The Journey from *Penturning to Penmaking*

by Kurt Hertzog

There is No Silver Bullet

Contrary to the old vampire movies or the adult beverage commercials, there is no "silver bullet." If I had a dollar for every penturner I've run across who believes (or wishes) there is something magic that will turn a "froggy" pen into a princely pen, I'd be living on a very big yacht. They believe that the major difference between their work and someone they deem more "successful" is that special blank material or that more expensive kit. Their ongoing search for some previously unused material, while keeping the pen blank suppliers content, is not the simple answer. Unfortunately, there is a lot of hard work required from the initiation to penturning to being accomplished. I intentionally didn't use the word successful, since it has a different meaning for every individual. Success can range from turning a pen barrel without having it blow up to selling the first "you fill in the price yourself" dollar pen.

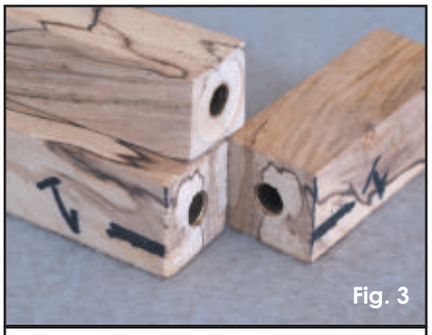
Not popular to hear, there is a dues-paying progression from the entry point of penturning to what might be called "accomplished." Skills in any endeavor not only take repetition, but also practice. Often the initiation and training in penturning is an hour or two at the local woodworking or woodturning retailer. The mechanics of gluing up parts and taking off material, finessed or brutally removed (see **Fig. 1**), gets to a pen that writes. From there, many penturners buy their gear and proceed into making pens of every species of wood that there is. Their belief is that the blank material is what will make them great. When pens are made in a huge array of woods, their customers will certainly accept that they are artisans and pay a higher price, right (see **Fig. 2**)? It usually isn't so. I would suggest dividing the penmaking arena into categories and focusing on developing expertise in each; then your progression will be more rapid and methodical as you strive for "accomplished," however you define it.

PREPARATION

Let me suggest that the first category is blank preparation itself. Seemingly simple, blank preparation has many aspects and is very important. The foundation created here is what everything else is built upon. Select your blanks carefully with an understanding of grain orientation, area of use selection, cutting, drilling, and gluing (see **Fig. 3**). If you want off-axis grain, go for it, but know that's what you're working with and its effect on turning and appearance. If you don't want off-axis grain, then prepare things accordingly. Just because someone cut the blank square doesn't mean that the grain is running parallel to the sides of the blank. Drill the blank on your selected axis with a

The beautiful piece of wood used to make this pen was done a disservice because of the catastrophic problems with sanding through, poor fit, and inconsistent finish.

Making poorly constructed pens in a variety of species won't overcome the maker's lack of attention to detail or the skill sets that need continued development.



Good preparation not only selects the interesting part of the blank, but drills from the inside interface ends, favors those ends for gluing in the tubes, and minimizes wood loss when facing.

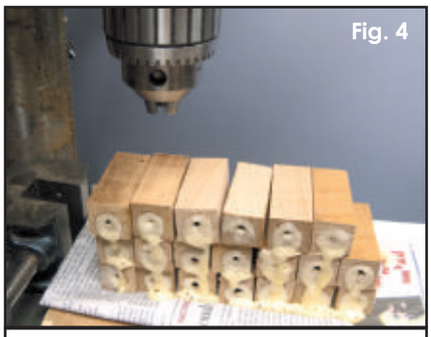


Fig. 4

Regardless of which is your favored adhesive, use it exclusively if you can. Get proficient with it so that you know what you can expect and the results will become consistent.


Fig. 5

I am a proponent of always scuffing the tubes. Whichever adhesive you use will certainly bond better to a roughened surface with the oxidation and drawing lube removed.


