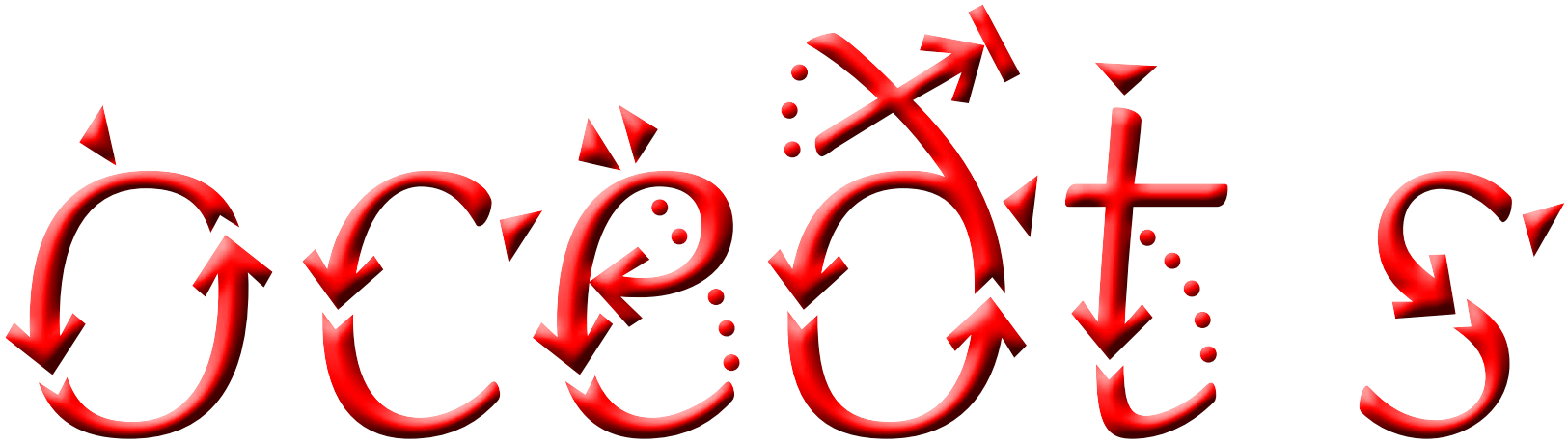




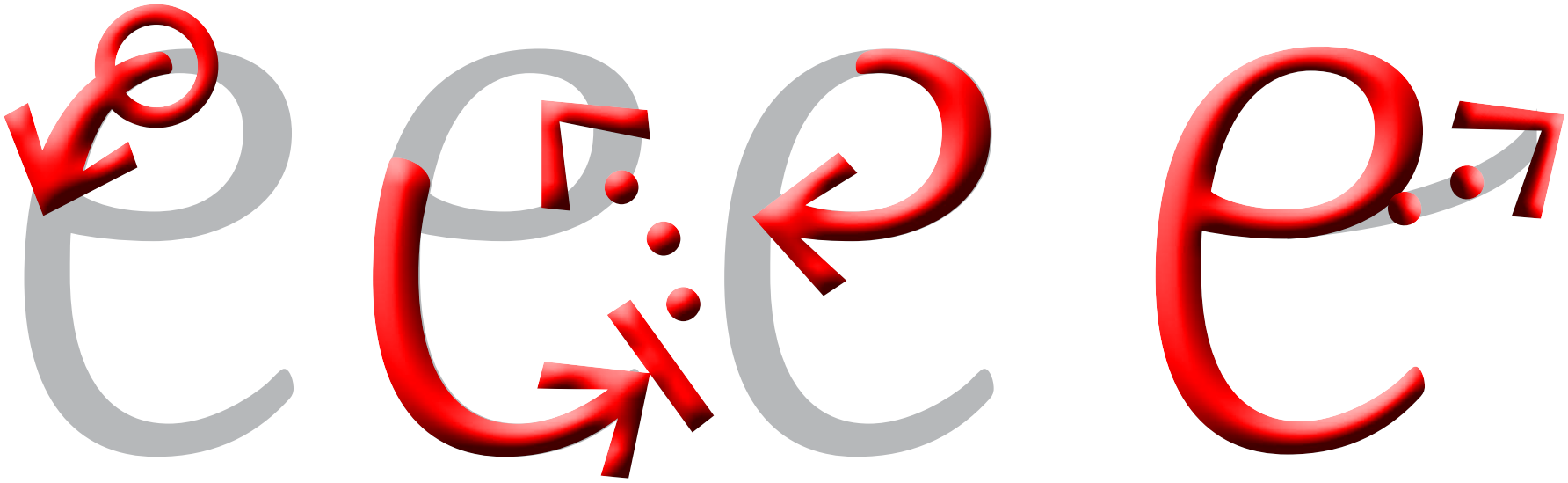


Do not let your hand slip into its usual habit. Teach it to make zigzags with recognition points. Then your letters will soon take care of themselves.

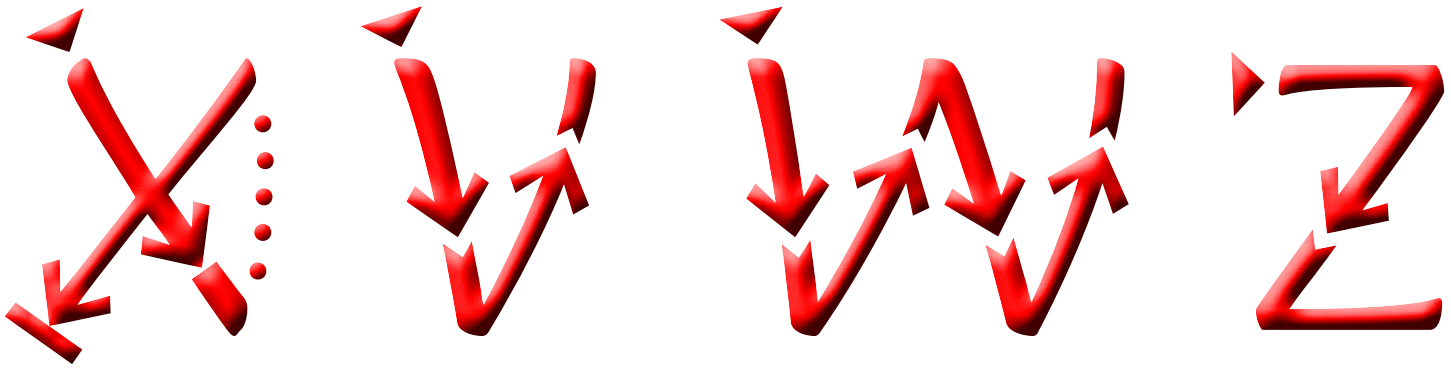
Now for the b-family. It’s much the same, except the triangular bowl is upside-down. The rightmost letter in the upper line is the thorn, which you will need when you write in Icelandic.

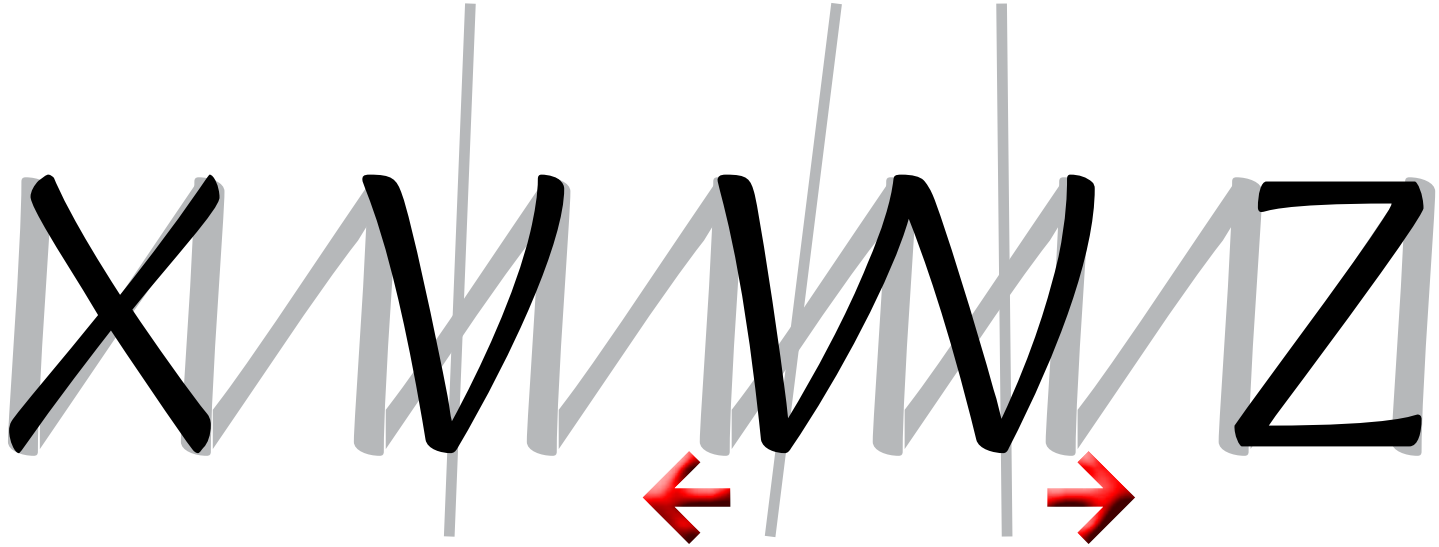


Most of the o-family should fit the space between two stems in a zigzag. Another tip: one way of making a nicely balanced letter s is to trace it on a letter o. The middle letter in the top line is of course the letter eth, which is the other letter you need for Icelandic.

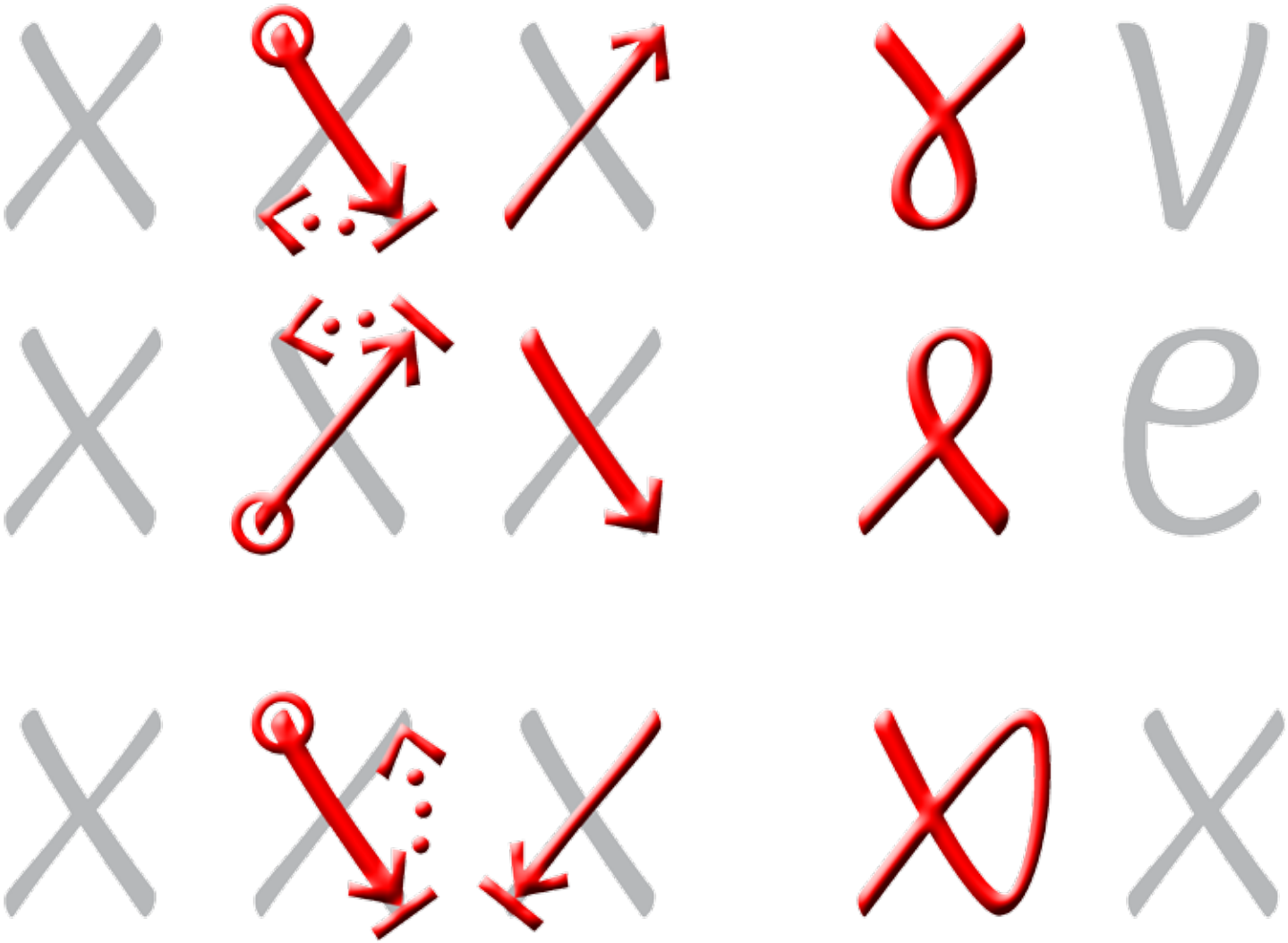


Here’s how to write the letter e, in greater detail. You start the way you write the letter o. Halfway through, you lift the pen and take it back where you began. You make a curve to the middle of the first stroke. From there you turn around and connect to the next letter.





The x-family is easy. The bottom of the letter v should be midway between two zigzag stems. The letter w looks better if the two halves tilt slightly toward one another. The second stroke of the letter x is a diagonal down and to the left. You don't join from it.



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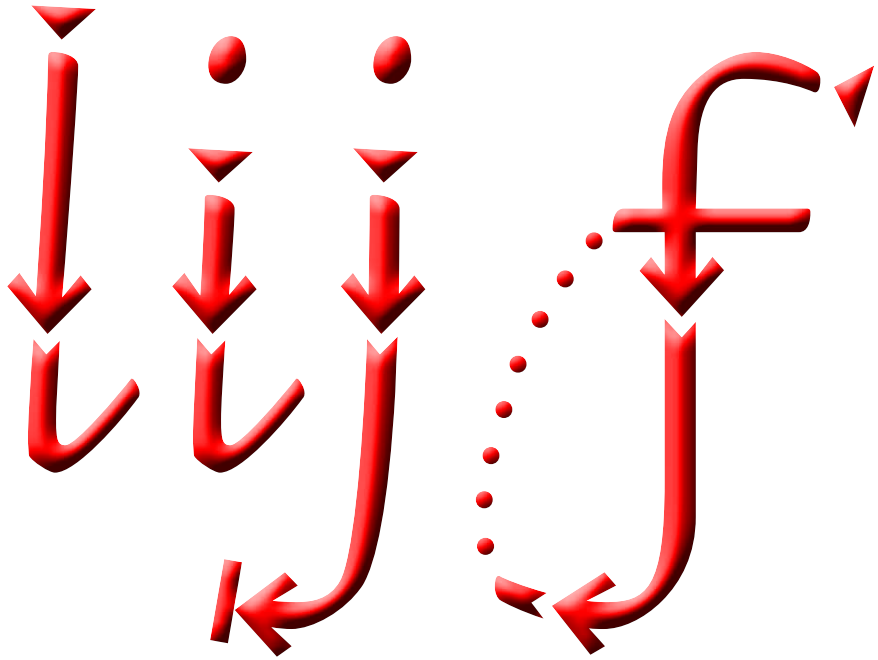
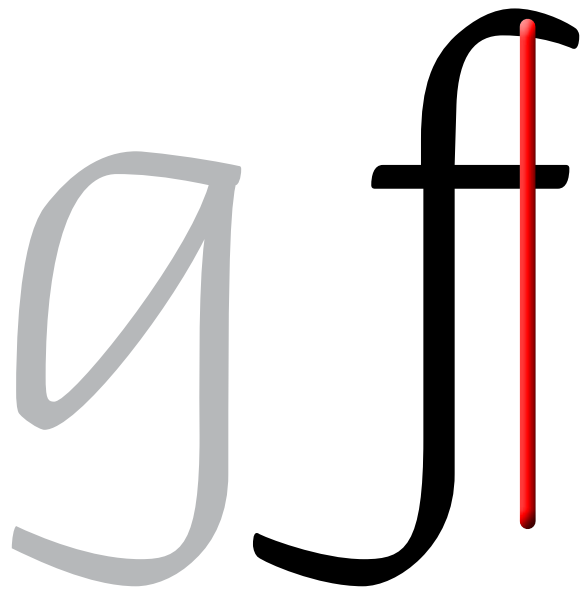
175

The path of the letter x is important. What happens when you're in a hurry? Then the top example can be mistaken for the letter v. The middle example can turn into a badly written letter e. But the correct path, at the bottom, only produces the letter x.

1234567890

Here's another example. If just a tiny bit of the numeral 3 goes missing, it turns into a five. This is why the movements that make letters are important.





The vertical letters are simple, obviously. If you can write the letter g, the letter f isn't hard. One thing, though. The curves at the top and bottom create an optical illusion. The stem should tilt less than the other letters.

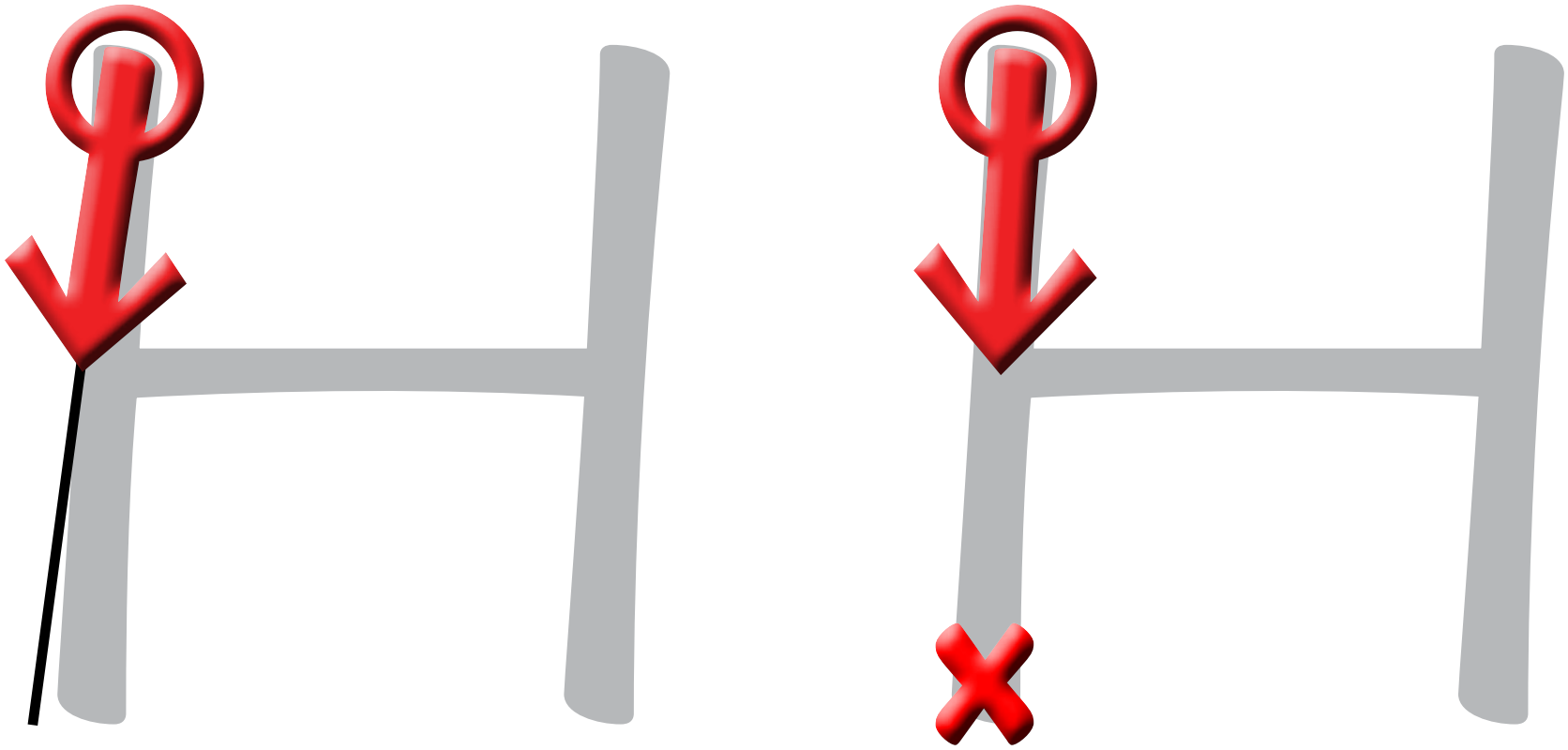
There's more to writing than understanding the letterforms. You have to move the pen where you want it to go and not someplace else.

Don't keep your eye on the ball

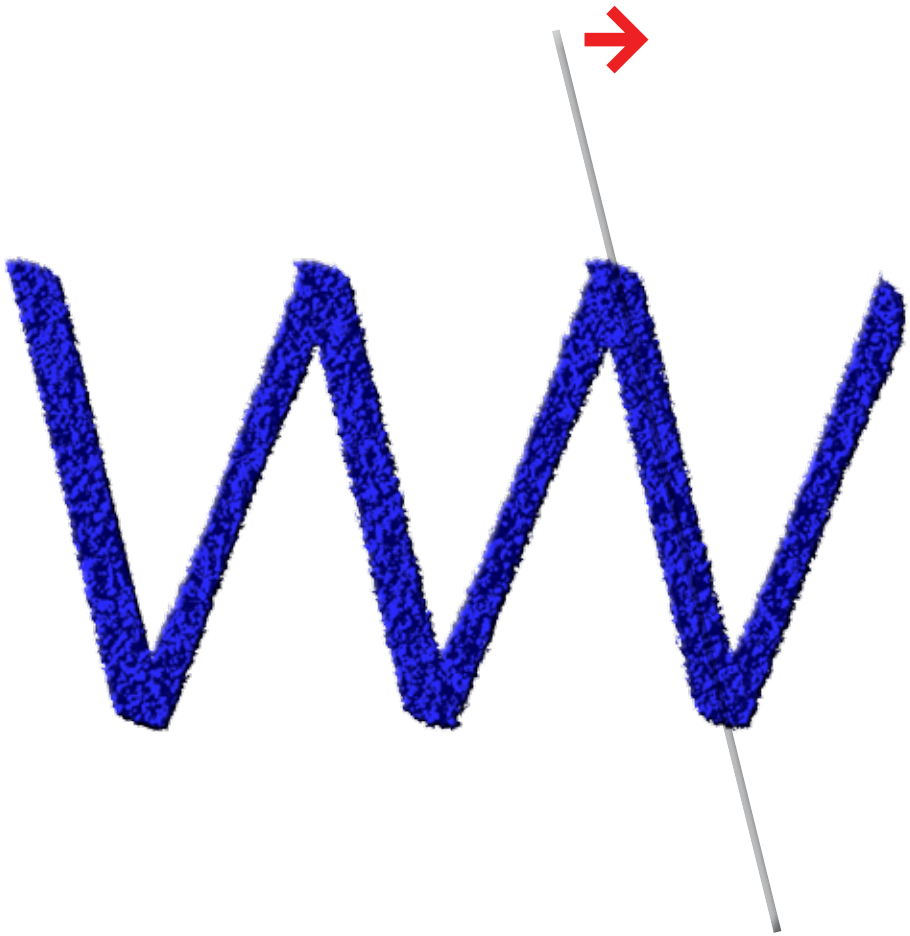
Look where the thing is going

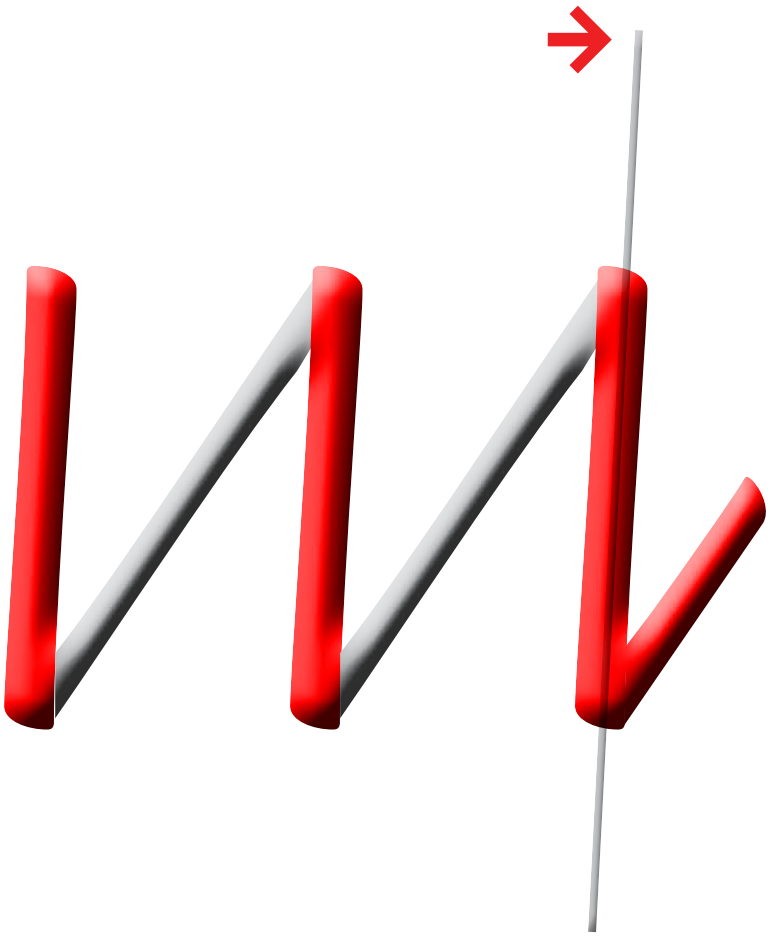
64

On the whole, you should look at the point where you want the pen nib to go, and let your hand take care of getting it there.



This is what I mean. Look at the point on the baseline where you want the stem to end.

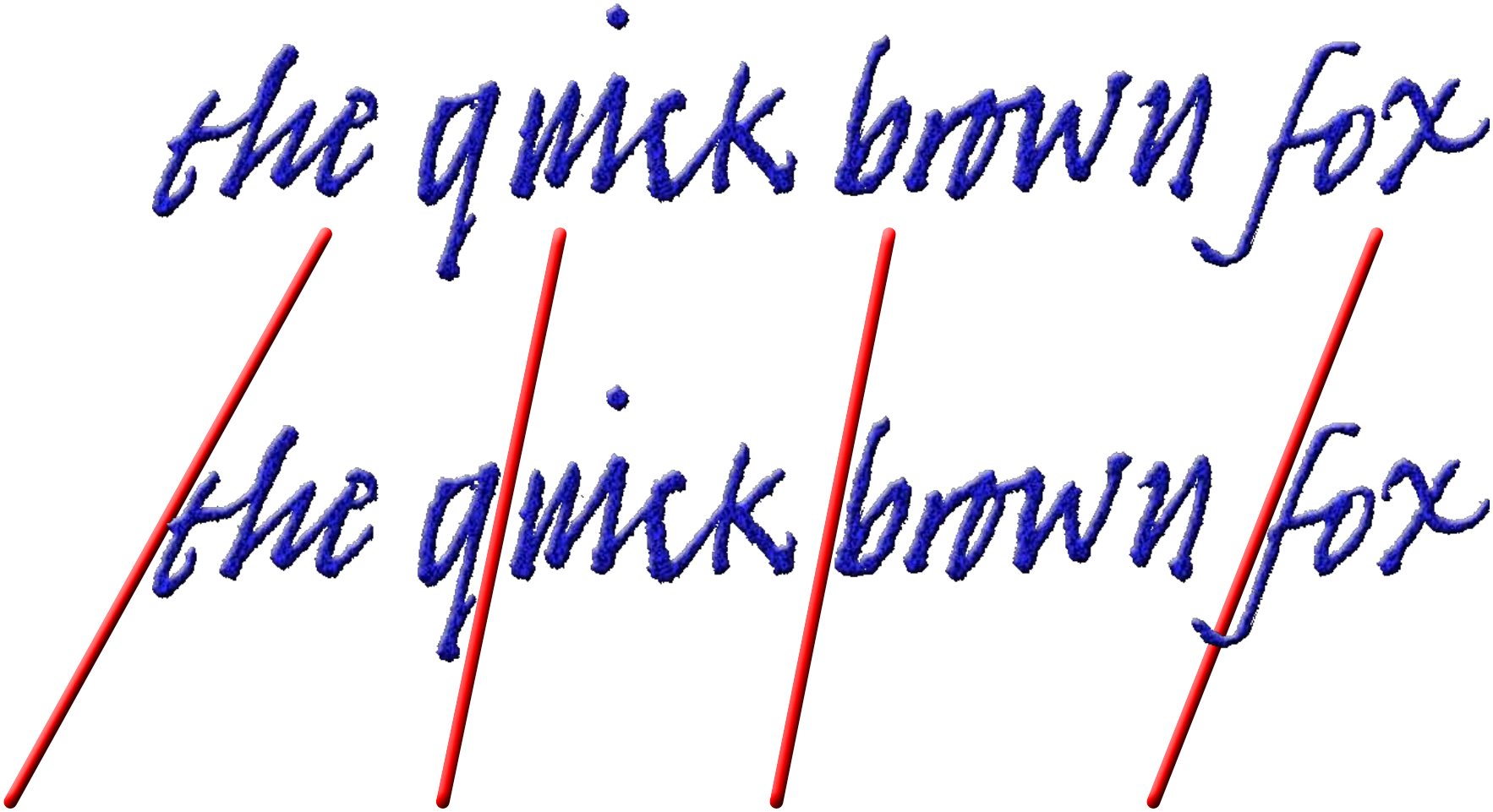




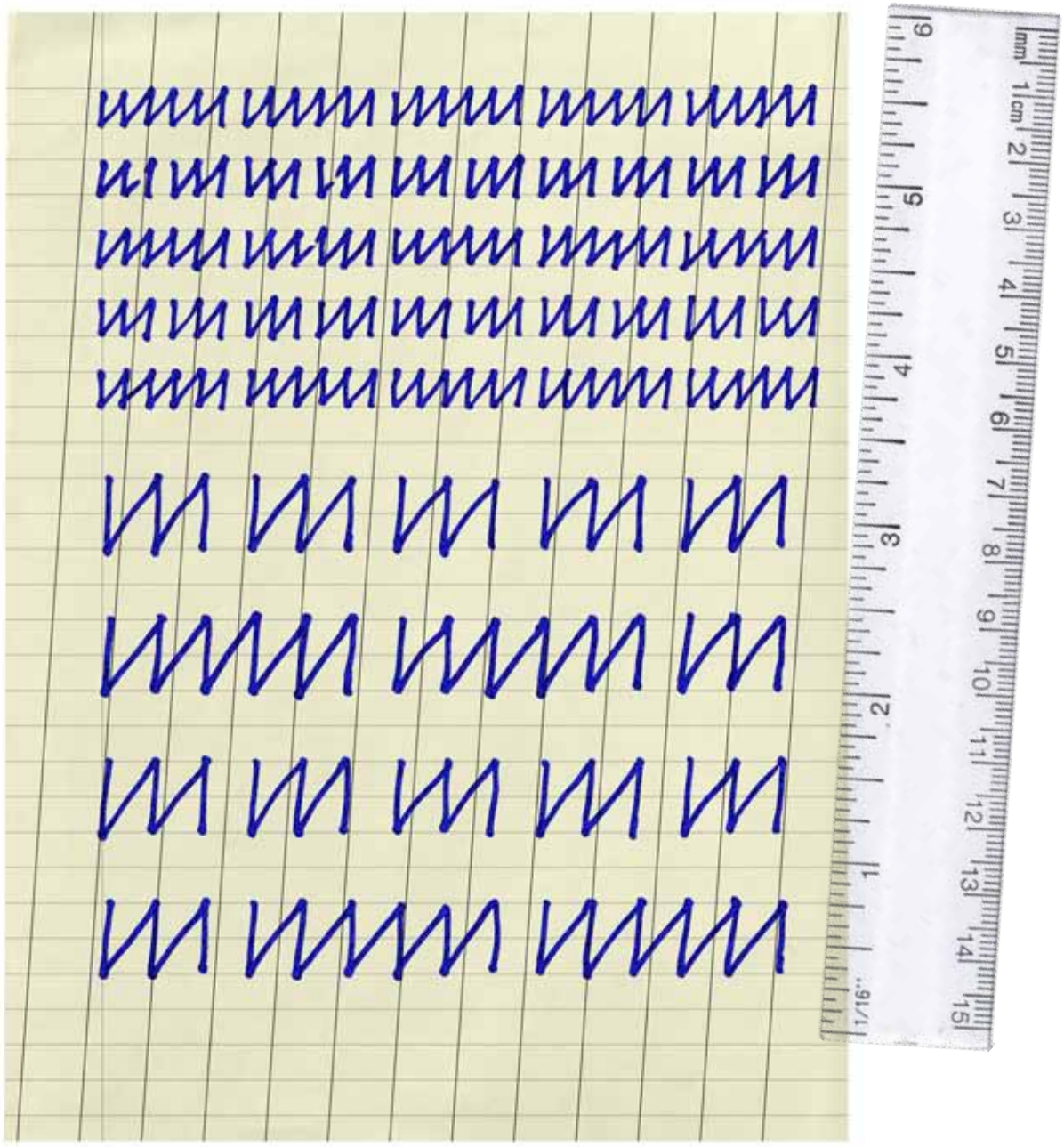
66
175

A zigzag that looks like the letter v, many times over, is a common mistake. To write it properly, you make slightly slanting stems that are connected by upstrokes with a much greater slant.

