

Your Secret Assistant



The Nail Writer Re-Imagined



Your Secret Assistant: The Nail Writer

There's a brand-new student of mentalism I meet with on a regular basis. Like me, he is a refugee of the magic world and he is keenly interested in learning about mentalism.

He is a delight. He has a lot of questions and he's fascinated with all the different faces of mentalism. One afternoon he was asking me about an idea he was working on. I won't describe it here, because it's not my concept to give away.

He wanted to know how he could get a two-letter prediction onto a paper. The sticky part, from his perspective, was that he would only know what the two letters were after the volunteer had told him. He was after a way to write those letters down right in front of her and make it look like a prediction...a thing that he already knew.

I asked if there were any other circumstances I didn't know about...because the answer was glaringly obvious.

"No. That's it," he said.

"Can't you just use a nail writer?" I asked.

"A what?"

"A nail writer...y'know."

His face was a blank. My world lurched to a sudden stop. This is a guy with an agile mind. We've had great discussions about Center Tears, Impression Devices...wordsmithing. How could he not have heard of a nail writer???

I won't recount the whole conversation but it boils down to this. He had never heard of a nail writer because it is hardly ever discussed on the forums. None of the New and Wonderful Products being sold are Nail Writers – or any of the many variations. He hasn't really read Corinda or Annemann.

How was this possible?

So I started explaining what a Nail Writer was, and the variety of forms it came in. His eyes lit up like a slot machine ready to make someone VERY happy as I started telling him about some of the ways I use a Nail Writer (NW) in my shows – both on stage and close-up.

"How come I never heard of this before?" he asks.

It is then that I realize he's a young man and the culture he's been raised in is very different from mine. He sees the world through chat rooms and You Tube videos. He buys individual props and 'tricks' and hasn't quite hit the point where he sees a BOOK as something of significant value.

I'm confident he will get there. He's got the kind of mind that will start demanding real information instead of 'tricks' before long.

In the meanwhile, the question begs to be asked: If no one tells him about these things, how will he know?



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Ask most mentalists – pros, semi-pros or those who perform and study mentalism for the joy of it – if they use NWs in their work and you’re likely to get the face that says “Are you REALLY asking me that, Scooter?”

I met a performer once who swore he did 20 minutes of his half hour show with JUST his NW.

I imagine you sitting wherever you are – in whatever corner of the world you dwell in --- reading these words. I wonder about you. Are you the kind of performer who uses a NW on a consistent basis...and you’ve picked this book up because you’re hoping for a tip or two that will help. Or maybe you’re someone who bought a NW years ago and tossed it into the Drawer of No Return because it didn’t seem relevant to your performances.

Or MAYBE you’re someone who’s never even owned a NW before and you’re interested in learning about this device.

I trust that in all three cases when we’re done you will feel like you came to the right place.

I can’t even conceive of doing a show – on stage, close-up or parlour – without my NW sitting in my pocket.

If you don’t already feel that way, my profound hope is that you WILL feel that way soon.

Let’s get started, shall we?

I think the show’s already underway...

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The mentalist looks at you for a long moment before he reviews what he's asked you to do:

"You were asked to take part in a lie detector test. I am going to use only my impressions of what you are thinking to make my decision.

"I asked you to write down five names. Four of these names are those of people you consider friends. The fifth name, hidden wherever on the list you choose to put it, is of someone you don't get along with...someone you actively dislike. Maybe a person you actually hate. The stronger your emotions were about this person the better. Is that a fair summary?"

You nod.

"I am going to read these five names out loud. As I do, I ask that you get a clear mental image in your mind of their face. And as you conjure up that image in your mind, I will also ask you to let your emotions, the way you feel about them, run freely through you.

"But please...try very hard not to show any outer expressions as to how you feel about this person. Simply focus your mind on each of these people. Are you ready to begin?"

A long moment passes. Finally you nod.

The mentalist places his finger against his forehead. He closes his eyes in concentration. His eyes get all squinty – which is how you can tell he is THINKING. Finally – in a very serious voice he reads the names you wrote on the index card:

"Jack."

"Jill."

"Frank."

"Joe."

"Sarah."

As he reads, he is watching you carefully – his eyes are fixed on yours. You are making every effort to keep your face rigid. When he reads...THAT name...your inner monster snaps and snarls and lashes its tail, but you are convinced you betrayed nothing with your facial expressions.

"I am going to read two of these names once more. As I do so...don't betray your emotion with your expressions. Ready?"

You nod. No way he is going to know who the Scumbag of the Year (Or Maybe The Decade) is. You are a stone. A rock.

"Frank," he says.

"Joe," he says.

You are thinking it is a good thing your face is a rock...set in stone because one of those two names is a freaking BULL'S EYE. How is he doing this???



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The mentalist relaxes. He moves his pencil over the paper and looks like he makes a checkmark...somewhere. He makes a point of setting the pencil down...and holds the index card close to his chest. When he speaks his voice is grave. Serious.