Fig. 6

Any of these tools will work nicely to turn pens. A 1/8" parting tool can do everything needed. Sharpness, tool technique, and turning proficiency will determine the final result—not the tool selected for use.

sharp, properly sized drill using appropriate speeds and feeds; drilling improperly can impact the end result. Burning the inside surface, overheating the blank, and blowout all can have detrimental effects. Getting the blanks cut and drilled, tubes scuffed and glued in to the desired position (remember the grain match) with the adhesive of your choice are skills worth developing (see **Fig. 4**). If a tube breaks free anytime in the life of the pen, whether while you are turning or years after turning, you have a costly and potentially embarrassing failure that could have been avoided. Facing the blank, whether sanded or milled, needs to be flush to the tube and exactly perpendicular to the axis of rotation. Poor workmanship here will haunt the fit and finish later on (see **Fig. 5**).

TURNING

Sure, you can hog off wood with any tool that you can find, and everything from a parting tool to a bowl gouge and all in between will work superbly for penturning (see **Fig. 6**). Believe me, anyone who tells you differently usually has something to sell. If you have a bench chisel, sharp and properly presented, pens can be turned quite nicely. Being able to sharpen any tool of choice and use it in the manner for which it was designed, usually rubbing the bevel, will let you cut wood rather than tear it off. If "anchor, bevel, cut" is a foreign concept to you, learning a bit about woodturning fundamentals in general will go a long way to improving your penmaking (see **Fig. 7**). Even if the end goal is never anything other than pens, sharp tools properly used will always improve the cut and help you get to a better result (see **Fig. 8**). Any tool in your bag that isn't properly sharpened ultimately gets used as a scraper. Scraping wood on a spindle turning is similar to having your hair cut with pliers—not necessarily the gentlest or best cut finish.


Fig. 7

"Anchor, bevel, cut" will serve you well. All the traditional woodturning fundamentals apply to penturning as well. Often, these fundamentals don't get ingrained in those doing only pens.


Fig. 8

Sharp tools, whichever ones you favor, properly presented will cut nicely, deliver beautiful curls, and leave a surface requiring far less sanding to prep for finish.

Fig. 9

The best results can be achieved by using all the grits. Jumping grits doesn't save that much time and can result in scratches that can't be removed with the finer grit.

SANDING

Sanding is a skill deserving a category by itself. If abrasive paper is being used to make up for your shortfall in turning technique, perhaps you should work on improving those turning skills first. Once you've developed those skills to cut wood to the point you wish, sanding becomes the method to prepare the pen blank for accepting a finish. Sanding isn't intended to fix the gouge marks or grain tearout in the wood. Believe it or not, sanding is a necessary evil that you had better learn to enjoy. If you despise it, you'll probably do it at high speed, use it to cover up poor cutting, and never prep a surface as well as needed for the application of a great finish.

We've covered sanding techniques in previous columns, but let me repeat them. Learn how much of the pen blank material the sanding process will remove. Cut to the point where the surface is at that desired dimensional point, creating a well-cut surface ready for sanding. With a grit a little bit coarser than needed, begin sanding at a SLOW speed. If gloves or pads are needed to protect your hands from the heat, you are going far too fast. After sanding radially with the lathe under power running slowly, turn off the lathe and sand axially, rotating the lathe by hand very slowly. Be certain to sand the entire blank equally both lengthwise and rotationally—once around, twice around, or whatever is needed. Wipe the surface with a paper towel to clean the debris. Repeat that powered and unpowered process with the next grit. Don't skip grits (see **Fig. 9**)! Continue until you've achieved a blemish-free, ready-for-the-finish surface that is dimensionally correct (see **Fig. 10**).