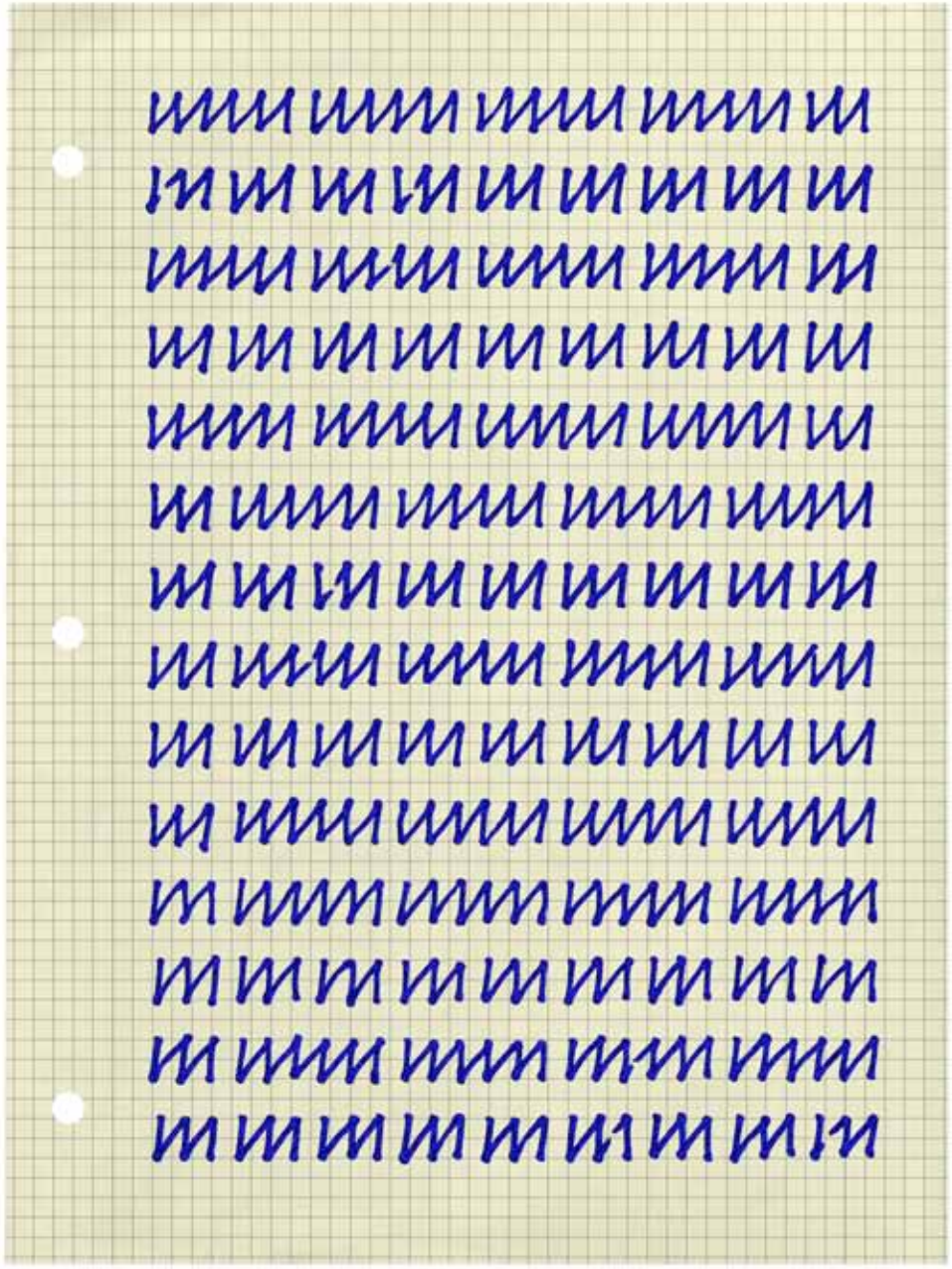
67 Writing zigzags on lined paper is only a single step away from writing proper letters. But what if that's too hard?



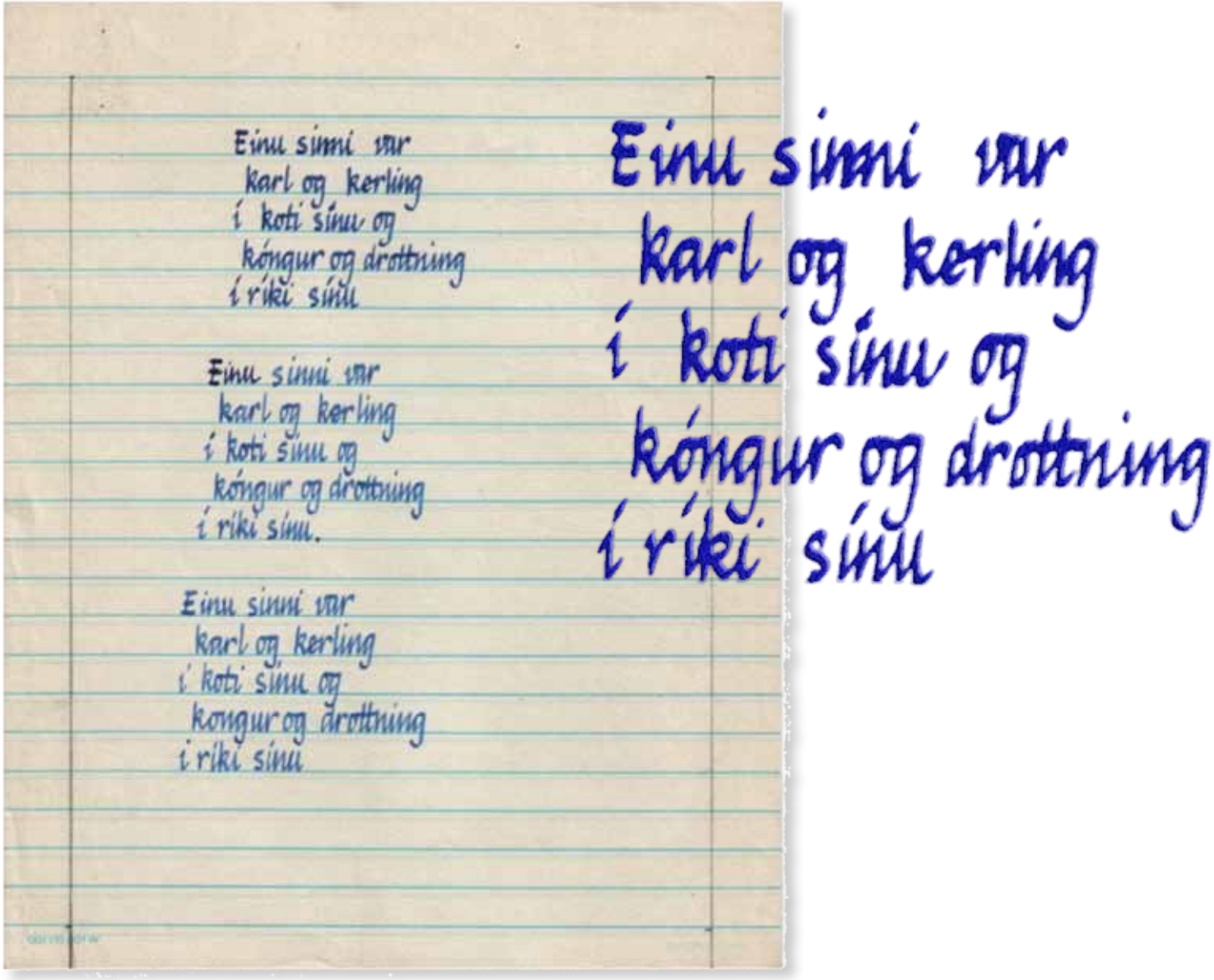
68 This writing slants all over the place. A ruler can help you notice. After a while, your eyes get used to catching tilting stems.



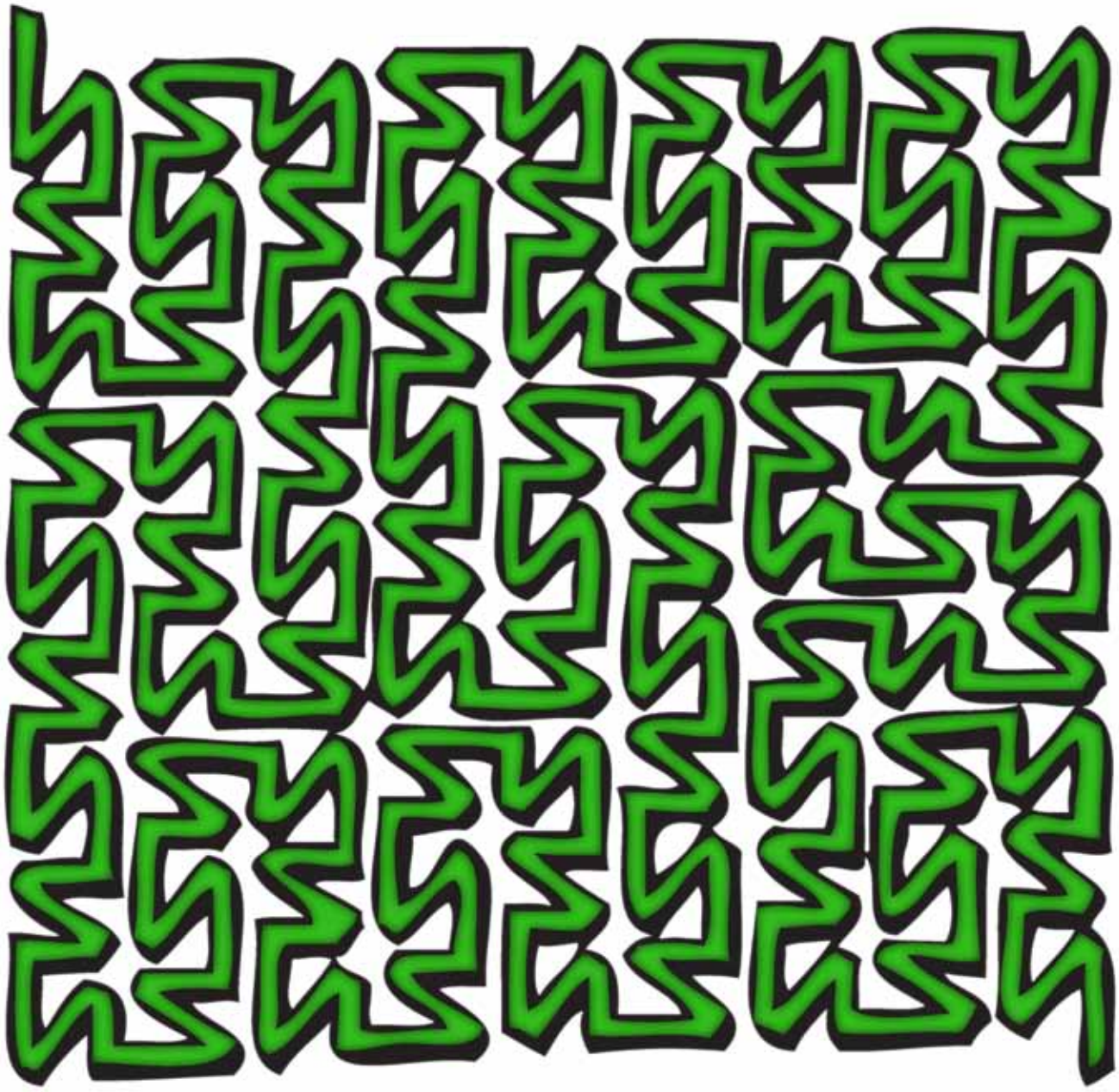
Adding slant lines makes zigzags easier. And start small: large zigzags are much harder than small. And three stems together are easier than six in a row. But what if this is too hard as well?



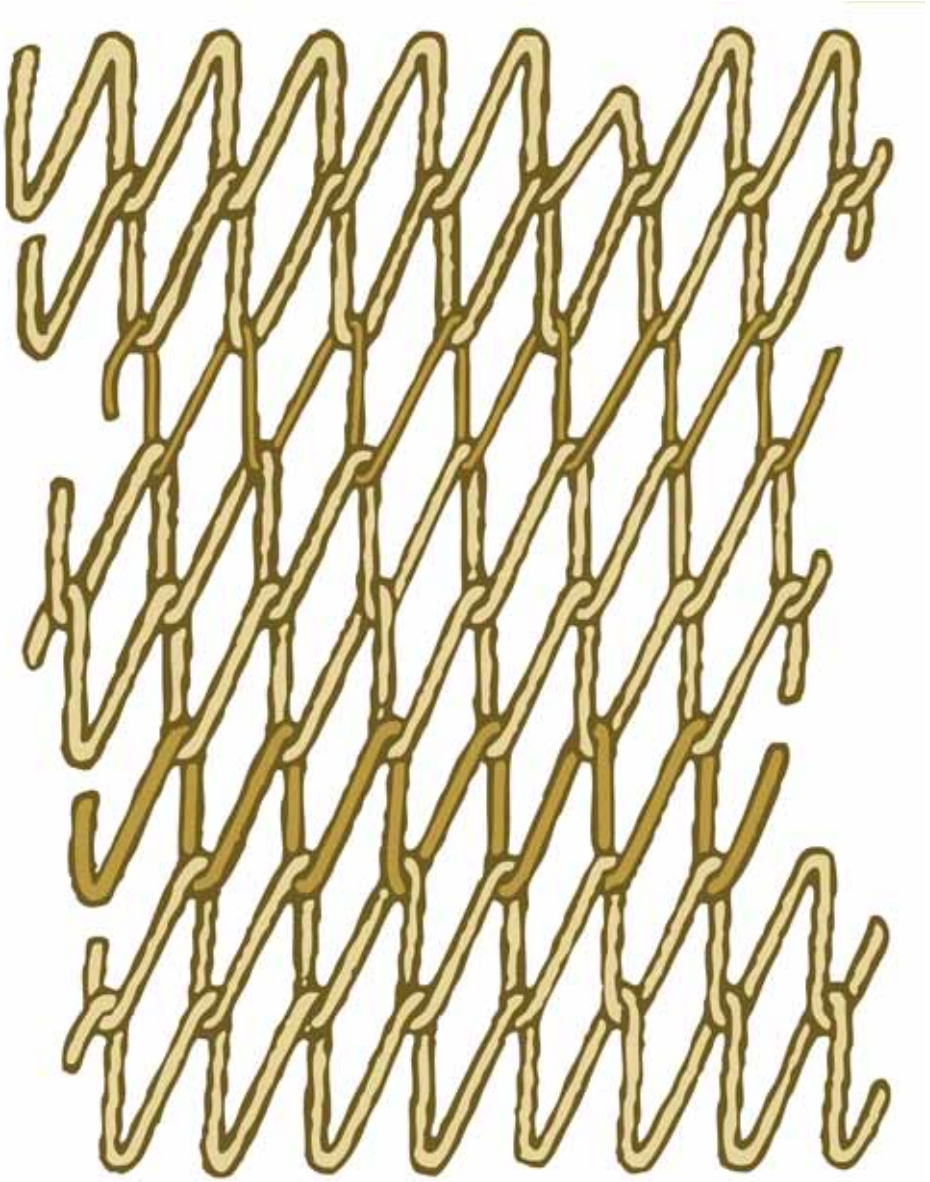
Squared paper provides even more support. Don’t worry. Italic is easy to teach and easy to learn.



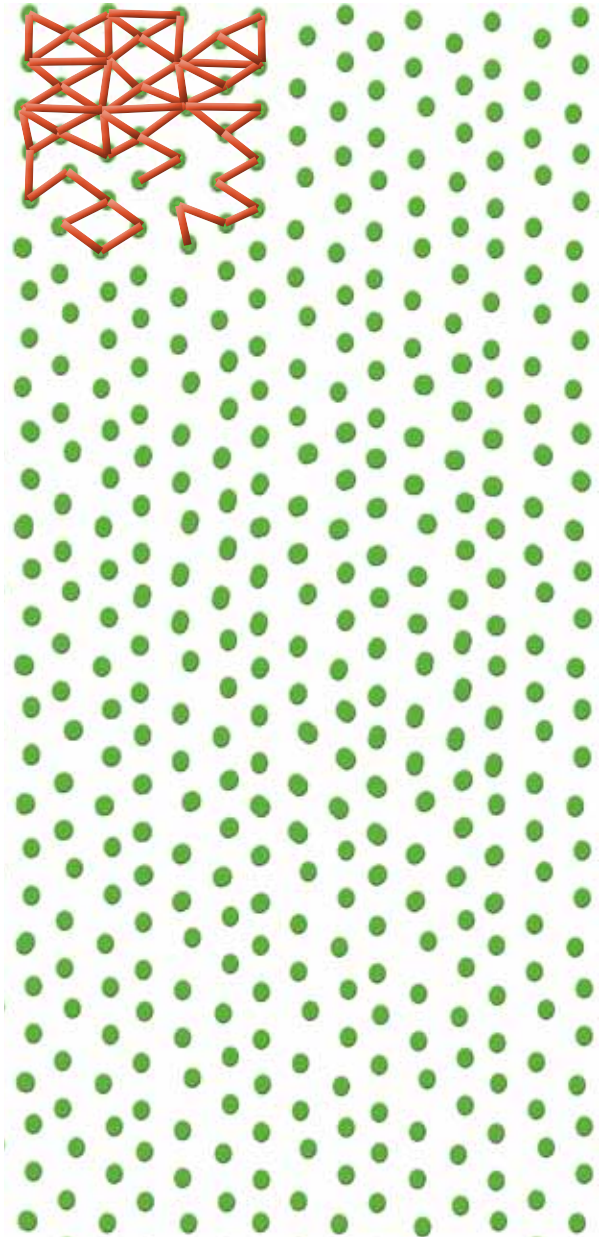
Here's the proof of the pudding. Alan was an average ten-year old pupil when I visited the Staplehurst Primary School in Kent. He had never seen this Icelandic text until he wrote it for the first time. (It means "Once upon a time … .")

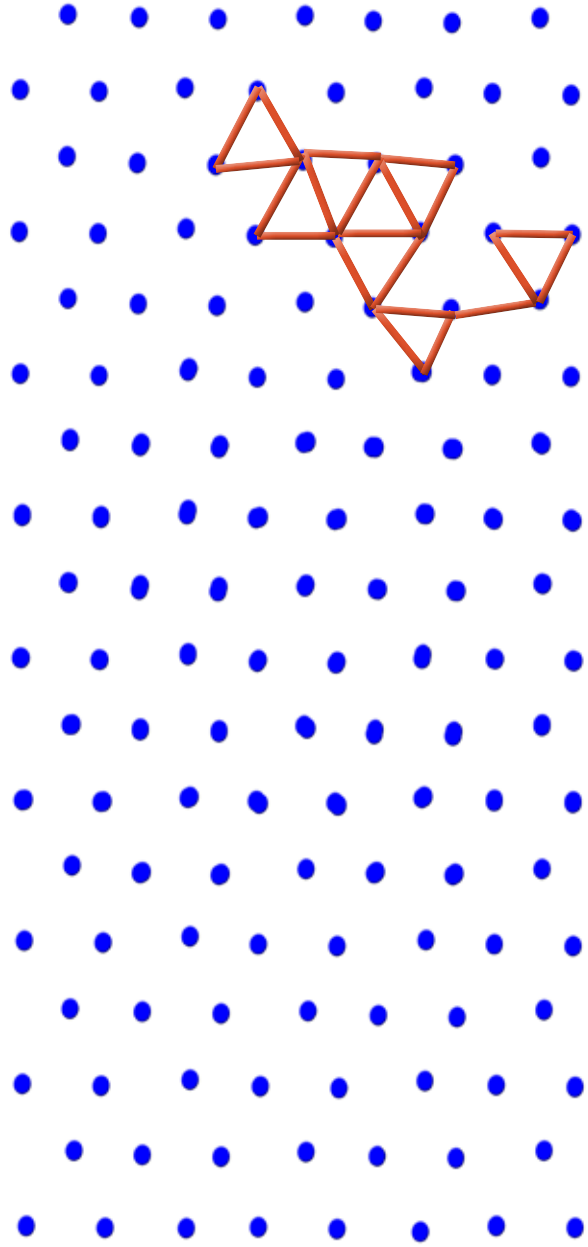


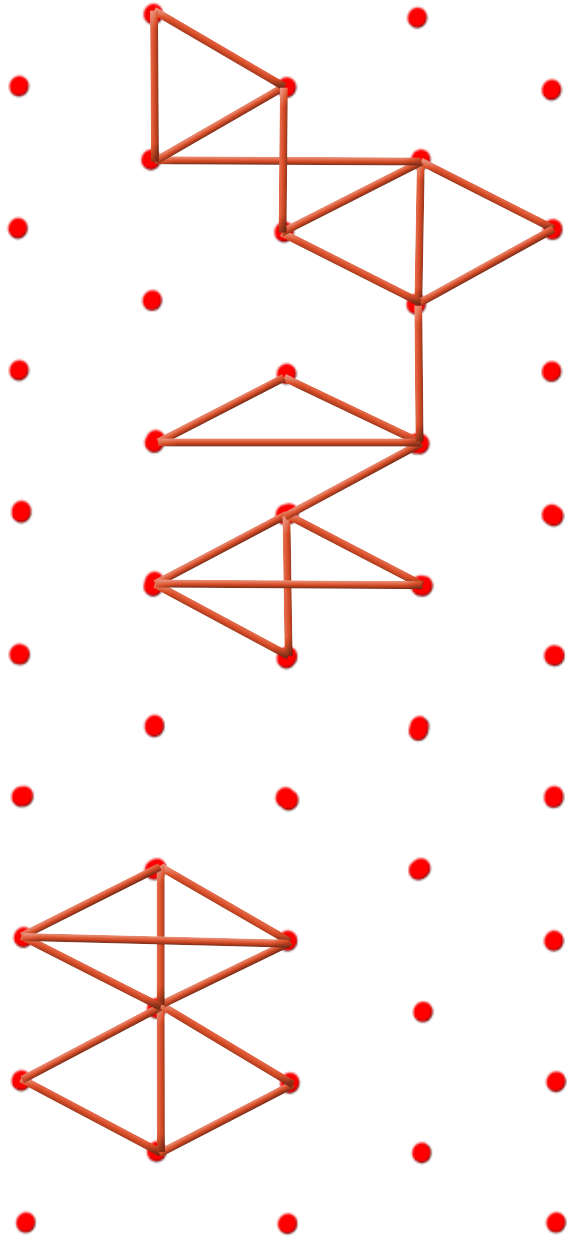
If squared paper isn't enough, we've got plenty of exercise sheets, such as a fractal pattern.



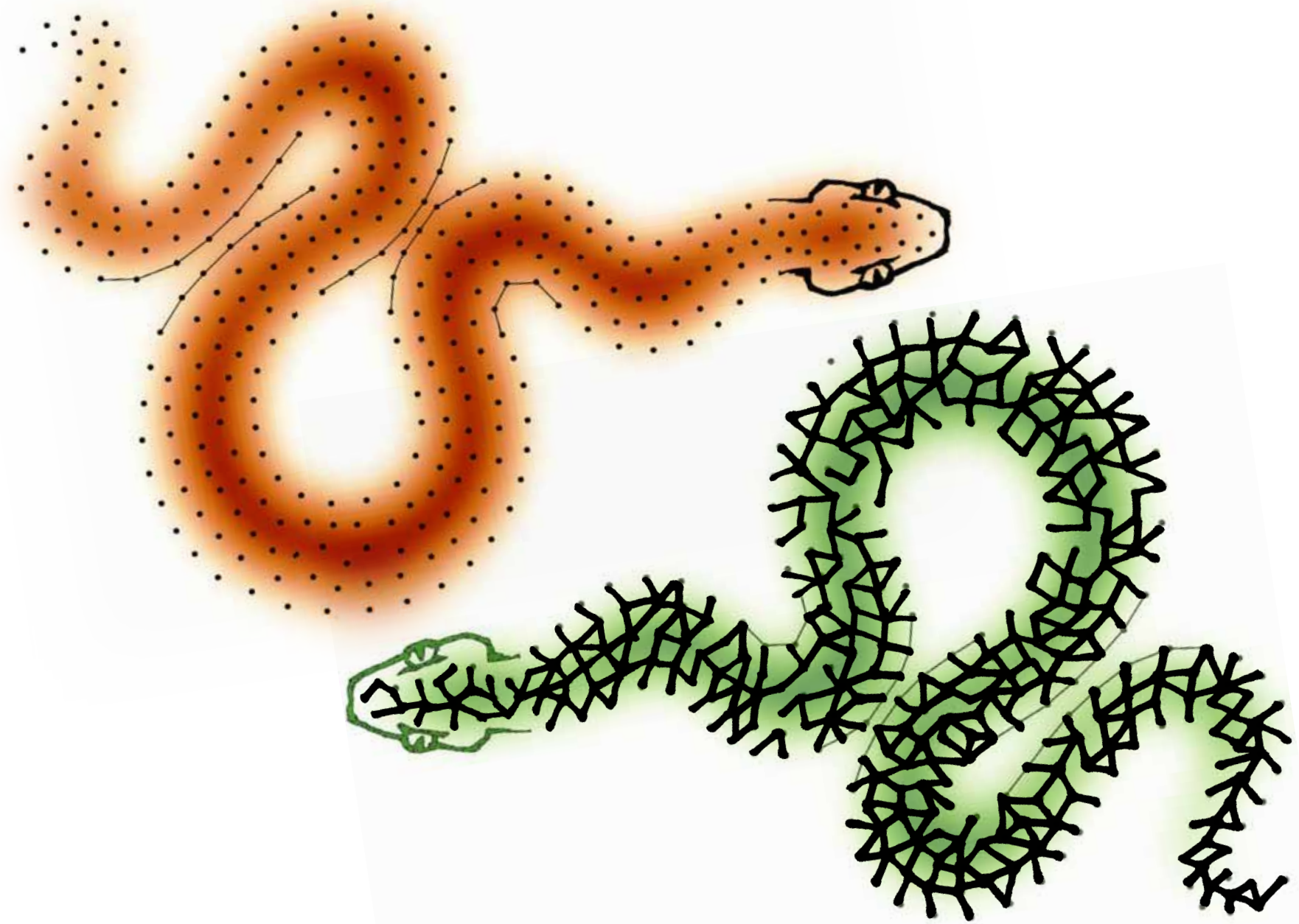
Children who can manage shape and form have nothing to worry about. What happens to those who don't? We do not leave the bottom rungs out of the ladder, never. If this exercise sheet is too hard, we've got something that's easier.







This one leaves nobody behind. Anybody can connect dots. The tight pattern is the easiest. Master that, and you can set upon the next one.

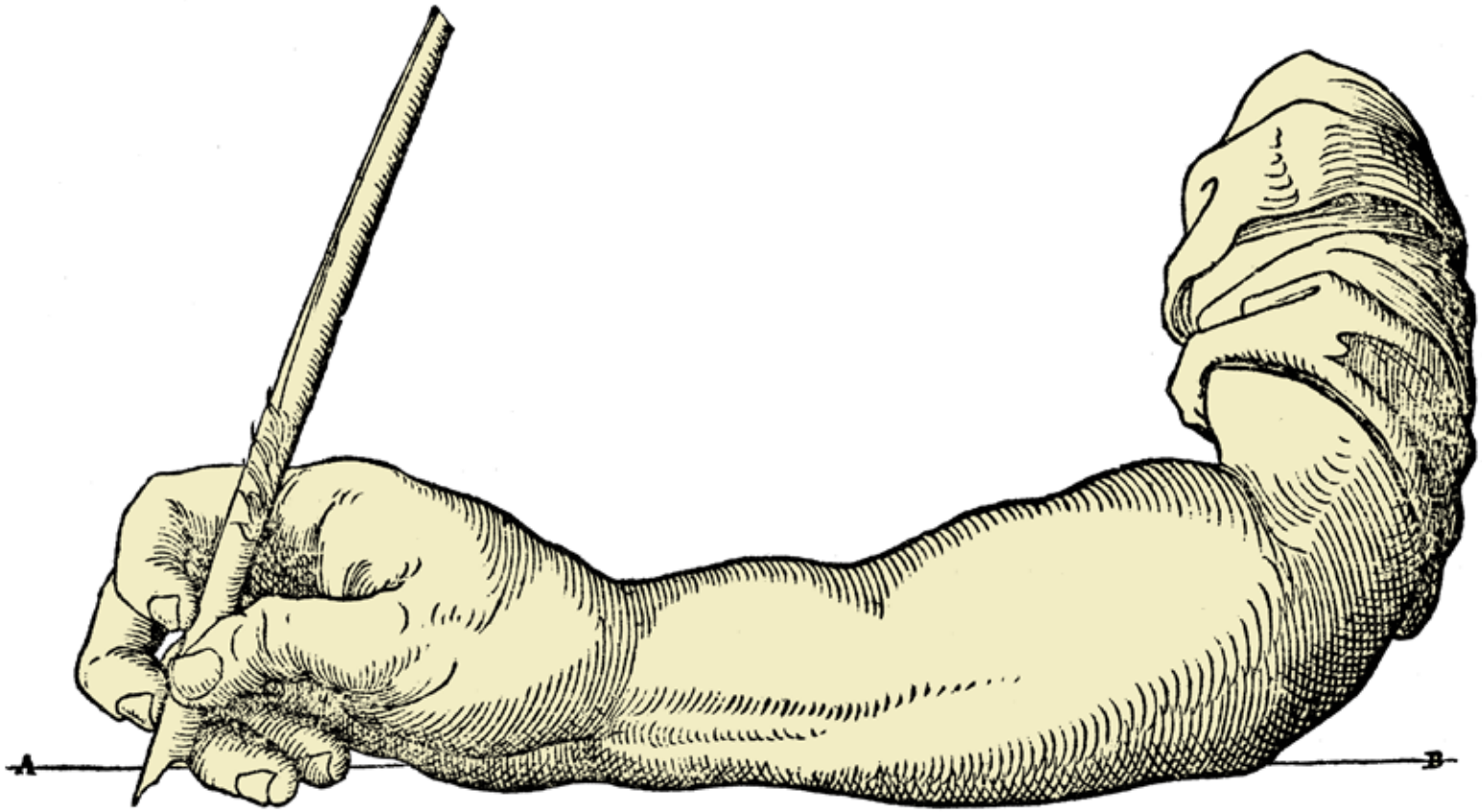


Dot exercises can be fun. With a little imagination, patterns can make pictures.

A lot has been said about writing with the whole arm, and using the hand rather than the fingers. This doesn't apply to italic.

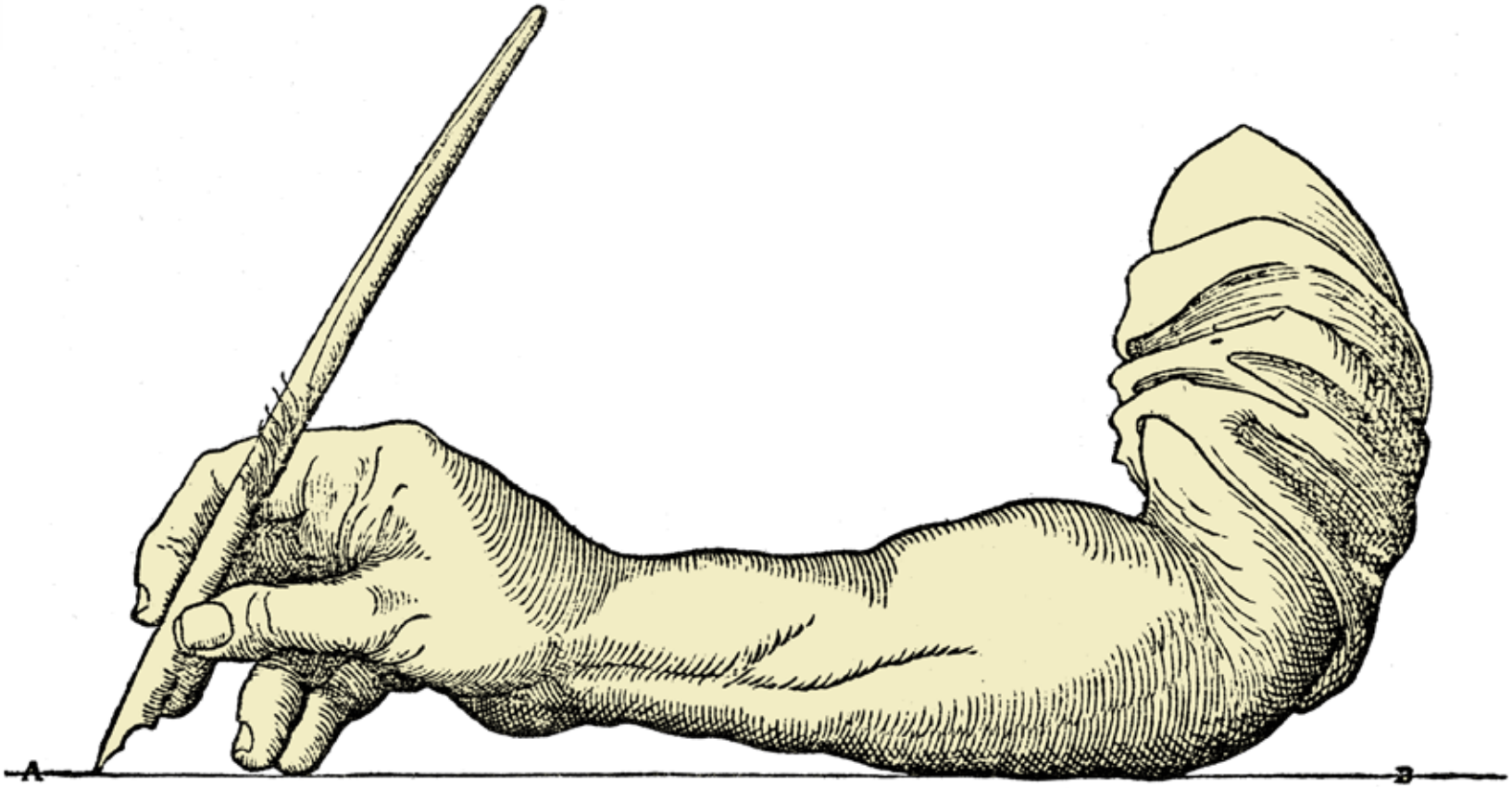
77
175

You can hold the pen in any manner you like. But some ways work better than others.



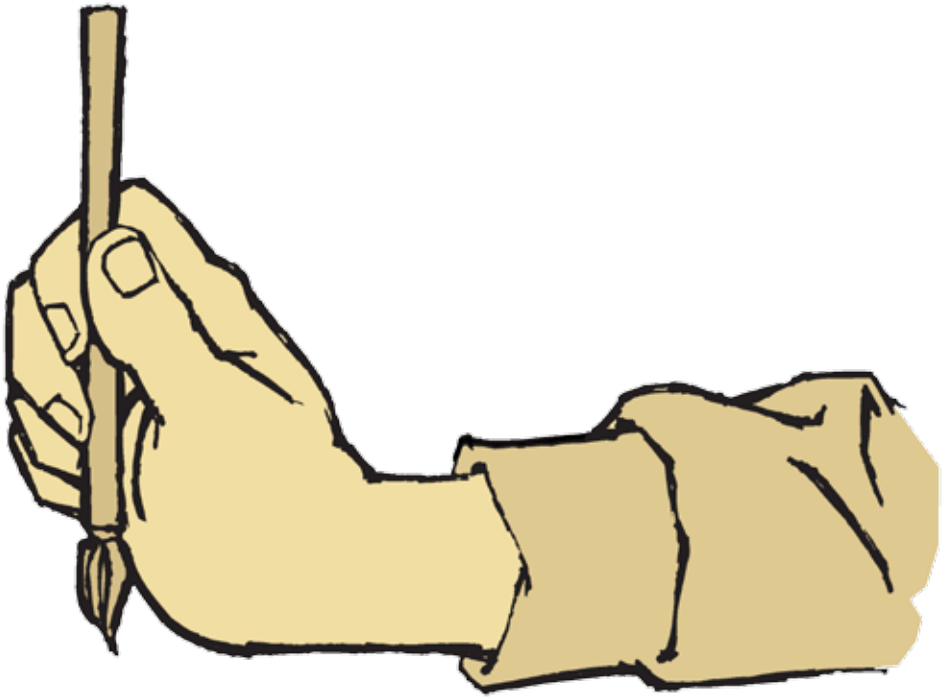
1553 Wolffgang Fugger

This is how you were warned not to hold the pen in the sixteenth century. Today we can only wonder who would be tempted to do it.