“Have you discussed this person – the one you dislike – with me or anyone here today?”

Is he kidding? You try not to even THINK of this guy.

“No,” you say.

“Is there any way I could know who this person is...?”

“No,” you say.

“You have good cause to be angry with this person. I sense that he was once someone you trusted...” starts the mentalist. He proceeds to tell you several things he could not possibly know about your relationship with the man you have come to think of as ‘Joey McStinkinmeister, butt stink McStinker.’

You nod after each one. How does he KNOW THIS STUFF???

“Would you reveal – for the first time – the name of this person?”

You sigh. “His name...is Joe.”

Finally, the mentalist turns the list around and shows you that there is a checkmark...right beside the name ‘Joe.’

He not only knew the name...he also knew all kinds of things about your relationship with this person.

This is the point where trumpets start to sound and the mentalist walks out of the building on rose petals scattered on the ground before him by two virgins...

Okay. So, the rose petals thing is a little over the top.

But this is a solid effect. I have performed it hundreds of times in hospitality suites and close-up venues. It is a splendid on-stage ‘lie detector’ effect – especially when the audience is invited to play along and reach their own conclusions about which name is the disliked one.¹

I include this effect here, as the opening to the Nail Writer chapter because it works very well.

Those who are familiar with books like Corinda’s 13 Steps to Mentalism will recognize that this really is just a reimagining of the ‘classic’ Living/Dead test. I never liked that premise...because the effect has the potential to create some very sad emotions...and the potential for using the choice as the basis for a Cold Reading (which is discussed elsewhere in this book under the heading “A Particular People”) is almost non-existent. Most of the material you would get only amp up the ‘sad’ factor.

¹ You MAY be more comfortable allowing this effect to be less PERSONAL for your volunteer. Or you may have a volunteer who is uncomfortable actually naming real people on the list. If this happens you can switch gears to CELEBRITIES they like and one they don’t. It’s less personal...but still affords some of the Cold Reading options.



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I've always felt it's important that an effect go SOMEWHERE...that it has the potential to reveal something interesting about the volunteer. People are keenly interested in other people. That's why I hit upon the premise of people the volunteer liked versus one person they didn't like.

But the method is exactly the same as the Living/Dead effect: the performer looks at the names, goes through the reading of them one at a time, pretends to put a checkmark somewhere on the list and SETS THE PENCIL DOWN.

Putting the pencil down is a critical part of the equation because in the minds of the audience, there's no way the performer can change his mind because he's not holding the pencil any longer. The choice has been made and 'locked in.'

Of course...the performer IS wearing a Nail Writer on his thumb and – hidden behind the index card. His thumb is poised as he waits for the volunteer to announce which person on the list is the “disliked” one.

He simply has to use that Nail Writer to make a checkmark beside the 'disliked' person's name (once the spectator reveals it) and the mechanics of the effect are done.

Don't make the checkmark right away. Immediately after your volunteer has revealed the number one person on their Hate Parade is when most of the audience will be watching you for any sign that you're cheating. Save your actual cheating for a time when their attention is focussed somewhere else, like when they are “oohing” and “ahhhing” about the amazing things you know about this stranger.

You have all the time in the world to 'make your mark.'



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Way Off Topic...BUT An Interesting Option

This effect COULD be done nine times out of ten without a Nail Writer. You just watch the person's face and in 90% of the time (no kidding) their expressions or body language will tell you which person they don't like.

When I am feeling particularly adventurous...or more likely when I know I am working with a particularly expressive volunteer (usually a young woman), I am open to using this as my 'go to' effect when someone asks me to 'show them something' while I leave my Nail Writer in my pocket.

It really is simply a matter of paying close attention to what they tell you with their bodies or their facial expressions. Just watch them carefully.²

You may see one corner of their mouth move downward. Often this takes place so quickly that you won't even notice it unless you are watching for it. This happens quickly and could be put down to a 'twitch.' This is the universal microexpression (as in one twenty-fifth of a second long) for contempt.

You may see lips tighten almost imperceptibly...or the eyes narrow slightly. It may look like a tiny twitch. This is an expression of anger. Again – you won't see these unless you are looking for them.

Occasionally you will see the jaw...or head jerk up slightly. The nostrils may flare. The fingers on their hands may tighten slightly, curling toward a fist. This is a sign of fury.

All of the body language, expressions and microexpressions provide powerful foundations for Cold Readings. Keep that in mind. The key to selling this effect lies more in the things you talk about that aren't written down.

Try it some time. Leave the Nail Writer in your pocket and see if you can make it work simply reading the body language. (You can always develop an itch...or a need to fish a pointy little 'something' out of your pocket later if you have to.)

But it probably won't be necessary. Very few people will be able keep their body language 'tells' to themselves.

² Yup...another foot note. Sorry. I've said many times that Body Language and learning how to read it is absolutely one of the most important tools in the mentalist's arsenal. People have learned how to lie with their mouths...but most have no idea how to lie with their bodies.