Oh yes, "dimensionally correct"—sanding makes things smaller and finishing makes things larger. Whether you cut to the bushings or to a measured dimension and then sand, the parts will get measurably smaller. The more you sand at coarser grits, the more the dimension shrinks. The goal is to develop your sanding to a methodical, repeatable process that will change dimension approximately the same amount each and every time. Since each material will sand differently, you'll learn what size to cut to in order for each type of wood to be ready for sanding. Okay, you say that sometimes you need to sand more than other times. Well, perhaps the surface wasn't cut as well as it could have been. Now the sanding needs to accomplish what the turning didn't. Fixing flaws really isn't what the sanding should be used for; the purpose of sanding is the minor faring of curves and prepping. Your effectiveness at sanding will be evident and much more important than your explaining how you sanded up through 12,000 Micro Mesh (see **Fig. 11**).

FINISHING

Depending on where you are in the journey, you'll be working with your chosen finish. Newcomers gravitate to the friction finishes or waxes. They are easy to apply, but not very durable. As aspirations and skills progress, the finishes being used usually move to the more durable, such as cyanoacrylate glue (CA or superglue) or lacquer (see **Fig. 12**). Though it isn't usually a huge dimensional change, these finishes do measurably increase the final dimension. Similar to the sanding process, experience and proficiency with a finish material and technique will provide you with the amount to plan for in the dimensional build. I think either finish properly applied will provide years of protection for the rigors of a pen's life. The growth from a newcomer to more accomplished will usually entail moving from the friction-type finishes to these more durable finishes.

Expertise in a CA finish, for example, comes with practice (see **Fig. 13**). Hearing the words and seeing it done is important, but doing it yourself is key—not once, but many times. I'd suggest that usually succeeding isn't mastery; rather, always succeeding (or very rarely having a problem) is what you need to strive for. One of the keys to mastering anything is to have a narrow focus. If you dabble with fourteen types of finishes, you'll perhaps get good at many, but probably master none. If you work with only one or two at most, you'll have more experience with them, more focused practice, and hence better skills. I recommend picking a finish or maybe two, and then using them for

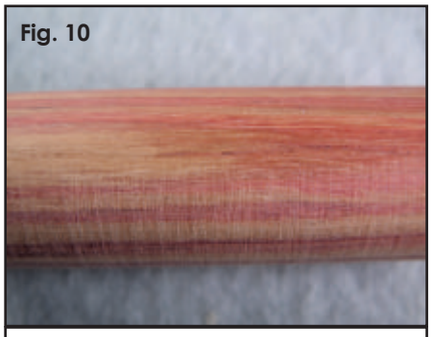


Fig. 10

Radial sanding scratches can be removed by axially sanding with the power off. Rotate by hand, as needed, while sanding the entire blank axially. Clean and repeat with the next grit.

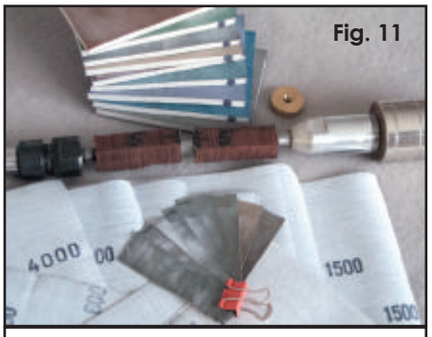


Fig. 11

Sanding preparation is key to a quality finish. With suboptimal surface preparation, the finish will suffer regardless of the materials used or how far you go.

Fig. 12

My entire finishing repertoire is CA adhesive or rattle-can spray lacquer. Which brands are the best to use? In my opinion, it doesn't matter.


Fig. 13

For a fast, easily applied, durable, and pleasing finish, I don't believe there is anything much better than CA adhesive. My technique is straightforward application without any voodoo, secret handshake, or added chemicals.

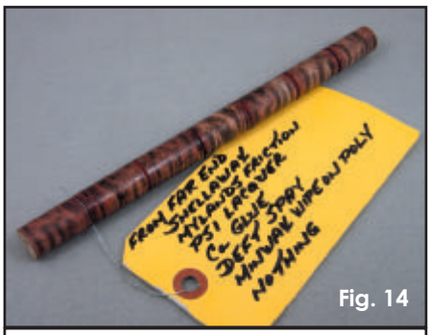


Fig. 14

As you develop your own favorite finish, don't be afraid to experiment and practice to arrive at a final decision. A practice stick with various finishes will certainly let you compare each result against the cost and effort of application.