1553 Wolffgang Fugger

But this was the approved way, and we wouldn't like that either. Not much is known about the way people who knew how to write held their pens in those days.

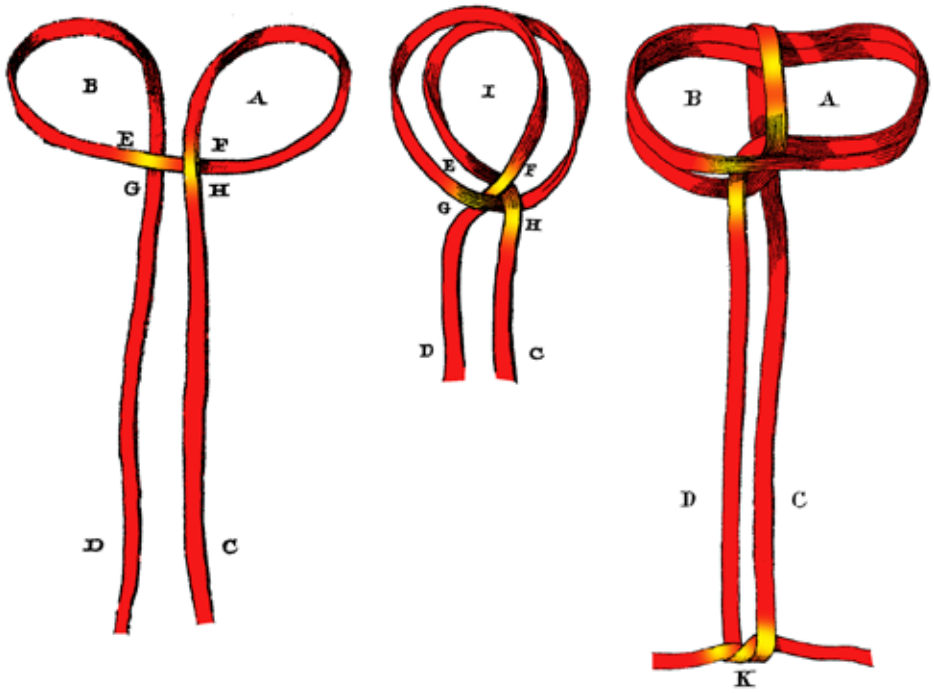


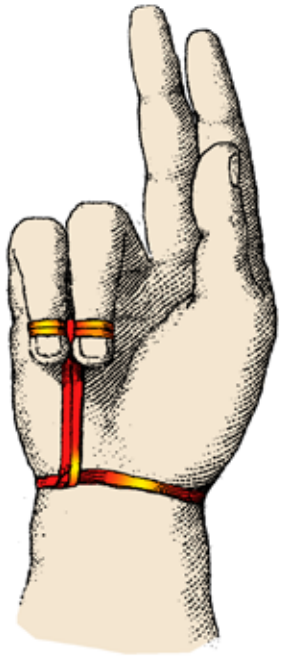
Chinese, classical

80 To Western eyes, this looks like an odd way to grip any writing implement.

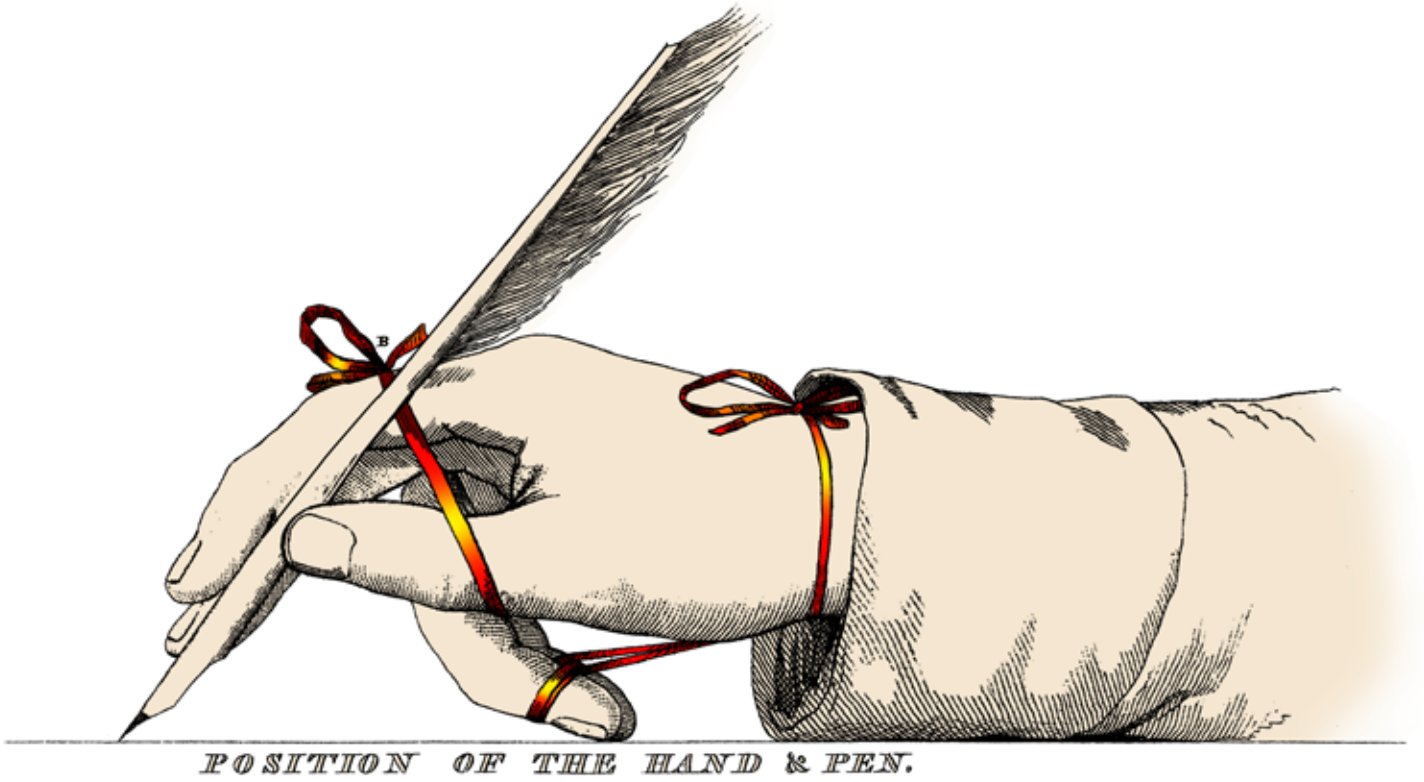
1547 Urban Wyss

It's not far removed from what we were advised to do four centuries ago. In the nineteenth century, things got really interesting.





1832 Benjamin Franklin Foster



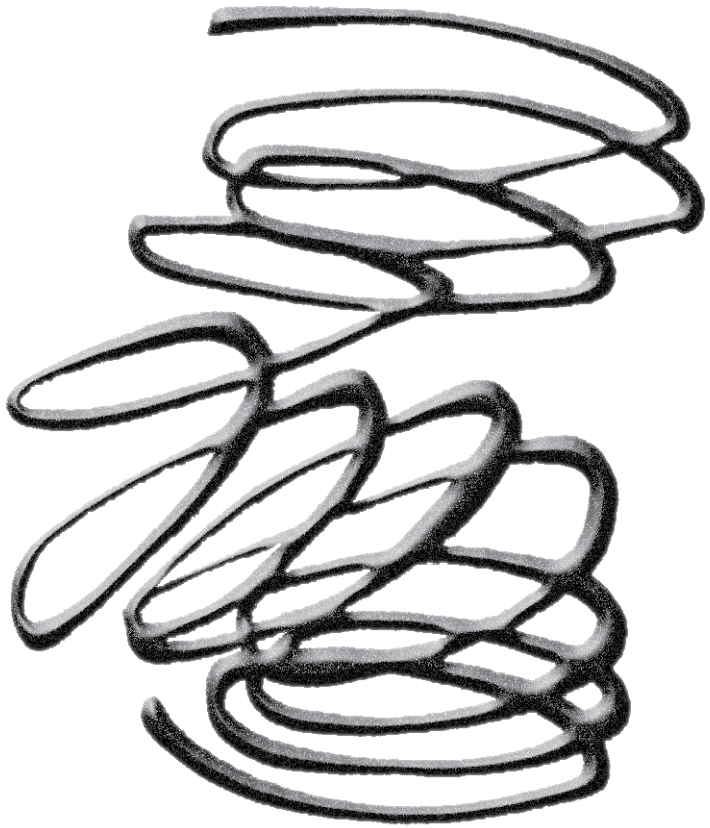
1832 Benjamin Franklin Foster

The others were tied together. This was the age of the machine. Writing was done with the whole arm. Assault on minors was an established pedagogical tool. I hate to concede that this really did work.

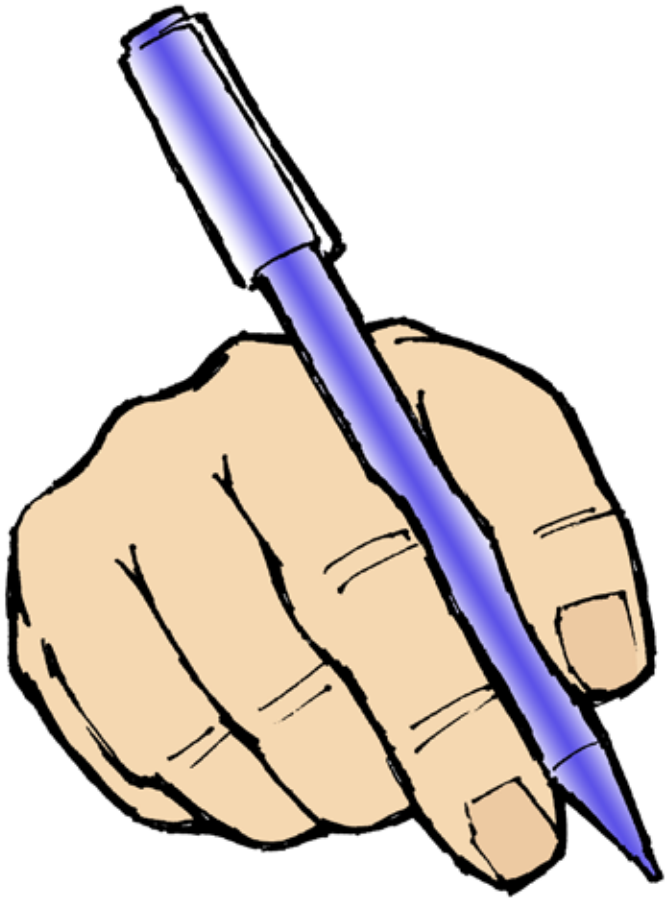
Modern penhold goes back to the eighteenth century at the very least, but has not been generally recommended for more than a hundred years. As long as the pen does what you want, hold it any way you like.

85 Just make sure you avoid writing cramp. It's a serious problem for a lot of people.

175



86 You can loosen up by writing squiggles.



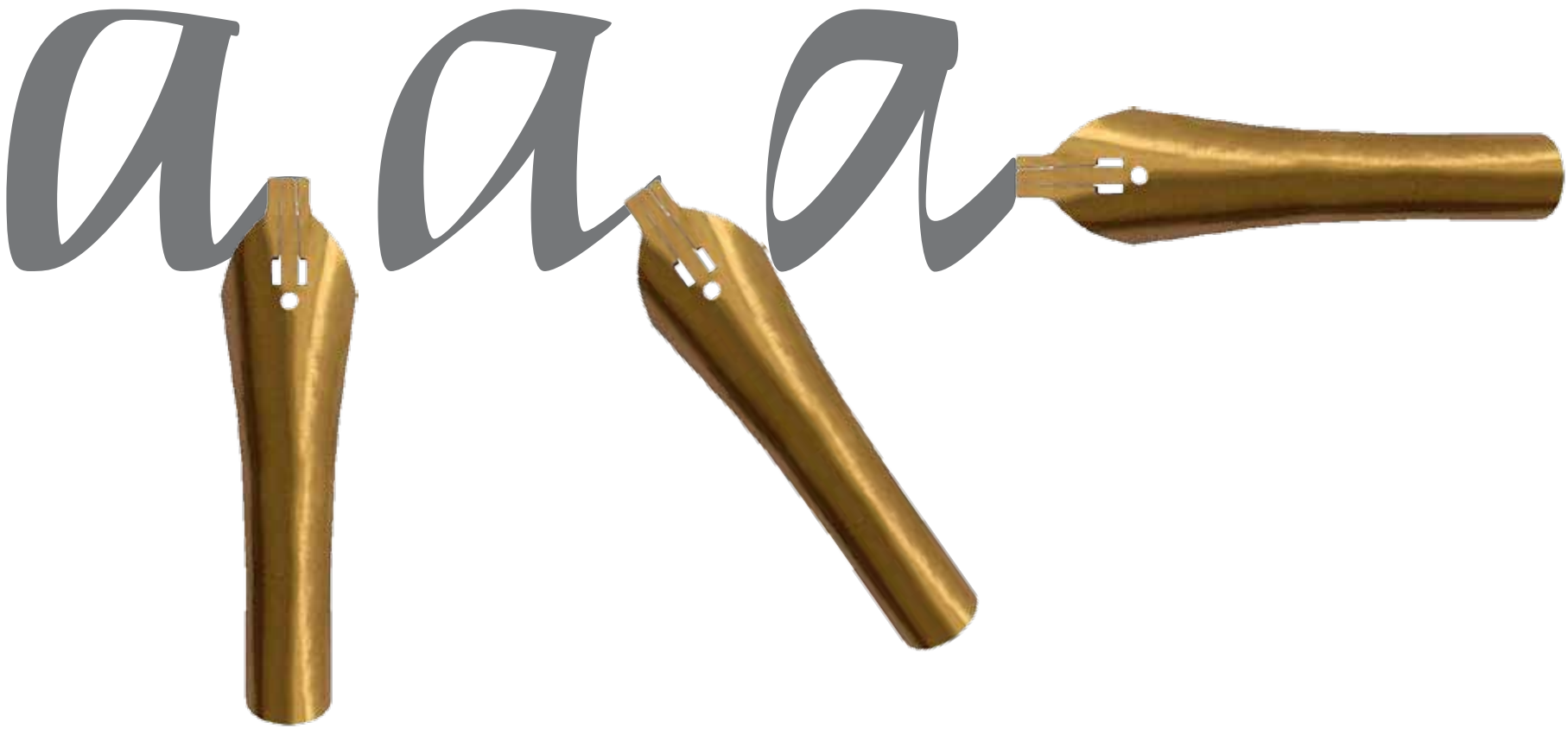
87 You can try holding the pen in a way that makes a tight grip is less likely.

88
175

A plastic pencil grip costs 50 cents and helps a lot of people. But the best way is just to relax and remember that a tight grip doesn't improve handwriting.

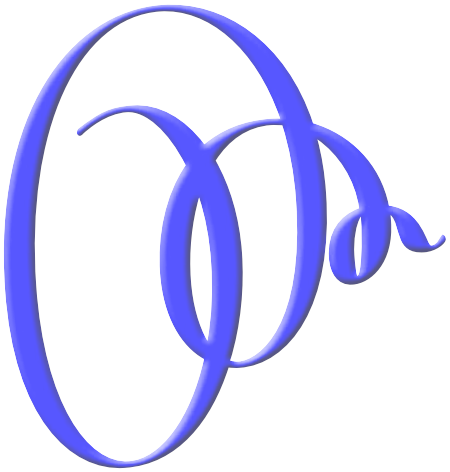
You can write a lovely italic with a pencil or a ballpoint. Raphael wrote a beautiful monoline with a quill pen.

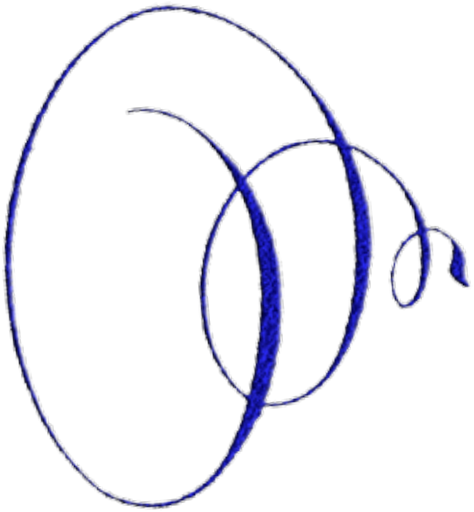
You have plenty of choices. But sooner or later, you'll want to try a broad edge pen. The angle of the pen creates the thicks and thins.



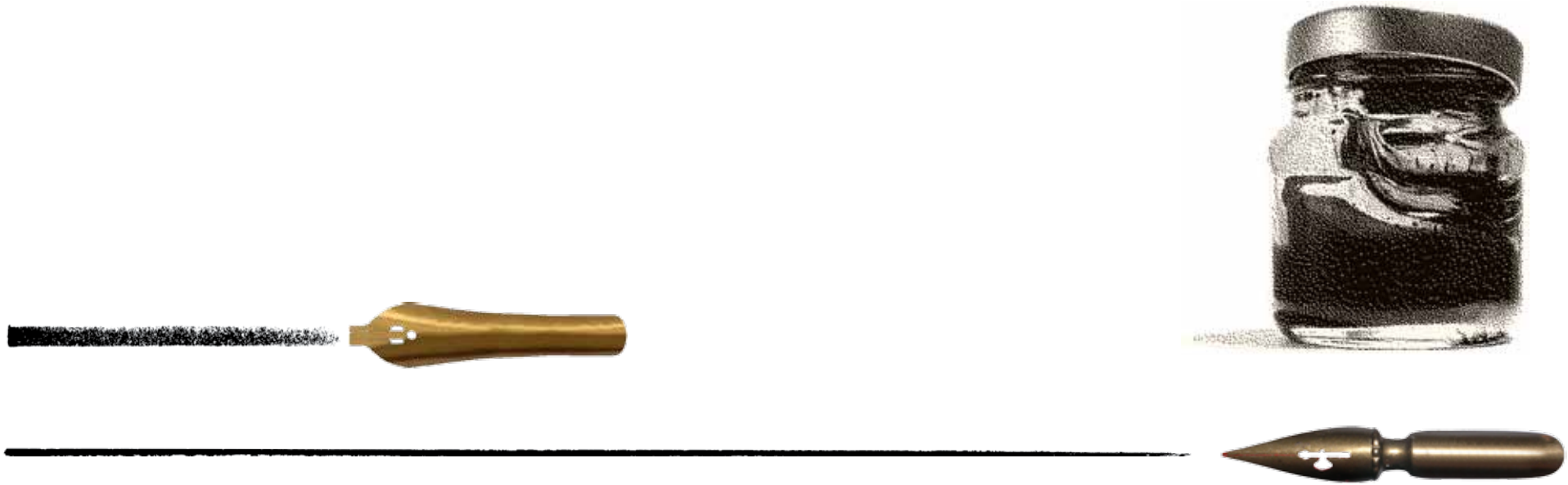
The pen on the left is at a 90 degree angle to the baseline. The top of the letter a is thin. The pen in the middle is at 55 degrees, which makes a nice letter. The the pen on the right is parallel to the baseline. The top is thick and the stems are thin.

You can write an acceptable italic with all sorts of tools.





A broad edge creates the thicks and thins. This is different from pointed, flexible pens. They make a thicker stroke when slight pressure separates the two halves of the split tip. The angled version was made for people who tended to strain their wrists.



94
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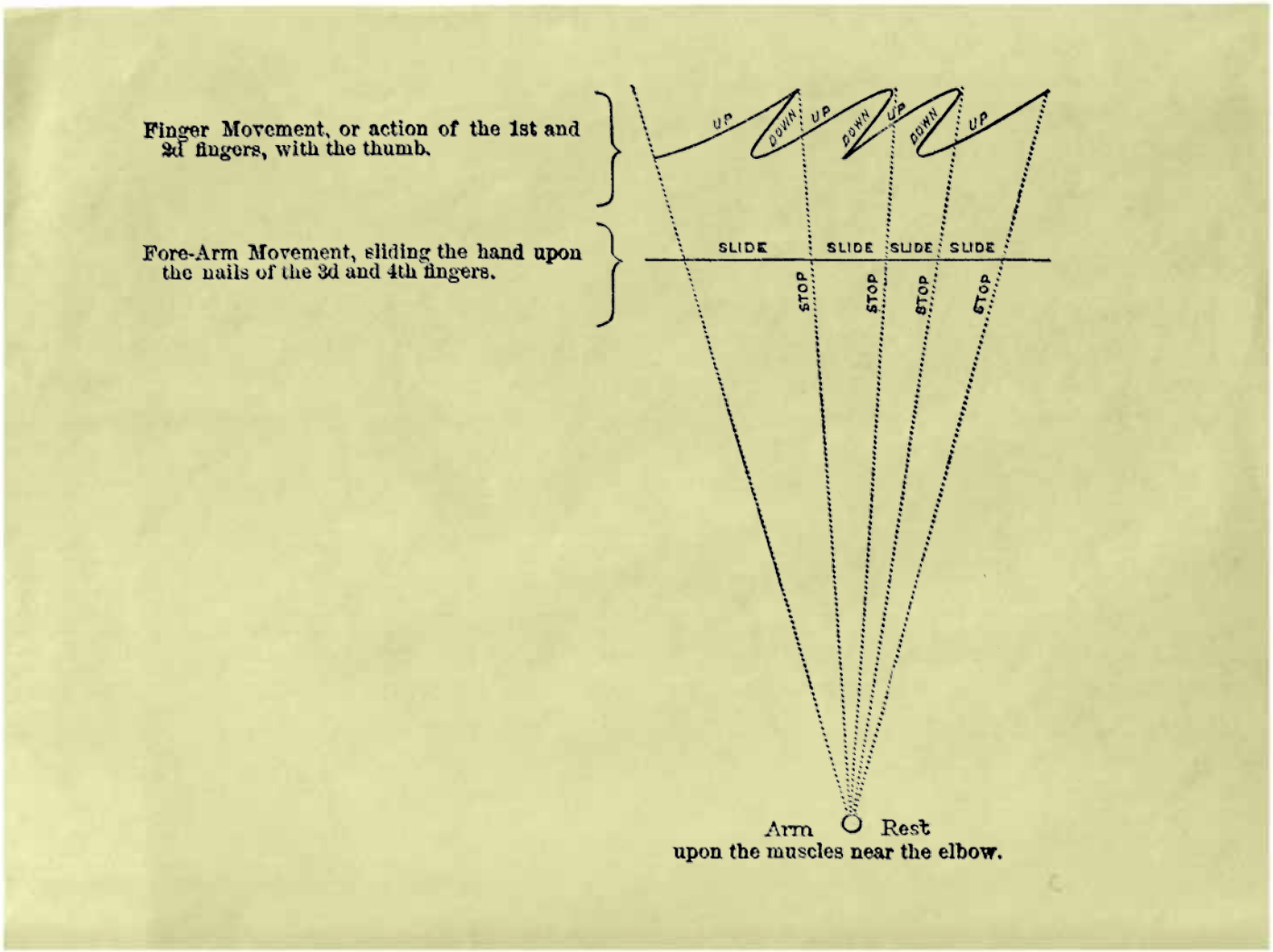
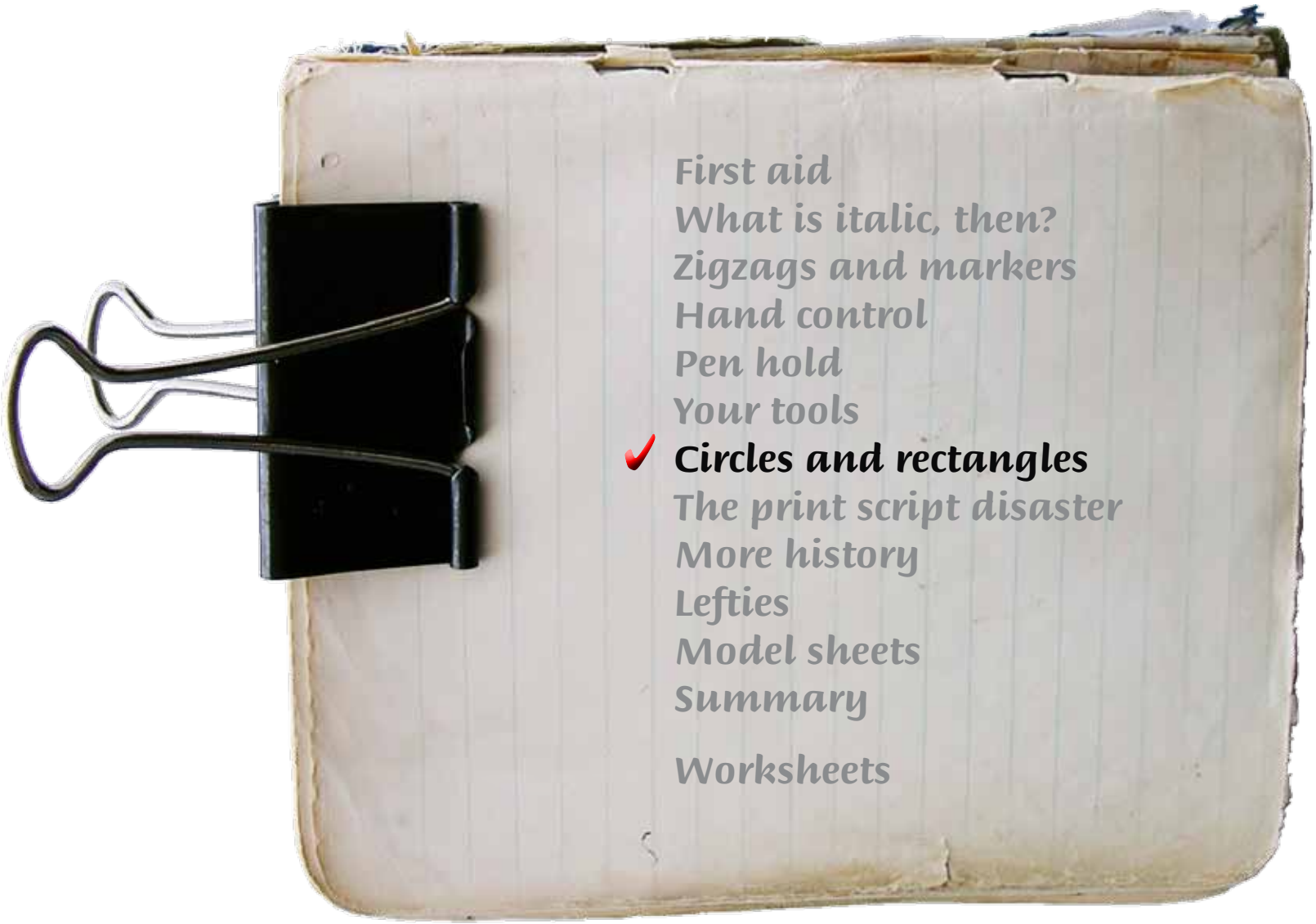
A pointed pen can easily write three times longer than a broad edge pen between dips in the inkwell. In the days before typewriters, all business documents were handwritten. A pointed pen saved money.



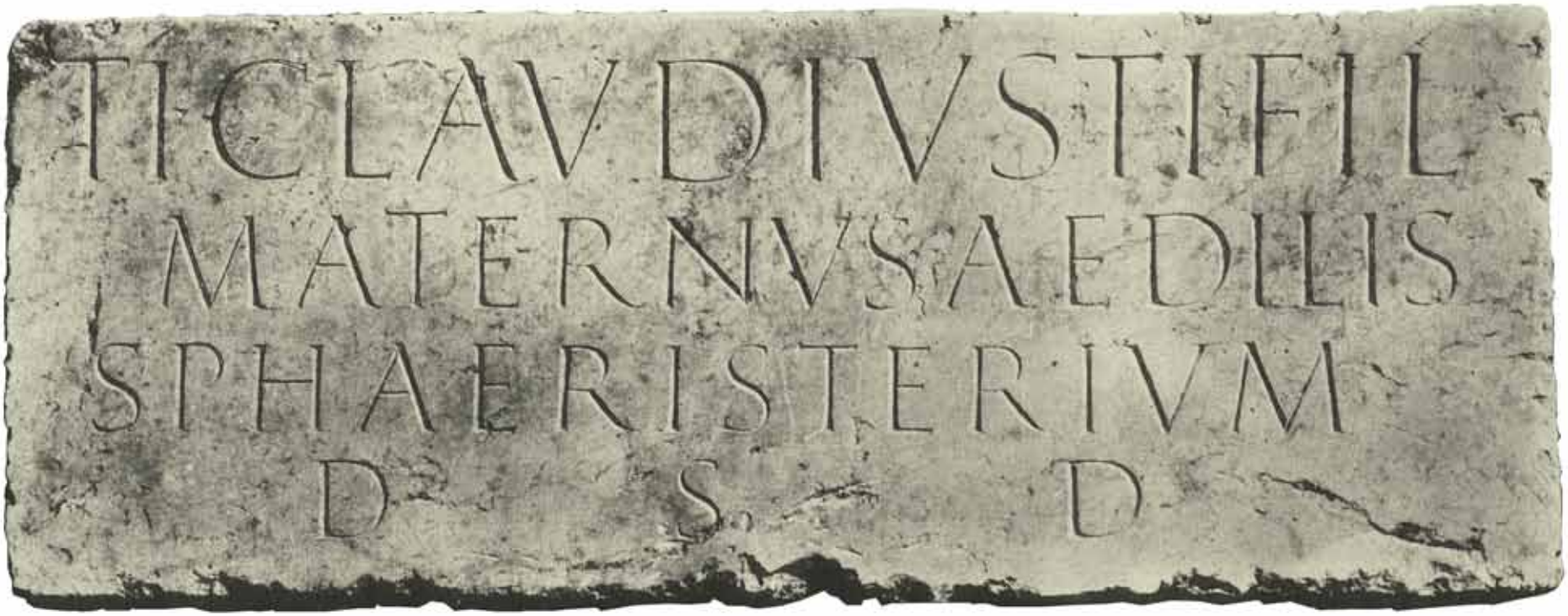
Until fountain pens came along, pen lifts wasted time and money. There was a right way and a wrong way of sliding the hand along the paper.

96
175

Lifting the pen and moving the hand after no more than five letters works well in italic. (“Anti-dis-establishmentarianism” opposes proposals to remove the Church of England’s position as the state church of England. It is the longest word in the English language, excluding coined and technical terms.



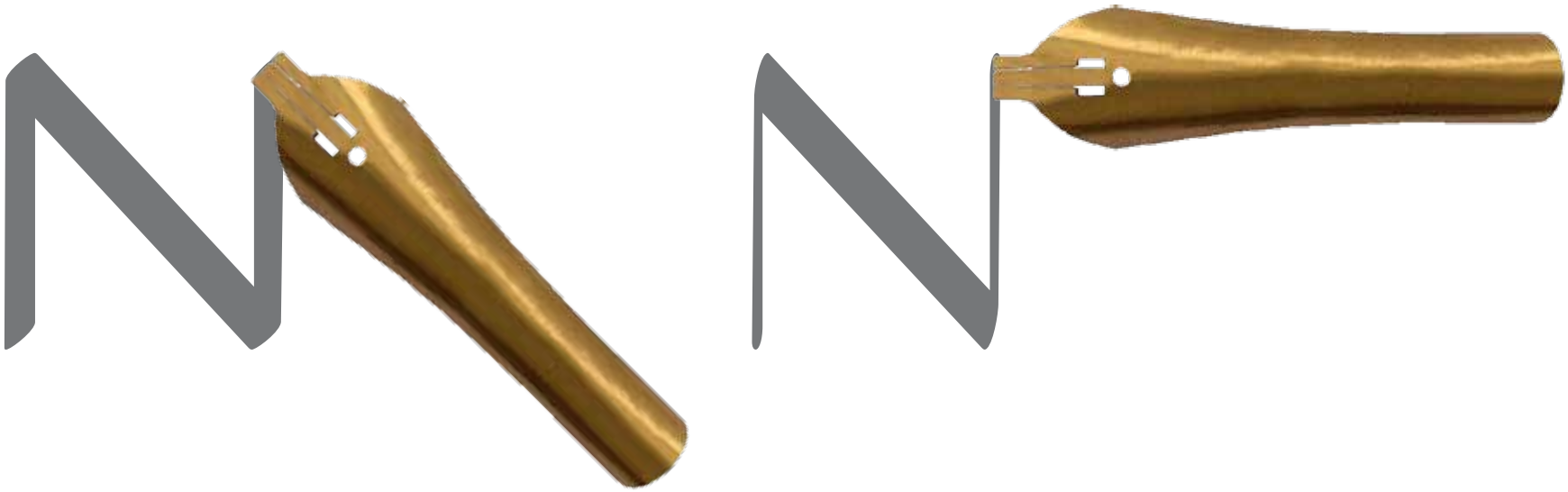
Unlike most writing systems of the world, the Latin alphabet, along with Greek and Cyrillic, has capitals and lower case letters.



98 Our capitals are based on a style of ancient Roman display letters.

These letters can be written in more the one way. They are based on simple geometric forms: circles, rectangles, triangles.