In the beginning it's hard to read body language...because you have to be SO focussed. This makes sense because you are learning a new language, right? After a while of applying it, you will find it is almost second nature.

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Cold Reading Notes for THIS Effect

Before getting to a deeper discussion on the Nail Writer, I have just one more thing to share with you about what goes on between the instant the volunteer reveals which one of the five names is your target – and when you turn the index card around to reveal the checkmark beside the ‘right’ name.

What ‘goes on’ is the heart of the routine.

Let me backtrack a little: When I saw my first Living and Dead test, I was underwhelmed. The spectator was asked to list five names. It was the standard test with the names of four living people and one who had passed on. The spectator says the dead person was Aunt Ruth. The performer turned over the card and there was a checkmark beside ‘Ruth.’

I thought... “Hmmm. Magic Trick.” Tuh...dumb.

Gee...however could he have known that? Whoever could possibly care?

What elevates this way beyond that standard? **Presentation.** And much of the presentation is tied into the quality of the Cold Reading you are about to do. Remember that, from an audience perspective, what you are revealing is WAY beyond what is written on the index card. The only reasonable conclusion is that there is some actual mind reading going on here.

But this is NOT a COLD Read. A Cold Read is when you are revealing things to a person you have never met before...and cannot reasonably know anything about. This is not that situation. You know something very telling about this person: you know that one name was put on their list because this person did something to be truly disliked by your volunteer.

As you go through the list, one of the names will set off alarm bells in the mind of your volunteer. This is an emotionally charged proposition. This is more of what is called a Warm Read, because you are working with some aspect of prior knowledge.

Let’s try a cold read on you right now.

Think for a second about someone in your life that you are truly angry with – the person you would put on YOUR list. Let’s see how my effort to do a cold read on you works out with me sitting here in my den. We are separated by many miles and much time from where you are as you read this.

I’m asking you to get a clear picture of this person in your mind. See them as vividly as you can. I know. I can feel your mind reacting to that idea and I know that thinking of them makes you feel uncomfortable. But I am going to ask you to do so anyway. I assume you are holding their image in your mind? Yes.

Imagine me looking right into your eyes. I step a little closer and place my right hand on your shoulder.

I think this person...betrayed you somehow. You thought they were one thing. But they weren’t. In the end they were actually someone else. I think this person hurt you and as you think about their face, I have a mental image of something dark coiling around them. You do not feel this is a good person.

On the contrary...



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The more you got to know who they really are...the less you like them. This isn't simple irritation. The color of your emotion as you think about them is a bright red. It is the color of anger.

Before things go too far, let's pause for a second. What SOUNDS like a cold read – a revelation of information isn't a Cold Read at all. It's not even a Warm Read. It's really just a recap. You've been asked to think of a person you don't like. I am, in essence, telling you that THIS person (even though at this point I have no idea what the name of this person is) is someone you don't like. But I am telling you this in a way that sounds as though I am revealing new information.

That's what a big chunk of Cold Reading is about. You pay attention to the responses or guidelines of the situation, you listen to what the person feeds back to you and paraphrase it back to them some time later as though it were new information.

So far, so good. But we are only skimming the surface of what is possible. We are about to get specific now – to stray into territory that is now going beyond a simple written name. So get the image of the person YOU dislike in your mind again...and let's continue.

This person...it isn't a man, is it?

Let me pause here briefly to share the utter brilliance of the phrasing of the above question. It is a mainstay in the Cold Reading techniques that many use. Look at how the question is phrased: "This person...it isn't a man, is it?"

You are performing a gentle pump that will cleanly eliminate 50% of all possibilities without the spectator having any idea that this is what you've done.

It works like this:

You ask: *"This person...it isn't a man, is it?"*

The volunteer responds: *"No."*

Even as they speak you shake your head and say: "No. I didn't think so."

OR

You ask: *"This person...it isn't a man, is it?"*

The volunteer responds: *"Yes."*

Even as they speak you nod your head and say: "Yes. I thought so."

The above technique is a masterpiece of wordsmithing. Utterly undetectable. You pose your question as though you are simply confirming something you already knew.

How'd I do with the start of that old read of you? It's much more difficult to do this without seeing you and watching for your body language. Occasionally the person will react with a shrug or a chuckle as I begin talking about betrayal. And this tells me that they have probably selected someone they just get irritated by – but all the following talk doesn't apply.

But the majority of the time they DO feel betrayed and let down.



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I use the word 'betrayed' specifically because it goes to the heart of what makes a person feel angry with another person. Since at the beginning of the effect you asked your volunteer to choose a person they REALLY didn't like, the likelihood of them going with someone who just irritates them is significantly lessened.

Think about the person YOU decided you would put on the list. What did they do? In the vast majority of cases I KNOW the word 'betrayed' could apply.

