

Tech Talk

This section of the site collects various notes on technical matters, and we hope to expand it in the future.

A Guide to The PENguin's Grading System

Grading systems for collectibles vary widely. Even within pen-dom, one person's "excellent" pen may not be another's, and we have no Record Collector or Goldmine authority to refer to. For this reason, we'd like to provide a quick guide to the system used here at The PENguin to grade pens.

Typical Grades Used

- **Excellent +:** a pen with this grade shows no apparent wear; it appears like new.
- **Excellent:** this pen will be unflawed, but may show signs of slight use.
- **VG+:** a pen at this level will show the expected signs of ordinary use.
- **VG:** fine condition, may have a flaw that will not be apparent without close inspection. We don't sell pens, generally, below that.

Less Common Grades Used

- **Near Mint:** looks the way it did the day it left the factory. No signs of use whatever.
- **Unused:** just what it sounds like. Note that The PENguin only uses "Unused" to describe pens that came to him still sealed in their original packaging. This seldom happens.
- **New:** self-explanatory. Used only for brand new modern pens with all their boxes and papers and so on.

Terms The PENguin Disdains

- **Mint:** you won't see this grade used on the site. Ever. Seriously, "mint" and "minty" are extremely unreliable and disputed grades in pen-dom and many other collecting fields (is a still-sealed Beatles LP "mint"? How do you know?), and no one should ever take them at face value when buying pens.
- **Rare:** Though not exactly a grading term, The PENguin makes a deliberate choice not to use this word. Rick considers that "rare" is for steak.

If you have questions about a pen's condition not answered by this guide or by the particular pen's own description, you may of course email Rick and ask.

Repairs

I do not, for the most part, do pen repairs any more, nor do I sell parts. Keeping up with restoration of my own pens and those for the site is all I can do, not to mention teaching and my work for PCA.

That said, if you have an interesting pen in need of restoration I may be willing to take it on, with the understanding that I am very slow and fairly expensive.

Interesting pens, by the way, are for the most part German and Parker Vacumatics and newer.

So, it doesn't hurt to ask, feel free to inquire about repairs. But, please, do not ask about parts.

Just so you know what you are getting, when I do perform repairs I do only full restorations which include a complete disassembly, gentle cleaning (I do not use ultrasonics except on nibs and feeds), replacement of worn parts, reassembly, tuning and smoothing of the nib, adjusting the flow, hand polishing and final testing.

Replacement of broken or missing parts is at cost, without additional labor. Replacement parts are always guaranteed authentic and appropriate to the make, model and vintage.

All work is guaranteed for two years or 24 million words, whichever comes first.

The cost of a basic restoration on Pelikans, other piston fillers and vacuumatic filled Parkers is \$95.00. I do work on other pens. Costs quoted on request.

Turnaround time varies, please inquire.

Finally, I do not sell parts.

A Word on Cork Seals

Many people fear cork seals in pens. They do so needlessly. Properly installed and maintained many cork seals will outlast rubber and synthetics. Think of wine storage.

In part, the quality of the seal depends on who does the repair. It is not enough simply to replace a cork, you must thoroughly clean the barrel, fit the cork and lube it.

To start, you need a properly cut cork. I get mine from Germany. Then you need to size the inner and outer diameters. I use aluminum oxide abrasives and size by hand. This is painstaking work and must be done patiently and carefully. Too small and the cork may not seal sufficiently especially after a few months. Too large and you will split the barrel.

Next, and this is critical, you need to seal the corks. The traditional sealant is paraffin and it works well, but is difficult to use. Some folks in Germany use paraffin oil. I've had no experience with it. Rather, I use PURE silicone paste.

Now, with a cork properly fitted and installed, the responsibility shifts to the user.

Avoid harsh and heavily saturated inks. (see A Note on Inks below) They eat seals of all kinds. Store the pen wet. There has been some debate on this. David Nishimura, whom I greatly respect, says it is not necessary with a properly sealed cork. That may be so, but it can do no harm to store the pen wet. There is a reason wine bottles store on their sides.

If the worst happens and the cork does dry out, rehydrate it. Usually after a few tries the pen will draw up some water. You don't need much. Set the pen nib side up so that the water will swell the cork. Go get a cup of coffee, enjoy it, come back in 15 minutes and you should be able to draw progressively larger amounts of water and then ink into the pen.

If the cork has perished, chances are that before it came to you the seal was on its way out after long years of service or dry storage.

But if you maintain a cork well it should outlast all of us, but the very youngest.

As always, YMMV.

A Note on Inks

I get lots of questions about inks. There are a lot of good ones out there and a few bad ones.

Be sure any ink you use is made for fountain pens, not dip pens or drawing pens. Never use India ink.

A good rule of thumb is to use any ink made or sold by a fountain pen manufacturer. They are generally not going to make an ink that messes up pens and causes them to have to do warranty work. The sole exception would be Diamine inks, not made by a pen maker, but safe.

My preferred ink list includes, in no great order of preference, Parker Quink, Pelikan 4001, Watermans, Aurora, Visconti, Diamine.

Please note: the use of Private Reserve or Noodlers' inks will void The PENguin warranty. I cannot be responsible for pens in which those inks have been used.

Setting the Nib and Feed on a Pelikan

Before trying to remove the nib, soak it for at least 48 hours in a solution of water and *pure* ammonia (not the sudsing kind). Be aware that on a hard rubber feed this may cause discoloration. Only then try to remove the nib by gripping face of the nib with your forefinger and flat across the vanes with your thumb. I'm attaching an image as illustration. You'll need to do the same with a modern pen, though it should come more easily and there is less chance of breaking the vertical vanes on the modern feed. They may deform, but can be bent back into place.

Once you have the nib unit out of the pen it should be easy to disassemble especially if the collar on a 400 is already cracked, as they often do. If for any reason, the collar remains in the pen, getting it out may be a real issue and something best left to someone with more experience. But, assuming all is well, you now have to disassemble the unit. There are two ways to do this. One is to drive the nib and feed from the collar if you have a suitable drift and nib block. If not, you can loosely screw the collar back into the pen and attempt to walk out the nib and feed. Once it is almost out, unscrew the assembly and finish removal of the nib and feed.

Now, if you are moving a vintage nib and feed into a modern collar, you need to increase the inner diameter of the modern collar. A round file is perfect for this, though check your work often to be sure you are not removing too much material. I use a rolled up cylinder of 100 grit sandpaper which I find more controllable. Regardless, very carefully open out the inner diameter of the new collar, trying the fit frequently. Once you have a good fit (very tight but not forced), set the nib and feed from the 400 into the new collar. Setting these nibs is a precision thing. With a Parker, if the nib and feed are within shouting distance of each other the thing will write, not so Pelikan. It might do to take a picture of the nib and feed on the original pen (assuming it currently writes well) before disassembly. Regardless, the nib and feed must be correctly positioned in every direction. A good rule of thumb is for the vanes on the top of the feed to come right up to the shoulders of the nib. Most people set the feed too low.