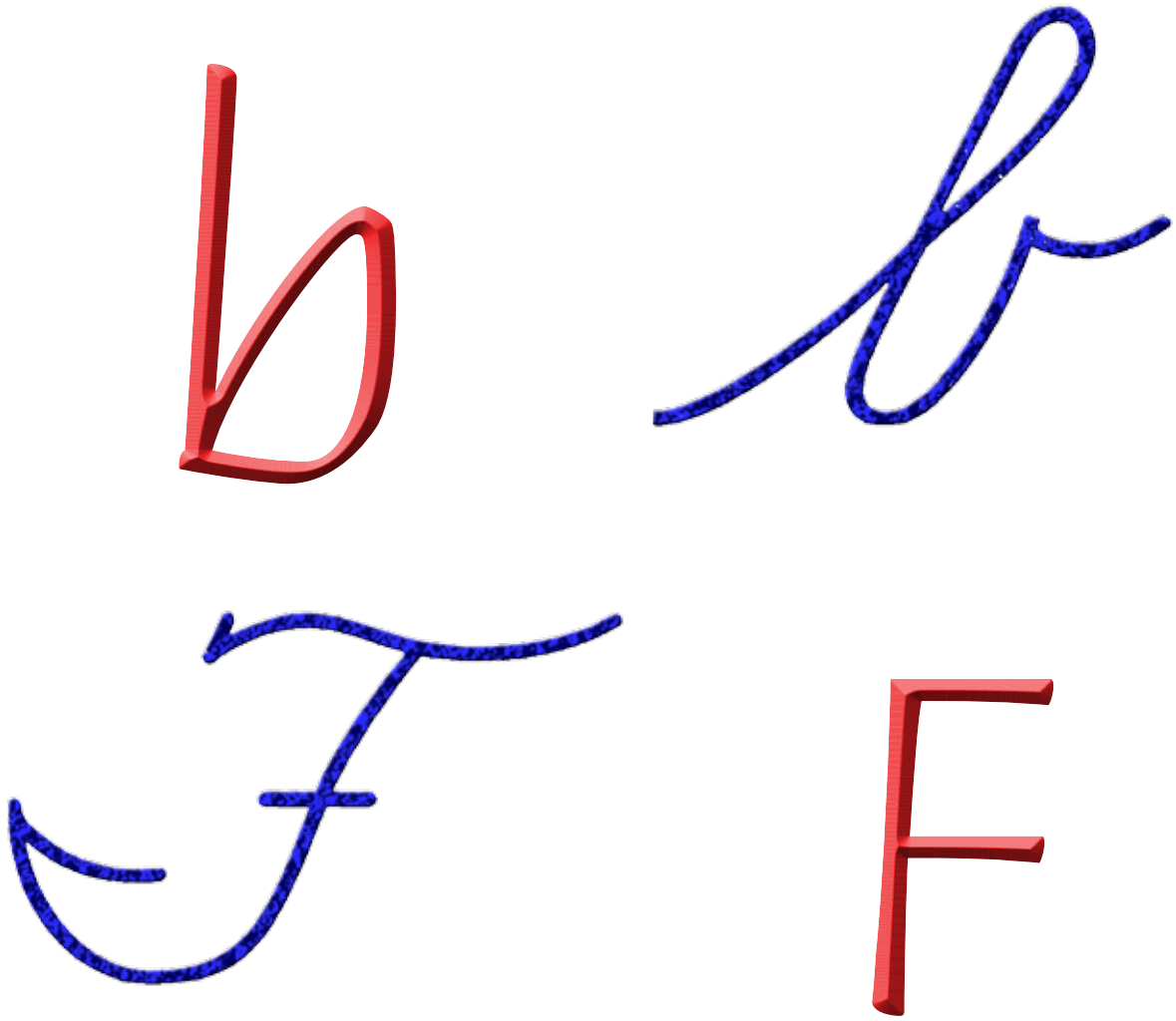
There are traditions and rules, especially about proportions. If you write a narrow letter O, for example, the letter H should be narrow as well.



In centuries of use and two major historical revivals, the ideal lettershapes have changed slightly. The thicks and thins are not always a logical result of the tool that makes them. You have to cheat. The letter N looks better if you change the angle of the pen.

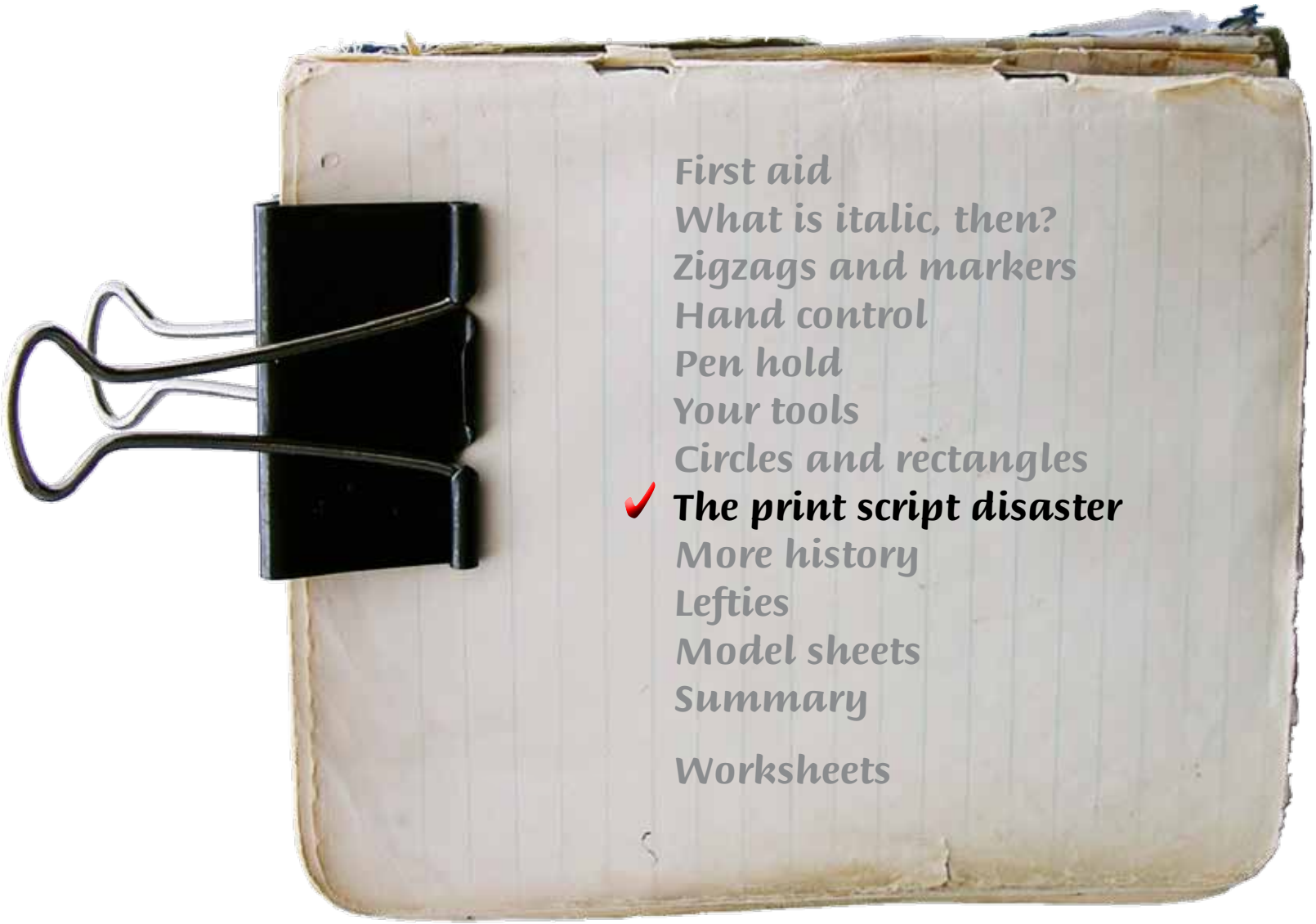
LEGIBLE
CAPITALS

But capitals of italic have a great advantage over most others styles. You can read them.



I used to think that conventional cursive was faster than italic. In my tests, they're about even. The italic letter b is slower. But cursive capitals take time as well.

And conventional cursive doesn’t survive speed any better than italic. A loop can be the letter l, the letter e, the letter i with a misplaced dot, and the letter t with a missing crossbar.



The biggest handwriting mistake in recent times is probably the print script, or manuscript writing if you prefer.

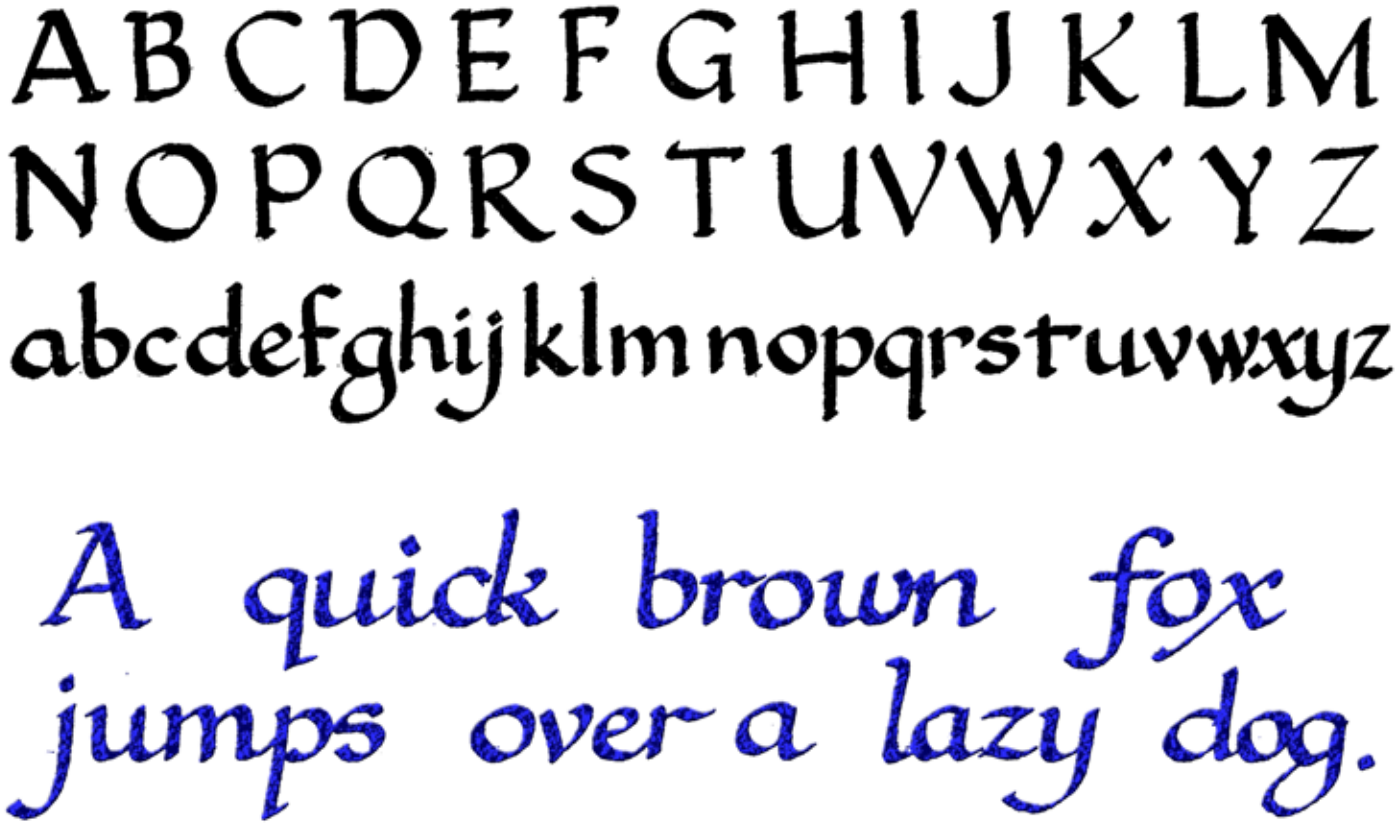
x10 x10

abcdefg abcdefg

About 1913, Edward Johnston, the great English calligrapher, gave a lecture to a broad audience of educators. He talked about skeleton forms, and they took off in a direction he never intended.

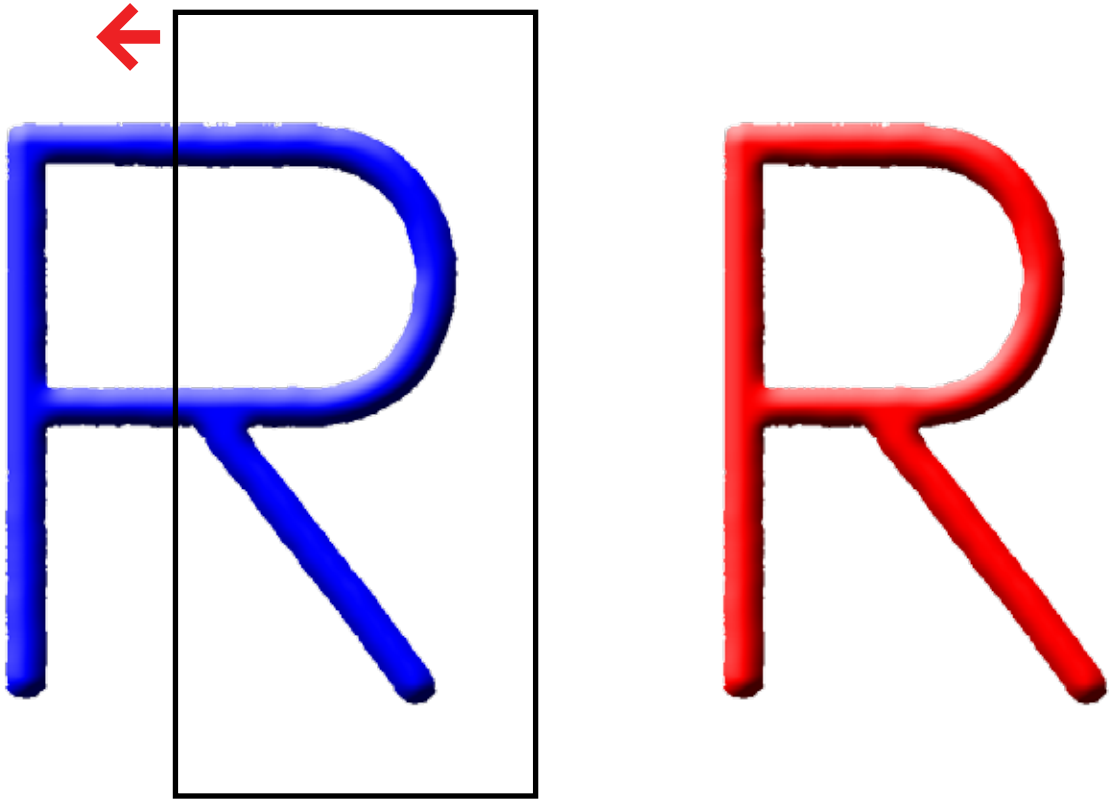
This is what he showed them, just a way of understanding lettershapes with shadings of thicks and thins.

One of his students, Marjorie Wise, introduced an inferior model in the United States. It was also meant to be a first step to writing with a broad edge pen.

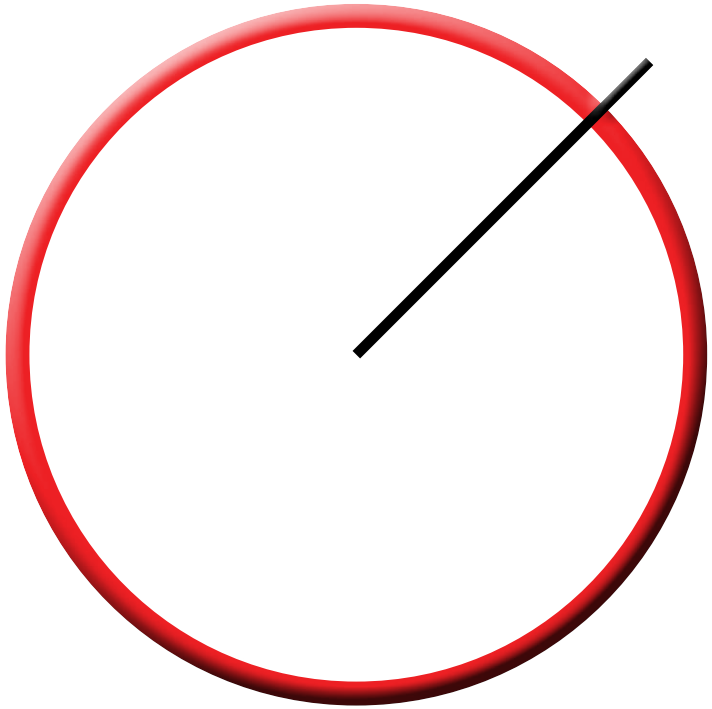


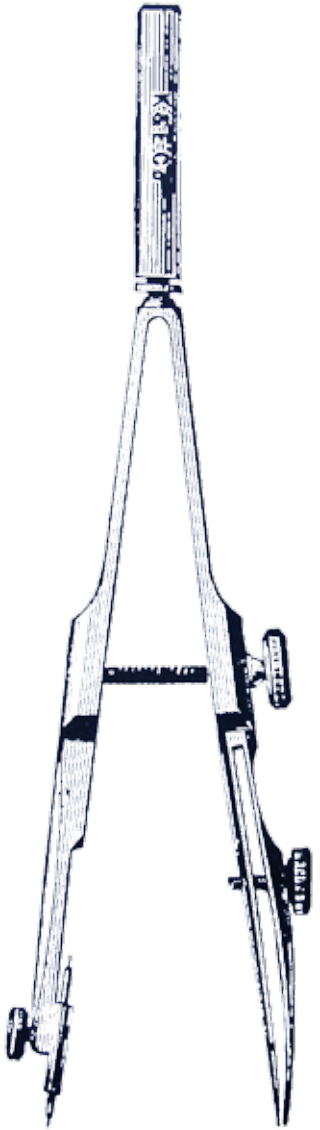
This was her final goal. But American teachers had ideas of their own.

This is an average example of modern print script. It is unnecessarily ugly. One example of that should be enough. Look at the capital letter R.

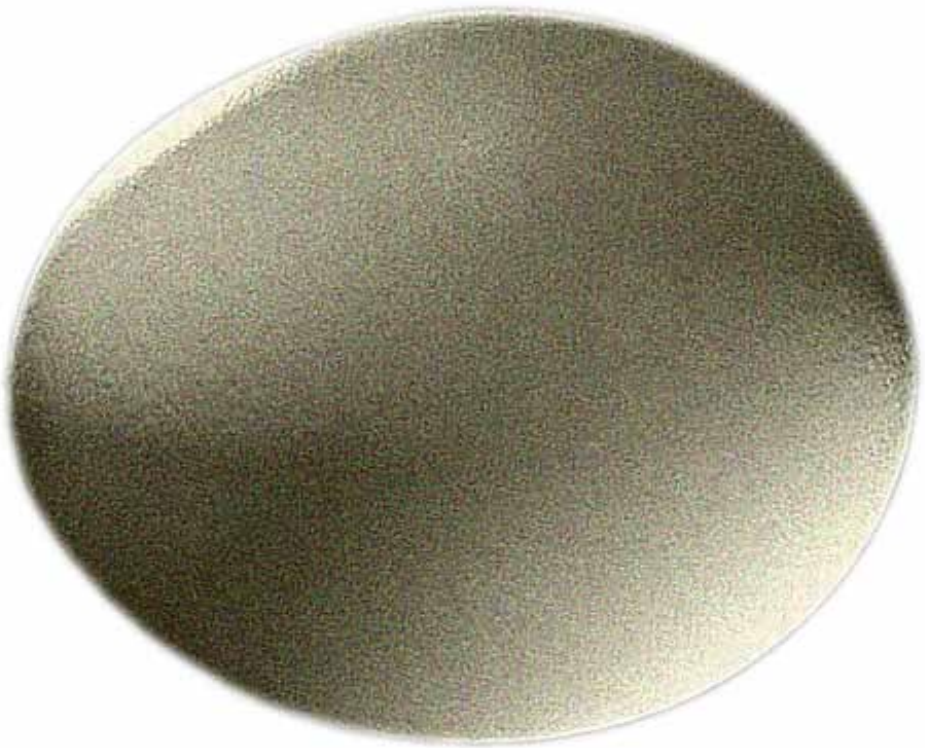


111 It is too wide. Make it one-fourth narrower, and it looks all right. People who don’t see this shouldn’t design model alphabets.

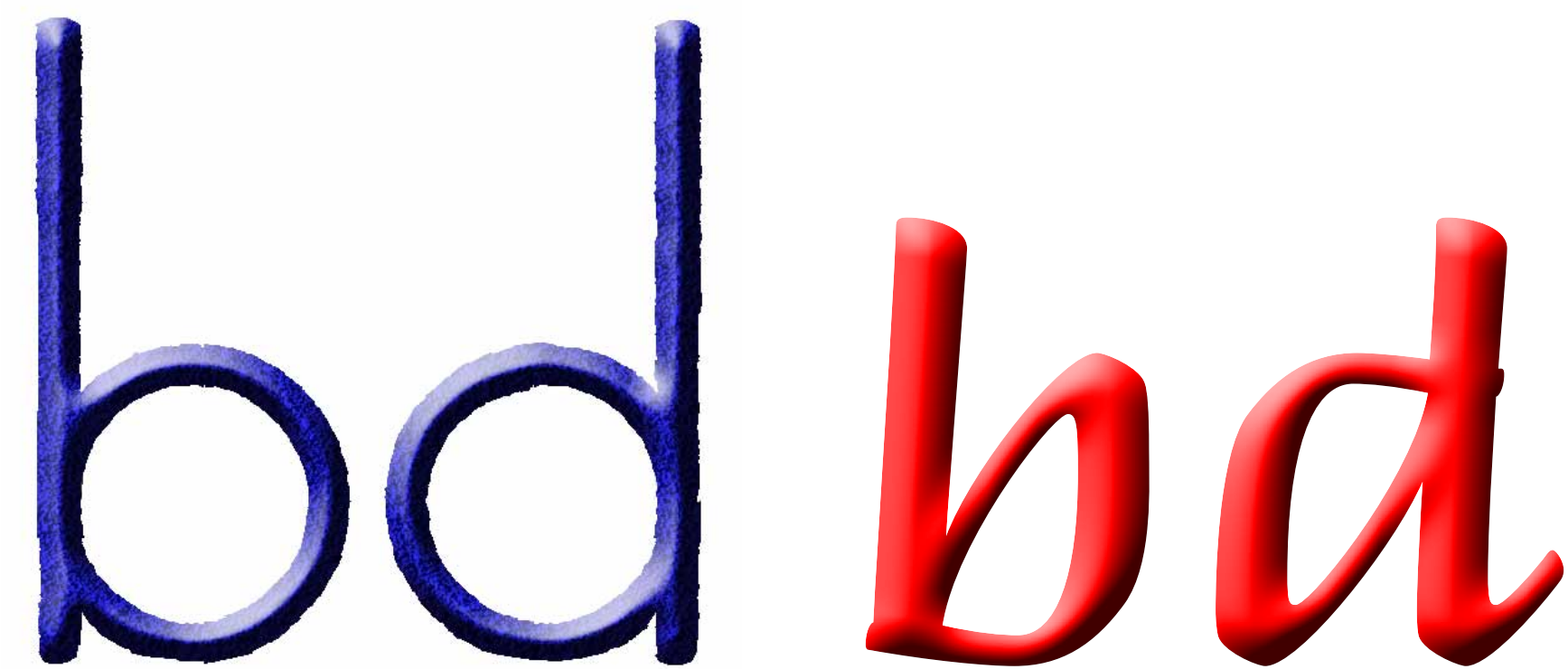




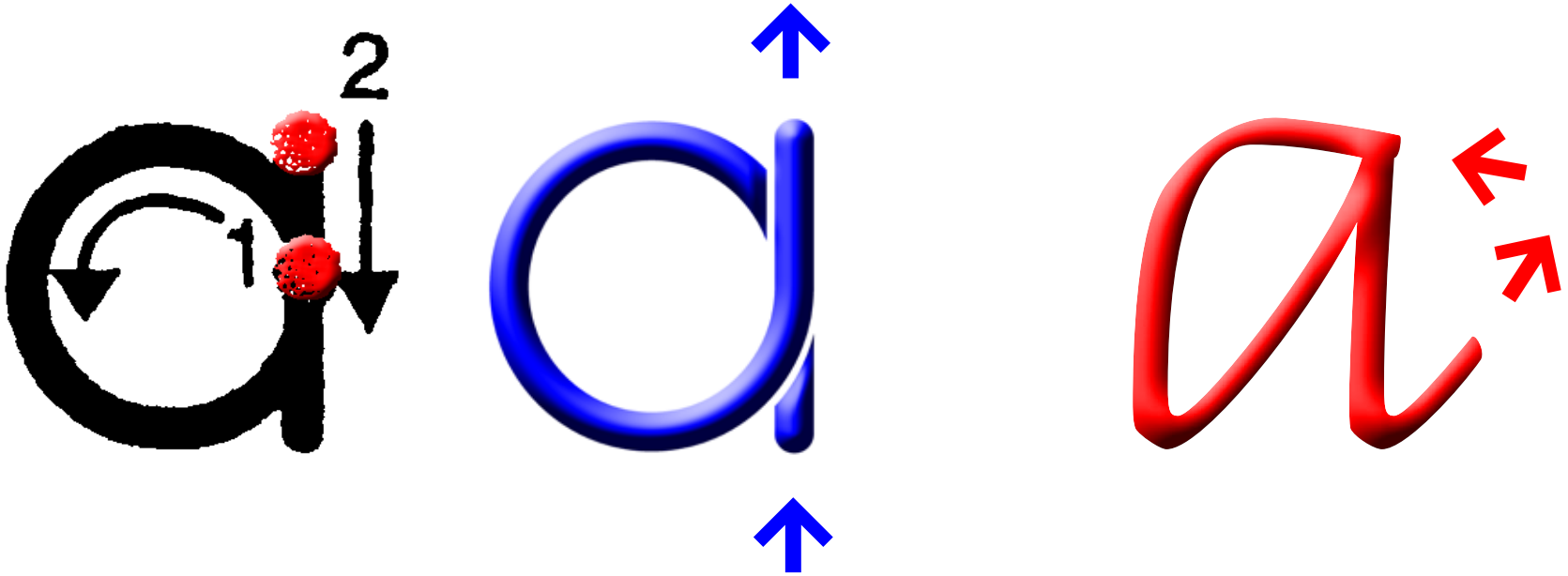
The first hurdle of print script is that a circle is an absolute form. It's either a circle or it isn't. Letters that are based on a circle are more difficult to write than letters based on an oval.



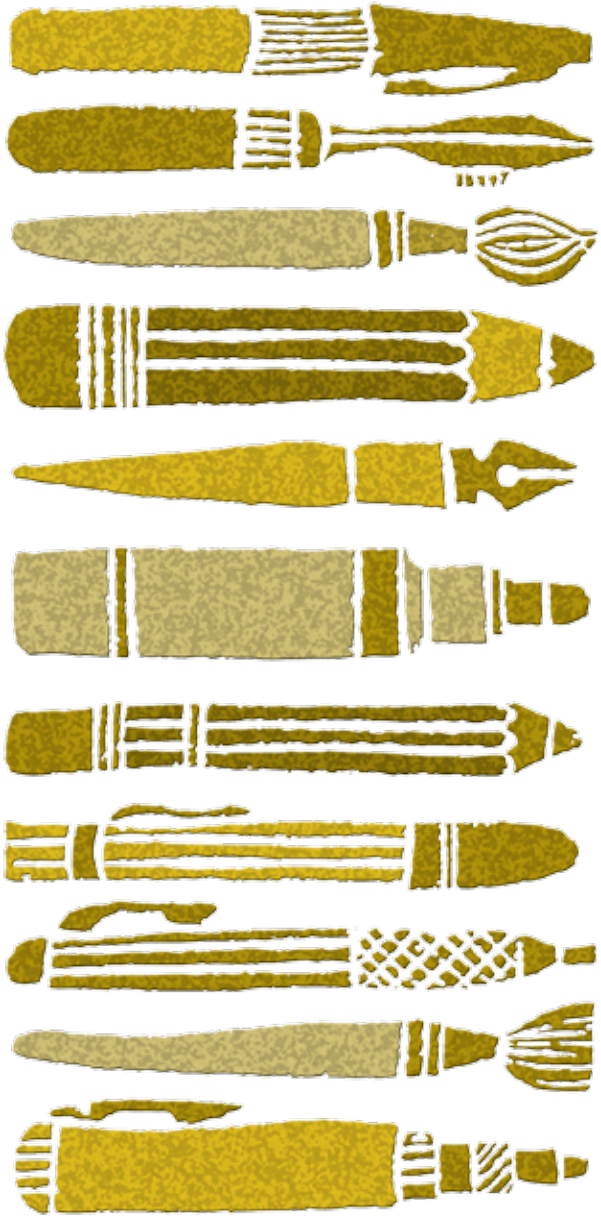
113 An egg shape is flexible. It doesn’t have failure built into it.



Ball-and-stick letters also make life very difficult for dyslexics. Letters that are not symmetrical are hard enough.

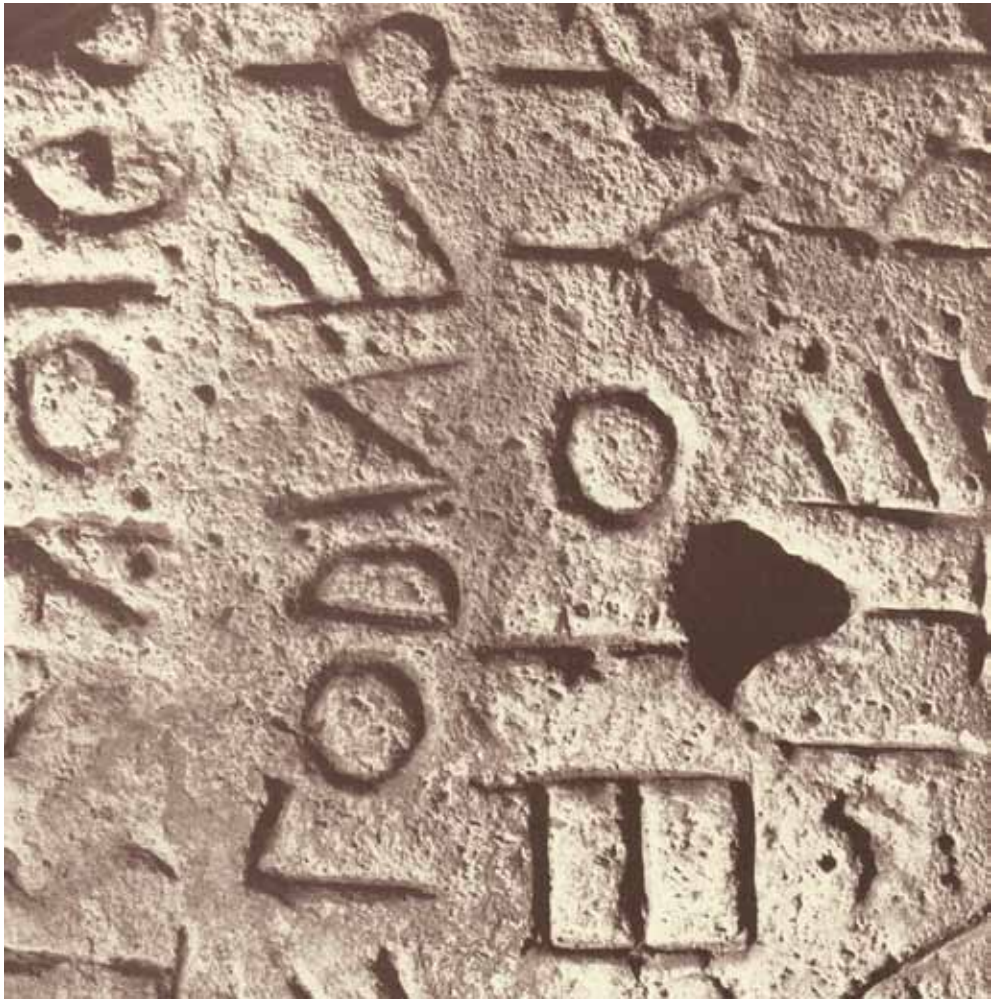


The writing movement can go wrong, too. You can easibly begin a print script letter a at the bottom and end it at the top. The italic letter a, on the other hand, begins at the right point and ends with the pen in the proper place for a join to the next letter.



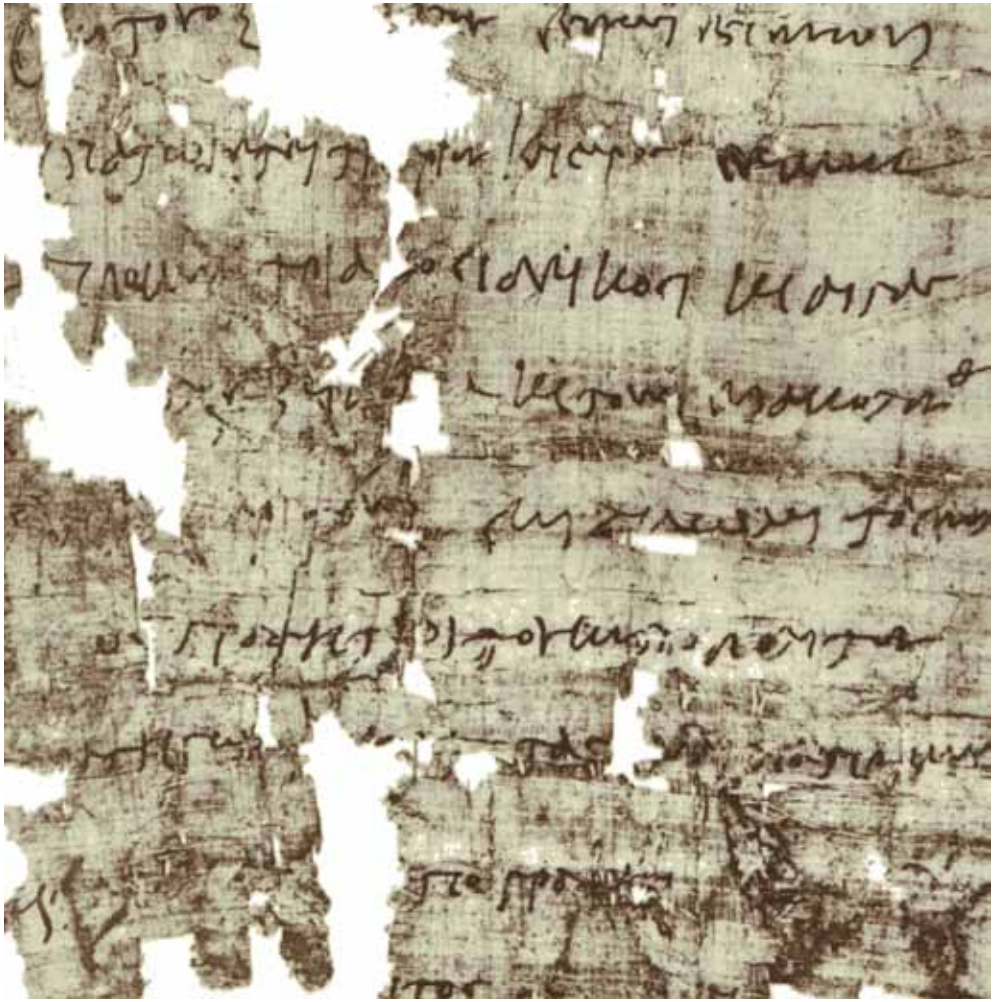
And the same people who like print script also have ideas about pens. Of all the writing instruments we can choose from, they make young children write with pens that feel like broomsticks.

The worst trouble with print script is the movement pattern.



