

# Modifying slimline pen kits

Walter Hall takes you through the steps for modifying two slimline pen kits

PHOTOGRAPHS BY WALTER HALL



## WALTER HALL



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Nowadays there are hundreds of different styles and designs of pen kits on the market and it is easy for a pen maker to make a wide variety of writing instruments without ever doing more than some basic turning and assembling the kits in accordance with the instructions. In order to make a pen that is truly individual, however, more adventurous pen makers choose to move away from basic kit assembly and venture into modification of kits and even making kitless pens from scratch. The first step on this journey for many is making simple modifications to the basic slimline kits that have been around since I began pen making,

more years ago than I care to remember.

In this article I explain how to make an oak (*Quercus robur*) one-piece pen that is operated by twisting the nib unit and a two-tone sycamore (*Acer pseudoplatanus*) and African blackwood (*Dalbergia melanoxylon*) pen that does away with the centre band, which constrains the designer when modifying the shape of the basic kit and results in so many people making 'bow-tie' shaped pens, which I find extremely unattractive.

It is assumed that the reader has a basic knowledge of turning and assembling pens from kits so only those processes that are additional are explained in detail.

## Making a one-piece pen

1 The one piece pen requires a blank that is just slightly longer than the combined length of the brass tubes supplied with the kit; this allows for trimming and squaring the ends

2 The blank is best drilled on the lathe as a pillar drill will most likely not have sufficient quill travel and will require repositioning of the table during drilling. A long drill bit, such as a Colt pen drill, is required and great attention must be paid to centring the bit on the blank at the start of drilling, as such long bits are prone to flexing and vibration if not properly centred. Taking your time to set up properly and regularly withdrawing the bit to remove swarf will result in an accurate hole



3 Only one of the brass tubes is glued into position for this project. Epoxy is the best adhesive for this and you must make sure that none gets into the other half of the bore or into the tube itself, otherwise you could encounter problems. The tube should be pushed just far enough into the tube to allow for squaring off

4 Once the glue is fully hardened, the remaining tube can be slid into the other half of the bore and both ends trimmed true and square with a barrel trimmer or a disc sander and jig

5 The whole pen assembly, complete with both fixed and loose tubes, can then be mounted on a standard mandrel or turned to shape between centres, depending upon your preferred method of working. In this case, with the loose tube, I find that using a mandrel gives better support

6 Once you are happy with the shape of your pen, sand the barrel through the grits of abrasive to about 400 and then finish with the finish of your choice. I chose to use melamine lacquer here

7 The nib unit and mechanism of the pen are pressed onto the loose barrel using a pen press or vice and the refill screwed into place. I find it best to press the mechanism in just short of the marked line on the body and check the protrusion of the tip and then adjust the fit by pressing the mechanism further in, if necessary. It is much easier to press it further in than it is to retract it from the tube. The clip and clip finial are pressed into place in the top of the barrel, just as they would be on the cap of a standard kit

8 Because there is only the nib unit to grip when removing the mechanism to change the barrel, this may be difficult. In order to make this easier, it may help to remove one or two of the three ridges around the top of the mechanism that are meant to grip the tube. This will facilitate removal without adversely affecting the working of the mechanism

9 Once the components are pressed together, all that remains is to push the assembled mechanism into the tube until it engages fully in the fixed tube

10 The completed one-piece pen should look something like this

## ▣ Making a two-tone pen

**1** The two-tone pen requires two contrasting blanks. Their combined length should be the same as the total length of the brass tubes, plus allowance for trimming. A couple of millimetres longer is OK. I have used a piece of spalted sycamore and a short offcut of African blackwood left over from another project. The blanks should first be drilled in the normal way

**2** It is very important to ensure that the mating faces of the two blanks, where they meet in the centre of the pen, are true and square to the tube. This can be done using a barrel trimmer with a spare brass tube slipped over the shaft or, as in the photo, using a similar technique with a disc sander and jig

**3** Slip the ends of the blanks over a spare tube and make sure the fit is perfect before gluing the tubes into place. When held up to a light source it should not be possible to see any chink of light between the components

**4** Glue the tubes into the barrels. The inner end of the shorter barrel should protrude from the mating face as shown. Ensure any excess glue is removed from the mating face. Glue the other tube into the top – non-mating – end of the longer barrel

**5** Once the outboard ends have been trimmed square the whole assembly can be mounted on a mandrel and turned to shape. The possibilities for shaping are endless and only constrained by your imagination. There is no narrow centre band to worry about

**6** Once shaped, it is best to sand and finish the two parts separately; this will avoid cross contamination of dark and light sanding dust from staining the blanks. This is especially important with open-grained woods. Finish with your finish of choice. Assembly is straightforward and is just as for a normal kit pen

**7** The completed two-tone pen should look something like this

## Conclusion

I hope you enjoy making these designs and that I have given you some ideas to develop more designs of your own and maybe look at modifying some other kits too ●