Go a little deeper into that word to find out how it instantly becomes more acceptable to your spectator. (Yeah...I know this is off of the Nail Writer topic – but it's critical from a Cold Reading perspective. Bear with me for a moment.) "Betrayed" casts a very clear image of your volunteer as the 'good guy' and 'bad guy' glow the name of the person they don't like. (Almost everyone sees themselves as the Good Guy, right?)

Your spectator is the one who has been wronged – which is the way they see it. And the one who did the wronging – the 'traitor' is clearly the bad guy who abused a trust.

Truth – what really happened – is irrelevant from the perspective of this Cold Read. 'Truth' is the way your volunteer sees the circumstances. Nothing else matters. Remember that it is only the actions and reactions of your volunteer that let the audience know you've scored a 'hit.' (THIS is why it's so much better to go with an emotionally charged theme.)

This one simple routine with the ENTIRE method being done with one touch of a Nail Writer will become something utterly remarkable with the proper presentation.

If you couldn't tell – I am all about presentation.

I like dead simple methods.

I like routines that reveal something...about somebody.

But I also understand that there is a place for effects that are designed to make an instant impression. I don't necessarily like them...but I understand them.

One of the most common uses for a NW is a variation and has been around in many versions over the years. The first written account I ever read of this came from Corinda.

This is an effect that would be used early in the show. No muss, fuss or bother. The mentalist would ask a person in the audience to name any number. The person does and the mentalist reveals that this number had been written on the card he has been holding the whole time.

It is an ice breaker...and I've performed it. But it seemed flat to me because I see numbers as sterile and uninteresting. It always felt to me like a simple NUMBER is nothing to get excited about.

I spent a lot of time working with the idea that follows, trying to build a powerful routine

I came up with a few variations that still featured the three number system...but worked to make the effect into a stronger stand-alone piece.

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By the Numbers

The mentalist walks out on stage...smiles at the audience and walks directly up to a young woman in the audience.

"Hello," he says to her. "Would you stand for a moment?"

She does.

"Have you ever been actually aware of someone trying to influence you to do anything?"

If she's pretty, you can probably count on a sprinkling of chuckles from the audience. But the mentalist holds up his hand for silence. "What I meant was – have you ever been aware of someone who could implant a thought in your mind?"

"No," she says.

"Can I try?" he asks.

She nods.

The mentalist leads her onstage, gestures for applause for his volunteer and positions her so she is looking at him.

"I want you to clear your mind. And I want you to look me in directly in the eye. I'm not going to hypnotize you. I'm going to try to get our minds calibrated...so that for a few minutes they run on the same 'wavelength.' Will you help me with this?"

She nods.

He puts his hand on her shoulder and speaks "I want you to look into my eyes. (Yeah. I know it sounds cheesy...but trust me...this is the only way it works.)

This is here purely to give the people in the audience a chance to chuckle a little and put the tongue in the cheek (figuratively) for the effect that follows.

I am going to be working to imagine the following things in my mind...to try to see them in my mind the exact same way you are seeing them in your mind.

"I want you to imagine a dark room. Black. Are you there?"

She nods.

"There is a soft scratching sound as a match is struck. A sharp smell in the air and you see a small flame appear. The flame floats through the air and touches the wick of a white candle. As it does so, you see a gentle yellow light in the room. Can you see this clearly in your mind?"

She nods.

There is really only one thing happening in this script. You are setting the scene. You are foreshadowing what is to come. In a theatrical sense you ARE working to put both of your minds into the same place. But it's window dressing.



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“Imagine there is a soft wind...a breeze blowing into the room. You feel it cool against your skin. The breeze gets stronger and see the candle flame dance in it briefly...and then it goes out.

“Have you done this in your mind?”

She nods.

“I am going to try to send a significant number into your mind. In just a second you are going to say three numbers. They are going to come into your mind one at a time. Please say them very slowly. I am going to begin sending them to you now. Say these three numbers as they come into your mind.”

You never break eye contact with her. But step back. (You need to do this because you need a little distance in order to Nail Write the numbers she is about to give you.) Hold the index card to your chest with both hands.

There is quite a bit going on at this point. SHE is the one saying the numbers which are apparently coming from you. The fact that she is speaking numbers out loud is a validation in the minds of some of the audience members that the transference of thought is happening. Of course, what is really happening is simply a woman on a stage saying three random numbers and you writing them down as she says them.

Make a show of concentrating. You want her to say these numbers slowly so you can write them clearly on the card with your Nail Writer. SLOW is key here. It increases the tension and the ‘mysterious’ aspects of the effect and it also allows you time to do the numbers neatly.

Affirm each number as she speaks it with a “Yes.” This, also, sells the effect and emboldens her to feel as though she is receiving your thoughts perfectly.

Let’s say the numbers she speaks were 5-9-7.

“The numbers you said were 5. 9. 7. Correct?” the mentalist asks.

She nods.

“Those were the precise numbers I was sending you. My daughter was born in the FIFTH month of 1997.

He turns over the card to show these numbers written there.