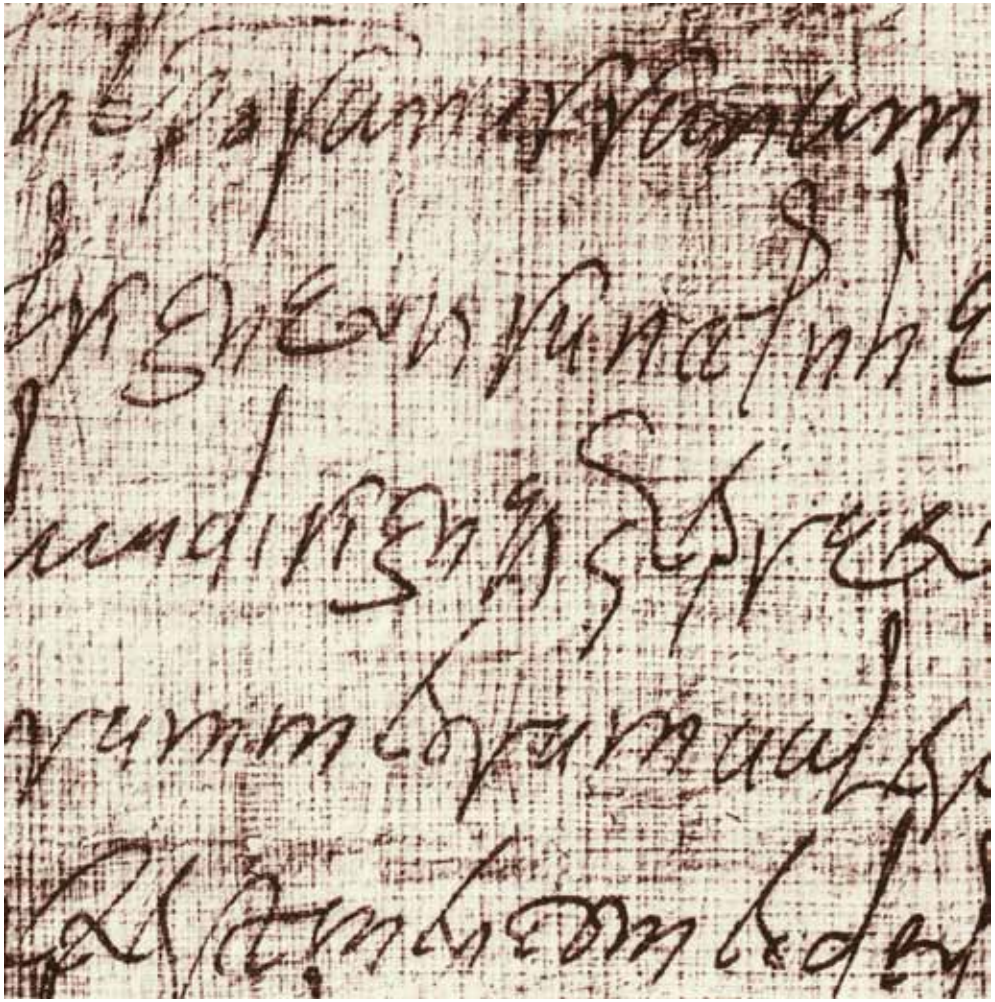
6th century BC. Rome

118 This is the Lapis Niger, one of the oldest surviving inscription of the Latin alphabet. It is made of simple geometric forms.



23 A.D. Early Roman cursive

How fast can you write and still produce text that somebody can read? Clerks and secretaries needed all the shortcuts they could think of.



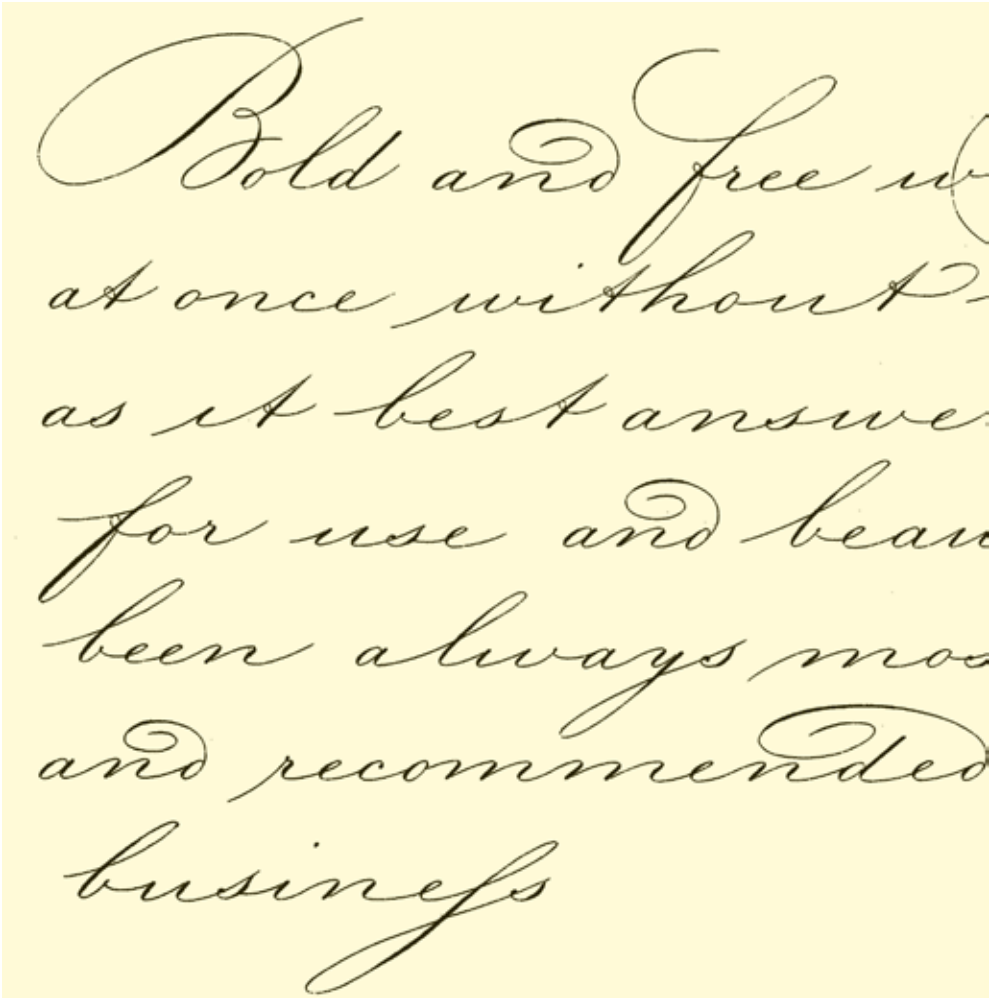
Ca. 552 AD, Ravenna. Late Roman Cursive

120
175

Not all the lettershapes are familiar to us, but many of the paths—the direction and sequence of strokes—are still the same in our time.

1524. Giovanantonio Tagliente, Venice

121 Seven centuries later, the style of writing has changed but many of the paths still remain the same.



1834 United States

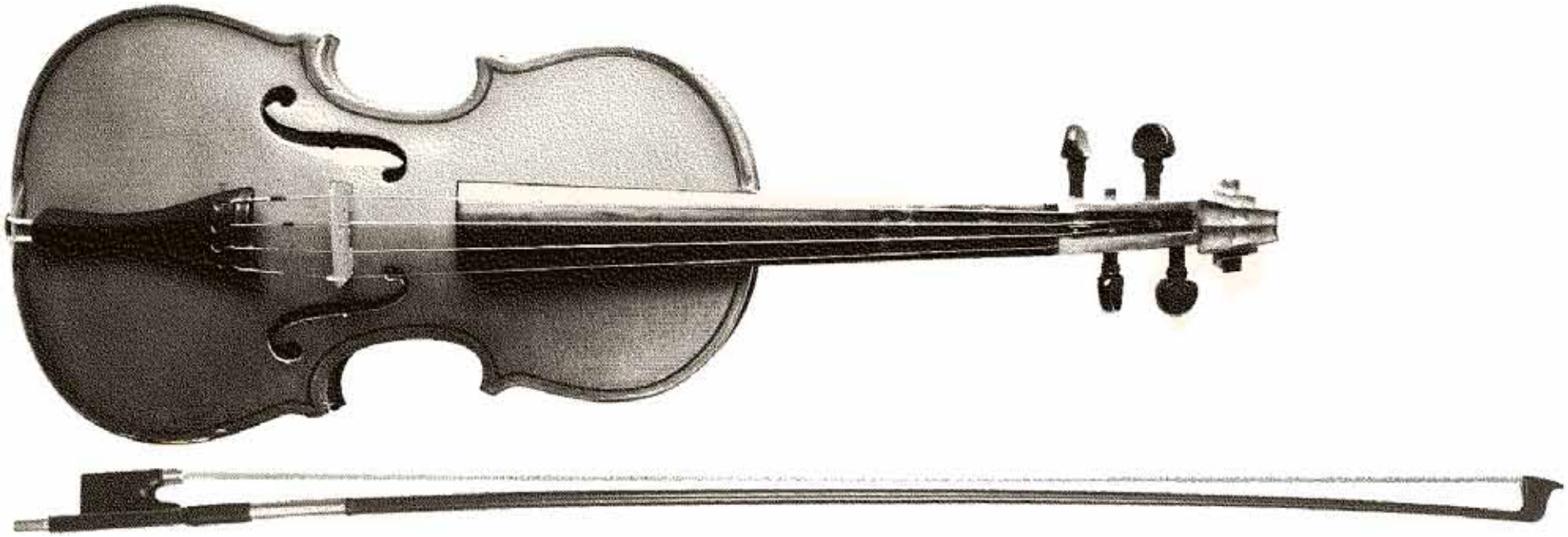
A simplified copperplate looks different, but the letter m has been written the same way for fifteen centuries. Then print script came along.

abc

abc

123
175

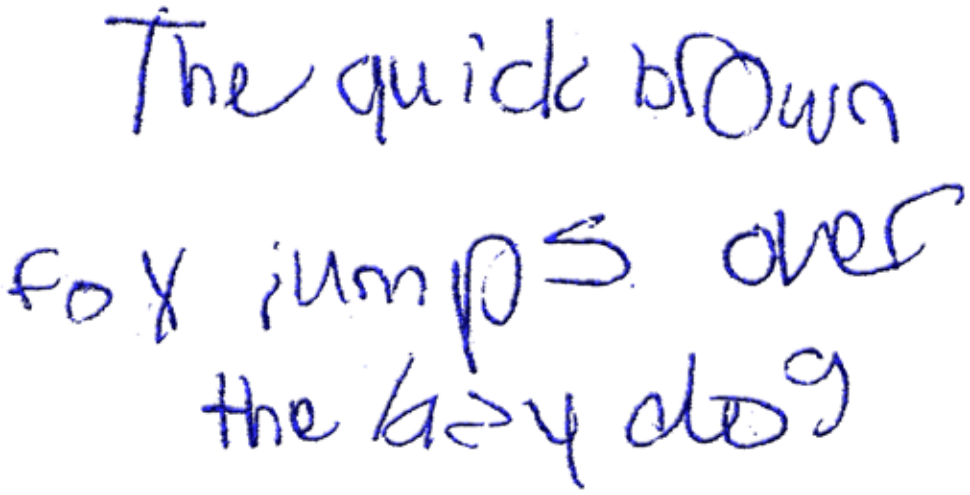
Two thousand years of evolution were thrown out by people who probably never heard of it. Children were taught print script for three years, and then told to learn a new, joined script.



124
175

Imagine, if you can, teaching a child to play the violin for three years and then say “Now it’s time for you to learn diferent fingering.” In 1974, Marjorie Wise rejected her efforts as “ill-advised and misused.”

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog



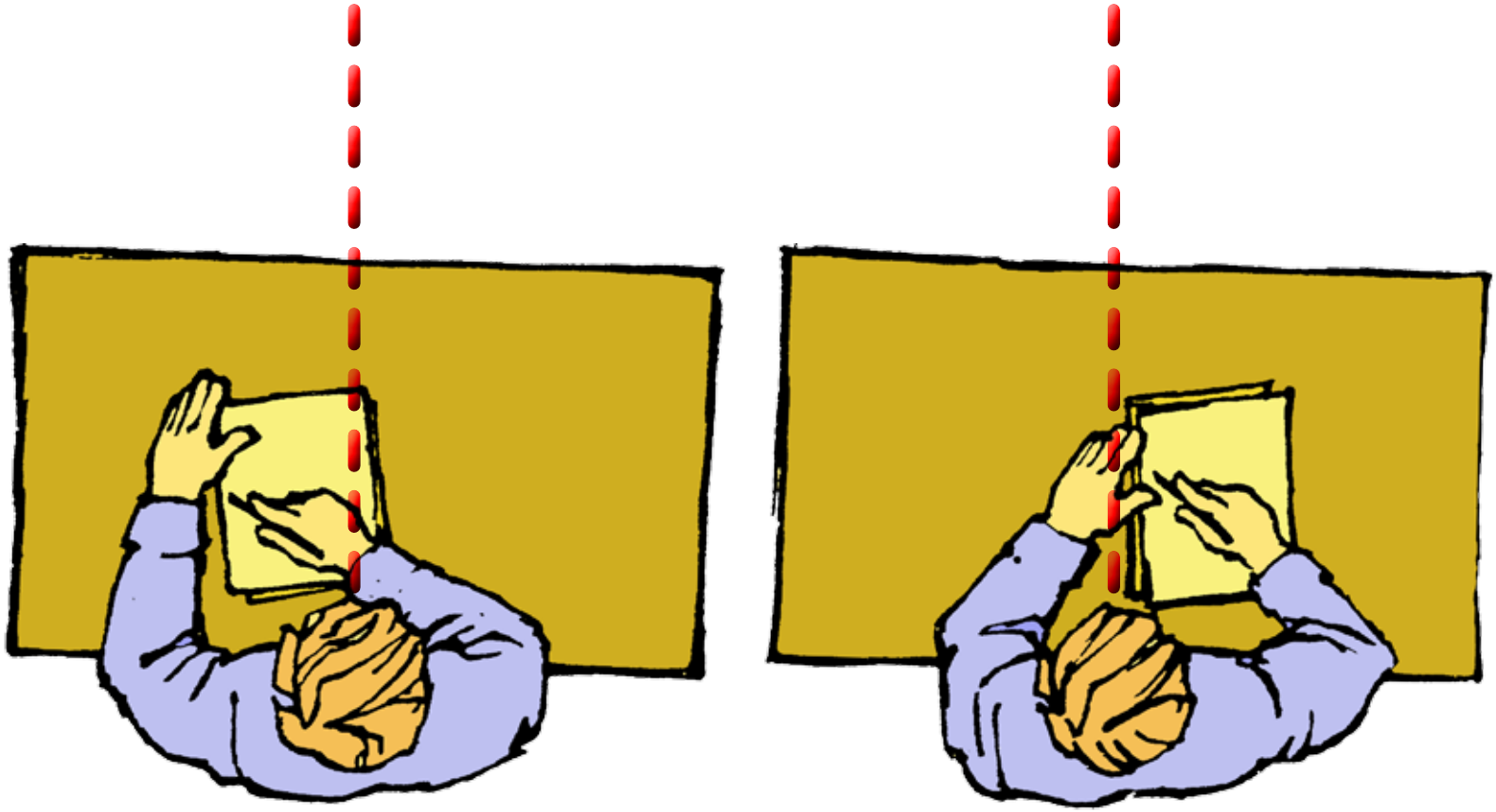
As I mentioned earlier, children who grasp shape and form on their own have nothing to worry about. But this is what happens to those who don't. There are more of them than you think.

First aid
What is italic, then?
Zigzags and markers
Hand control
Pen hold
Your tools
Circles and rectangles
The print script disaster
More history
Lefties
Model sheets
Summary
Worksheets

Convenient

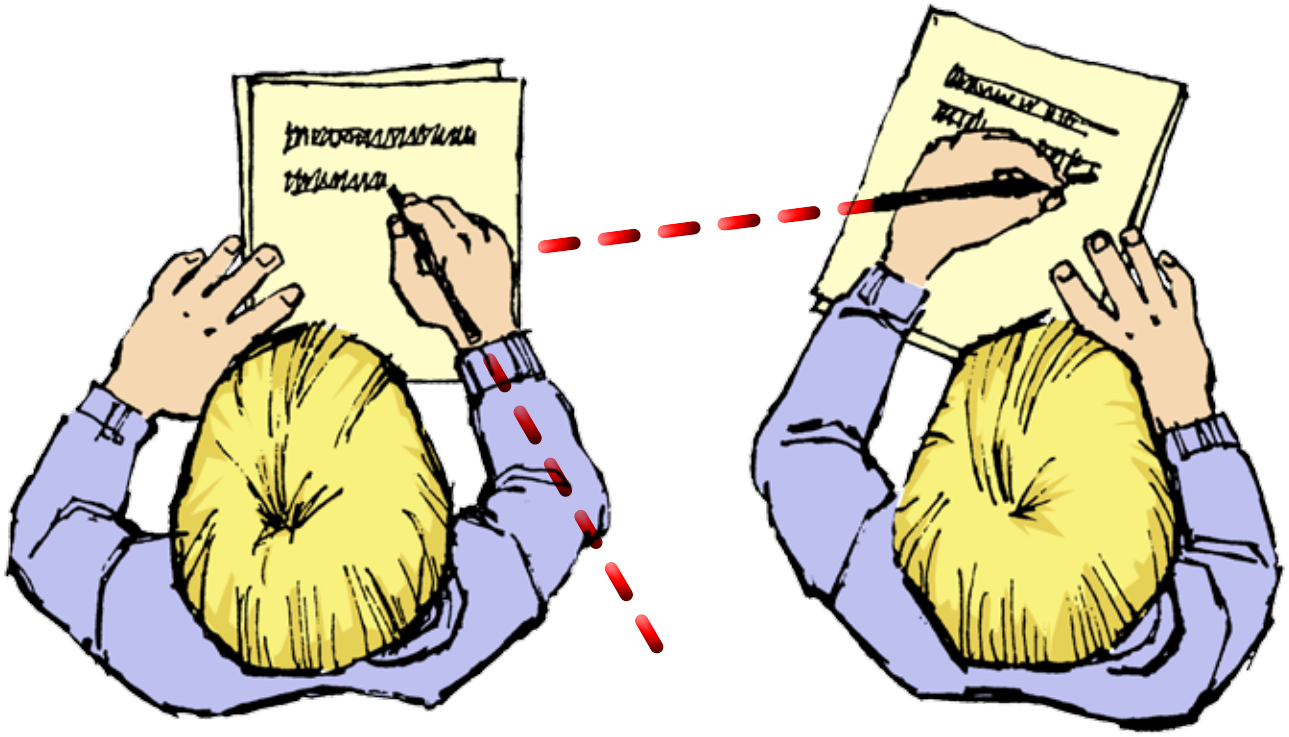
127
175

Until recently, schools had a simple approach: make them write with the right hand. Beat them if they don’t. Things are more complicated now.

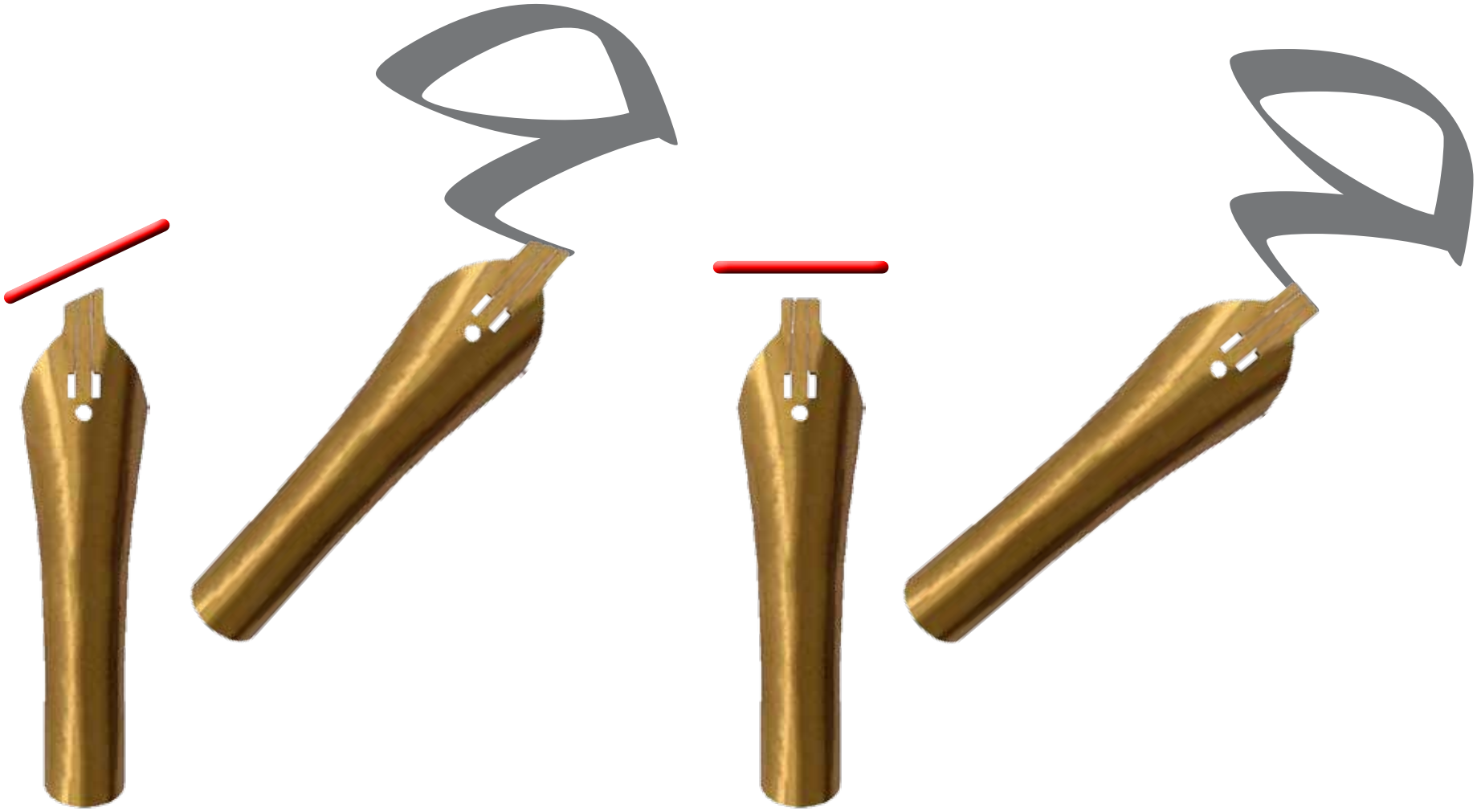


Where do you put the paper? If you are right-handed, the page should be on your right. Otherwise your hand gets in your line of vision and you can't see what you're doing.

A left-handed writer should have the paper on the left. It should also be at a different angle.

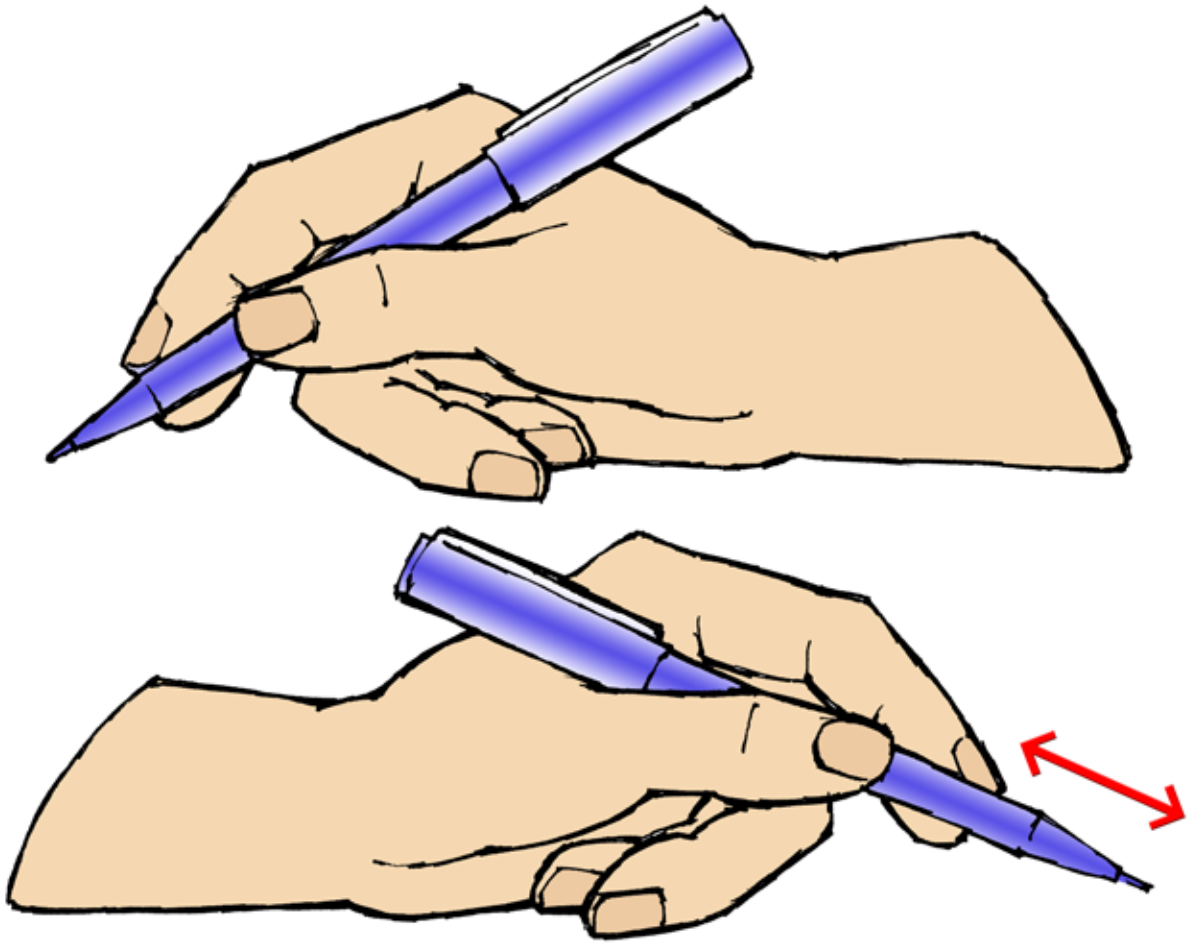


130
175 The pen of a right-handed writer usually points to a spot just off the right shoulder. The pen of a left-hander is often nearly transverse, like a flute.



131
175

Special pen nibs with an oblique cut are available for left-handers. I'm not sure they help much. You quickly get used to writing with a broad edge pen on paper at a 90-degree angle.



132 But most left-handers need to keep the pen nib farther from the fingertips that right-handers usually do.

133 There are specialty pens, like this beautifully photgraphed item. I don't know many people who use them.

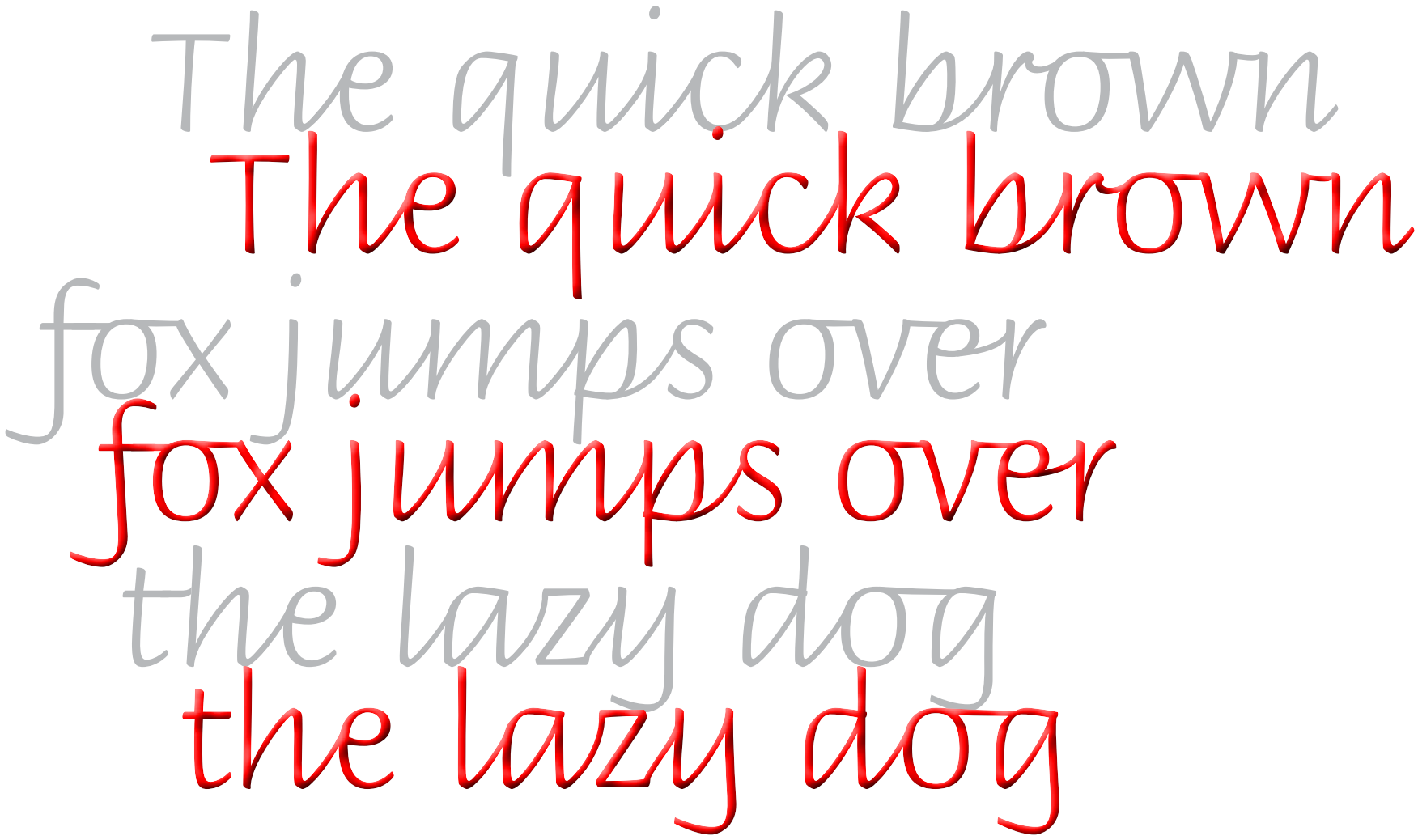
175

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Handwriting evolved around the joins of the human hand. If you flip your wrist and make writing movements with your hand, you'll know what I mean.

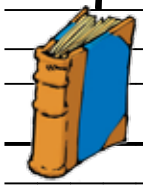
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The joints of the left-handed are the opposite. A little backslant in the writing can help a lot. Choosing a good paper position is also useful.

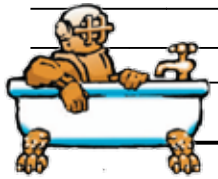

The quick brown
The quick brown
fox jumps over
fox jumps over
the lazy dog
the lazy dog

wwww wwww wwww

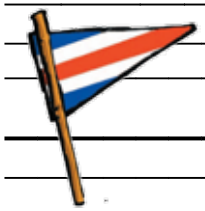
ape

 book

cake

 diver

earth

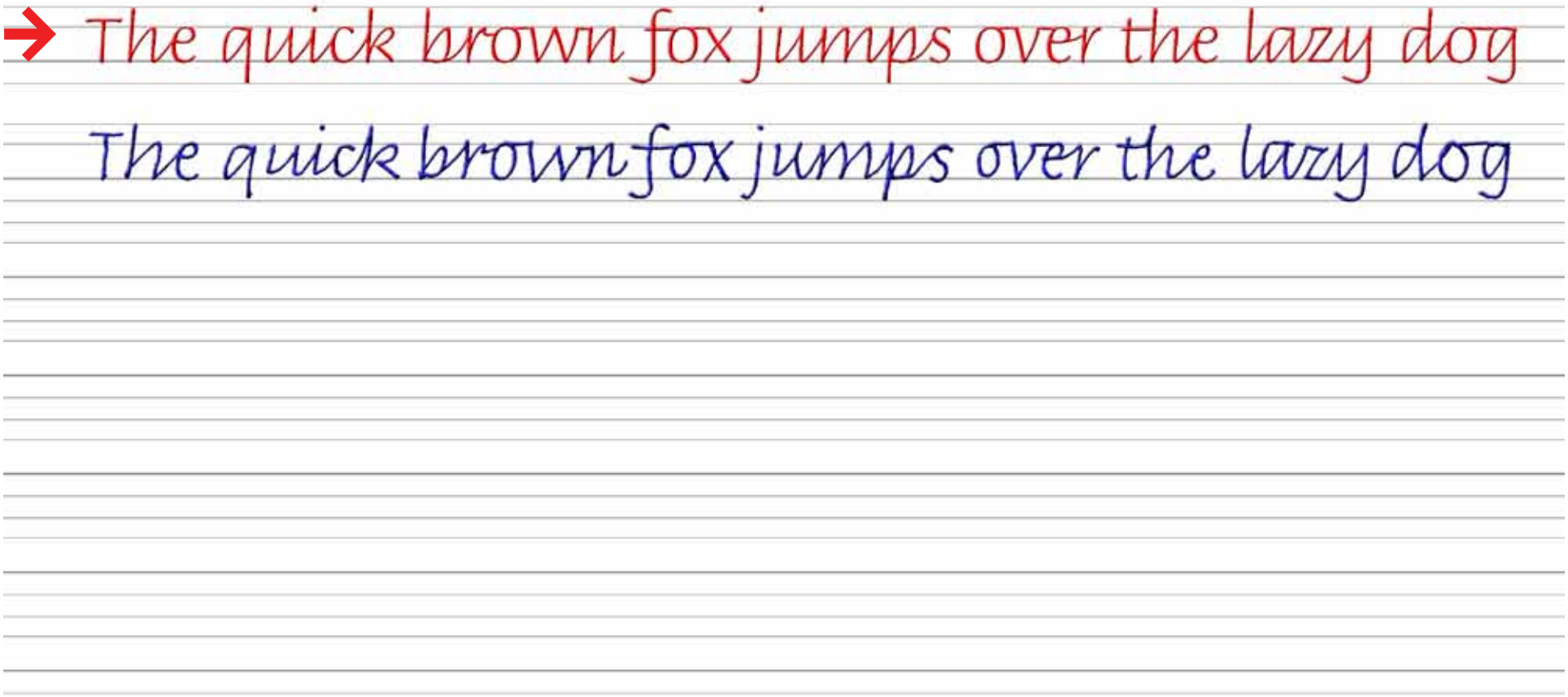
 flag

This model sheet is useful for a right-handed child. Write on it with the left, and the hand goes over the model.

