

# SKETCHBOOK ADVENTURES

## Chapter 4: Hand Lettering Techniques

The summer before I started junior high my grandmother took me across the country to the East Coast to visit our relatives. Of all the things I packed, my journal was the one thing that I double-checked my suitcase for when we arrived at the airport. I wanted to make sure I recorded every last tiny detail of my first vacation.

Every day my grandmother and I had a new adventure. Meeting aunts and uncles for the first time, swimming in a lake, cheering as a small town parade of fire engines and men in Elks Club leopard-print hats passed, and spending hours on my great aunt's brick porch watching my cousins trap crickets in old mayonnaise jars. Every night I'd grab a flashlight and lay down on my great aunt's pullout couch and record my experiences in my journal. Even back then I knew that everything I did, saw, smelled, tasted, thought, heard and felt was grist for the mill. All of it was part of who I was, who I'd become and what I would make out of my life, and I didn't want to forget any of it.

Before this trip my journal was mostly filled with writing but during those humid summer East Coast nights I began adding drawings and using my writing as more of an element of art that was a part of the story I was telling rather than telling the story with words alone. I started experimenting with the way I wrote words, adding tails on the ends of letters, making some words larger than other and adding details. Without knowing it I had started hand lettering!

Although my hand lettering skills weren't very good, I was finding my own way to make my words do double duty since the message and emotion I was expressing was being communicated by what the words meant as well as how they looked. Hand lettering is a technique that has remained a part of my art repertoire ever since and I rarely create a piece of art that doesn't feature some kind of text.

It's easy to get intimidated when you look at elaborate calligraphy or fancy hand-drawn artwork, but we're going to take the fear out of hand lettering. Lots of people (myself included) aren't 100 percent pleased with how their handwriting or printing looks. Most of the time when we're writing something we're simply trying to communicate a message and we're not concerned with how the letters look. When it comes to hand lettering it's essential to pay attention to the appearance of the letters. Of course, the meaning of the words is important as well.



To begin getting the hang of hand lettering you'll need to start paying attention to letters in a way you may not have before. Start by downloading the font (a font is a set of characters/letters that has a distinct shape, size and style) sheet at the end of this chapter and think about how you feel when you look at each one. In most cases, the style of the word/message should reflect the meaning of the word. For example the word is love is often (but not always) written in script or cursive. Script fonts (like [Lavanderia](#) or [Snell Roundhand](#)) tend to be associated with elegance, informality, beauty and femininity, sentiments usually linked to love. Big bold non-script fonts (like [Impact](#) or [Poplar](#)) command more attention and feel serious. Classic non-script fonts (like [Times New Roman](#) or [Cambria](#)) are fonts that we see daily in books, magazines and pretty much everywhere and because we're almost immune to them and they're so timeless we tend not to associate them with a specific emotion or message. Once you start thinking about fonts deeply you'll begin to realize how much thought goes into which font a designer uses.

When you're analyzing fonts you should also consider the height of the letters, the space between the letters, if the block letters are filled in or open in the middle, the type of font (script or non-script), the details on letters like tails, curls or serifs (serifs are the little lines of detail on the ends of letters), the angle of the letters (straight at a 90 degree angle or tilted to the right or left), and if the letters are light or bold. We won't get into too much detail on the technical terminology of hand-lettering, since hand lettering is only a part of this workshop, but it's important to have a basic understanding of what to keep in mind.

The best ways to improve your hand lettering skills are to get over your fear that your writing isn't good enough, notice and study letters around you, and practice. The exercises in this chapter will help you do all three things.

\*A bit about writing tools. I don't believe that you have to spend a lot of money to have great tools to work with BUT in some cases having the right tool (even if it costs a bit more) will help you get the job done more efficiently and save you money in the long run since well-made products tend to last. Can you use No. 2 pencils and a ball point pens to do hand-lettering? TOTALLY! But using pens with permanent, waterproof, fade-proof ink with a variety of tips will help your image last, make working with other media like watercolors or markers easier, and help you make the most out of your time. Check out my must-have pens for hand lettering below. These pens allow me to create fine lines as well as brush stroke letters.

*Lavanderia*  
*Snell Roundhand*  
**Impact**  
**Poplar**  
 Times New Roman  
 Cambria



serif font  
 serif → **American Typewriter**

sans serif font  
 no serif → **Arial**

script font *HalosHandletter*

bold block font **Haettenschweiler**

hand-written font *Sue Ellen Francisco*

ornate font **ROSEWOOD STD**

block outline font **OSTRICH SANS INLINE**

Now it's time to get started exploring and practicing. Download the five hand lettering tutorials at the end of this chapter. I suggest doing the exercises in order since each one builds on the skills you learn in the previous one.

Hand lettering is a skill that some people spend their whole lives developing so don't beat yourself up if you're not an expert after the exercises in this chapter. The goal is to become more confident, know the basics and explore different styles, so that when you want to add text to a page in your sketchbook you're not struggling with deciding what style to write it in or how to get that style down on your paper.

There are also tons of other ways (you can download a list at the end of this chapter) to add text to your sketchbook pages, some of which we explore in this workshop.

It's paramount to embrace your unique voice and style in everything you make. Of course it's awesome to strive for perfection, but I see my sketchbook more as a place for adventure and exploration rather than a place where I do everything perfectly and everything turns out exactly the way I wanted it to. One of the awesome things I love about hand lettering is that no matter how hard I try I can never reproduce the same letter in exactly the same way so my text is always original. Study, explore, practice and embrace the imperfections and uniqueness.