From the audience perspective? There’s no way he could have written anything. There’s been no pen in his hand and he has been holding the card close to his chest the whole time. So...obviously...the numbers were pre-written. A MIRACLE!

SPEAKING OF NUMBERS: You simply adapt the family member’s birth month and last two numbers of their birth year to whatever your volunteer says. I don’t know how old you are...but I DO know that the FIRST number they give is going to be a month between January and September (as in 1-9).

The wild card is what the LAST two numbers are going to be.



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In my case I'm pretty old. So anything that goes from 0-0 to around 2-0 (as in 1900 and 1925 is going to refer to a great grandparent.

A number between 1926 and 1950 is going to be a grandparent.

A number from 1951 to 1965 is going to be my wife.

A number between 1966 and 1975 will be my eccentric aunt Molly.

A number between 1976 to 2017 will be my daughter Molly.

By the Numbers: "Aunt Molly" Variations

Aunt Molly – By the Numbers

Here's a variation on this effect. I would give my Volunteer a head and shoulders (as in you cannot-define-an-era) **picture of a woman**.

I would have the volunteer and the audience concentrate on this picture just before I 'sent' the numbers into the mind of my volunteer.

After the numbers were said, I would draw attention to the picture my volunteer was holding. I would turn over the index card, showing that the three numbers my Volunteer had come up with and the three numbers on the card were exactly the same.

Then I would explain that these are the numbers that correspond with the birth month and birth year of my Aunt Molly...the woman in the picture my Volunteer has been holding.

Aunt Molly: Picture Perfect

I have also used a variation of this effect where dear Aunt Molly's portrait was on a free-standing easel. As before I would have my volunteer concentrate on the picture for a moment and THEN receive the numbers from me.

I would talk about my eccentric Aunt Mollie as I picked up the portrait to show the picture to my volunteer. As I crossed the stage and continued to talk about what a character she had been (a carnival psychic in my case) I would simply slowly and carefully nail write the three numbers my volunteer had chosen in the lower corner.

These numbers (can you see it coming?) corresponded with the birth month and birth year of my Aunt Molly...the woman in the picture.

I like both of these routines and I still perform them. I find they play strongest to smaller, more intimate groups. If there is soft music in the background and an attentive group, this can be very powerful.



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Bands and Boons and Thumb Tips...oh MY!

You don't argue with people about the BIG THREE: Sex, Religion or Politics. You don't argue because no one is going to change their mind and the only result of this argument will be a whole lot of upset really annoyed people.

That's the same reason you don't ask the average mentalist about his Nail Writer preferences. There are passionately committed people in every camp. And everyone in every camp figures that everyone in any other camp is a freaking idiot because they can't see the OBVIOUS advantages of the NW they use.

It makes sense...because Nail Writers – and their many variations – are happily residing in the pockets of performing mentalists all over the world. I've put a few of my routines in the pages before this, but there are literally ENDLESS possibilities.

Think of your Nail Writer as your Secret Assistant. With this baby you will be able to *secretly write* anything! You can reverse engineer predictions. You can use it as proof of your ability to transmit or receive thoughts. You can use it as a way of proving that you are able to influence people to say almost anything.

You can 'know in advance' what item they will choose from an exhaustive menu...which travel destination they would go to from a list of 25...or 100. You can have the name or initials of their first crush, kiss, car written down before they even speak.

Some performers feel they could do an ENTIRE show using only this little device.

It's perfectly adapted for close-up, parlour or stage. It requires no batteries...no reset...no stooges...no assistants...and it is TINY.

So you can well understand that the selection of a Nail Writer is critical.

It's also individual.

I want to show you images of the products...so, as opposed to creeping around and stealing images from other people, I went directly to the commercial images of the products. This way you will see the company name etc. where possible.

I've worked with and tried out many Nail Writers over the years and I'm going to share my honest impressions with you but I say again: these are my PERSONAL opinions, okay? These devices have been around in many forms over the years for a reason. Certain styles work for certain people all the time.

Ready to start the tour?

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SWAMI GIMMICK (aka “Under Nail Writer”)



The rounded part fits under your thumbnail and the lead is pointed forward. This is probably the most popular model on the planet. Richard Osterlind swears by them.

They are very inexpensive. Most come out of India...and the people who use them will often remove the “there’s no flesh like that color” paint and then re-paint the metal a more acceptable color. You will find a number of suppliers on eBay.

My experience with this style has not been positive. I have a hard time getting the tip on and I find I have some stability issues once it is on.

Another significant problem for me is that it IS so small and I find it very hard to work with. I tried very hard to make this one work for me. I simply couldn’t...so mine are in the Drawer of No Return. (Maybe Richard wants them. 😊)

The BOON (aka ‘BUG’) Writer

This device – made by the same people who bring you Thumbtips, is designed to adhere to your thumb with a sticky substance. You do the writing with the pad of your thumb.

This writer is also smallish – but Vernet has a number of devices that make it easier to get on and off. As long as you are good writing with the pad of your thumb, this is a good option. It’s virtually undetectable and easily ditch-able.