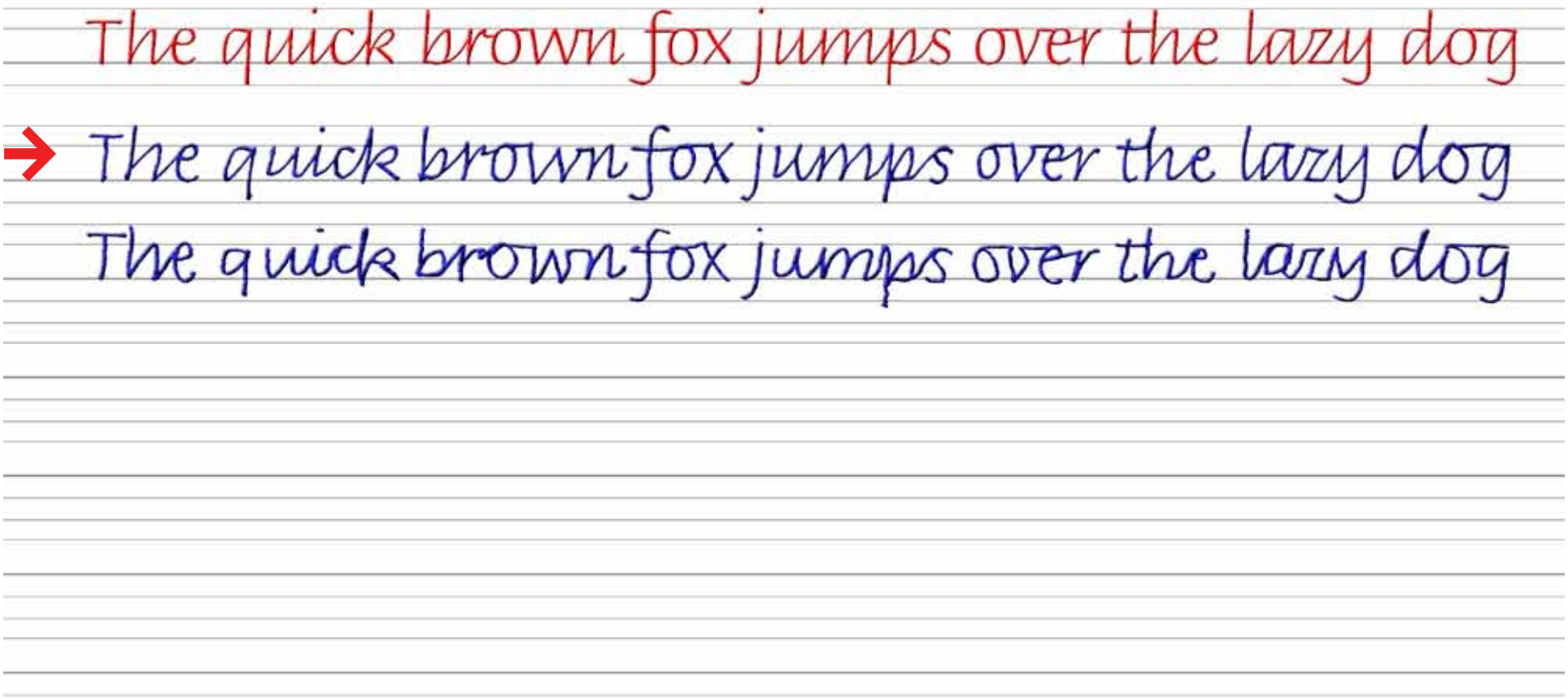
This model sheet works well for left-handers. But there is a better way.

Who wants to write page after page of exercises and not get any better?

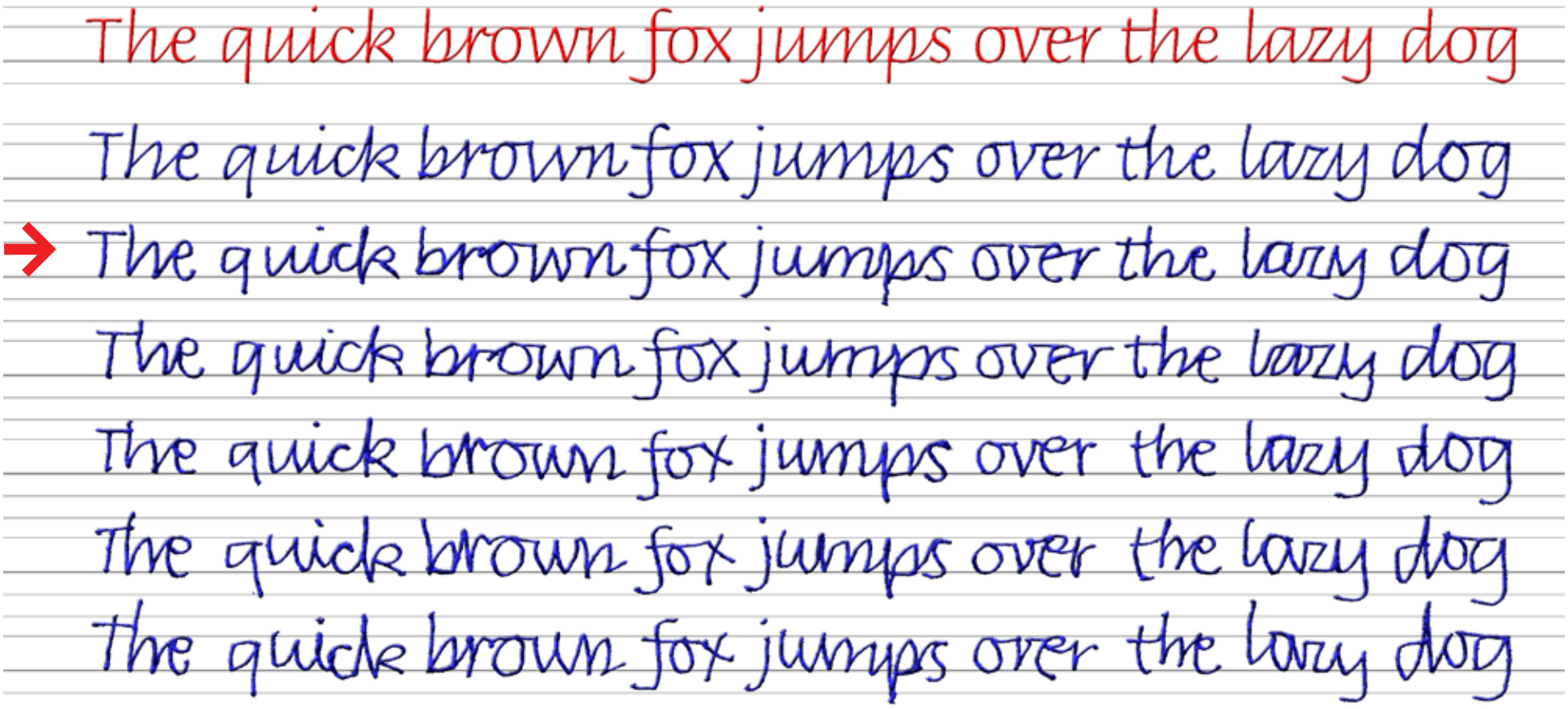
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog



141 The first line of writing is a copy of the model.



142 The second line of writing is not a copy of the model. It is a copy of the first line of writing.



The third line of writing is not even a copy of the first line of writing. It is a copy of the second. Each line is worse than the line above it. You only get one useful line of writing on the whole sheet. The rest is largely a waste of time and effort.

Alice had never seen such a curious croquet-

ground in all her life, all ridges and furrows;

the croquet-balls were live hedge-

hogs, and the mallets live flamingoes

My experience suggests this makes sensible use of time and paper. Every page begins with a zigzag for tracing. The text is traced before it's written. The sheet can be used by left-handers and right-handers alike.

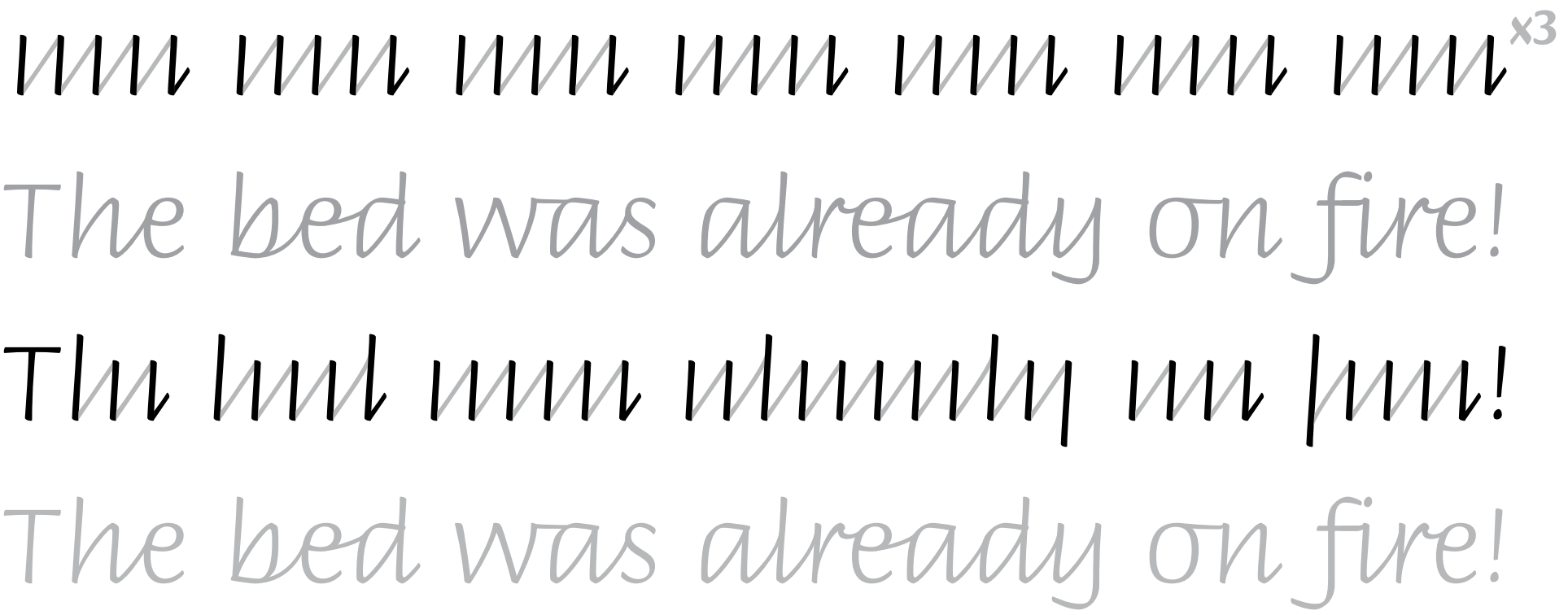
In the workshop we'll use practice sheets with lines. Each set of four (ascender line, midline, baseline and descender line) is marked with a gray bar at one end. The baseline is slightly bolder and marked with a dot.

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

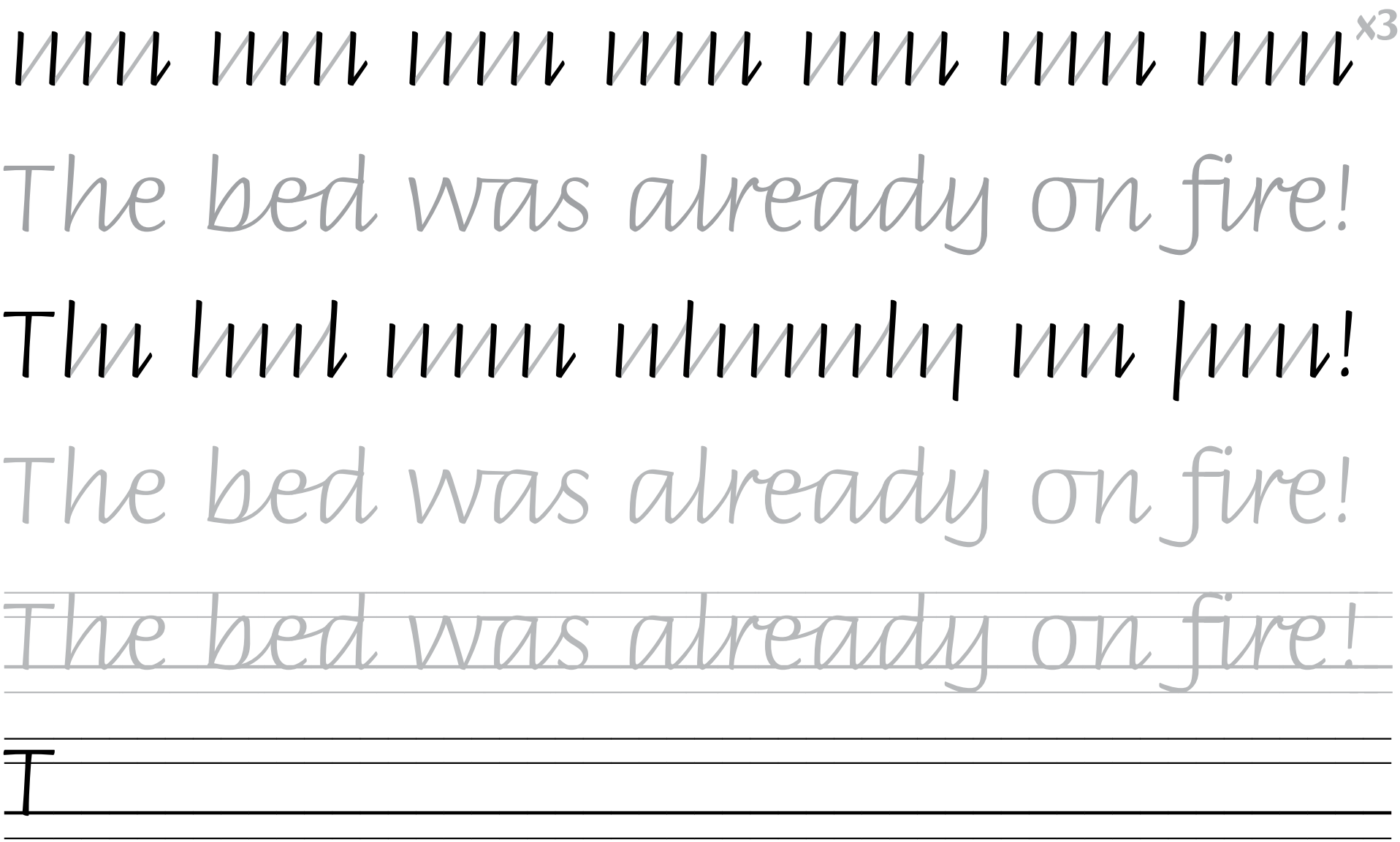
Model strips are very useful. With them around, a shopping list can turn into a short practice session. They fit five to page. When more are needed, they can be printed or photocopied.

We will use model sheets in our workshop. At the risk of insulting your intelligence, I will now tell you about them in great detail. We'll trace the same line of zigzags three times. Make each pass slower than the previous one.



148
175

Next we'll trace zigzags on top of the text in the second line. Then we'll trace the zigzags of the third line. And finally we'll trace zigzags over the text of the fourth line. This may well feel silly. Experience tells me this is what it takes.



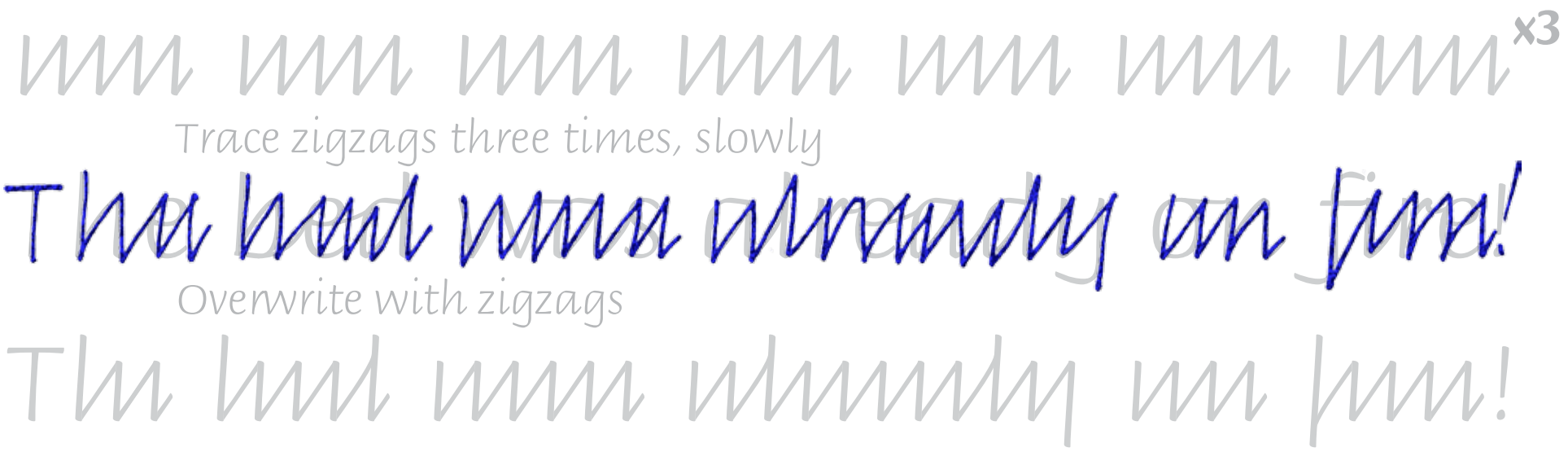
After this, I'd like you to trace the text in the fifth line slowly. Finally you should write the text on the blank lines. Most people can learn the movement for italic in twenty minutes. This sheet will take you about five. And now, please let me insult you some more.

Trace zigzags three times, slowly

The bed was already on fire!

150 Here it is again. You trace the zigzags three times, slower each time.

175



151 You write zigzags on top of the text in the second line.

175

As a reminder, this is how the lettes e, s and w fit onto a zigzag grid.

mm mm mm mm mm mm mm x3

Trace zigzags three times, slowly

The bed was already on fire!

Overwrite with zigzags

Trace zigzags

The bed was already on fire!

153 You trace the zigzags in the third line.

175

mm mm mm mm mm mm mm x3

Trace zigzags three times, slowly

The bed was already on fire!

Overwrite with zigzags

Thm hmml mmm whmmmly mm fmm!

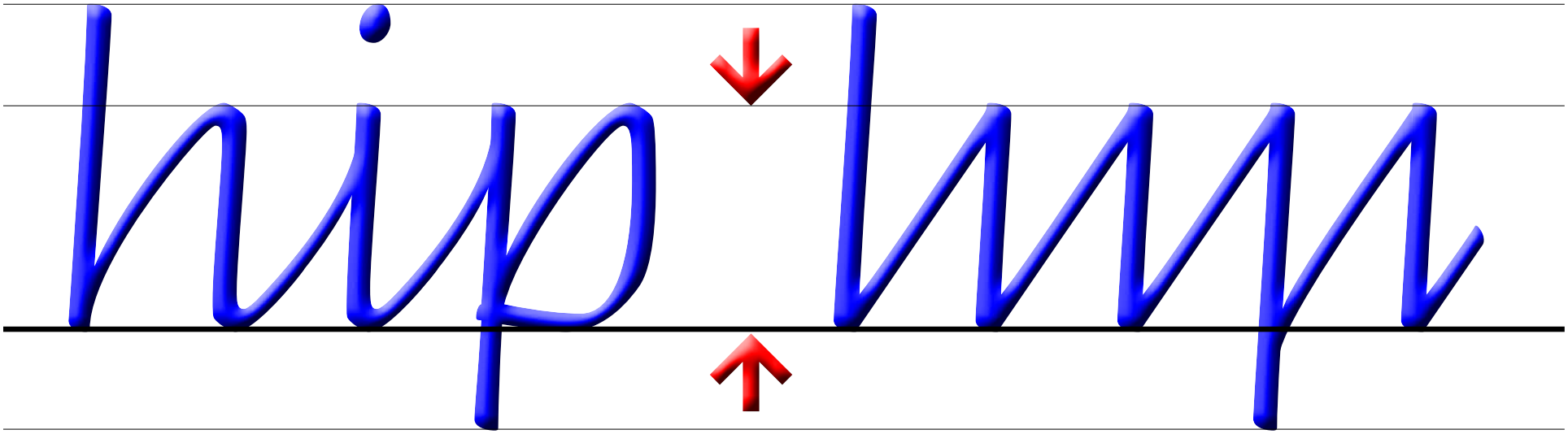
Trace zigzags

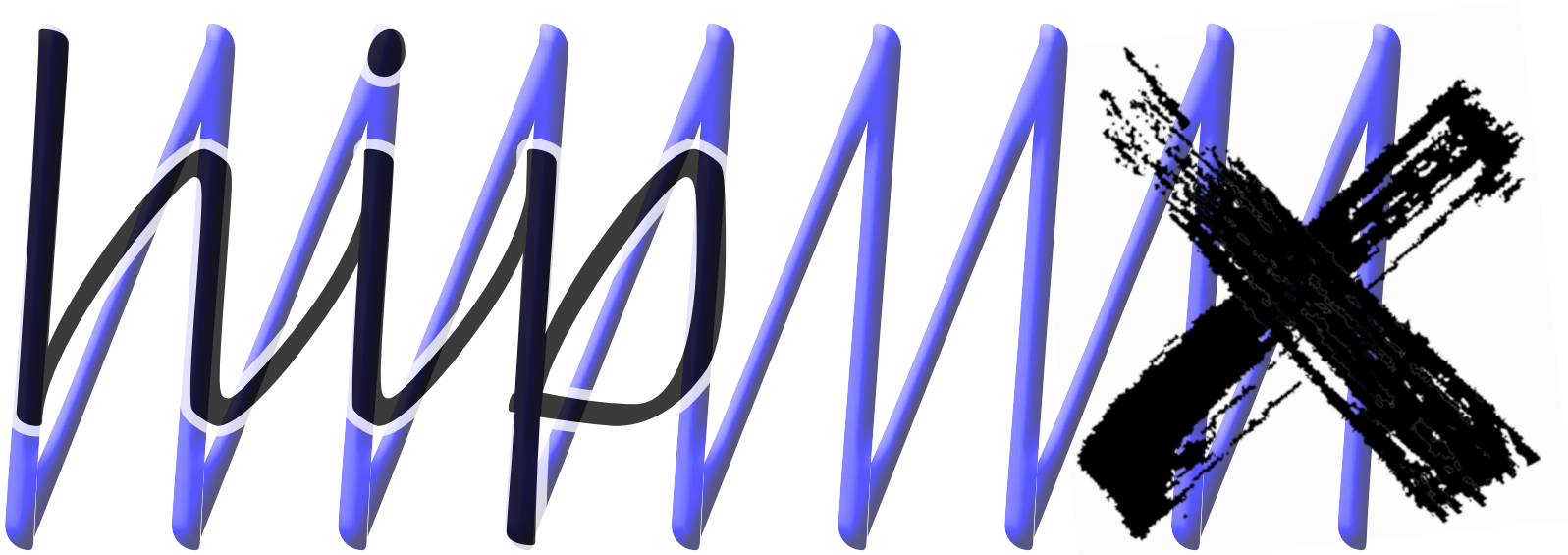
Overwrite with zigzags, again

The bed was already on fire!

154 You write zigzags on top of the text in the fourth line.

175





Here's another reminder. When you write zigzags on top of letters, you can include an occasional ascender and descender. But on he whole, your zigzags should go between the baseline and the midline, not like the zigzags at the bottom of this page.

mm mm mm mm mm mm mm x3

Trace zigzags three times, slowly

The bed was already on fire!

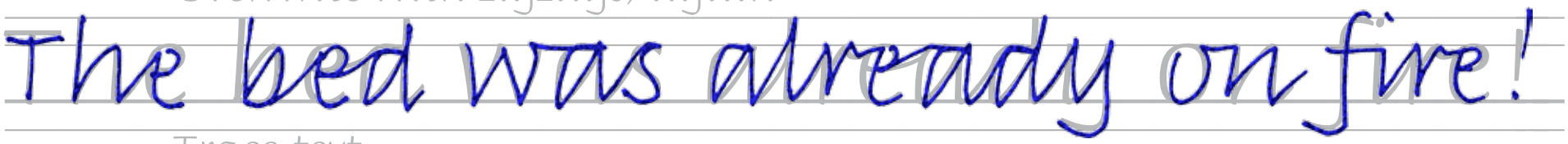
Overwrite with zigzags

Thm hmml mmm whmmmly mm fmm!

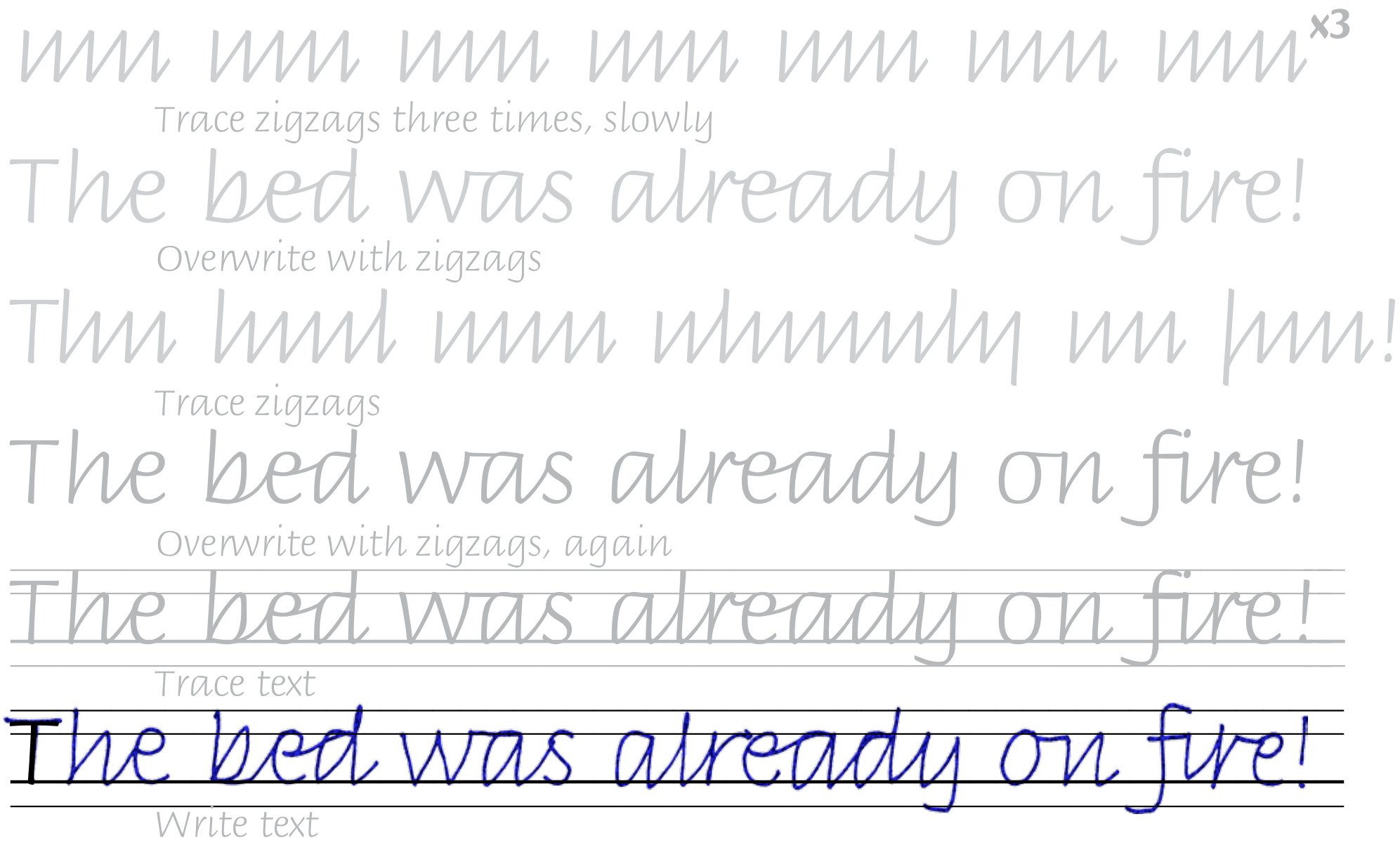
Trace zigzags

The bed was already on fire!

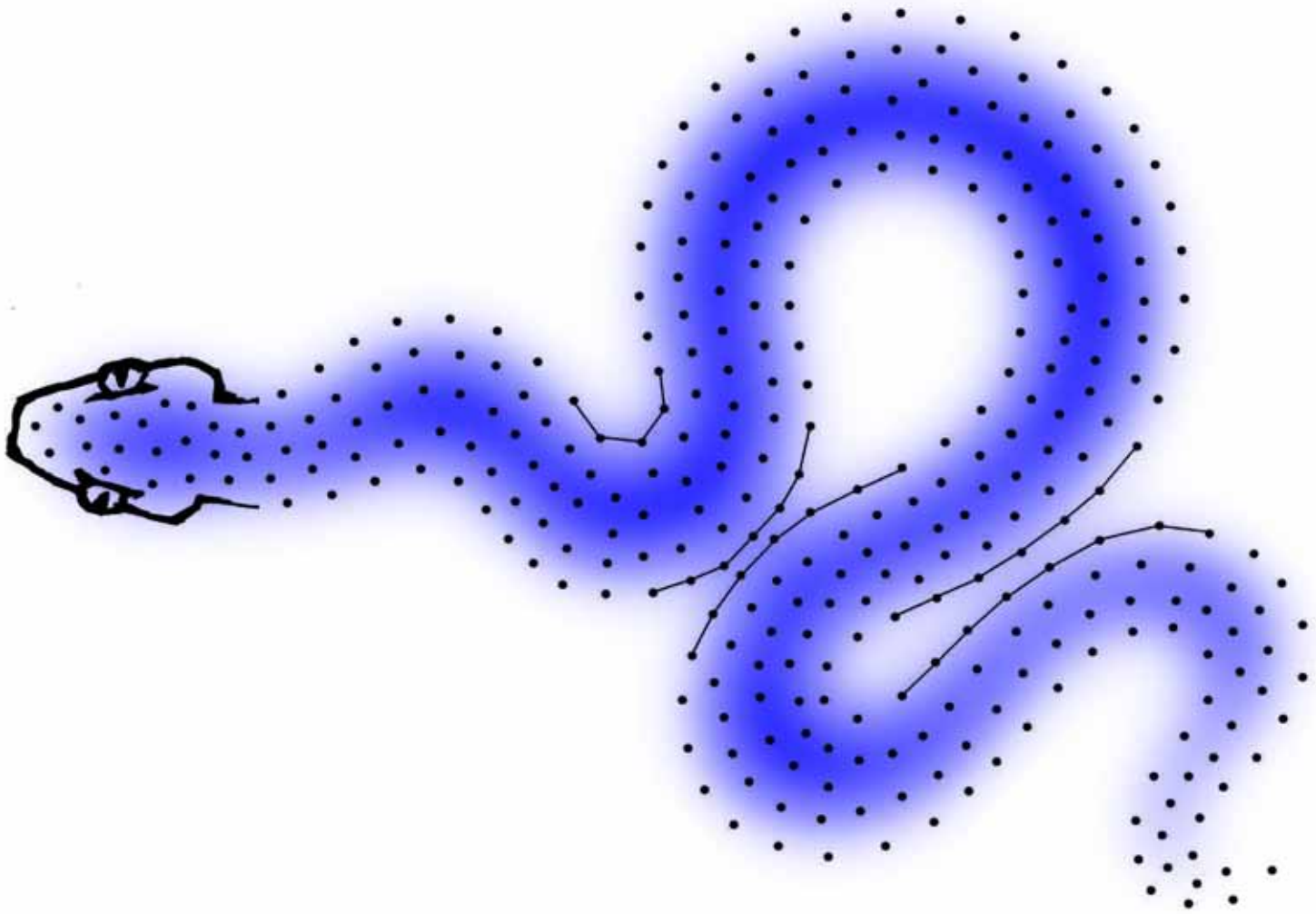
Overwrite with zigzags, again



Trace text



And finally, you copy the text onto the blank lines. (It is a punch line from a joke about a drunk who set his hotel room ablaze.)



