



Children of Early Appalachia

Quill Pen and Nut Ink

Grades 3 and up

Early writing tools were made from materials people could find or easily make themselves. Children used a slate with chalk and stone to write lessons at schools. They also practiced drawing and writing with a stick in dirt. Penny pencils for slates were available at general stores. Paper was purchased at stores too. Before the invention of pencils and pens, children used carved twigs or goose-quill pens made by the teacher. Ink was made at home from various ingredients (berries, nuts, roots, and soot) and brought to school. Good penmanship was highly valued but difficult to attain.

Objective: Students will make pen and ink from natural materials and try writing with these old-fashioned tools.

Materials:

Pen: feathers, sharp scissors or a pen knife (Peacock or pheasant feathers make wonderful pens, but any large feather from a goose or turkey works well too.)

Ink: 10 walnut shells, water, vinegar, salt, hammer, old cloth, saucepan, small jar with lid, strainer. (After using the homemade ink, students make like to continue practicing writing with the quill, so you may want to provide a bottle of manufactured ink for further quill writings.)

Plan:

Pen: Cut off the end of the feather at a slant. Then cut a narrow slit at the point of the pen.

Ink:

1. Crush the shells in cloth with a hammer.
2. Put shells in saucepan with 1 cup of water. Bring to a boil, and then simmer for 45 minutes or until dark brown. Much of the water will evaporate.
3. Let ink cool, then strain into a jar. Add $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon vinegar and $\frac{1}{2}$ teaspoon salt as preservatives.

Activity:

Ask students to write a story or a song with the quill and nut ink.

Some of the material from this lesson is credited to [Copycat Magazine](#) 1986, p. 25