

Carving Type from Potatoes: A Grinnell Guide



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Introduction:

Why Potato Type?

This exercise simulates some of the processes involved in publishing books in the hand-press era. Carving a potato and using it to make prints involves selecting typefaces, producing a precise image that becomes the basis for duplication, reversing the image onto a sort (a piece of type in potato form), carving away the negative space from the image, then using the potato to create a relief print of the character.

Even though this process differs from the hand-press process in major ways (creating perishable type, not using a press), it still produces a kinetic understanding of many components of early printing.

Process

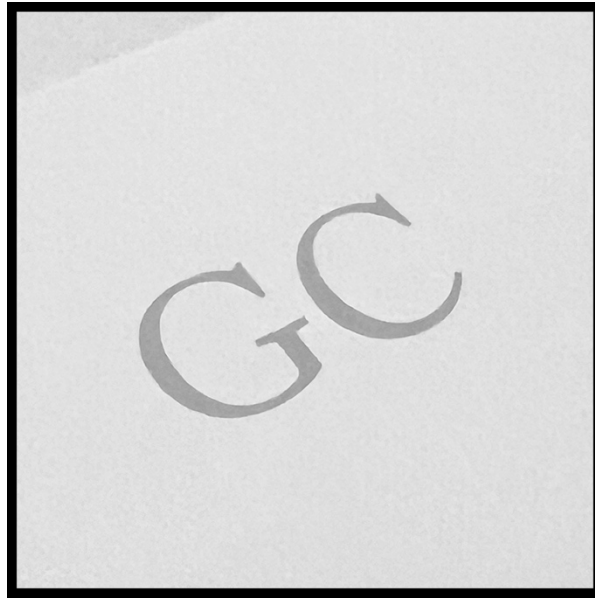
1. Choose Your Character

First, you need to choose the letters and typefaces you want to reproduce in potato form. If you are doing this exercise for my class, check the details of the assignment for guidance on your selection. If you are a beginner in carving print block, you may want to avoid letterforms that have intricate details, especially on the inside of the forms.

This guide will describe how to print a single character. To make more characters, just follow the same steps again.

2. Print Your Character

Print your character in the size you would like to print it with your potato. In choosing the size, keep in mind that 72 points are approximately equal to one inch. For many fonts, a 72-point typeface may be about right for potato printing, but you can try multiple sizes and use your judgment.

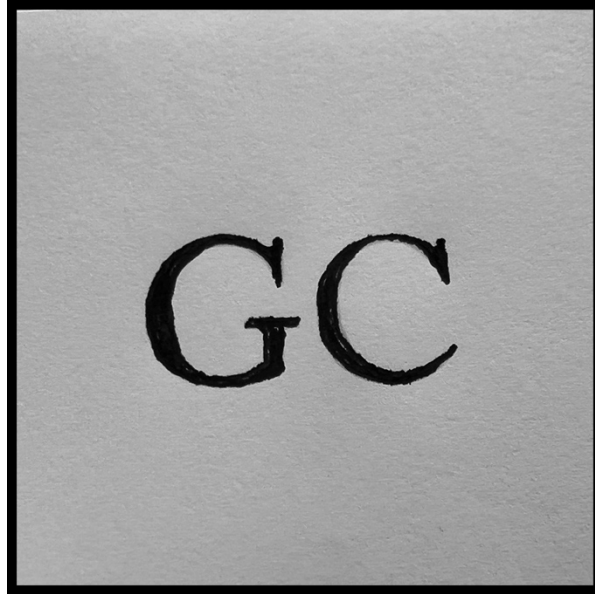


Print your character in a lighter tone, such as light gray, so you can see what you are doing when you trace them in the next step.

Note: for this example, I am printing two characters on one half-potato block, to have fun with “GC” for “Grinnell College,” but you would normally print only one character at a time.

3. Write over Your Character in Felt-Tip Pen

Ink over your printed character with a felt-tip (or “flair”) pen. Other kinds of pens may work for ink transfer as well, but I know that felt-tip works very well.



4. Transfer the Character to Your Potato

Cut your potato in half just before this step, so its surface still has some natural potato water on it. Stamp the flat side of the potato on your inked character, to create a reverse image of the character on the surface of the potato.



5. Carve away the Negative Space of Your Letterform

You will be using a relief printing method, which means that you want your letterform to remain on the surface of the printing block, with everything else (the negative space) carved away. Using linocut tools or some other cutting instrument, carve away all of the potato's surface that is not part of your inked character design.



Note that if you are using linocut tools, as shown in the photos, you will do most of your cutting by submerging the bottom of the v- or u-shaped blade under the surface of the potato and lifting bits of the potato outward.

At the end of this step, you should have only the inked letterform remaining on the surface:



6. Do a Test Print

Using a stamp pad or relief printing ink, try out your potato character and see what happens!



7. Refine Your Character

The test print will probably reveal bits of the potato that you can carve away to make your character more precise. Keep tinkering and test printing until you are pleased with your potato.