158 If this is too hard, you can connect dots until you have developed a firm hand.

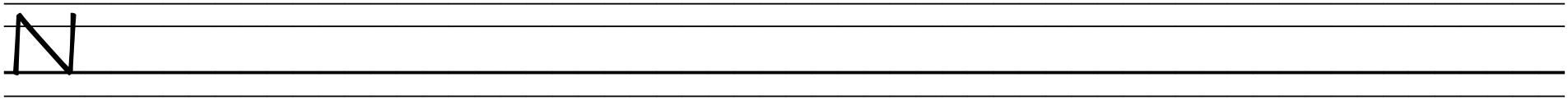
175

Now is the winter of our discontent

Nnn n nn nnnn n/ nnn nnnnnnn

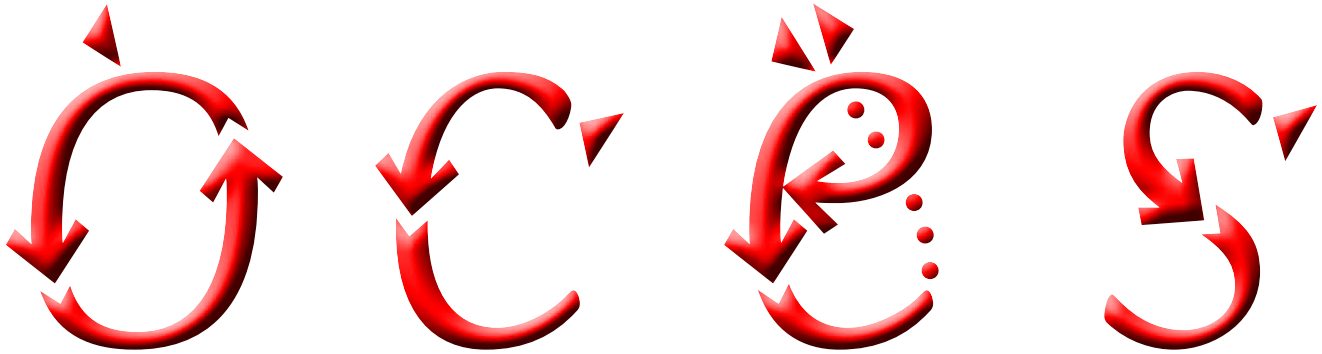
Now is the winter of our discontent

Now is the winter of our discontent

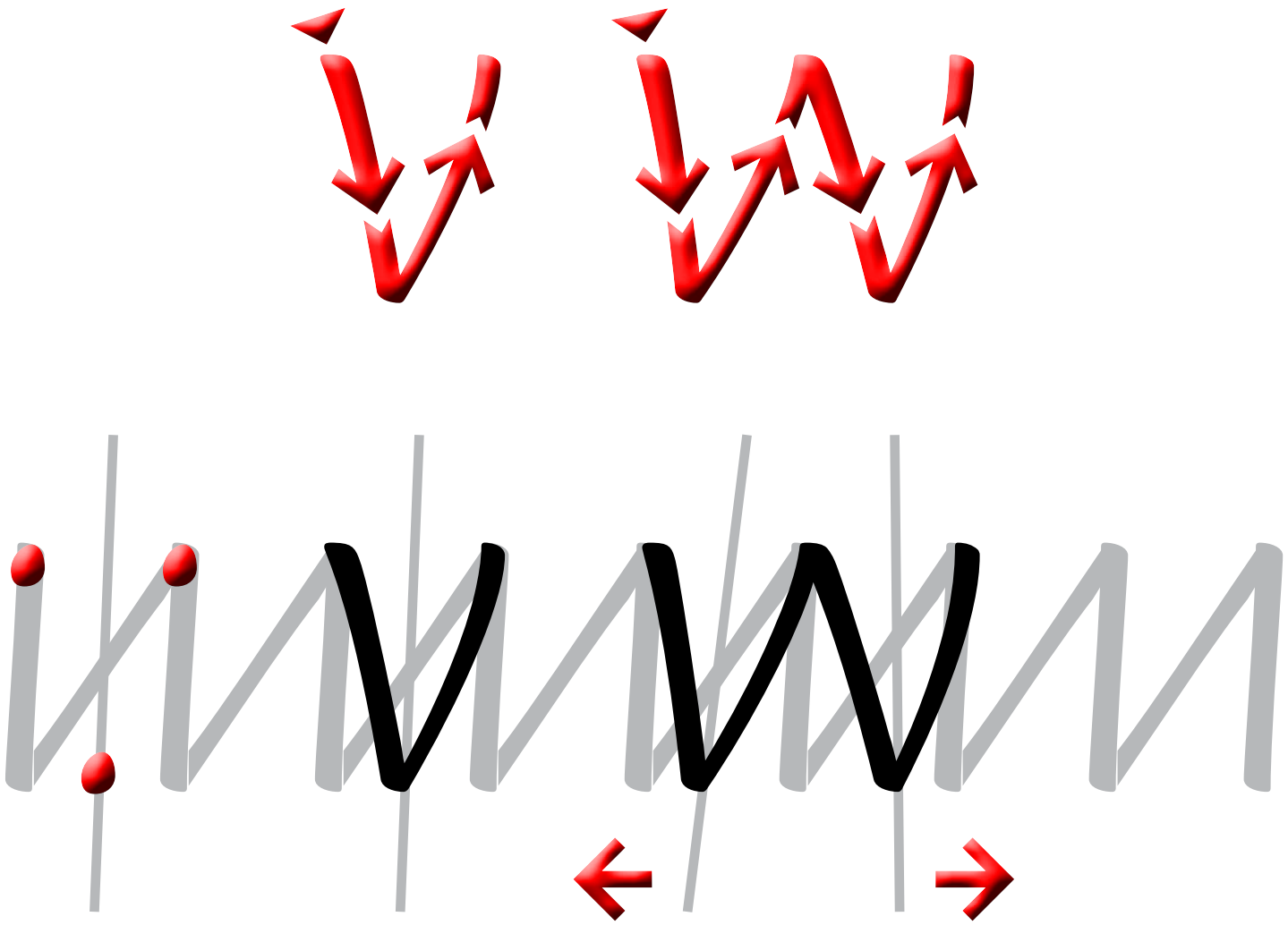


159
175

We'll do three sheets of movement patterns. When they are out of the way, you will know the writing movement for italic. Your hand will know it, too. (This text is the opening soliloquy from Richard III.)



Remember to think of the curved letters as a part of the zigzags.

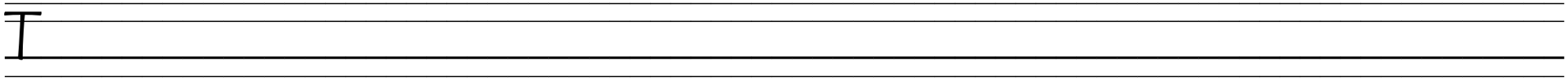


x3

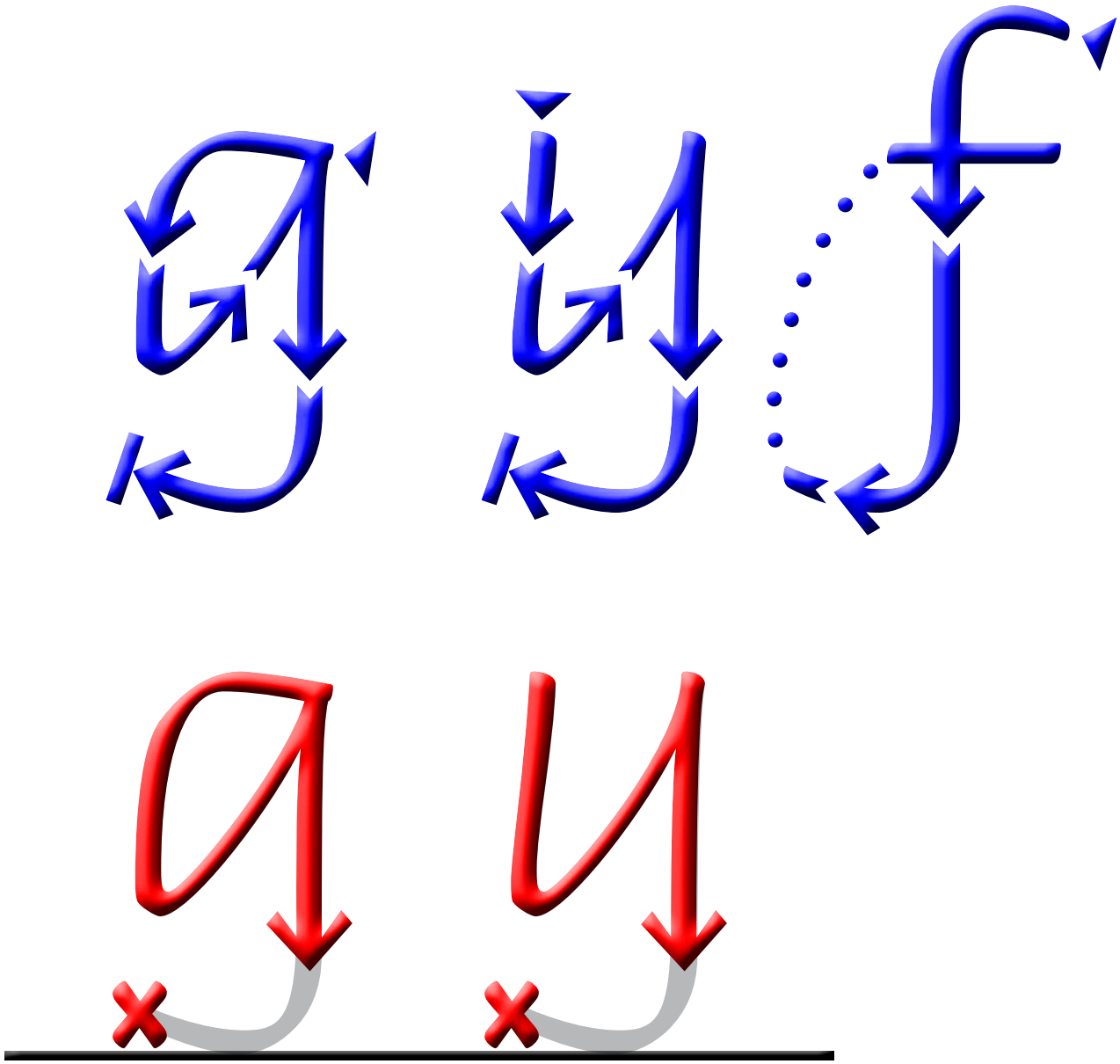
The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

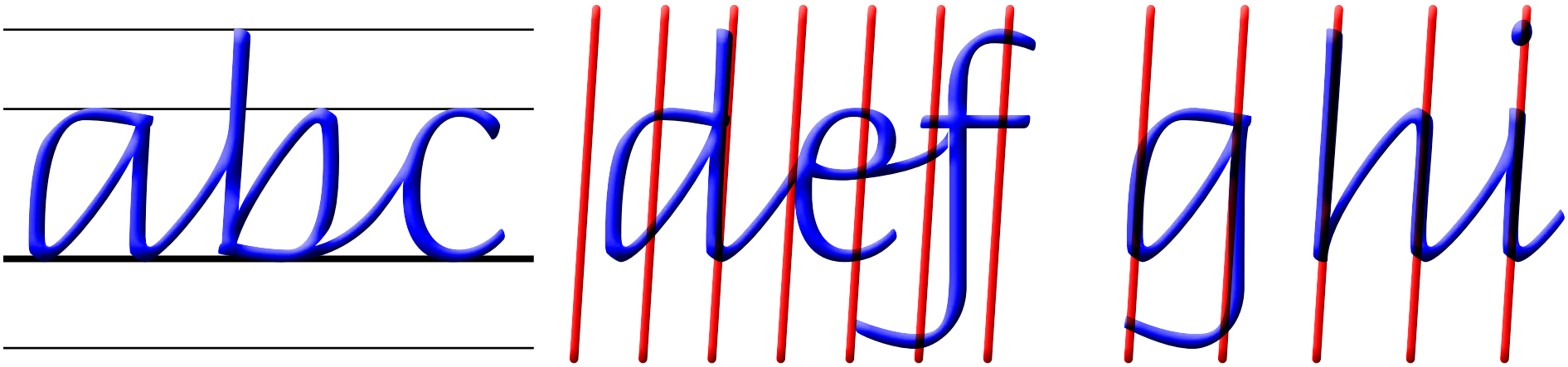


This is the last of the movement exercises. (The text contains all the letters of the alphabet and is well loved by printers and lettering people.)

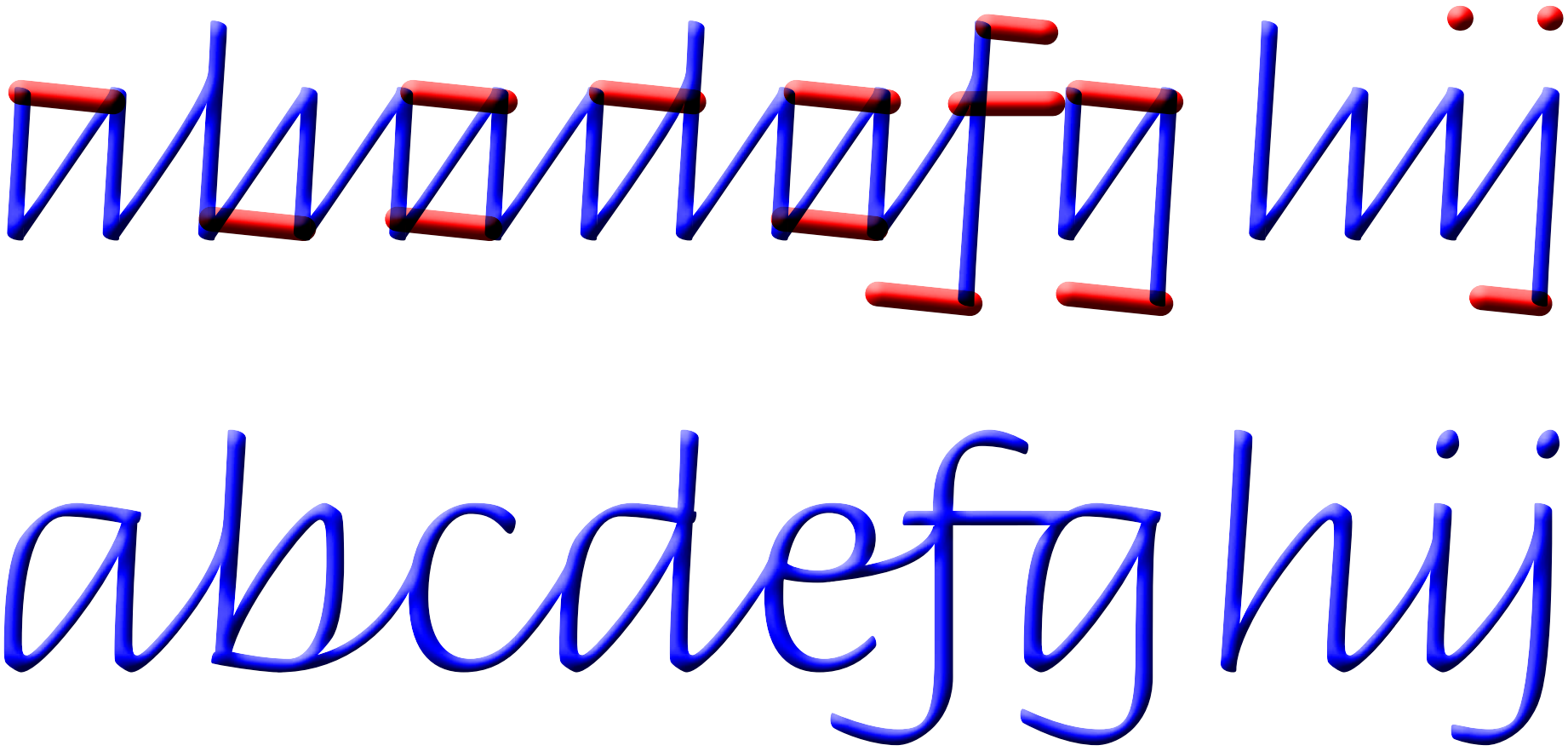


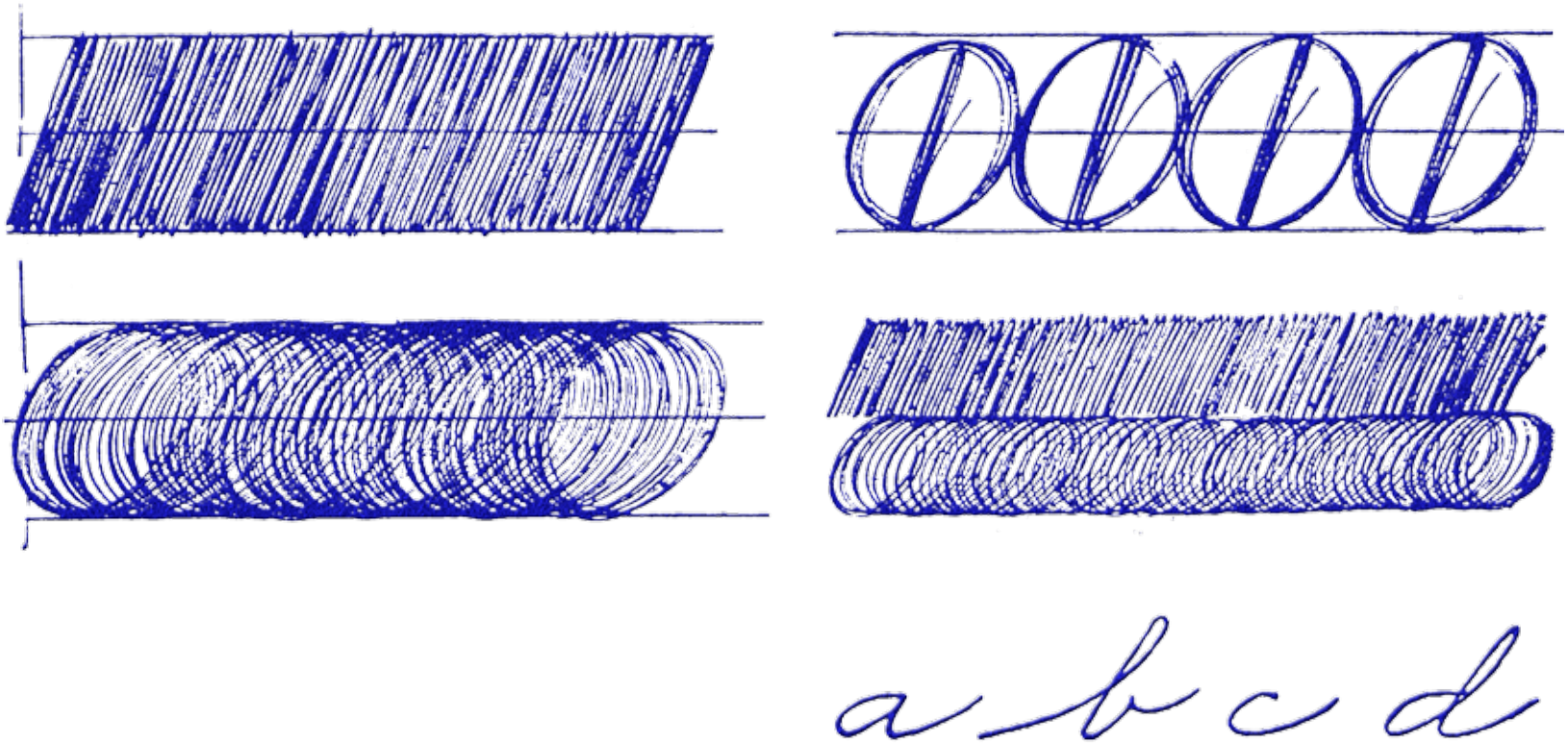
Please remember that you don’t join out of a descender until you have got used to italic.

First you tell them what you're going to tell them. Then you tell them, and make sure they know where they are and how far they have come. Finally you tell them what you told them.

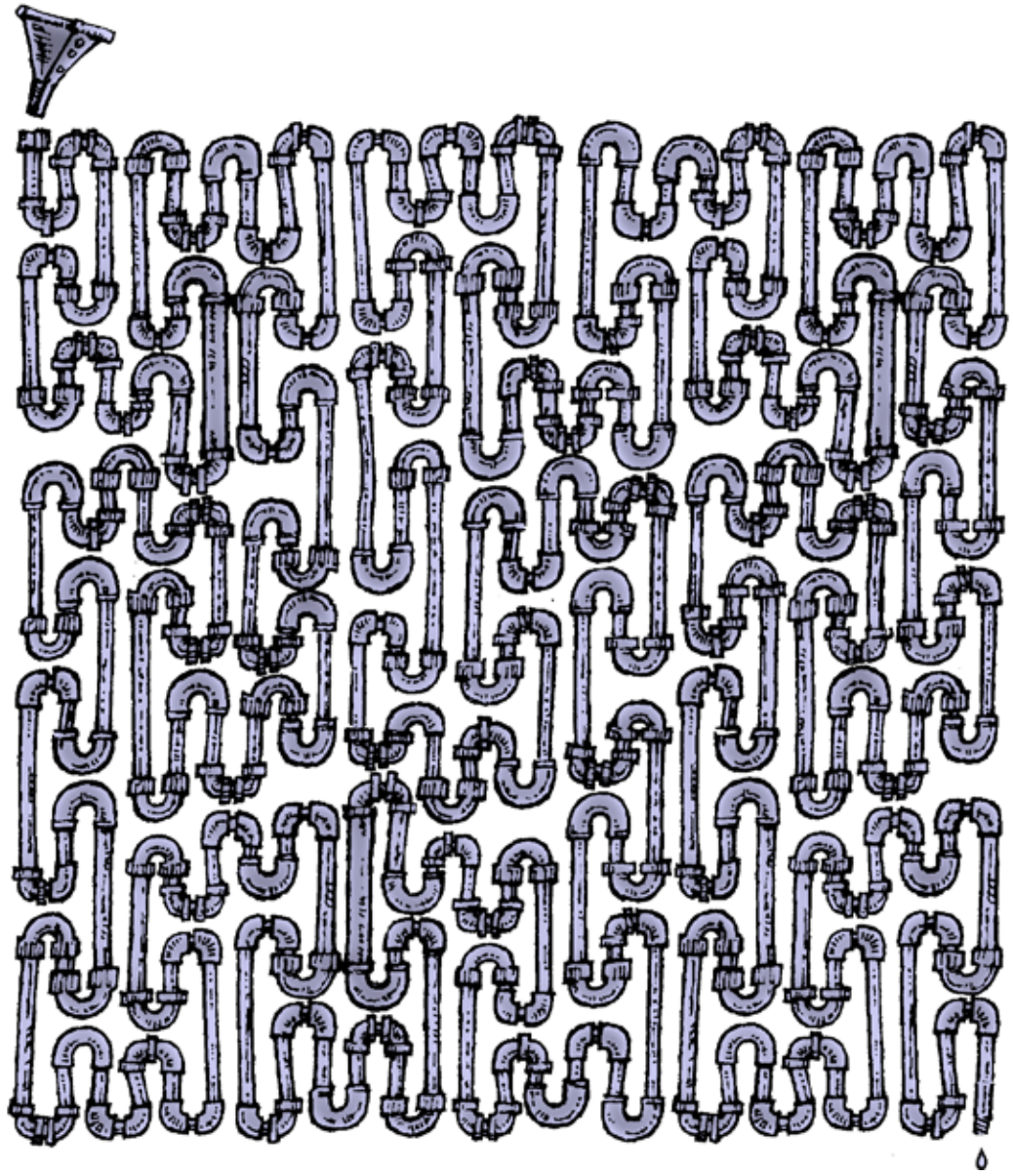


You can improve any style of handwriting with horizontal lines, slant guides and proper spacing.





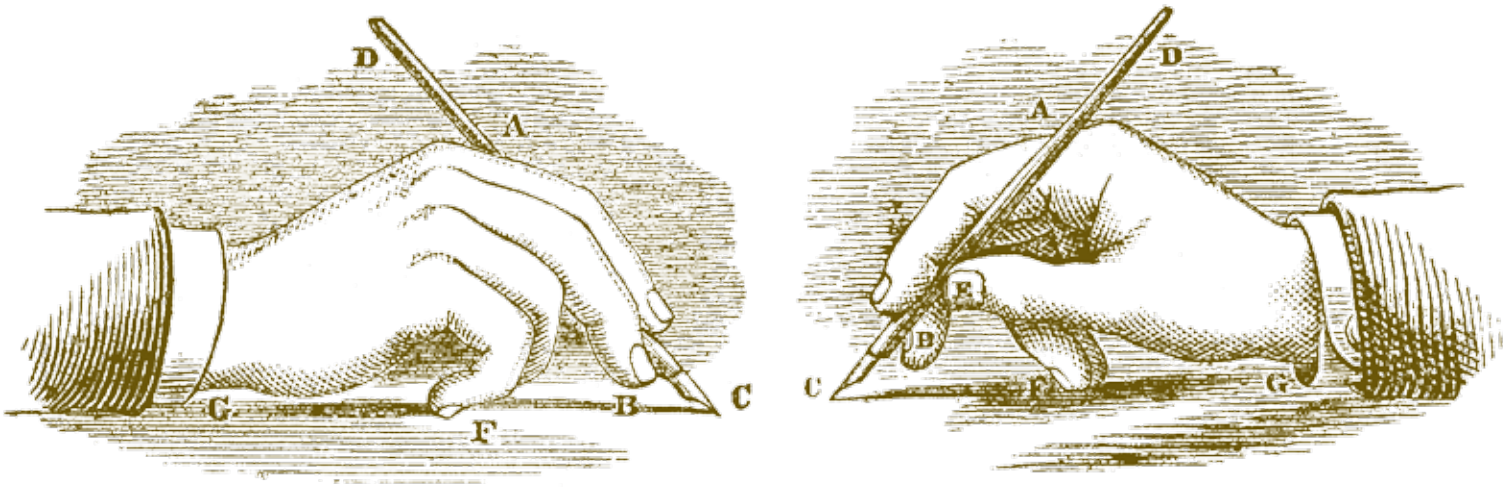
You can practice ovals instead of zigzags if you prefer, and work from the model of Austin Norman Palmer instead.



168 If your hand still doesn’t know who is boss, use pattern exercises.

175

A broad-edge pen makes italic look great, but you can use any writing instrument.



170 You can hold the pen any way you like—within reason—as long as you avoid writing cramp.

175

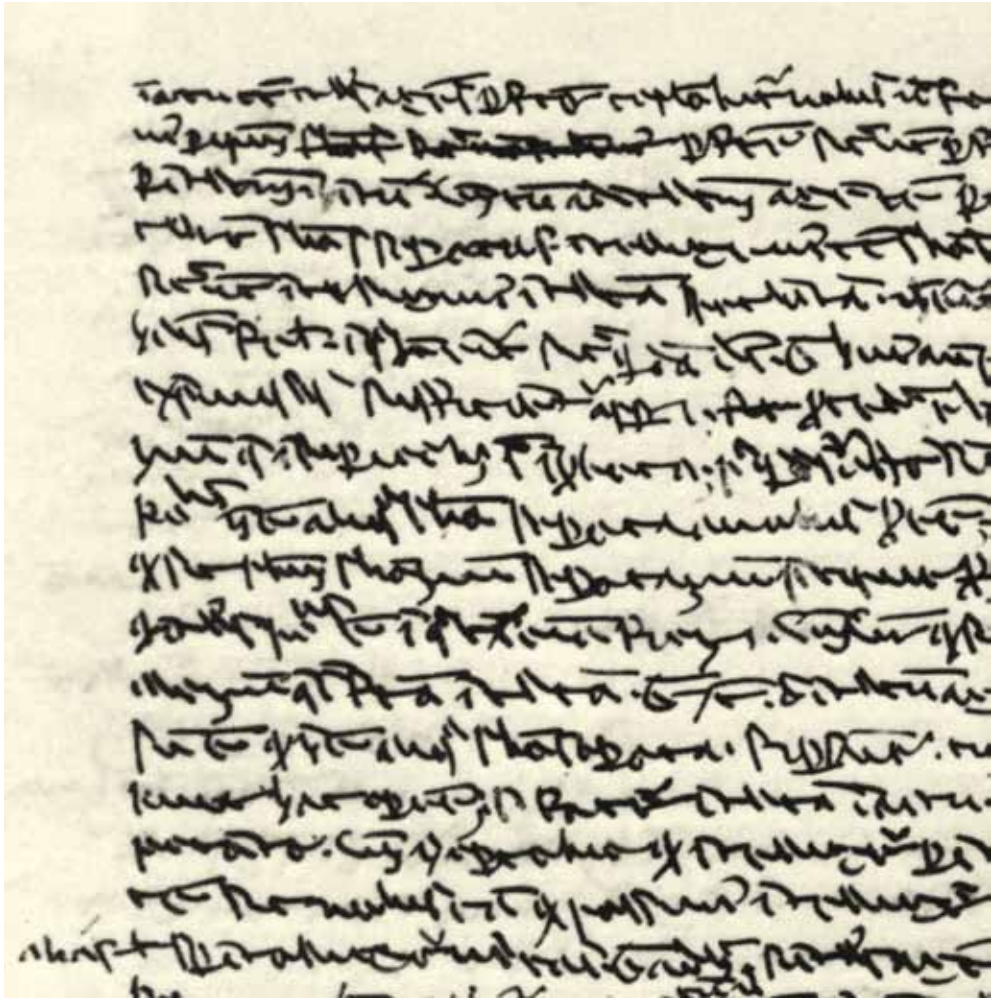
171
175 You put the paper wherever you get the best result. If you're right-handed, try to have the light on your left. If your're left-handed, you want the light from the right.

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog



Circa 1250. Thomas Aquinas

173
175

Paleographers have a name for this personal hand. They call it “littera inintelligibilis.“ Dominicans of the thirteenth century weren’t usually allowed a secretary. Thomas Aquinas had one, and he wrote almost as badly. There’s hope for us all.

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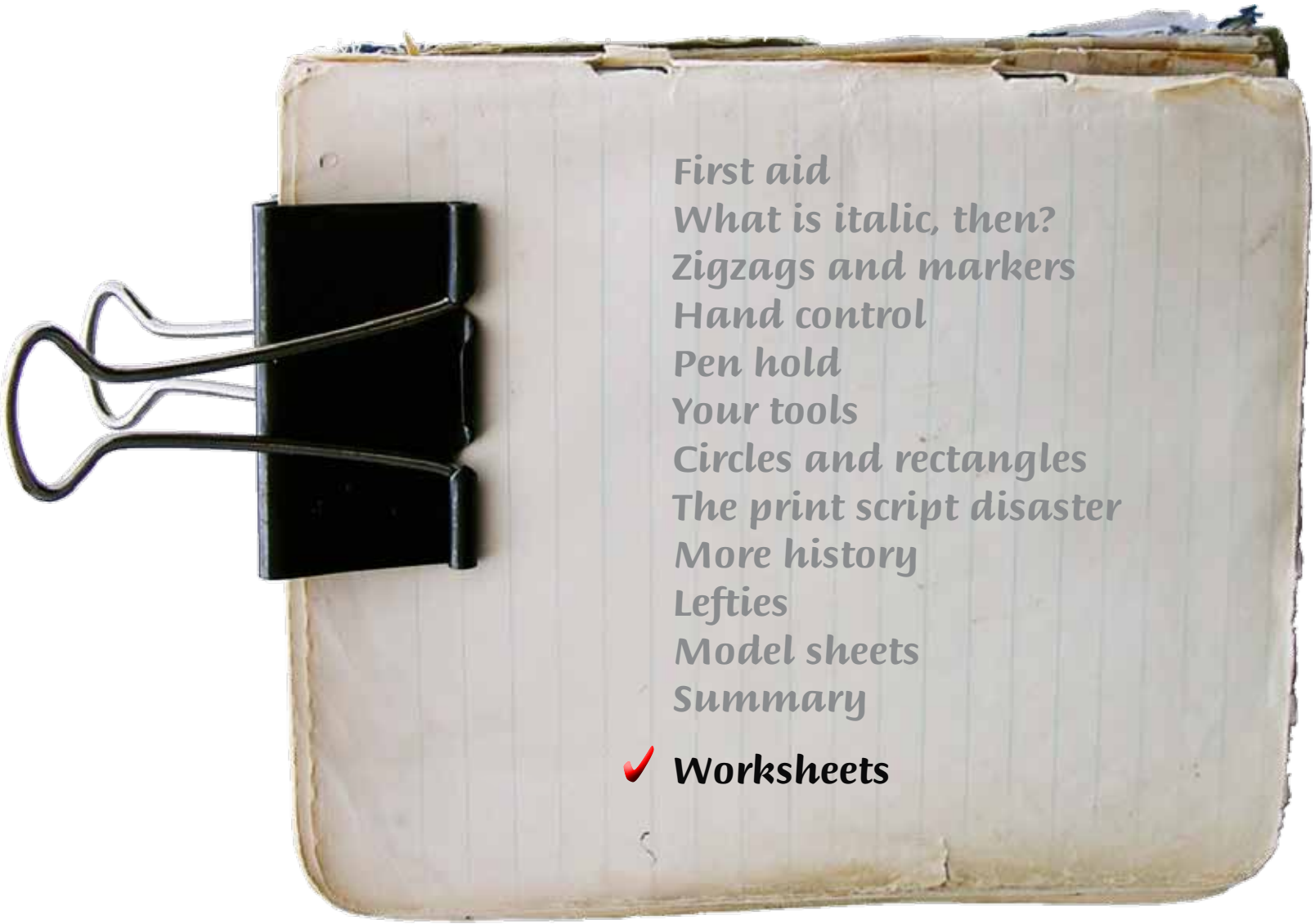
I thank Atelier Gargoyle for inviting me here, and all of you I thank for coming.


First aid
What is italic, then?
Zigzags and markers
Hand control
Pen hold
Your tools
Circles and rectangles
The print script disaster
More history
Lefties
Model sheets
Summary
Worksheets

175

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

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xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

abcdefghijklmnopqrstuvw
xyz ABCDEFGHIJKLMNOP
QRSTUVWXYZ 1234567890?

x3
Trace zigzags three times, slowly
The bed was already on fire!
Overwrite with zigzags
Trace zigzags
The bed was already on fire!
Overwrite with zigzags, again
The bed was already on fire!
Trace text
Write text

Trace zigzags three times

Now is the winter of our discontent

Overwrite with zigzags

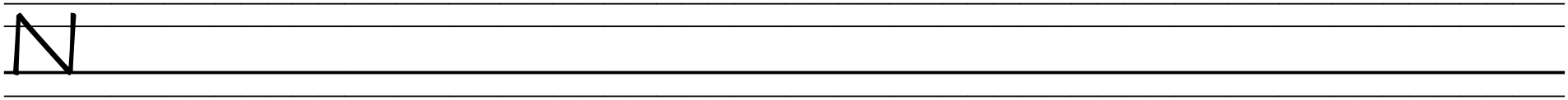
Trace zigzags

Now is the winter of our discontent

Overwrite with zigzags

Now is the winter of our discontent

Trace text



Write

x3

Trace zigzags three times

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Overwrite with zigzags

Trace zigzags

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Overwrite with zigzags

The quick brown fox jumps over the lazy dog

Trace text

Write

www www www www www www www

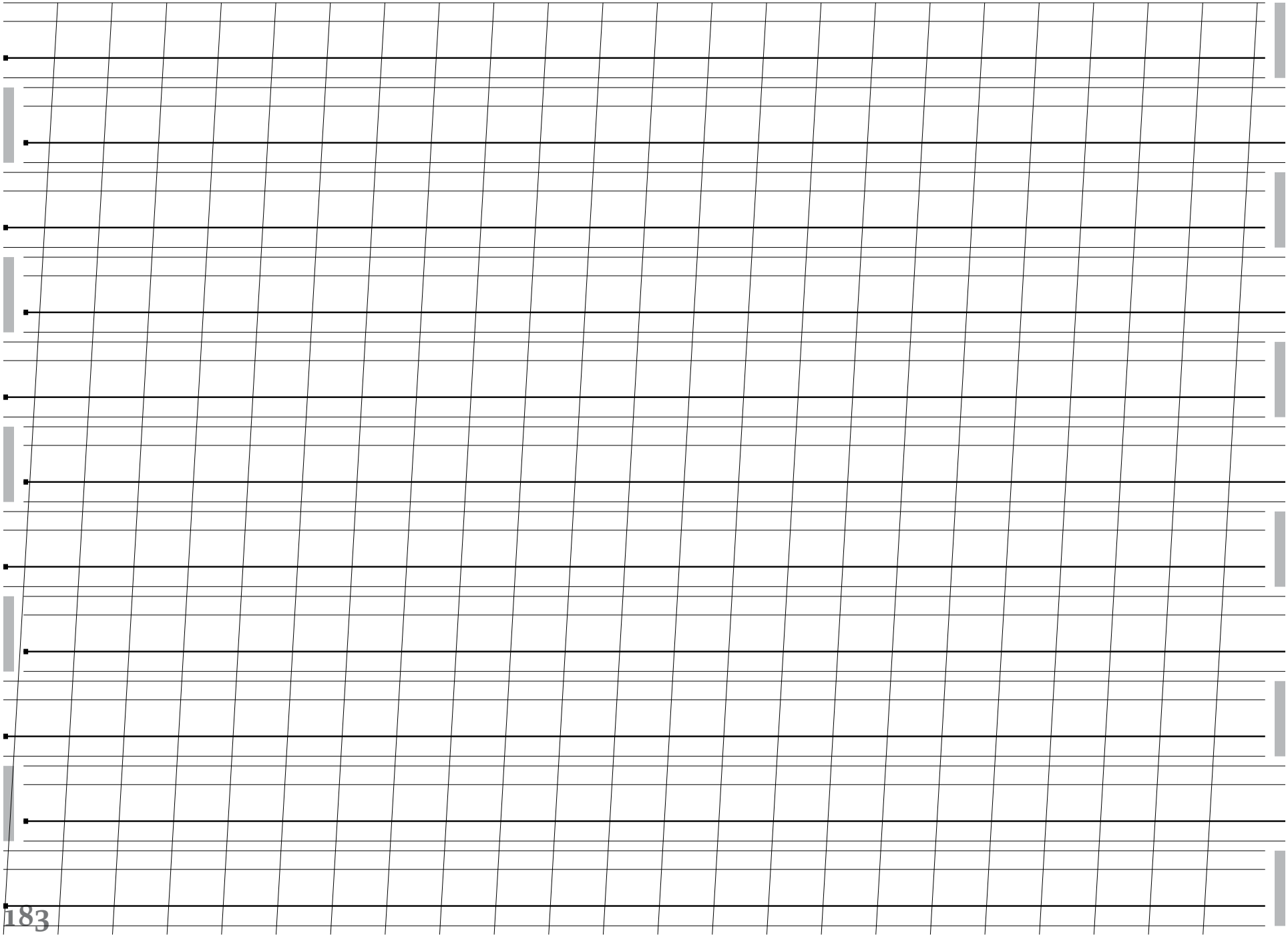
The puppy rushed at

the stick, and made

believe to worry it. Alice

dodged behind a great

thistle, in order to avoid being run over.



