

Letter Opener

By Alan Lacer

A skill-builder
that makes
a fine gift

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The size is somewhat a design question of proportions as well as a preference for what would feel good in the hand of the user. Turn several prototypes to work out the balance, look, and feel. I have settled on a 9" overall length and 7/8" at its greatest diameter. The rough blank should be slightly larger in diameter and about 10" in length.

Turn the opener

After making a cylinder (using either a roughing gouge or skew chisel), determine the handle length. I normally fit it to my

A letter opener is a favorite project in beginner classes I teach. And because it's an ideal project to develop skew skills, I encourage turners to detail the entire beaded handle using only a skew chisel.

For turning stock, I look for a closed grain wood that takes a good edge. Hard maple (plain, birdseye, or curly), cherry, apple, pear, plum, Osage orange and dogwood make good choices from domestic stock. Among exotic woods, fine options include cocobolo, boxwood, goncalo alves, tulipwood, and kingwood.

hand, so the handle in this case was about 4" long. The handle detailing is what moves this project from simple to challenging.

Design the handle with an arching form—probably with a bead at the blade end and some finishing detail for the end of the handle. For added handle detail, try adding a series of beads or coves with either a 3/8" detailing gouge or 1/2" skew chisel. It is often more interesting to vary the size of these details rather than making them all exactly the same.

Finalize the handle area by sanding to at least 220 grit. For the

blade area, I usually turn with a greater diameter in the middle and taper towards the handle and the tip, which adds visual interest.

Shape the blade

Rather than rough-shape the blade on a bandsaw, I prefer the safer route of sanding the blade into its final shape using the lathe. A small disc sander works quite well for this operation. A 5" plywood disc mounted on a faceplate or in a chuck makes for a quick sanding system, as does a 5" hard rubber disc mounted in a Jacobs-style chuck in the headstock.

I initially shape the blade with 80 grit, followed by 100, 120, 150, 180, and 220 grits. The basic shape is one of being thicker in the centerline of the blade and tapering to the two cutting edges. Strive for a sharp edge but one that is not so fragile and prone to chipping. The end of the blade needs to taper to a point that is easy to insert into the end of an envelope. Complete the final sanding by hand.



With a 1/2" skew, roll large beads with the short point and 1/4" or smaller beads with the long point.



To shape the blade, the lathe becomes a sander. Mount a 5"-diameter plywood disc in a chuck or on a faceplate.

Now, apply finish

Again, several options are possible depending on the desired look and level of durability. For a film-type finish, pre-catalyzed lacquer (sold as melamine in turning-supply catalogues) produces a tough finish. If using this finish, apply to the handle area on the lathe, then finish the blade by hand after the forming and sanding process.

For an oil finish, be sure and choose one that dries thoroughly. Good choices include pure tung oil, Watco, Deftoil, and Nordic oil. I recommend avoiding these oil

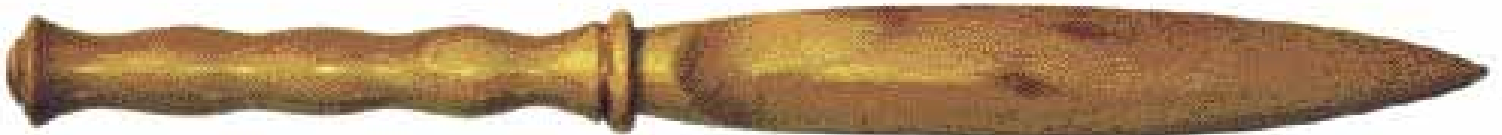
finishes on light-colored woods unless you don't mind the amber color that the finish imparts.

On the Osage orange opener shown, I applied a coat of 100 percent pure tung oil every other day until I had completed four coats (light coats, short soaking time, dried off completely, and sanded with 320 grit between coats). After about one week, I lightly buffed the opener with a cotton wheel on a lathe arbor.

Alan Lacer (www.alanlacer.com) is an *American Woodturner* contributing editor. He lives near River Falls, WI.



Pear



Osage orange