

Using an Ames Lettering Guide

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You will need:

- Pencil, harder (lighter colored) lead preferred, but a number 2 mechanical pencil is just fine
- Ruler or other reliable straightedge, not too thin
- Lettering guide
- Paper you plan to mark for calligraphy
- Optional pen and ink for determining line width

About the lettering guide

- Architectural tool made in Ames, Iowa; sometimes also called an Alvin Lettering Guide
- Has several rows of holes in a rotating circular disk, inside a body with a straight edge along the bottom
 - We scribes pretty much exclusively use the middle row of three
- The disk rotates to make the line spacing wider or narrower and has numbers along the edges to calibrate the measurement of the line spacing
- Works best on flat surfaces (paper); difficult to use on warped or cockled surfaces like some vellum, or pergamena that has already been painted and has cockled

Steps to mark the text block

Note: I work bottom to top, so these instructions reflect that. Working top to bottom is also allowed, if that works better for you.

1. Use your pen nib to determine your letter height
 - a. Usually four nib widths makes for a good “x-height” or “minim height”; period ratios were typically from 3.5 to 5 nib widths
2. Set the lettering guide to the correct width by measuring it against your minim height
3. Use a guideline, typically the edge of the text box, and place the bottom hole on that line
4. Brace the guide against the ruler
5. Double check that the guide is correctly placed at both ends of the guideline; adjust the ruler as needed until the guide is correctly positioned
6. Put the pencil in the bottom-most hole and slide the guide along the ruler; this should exactly match your guideline. The *second* hole will mark the first line of your text block
7. Mark each following text line in order from bottom to top (for me; remember, top to bottom may work just fine for you)
8. To advance the guide and fill the text block, use the topmost marked line as your new guideline and repeat from step 3.

Writing in your marked text block

- Make a dot or other mark on every THIRD line, but starting with the SECOND line in the text block.
 - The idea is that you are designating top-MIDDLE-bottom, top-MIDDLE-bottom, etc
- The marked MIDDLE lines will be where the bodies of your letters will go; “top” and “bottom” are the spaces for your ascenders and descenders, so that the text doesn’t crash into itself as you advance lines

Exceptions

- Not all alphabets require every third line; gothic textura quadrata, for example, does fine with every SECOND line rather than every THIRD, because its ascenders and descenders are half as tall as, say, Carolingian letters; Uncial also does well with every second line because it has almost NO ascenders or descenders
- Some alphabets, particularly late period batardes or secretary hands, might do well with even more space left for ascenders and descenders; perhaps the third line of every four, or even the middle line of every five

Other uses

- Use the lettering guide to mark a “window frame” around the text block, so that your illumination does not crowd the text
- Turn the page 90 degrees and mark perpendicular lines, creating an even grid for diapering illumination
- Turn the page 45 degrees to mark a diagonal grid for diamond diapering