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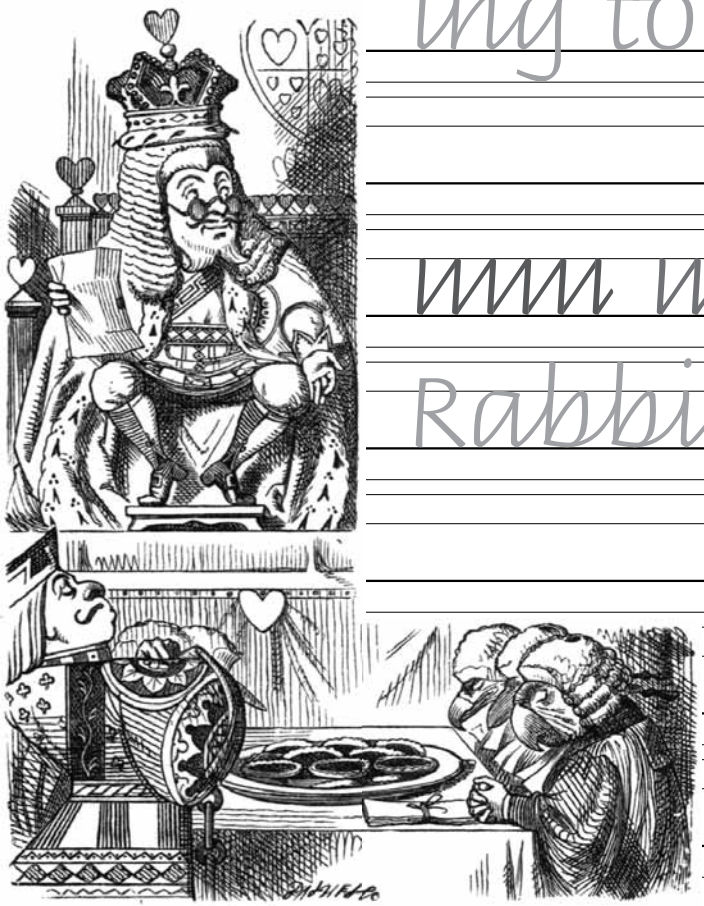
"Very important," the King said, turn-

ing to the jury. The White

www www www www www www

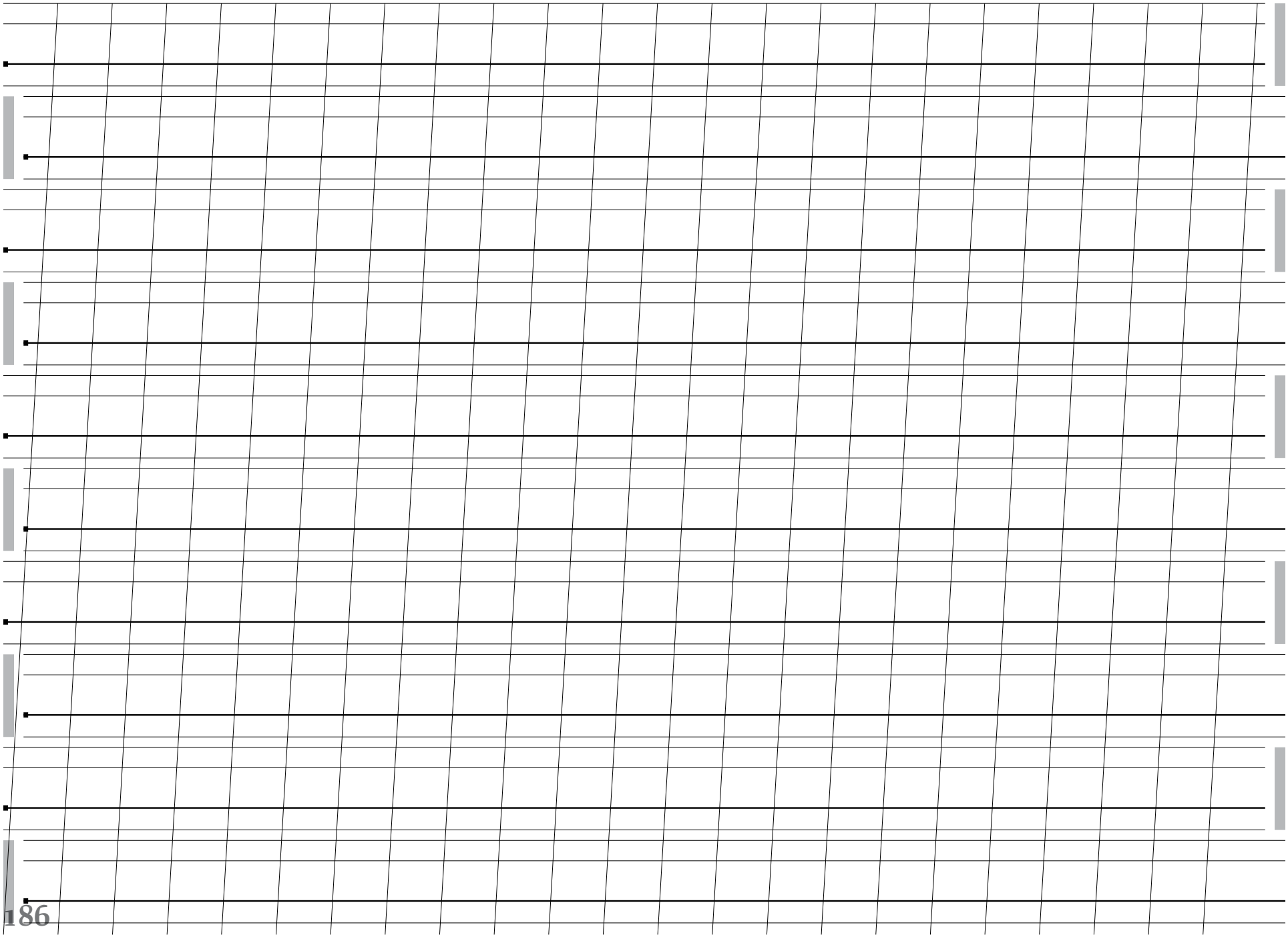
Rabbit interrupted: "Unimpor-



tant, your Majesty."

184

175



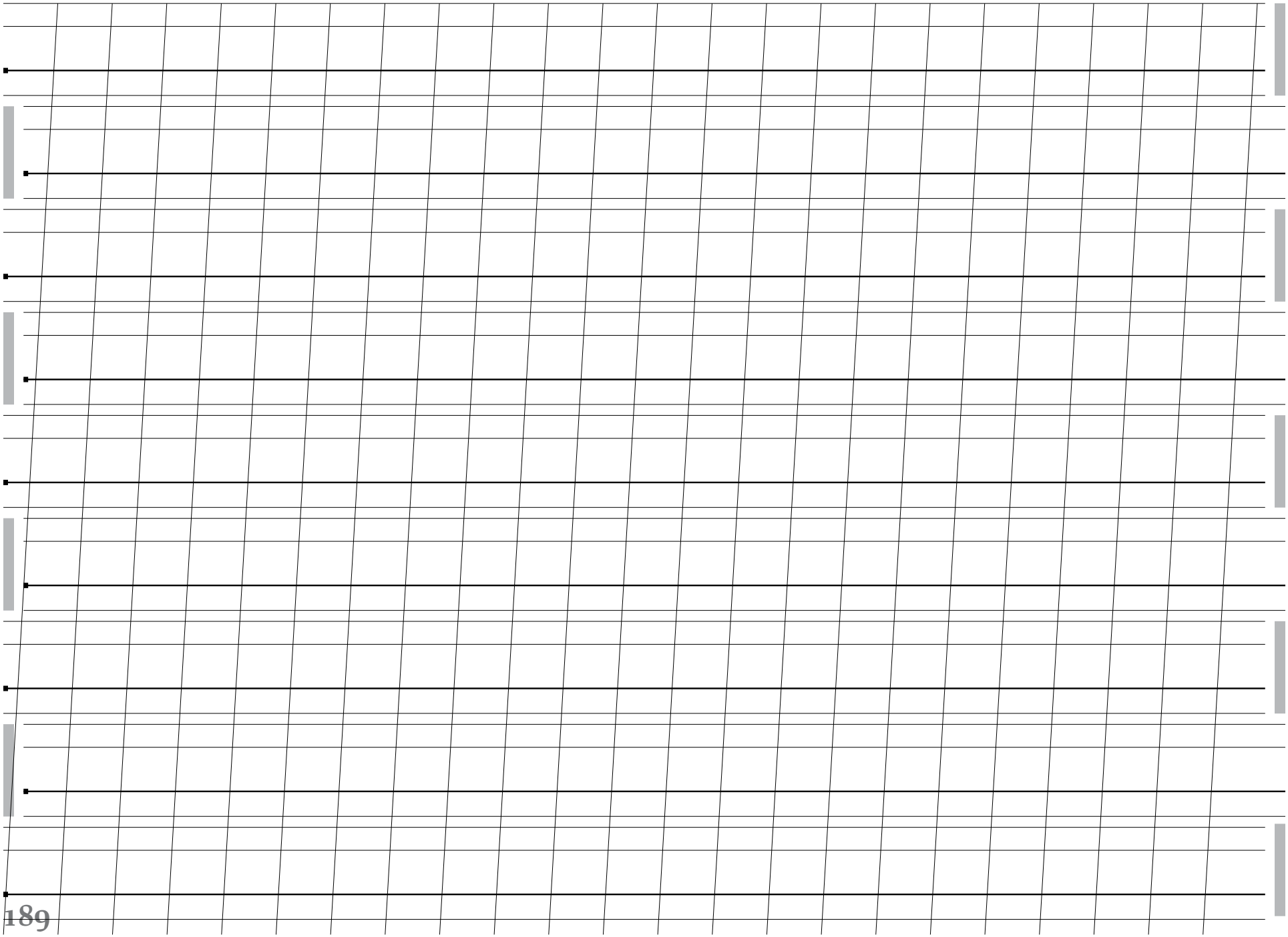
wwww wwww wwww wwwww

"Why is a raven like a

writing-desk?" asked

the Hatter. "Come, we shall have

some fun now!" thought Alice.



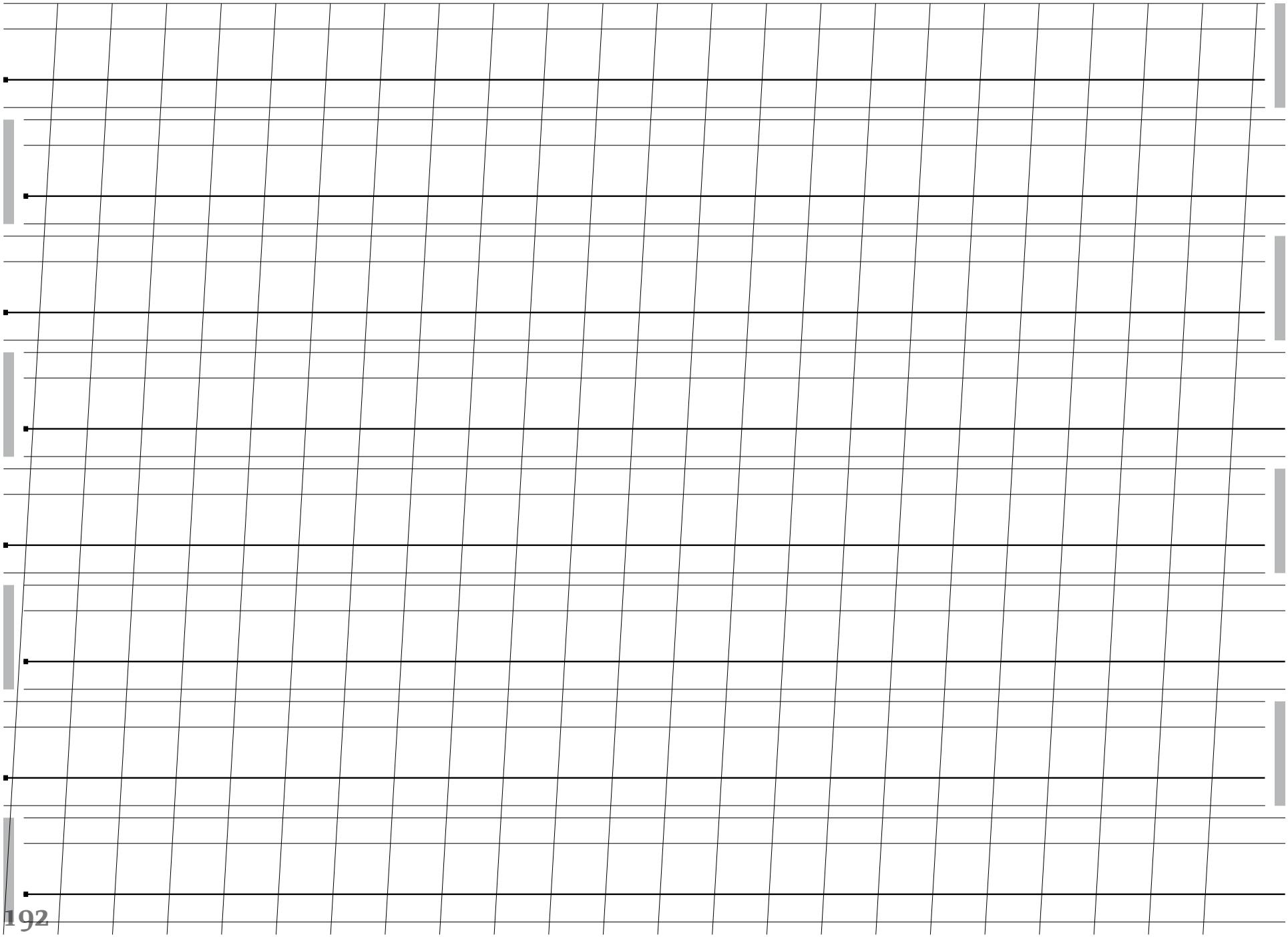
wwww wwww wwww wwww wwww wwww

Around the neck of the bottle

was a label with the

wwww wwww wwww wwww

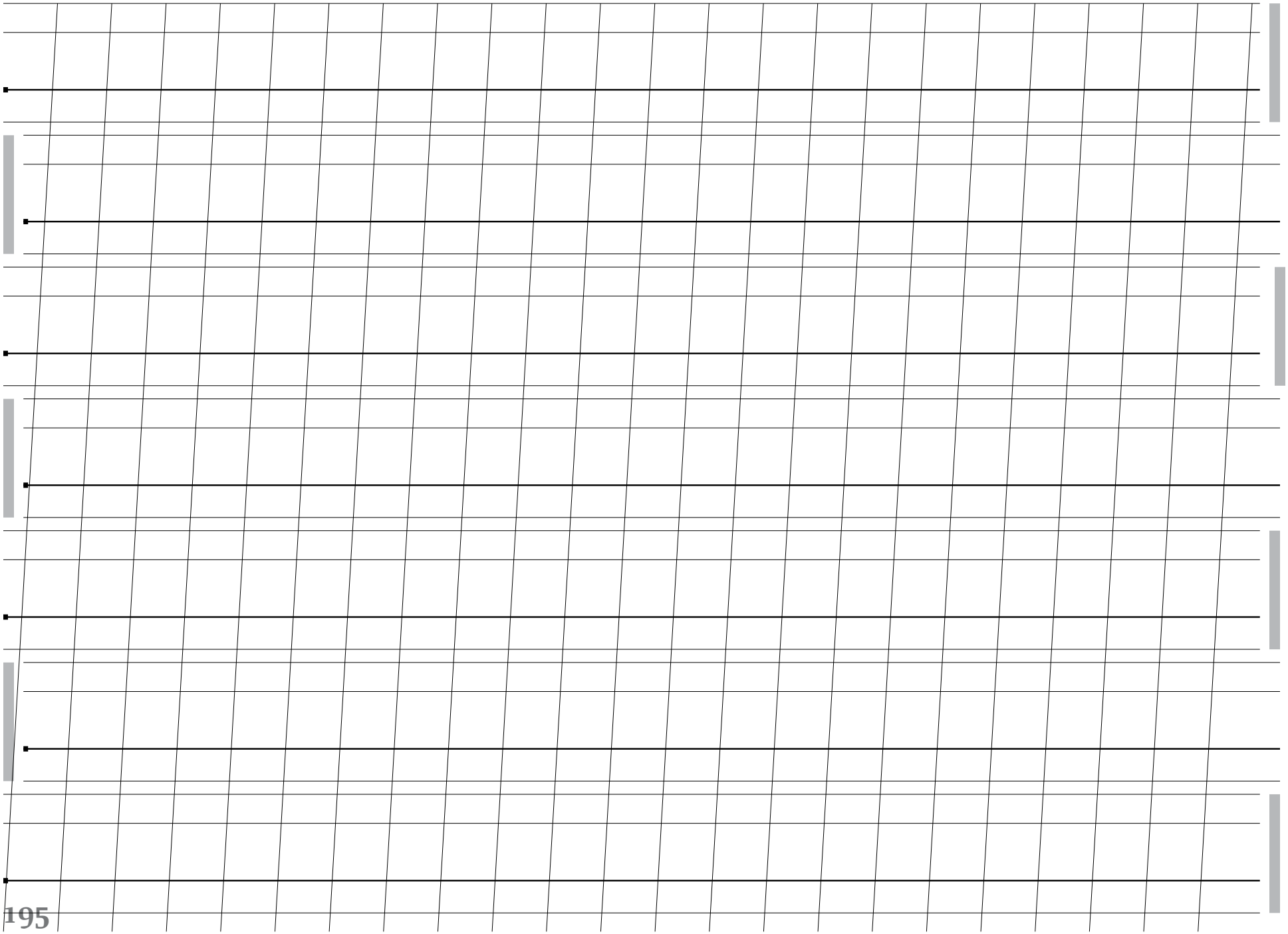
words “Drink Me”.



wwww wwww wwww

"To show I'm not proud, you may shake hands with me!"

Seven lines

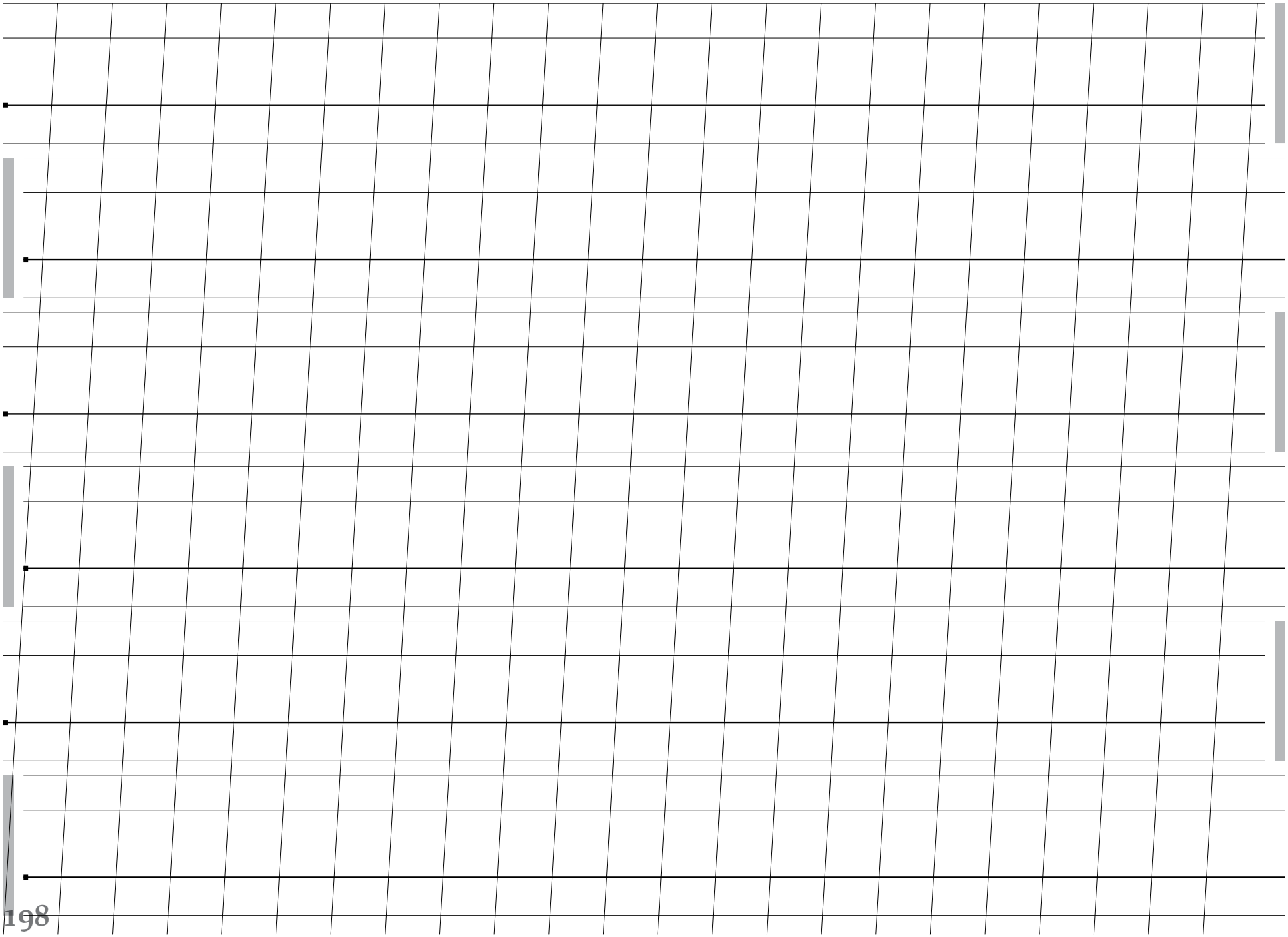


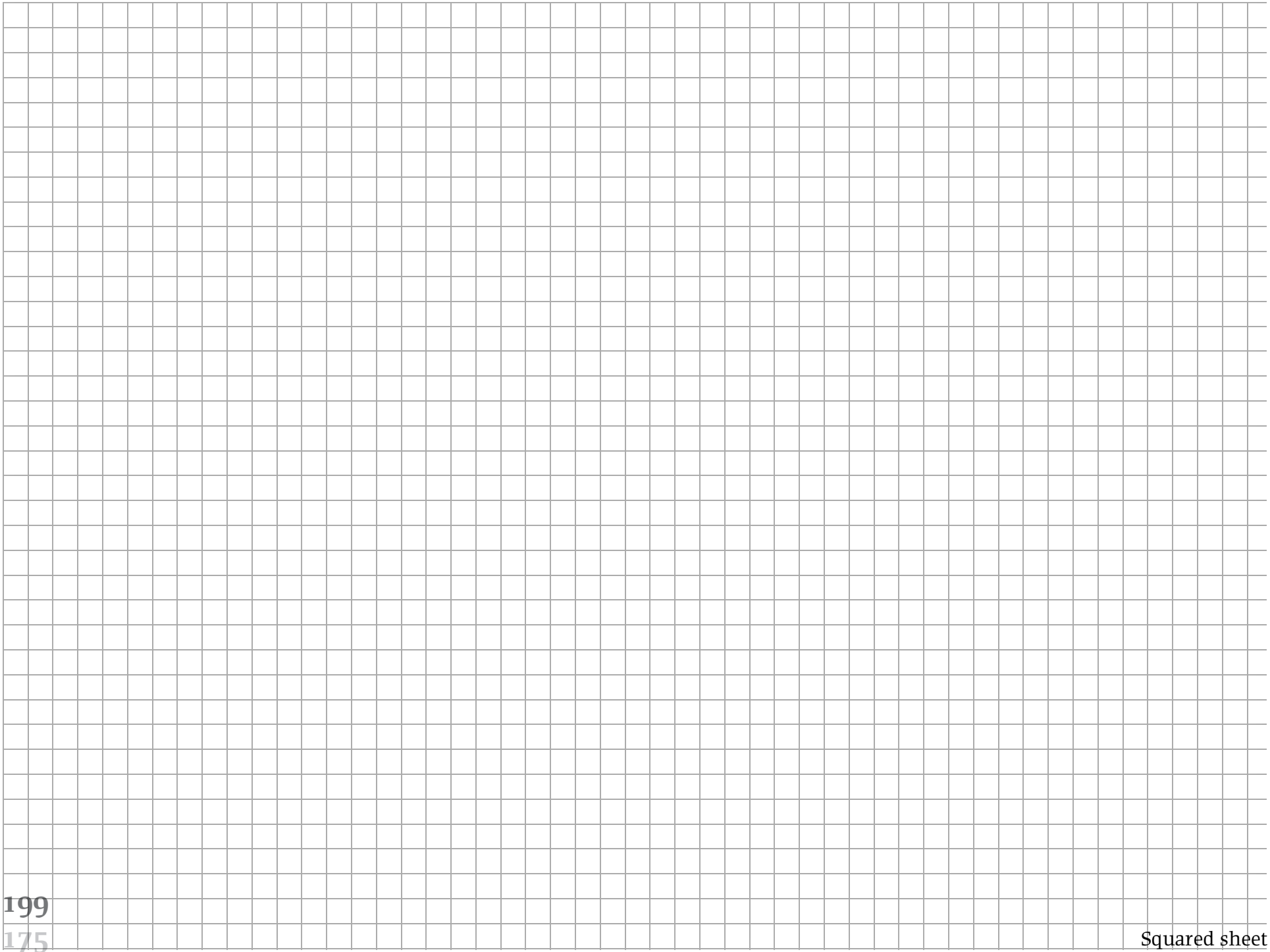
wwww wwww wwww wwww

The Cat only

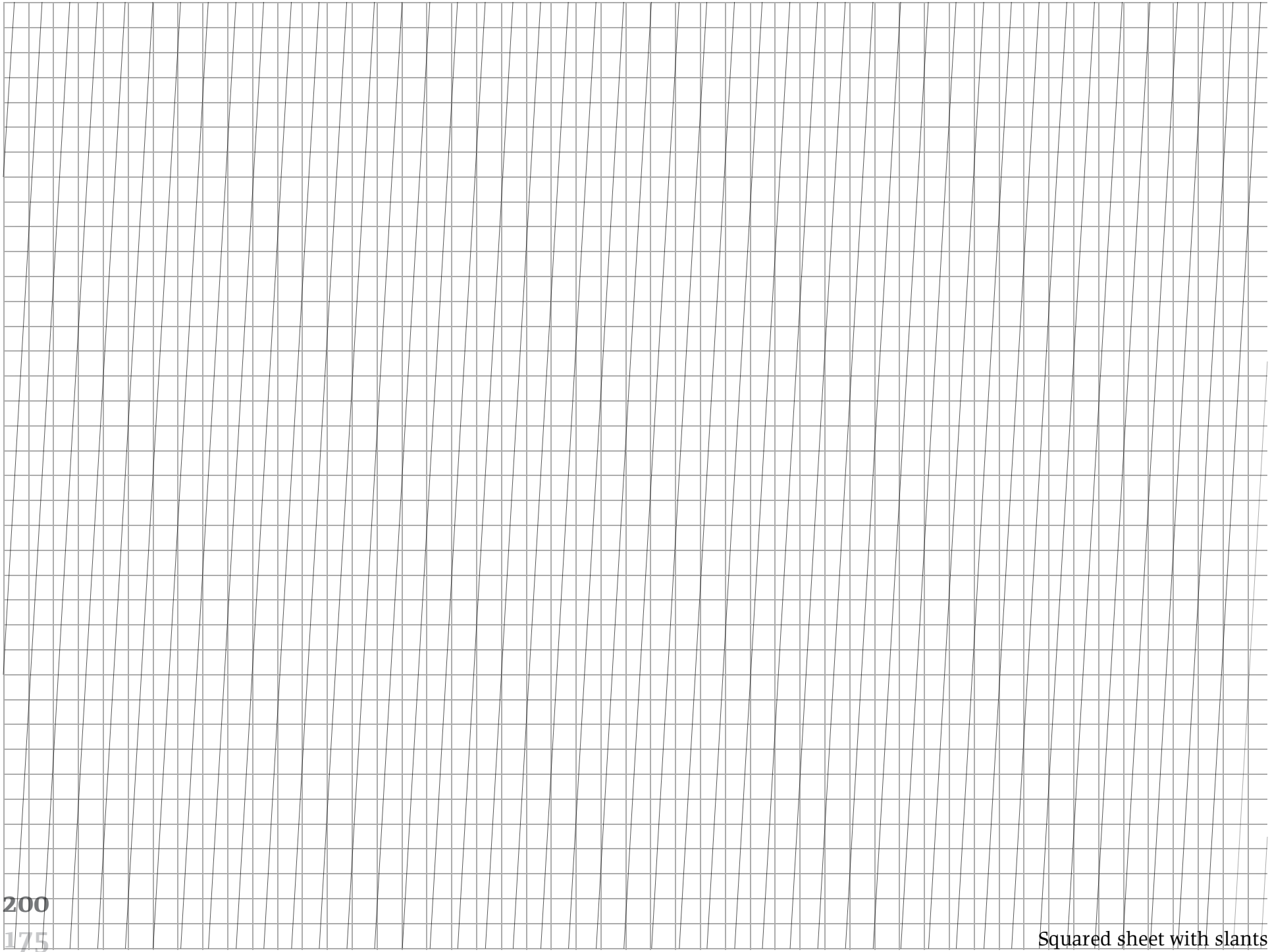
wwww wwww wwww

grinned at Alice.





Squared sheet



200

175

Squared sheet with slants

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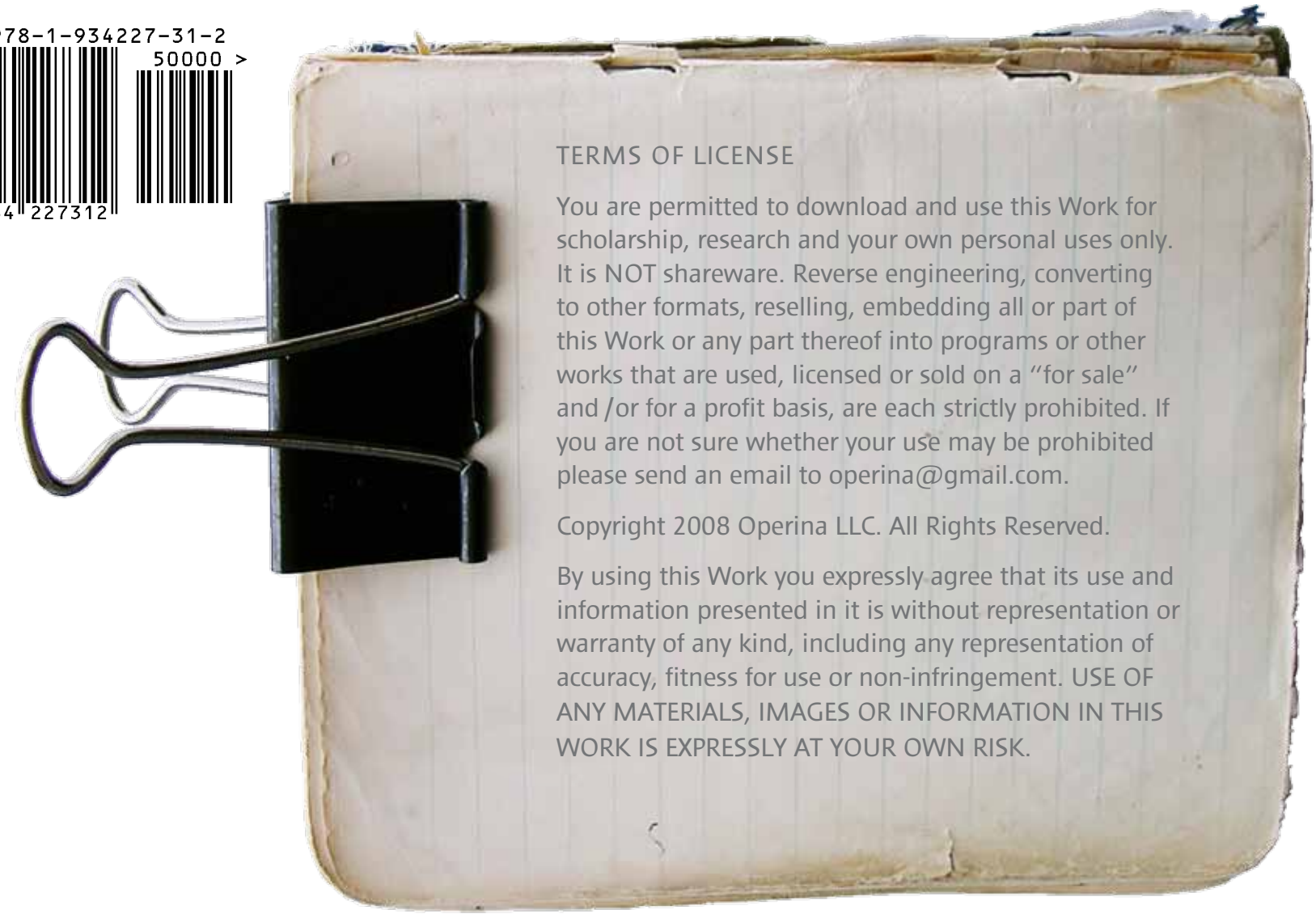

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