

Activity title

Books and illuminated letters – How books with illuminated letters became a luxury item

Time required

1-2 hours

Activity summary

Creating an illuminated letter.

By the end of this activity, you will be able to:

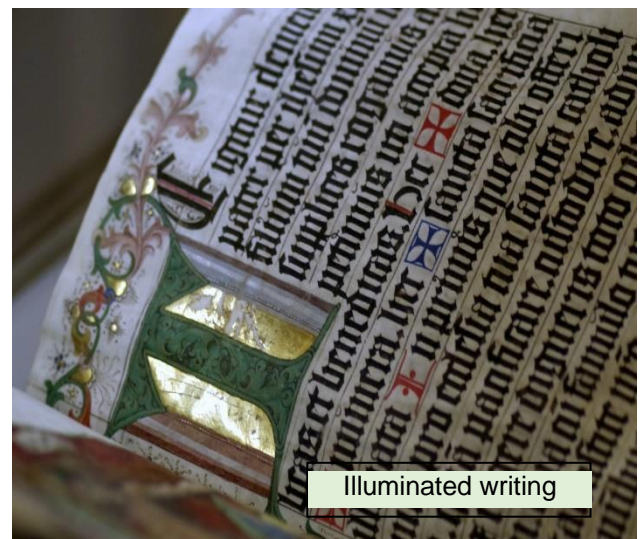
Create an illuminated letter like those in a medieval manuscript.

What is this all about?

Paper was invented in China about 1800 years ago. In Europe, the first paper was manufactured about 900 years ago.

Until 600 years ago, if you wanted a copy of a book, somebody had to write it out one letter at a time. This meant that books were expensive luxury items - only rich people could afford to own them.

The pages of these books were often beautifully decorated or 'illuminated'. The first letter of a page was sometimes turned into a picture that included bright colours and even gold. Mediaeval monks were extremely skilful at applying gold leaf on top of their illustrations.



Illuminated writing

What equipment will you need?

- Paper
- Pencil for outlines
- Coloured pencils or felt tips

You can also have a go at applying gold to your design:

- **Gold Leaf** – this can be bought for a few pennies a sheet.
- **Tissue paper**
- **Paint brush**
- **Glue, such as PVA**

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Now try this

There are three things you could do – take your pick do at least two!

1. Illuminated letter without gold leaf

Draw or print out a block letter. Decide on how it is to be decorated. Use coloured pencils or felt tips to draw in the decoration.



Draw letter



Add decoration

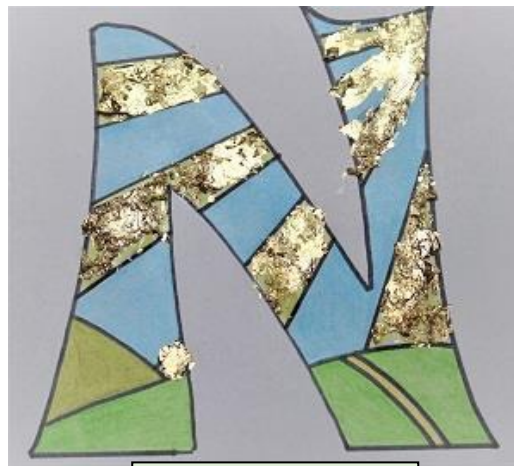


Add colour

2. Illuminated letter with gold leaf

Method one – decoration inside the letter

- Draw your letter and decide where you want to put your gold leaf. Apply colour to the other areas.
- Use a paint brush to apply a thin layer of PVA glue to the letter, where you want the gold leaf to be.
- Place the gold leaf onto the glue.
- Press down with the tissue paper then gently peel away, leaving the gold leaf where the PVA is.



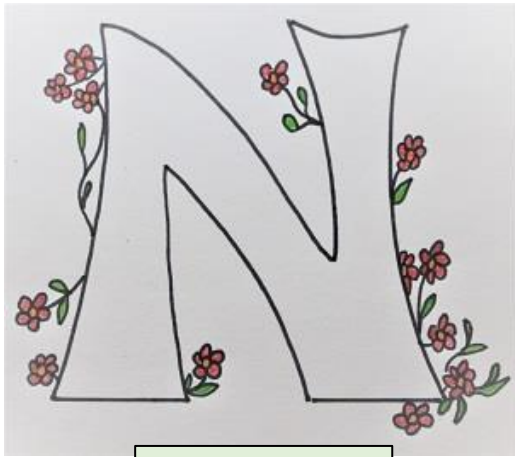
Gold leaf added instead of the yellow

Gold leaf is so thin it is difficult to handle. It is usually supplied with separator sheets to make this easier

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Method two – decoration around the letter

- Draw the outline of your letter and add decoration around your letter.
- Follow method one steps b to d to add the gold leaf filling the whole letter.



Draw and decorate a letter



Add gold leaf

3. Using gelatine, the medieval way

In medieval times they used gelatine in place of PVA glue.

To prepare the gelatine:

- Put a small sheet of gelatine into a bowl and add 2 teaspoons of hot water.
- If you have a microwave, put it in and 'cook' for 10 seconds. It should come out as a sticky glue.



Gelatine after the microwave

Be careful, this method can get messy! If you use a microwave, make sure you get permission from a responsible adult first!

- Using a brush, paint a thin layer of gelatine on your letter where you want the gold leaf to be.
- Carefully place a sheet of gold leaf over the letter.

Press down with the tissue paper then gently peel away, leaving the gold leaf where the gelatine is.

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You could also

Try both methods of illuminating letters (decoration inside the letter, decoration around the letter).

Write your name with the first letter using illuminated text.

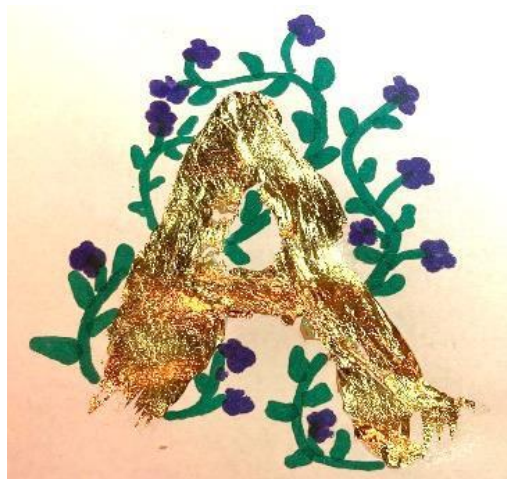
Find the words of your favourite song or poem. Create an illuminated manuscript for this.

The following websites can be used for additional background information:

YouTube – Drawing for Kids: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=q5lh0ZDzd08>

YouTube – Book of Hours: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A29JLRwFLj8>

What results are expected?



With thanks to Hawthorns Primary School, Worthing, for sharing these resources which were created as a series of activities to celebrate 150 years of the IET.