I used one of these for a couple of years and was reasonably happy with it. The prime issue is that the tackiness of the sticky material could get significantly less tacky because of things like pocket lint. If the sticky stuff is less sticky, that makes for some difficulties in stability...which makes trying to write can be very iffy.

In the end, I abandoned this style and started looking for an option that was a better fit for me.



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The Band Writer



The construction of these models is much better. You can conform the band so it's a good fit for your thumb. They are bigger, so they're easier to locate in your pocket and get on.

They are available in grease marker and pencil.

I didn't use this [particular model](#) but I show you this picture because it is highly spoken of by People Who Know and its construction is similar to other ones.

The C.H. Bandwriter

I was very happy with my band writer. (I would tell you which one it was...but I honestly have no idea who made it.) I had only two and a half issues with it.

Issue One: Since I only use the grease version, it had a tendency to paint little lines of grease on the inside of my pocket, my ProMystic receivers...my magnetic coins...and my fingers.

Issue Two: Once in a (great) while the grease load would come out of the tip and get loose in my pocket. This meant that I had to start carrying TWO of them just in case. (See Issue One above. Times two.) I am admittedly paranoid about these matters. But I have a hard time trusting a prop that has ever let me down.

Issue Two and a Half: occasionally the Band Writer would be difficult to get on.

Still – the Band Writer style remains my second favorite.

The Thumb Tip Writer

Having a magic background I whispered a soft “Eureka” when I found out that NWs were available in thumbtips. I was well versed in TTs and I KNEW I would have no problem getting them on and off of my thumb. I thought I had found the solution.

Nope. The reason there is no brand name here is that I never found a single one I could depend on. In the first place, the grease versions gave me the same issue the Band Writers did. But worse? The lead/grease insert had a habit of falling out.

I hated these things and did not even accord them sanctuary in the Drawer of No Return. All three models I bought went straight into the trash.



I went back to my Band Writers for a couple of years and just lived with the difficulties they gave me.

Your Secret Assistant: The Nail Writer

Before I reveal what my solution was, I need to tell you that this is MY solution and I am very happy with it. But I have no interest in whether you get as excited about this solution as I did.

I was at MindVention one year and everyone was buzzing about this new prop. The guy who was distributing it said he carried it in his pocket all day and never had a problem

He put it into a glass jar and shook the heck out of it in front of a herd of mentalists who were watching with the same attention a panther would give to a baby gazelle. He shook that thing and it rattled off the glass sides. He shook it up and down. He invited other people to shake the jar and we did.

Once the shaking was over? He removed this device, slid it onto his thumb and it worked flawlessly.

The grease tip slid into view, did it's job and with one very simple motion, it slid back.

No more mess in my pocket. No more issues putting it on my thumb. No worries about the lead or grease slipping out of the hole.

I bought three on the spot and have since bought two more – just in case.

It was then...and has been since...one of the Most Perfect Things I've Ever Purchased. I take it with me to every stage show. Every parlour show. Every close up show. It has never let me down. Not once.

Greg Edmonds designed it...and gave the distribution rights to [Mark Strivings](#). You have to approach Mark directly and catch him when he actually has stock...but, as of this writing, you can still get one.

The RTW (Retractable Thumb Writer)

The business end looks like this:



That is a full grease lead in the end. You will note that it is RETRACTED and held tightly in the exit hole.

You will also note that this is a standard Thumb Tip...very easy to get on and off. It is simply a thumb tip that has been carefully prepared to deliver the lead or grease marker and then slide quietly back into the thumb tip until it is needed again.

The method for delivering the lead/grease is dead simple. As you slide your thumb into the tip, that plastic flange you're looking at pushes down on the lead and sends it out of the tip so you can use it. It's pushed back into the tip with one easy motion and it's ready to use again.



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Learning to Use A Nail Writer

The issue many people have with NWs is that it's very difficult to write with them.

On the other hand, there are those who can write entire words...or sentences with them. I am not one of these people. Wherever possible I will try to stick to drawing a checkmark or a line. I will work on using initials instead of writing full names if I can get away with it.

It's also important to have whatever you write easily read by the audience or volunteer. That's why I really prefer the grease/Listo inserts instead of the pencil ones. They make a much stronger line and can be seen by many more people than that little pencil scratch.

Many people – myself included – do the nail writing as quickly as possible because they want to get it over with. And that's why many of the things written at this time look like they were done by a man with muscular twitches scrawling on a paper in an earthquake. While riding a horse. A galloping horse.

As you work through using a NW, I suggest you take it slowly. Make each letter or number you draw **deliberate**.

When you practice these exercises, do it with an index card held close to your chest and your NW in position. If you will be standing when you use it, practice these exercises standing. You want to come as close as possible to the actual performing conditions.

You also want to go through the whole routine. Why? It will force you to decide when you put the NW on...and how you get it on. Remember you need to get it on -- and off again -- in front of your audience.