Fig. 15

A poorly done pen is a poorly done pen, regardless of the kit cost or the blank selection. Attention to detail drives perfection in fit and finish. It does take practice.

every pen that needs an added finish. You'll not only minimize inventory, but also develop skills to speed the process and move toward mastery (see **Fig. 14**).

ASSEMBLY

Regardless of the price or rareness of the blank or kit, the final result tells all. You can rave about the petrified walrus body parts or the beautiful crystal in the clip all day long, but a pricey kit that is poorly fit is nothing more than a poorly fit pen. The step in the wood at any interface, the evident sanding scratches, or the ripples in the finish will always be there. Don't be explaining how great it is from a materials standpoint while making excuses for any flaws in execution—it's much like diluting top-shelf whiskey with mixers; it's somewhat of a waste of great materials. Other "killers" are not only blemishes and dimensional issues, but also marks in the metalwork or perpendicularity issues in fits (see **Fig. 15**). Many times, I've seen a superb kit made with exotic materials that was flawless EXCEPT that the barrel wasn't flush all the way around the metalwork, indicating flawed perpendicularity or trimming. Most of the time, it is a small, but discernible, gap that is usually fixable by disassembling and minor rework; unfortunately, makers are usually adverse to disassembly and rework. Sometimes, more than minor work is required, but rarely does a pen need to be scrapped. However, if it does need to be scrapped, do it; I think I'd rather have fewer pens in my display than have to price them according to the number and severity of the flaws they exhibit. The bottom line: It takes little effort to do it right from the beginning.

FINAL THOUGHTS

I didn't set out to make this a doom-and-gloom column, and I hope my intent is obvious. Nowhere did I insinuate that using good materials is a bad thing; my intent is to dash the belief that exotic blanks or high-priced kits will make you an accomplished penmaker. It's experience and practice that will develop skills to make you an accomplished penmaker. Every other skill where people excel, whether it is a sport, a musical instrument, an art form, or a foreign language, requires not only learning, but also practice. When was the last time you practiced turning (see **Fig. 16**)? What about finishing? Did you ever just practice to get better at something? Practice applying a finish to develop those skills. When was the last time, if ever, that you experimented with different methods of finishing to determine the "right" process to provide the best results. Any and all the skills covered here can be mastered by anyone. Similar to other skills, they will come more easily to some than others, but there is nothing covered here that can't be accomplished by anyone wishing to excel at it. Just for fun, one day, turn spindles—not pens, just spindles. After you've turned them, sand them and then apply the finish. When that is completed, get another piece of wood and turn another spindle, sand, and finish. Repeat this as many times as necessary for skill development. Perfection in fit and finish are the skills that can be achieved with practice. Make each and every one of those skills become rote to you. Then creativity can turn to design, materials, presentation, and other things that will set your work apart. Practice on the less expensive stuff to develop and master your skills. Don't make pens, make


Fig. 16

Use a decent, but low-cost, wood. Create your own practice materials. You don't even need to drill and put tubes in if you don't want to. Turn, sand, and finish practice materials until you can do it perfectly—on demand and reliably.

chips. Don't finish pens, finish sticks. You'll be more inclined to practice if you aren't worried about the cost of the materials or making sure that you'll get to the end point of a usable pen regardless of how "froggy." Master the skills by practicing. Excel at perfection of fit and finish on the run-of-the-mill materials and kits. Move to the more expensive materials when your work can genuinely showcase it. The old joke about "how do I get to Carnegie Hall?" wasn't too far off: Practice, practice, practice (see **Fig. 17**)!

Fig. 17

Practice every facet of penmaking until you have it mastered. The key is practice. Make it low risk, low cost, and do it over and over. Making nice curls with each of your tools is just one of the keys to success.

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