I will get mine on as soon as I start the routine. Since putting a hand inside a pocket is always suspicious, I will most often disguise it as myself looking for my marker to write with.³

Stand with your NW thumb well behind the surface you will be writing on. Consider using a stiff surface like an index card or a pad of paper. This makes writing much easier. Some performers prefer to use a stack of standard sized billets – or even a post-it pad.

Keep in mind that the size of the surface you're writing on is important, since that surface is your only cover for the nailwriting you're doing. The smaller the surface, the more carefully you need to mask your thumb movements.

Spend a little time in front of a mirror and watch yourself from as many angles as possible as you work with the paper/pad/card you've chosen. You'll know very quickly which one suits you best.

³ I don't have to tell you that you need a marker/pencil that uses the same lead/grease load as the NW you've chosen so that it looks 'right' when you pretend to write with it on the index card before setting it down. You already know this, right? Of course.

Some performers actually put an acrylic on the end of the pencil lead to keep it from writing...or leave the cap off a marker so it dries out...or coat the end of a grease pencil so it will not write. The idea is that, by doing so, the audience can actually hear you writing on the index card without actually writing anything.

This can be useful in close-up situations...or when your audience member is very close to you on-stage.

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Numbers

- Without looking down at your hand, draw a perfect “1” on the paper. Do it SLOWLY. Do it DELIBERATELY. Check your work.
- When you are satisfied you can do a “1” now write 2 3 4. Again -- and always – do this without looking at your paper. It’s even a good idea to talk about something else...anything...while you write.
- When the numbers are perfectly legible and LOOK like you wrote them sitting at a desk try 5 6 7 and 8. (You are likely going to find 8 the most difficult number. This is best done drawing two circles one on top of the other.)
- Write the numbers 9 4 5 7 8 2 3 1
- When all of this is legible and good enough to fool someone who is watching you closely...go to a room with a mirror in it. Do these drills again...but WATCH YOURSELF. Is there any telltale motion behind or on the paper? Watch what you do critically.
- Finally watch yourself doing these drills in the mirror while you discuss your favorite movie.

When you’ve finished this and you can actually fool yourself? You have mastered numbers. And without even TRYING, you have also mastered the art of drawing checkmarks on random lists. (You’re welcome.)

Words & Letters

With numbers and check marks out of the way, it’s time to tackle words.

Let’s start with an experiment: write your first name with your NW on an index card. Do the best you can. Remember you can’t be looking at your thumb as you write and ideally you are going to be talking about something entirely different while you’re writing.

Take a look. How did you do? Does that name look like it was written with you sitting at a desk and confidently using a marker?

Unless you are very much unlike me, your name looks like it was scrawled on the paper by a two year old. It IS true that practice will improve your ability to write full names and that being able to do so adds a whole new dimension to your act. Writing whole names or words requires PRACTICE.

I know a mentalist who can do small drawings – stick men, happy faces, houses, flowers etc. with his NW. They look very good. He has spent hundreds of hours developing this skill. If you are of a mind to do this, you have my respect.

The **entire** purpose of NW work is to convey the impression *beyond a shadow of a doubt* that what was written on that card was written with a pen/marker/pencil in the conventional manner either in advance of the performance or right in front of an audience. **That’s it.** The whole illusion falls apart like cardboard in water when the writing is poor.

I use my NW a lot. I will do full names but it’s taken me a while to get comfortable with them. Most often, I will use numbers. I will try to use initials...or single letters. From my perspective, the more I write the greater the possibility that I will get busted because the paper is moving oddly...or they see my hand doing unnatural things (maybe I should rephrase that...)...or the finished product is just a spidery scrawl.

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Performers can get out of writing names by using pre-printed cards like this:

THE PERSON YOU HAD A CRUSH ON BACK IN
ELEMENTARY SCHOOL HAS A FIRST NAME THAT
BEGINS WITH THE LETTER _____.

This idea can be adapted to thousands of different routines.⁴ It's also an outstanding way to get out of printing a whole name. The card is pre-written and all you need to do is write on the printed line. This is an early-in-the-show effect...and isn't likely to be a stunner. But it DOES make sense in a way.

Think about it: if you were reading minds for real, would you ALWAYS get a full thought...or a complete name? Doesn't it make sense that when you are 'warming up' that you would go for small things first?

Here are some exercises to get you started working on letters:

- In the NW position write M. You will note that there are two ways to do an "M." You can make it with the sharp angles like this: M. You can also do an M with rounded arches – like the McDonald's logo.

Go to a mirror now and give it a try. Draw both versions of an "M" and watch your index card and hand for those telltale signs of movement. I will bet you a buck that you saw more movement on the sharp angled 'M' than the softer arched 'm.'

This is Lesson One in "Writing Letters With A NW." Letters are full of sharp edges. And sharp edges are more difficult to do.

Soft angles are much easier to execute. The writing flow is cleaner and more natural. The movement of the card is significantly lessened.

- Next draw a CAPITAL "B." Beside it draw a CAPITAL "H." Now make a CAPITAL "K." Why these letters? I've found them to be the hardest ones to write perfectly. They are complex and there is no easy workaround to avoid doing them.

Take this exercise to the mirror and work on it until you feel confident writing all three of them.

- Now work on doing only the initials with a "." after each letter for the following names:
 - Jerod Ellis
 - Victor Smith
 - Josephine Reynolds

⁴ If you DO get an RTW...it comes with some great ideas from the clever Mr. Edmonds that are a perfect match for this concept.



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Try it in front of the mirror

- Now try writing the name “Joe.”
- Write the name “Frank”

Try both in front of the mirror.

You’re getting the idea by now, right? Doing letters – or complete words and names with a NW can be very difficult. At the very least it is going to require practice.

You will not be able to simply be silent and concentrate on writing a long name. Why not try it now? Get your NW on and, as you talk about the weather outside, try writing the name “JOHNATHAN.”

That’s a killer name to begin with...and trying to talk while you’re writing it adds a whole new dimension of challenge.

The key to ALL aspects of Nail Writing is to go slowly.

Don’t move beyond the check mark until you’re completely ready to do numbers.

Don’t move beyond numbers until you are 100% ready to do letters.

Don’t move beyond letters until you are absolutely ready to do names and words.

When you are working with your NW write slowly and deliberately. Concentrate on forming the letters and numbers perfectly. Given that you’ve done the exercises in front of a mirror and are satisfied that there’s nothing going on that would give you away, you have all the time in the world to do the work properly.

Having already made nearly every possible mistake with a Nail Writer myself, and listened to the mistakes others have made – every single performance problem (the hiccups as well as the outright tragedies) fall into one of three categories:

- The performer hadn’t practiced enough
- The performer hadn’t prepared his props well enough
- The NW was crap

The top two, thankfully, are preventable if the performer is willing to take it slowly.

The bottom one WILL show up as the performer works with the prop.



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The When(s) and How(s) of NWing

Performers are often uncertain about WHEN to a) put on the NW and b) when to do the actual writing.

I generally put on my NW shortly after I start the effect I am planning to use it for and I ALWAYS disguise it under the pretext of going into my pockets to find something else. Since I use a Thumb Tip style, I take the TT between my index and second finger and put it on that way. (Think of the position your hand is in when you do that cheesy trick where you pretend to pull a kid's nose off his face.) It comes off in the reverse order.

With a Band Writer the critical thing is orientation. The lead needs to be pointed down, the metal flanges should be just slightly smaller than your thumb so that when you slide your thumb into the opening that the hold is secure.

There are MANY methods to try to put a Bug/Boon writer on. Most of the people who use this device have some kind of delivery system that allows them to get it settled onto the pad of the thumb with one simple exertion of pressure. If you go with this model always double-check the 'sticky stuff' prior to a show. Always.

A good rule of thumb (pun intended) is to get your hands in and out of your pockets as quickly as possible. Why? Hands in pockets, regardless of how folksy and disarming *you* think it looks, are a red flag from a body language perspective. Study after [study](#) has shown people find a person with his hands in his pockets significantly less trustworthy. The longer your hands spend in your pockets the more deceitful your audiences will feel you are. (And if there's a lot of fumbling going on in those pockets, they may perceive something else about you.)

I can't stress enough how important it is to seamlessly get your NW on and off...and how critical it is that you practice this until it's muscle memory ready.

A friend of mine tried for years to get his NW to a place where it worked for him when it was on his thumb. He simply couldn't get it to a point where he was confident. Then he hit upon the idea of using a band writer on his index finger (the one next to the thumb) and has had stunning success with it.

Whatever system you come up with needs to work for you. And it doesn't matter even a little bit if your solution is unconventional...as long as it works.

The ultimate goal is to keep your Secret Assistant...secret. If you've used it properly if no one suspects you were using it in the first place. They can't tell when you are using it...and they can't tell you used anything other than an ordinary pen/pencil/marker from looking at whatever you've written.



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Go Forth and Nail Write!

The humble Nail Writer (which isn't really all that humble in the final analysis) may be the most consistently overlooked device on all of mentalism. Maybe it's because it's not shiny enough to attract the attention of the newbies who are stomping all over each other in search of the Latest Greatest Shiny Whatever.

But when you think about the *possibilities* opening up before you from having a relatively tiny device in your pant pocket and the knowledge how to use it, it's a staggering concept.

- Predictions
- Influence
- Telepathic Transference
- Thought Reading
- "Spirit" writing...

And those are just a few of the options.

There is no question that modern miracles – ones that simply cannot be reverse engineered by your audiences – are literally at your fingertips. (Or your thumb tip, I guess.)

I truly hope that your interest in this solid little device has been kindled and that there are new ideas flying around your head.

Go out and make some fabulous mentalism!

David Thiel

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