

Serpentine

PEN BLANKS

Terry Quiram



The author's serpentine pen, a modified 7mm slimline with a custom centerband. Bubinga with maple veneer.

Here's an easy way to add interest to your pens. To make a "serpentine" blank, you'll cut apart a solid pen blank prior to turning and glue it back together with a contrasting veneer between the surfaces. It's a time-consuming process because you'll need to cut and glue multiple times in stages, not all at once. But the results are worth the time and effort.

In 2014, I introduced my serpentine pens to the International Association of Penturners (IAP), but the process is not new—I just applied it to a pen blank. Since that time, I have made

approximately 1,800 blanks and used close to four gallons of glue.

Prepare veneer strips

Start by preparing the veneer strips that will be glued into the pen blank. A contrasting-color species offers the most striking results. I buy sheets of veneer and cut them into strips using width gauges and a utility knife. The strips should be cut just a bit wider than the pen blank's width, as you'll trim the excess after gluing. Use scissors to cut the veneer to length (*Photos 1-3*).

I typically glue thirty blanks at a time, so I cut multiple veneer strips at once.

Cut and glue, repeat

Cut and glue twice on plane 1

Cut a flowing, gentle curve lengthwise down a pen blank. You can cut the blank on a bandsaw, but the finished product will not be as pleasing due to the rough vertical marks left by the saw teeth. I use a scroll saw with a #6 skip-tooth blade, as it leaves a nice surface suitable for gluing. Sand the "fuzzies" off the bottom edges of the blank and use a vacuum to remove the dust (*Photo 4*).

Apply glue to the cut faces of the blank, insert a strip of veneer, and begin clamping. I use Elmer's Glue-All®, a white multi-purpose adhesive. Regular wood glue would also work fine. Start clamping in the middle of the blank and work outward. Alternate the direction of clamp handles to give yourself room to tighten them (*Photo 5*).

Let your glue-up dry overnight, then remove the clamps and trim any veneer that stands proud of the blank. I use a utility knife, as I find it much faster than using a table saw (*Photo 6*).

Now cut another flowing curve in the blank, but this time make the kerf criss-cross through the first veneer line. This second cut is

Cut veneer strips



1 Strips of sheet acrylic precut and labeled at defined widths to accommodate various pen blank sizes. These templates act as a fence when cutting the veneer with a sharp utility knife.

3 Cut the veneer strips to length using scissors.

done on the same plane as the first cut. Glue in another strip of veneer using the same gluing and clamping process as before.

Note that when gluing in the second and, later, the fourth veneer strips, it is important to ensure the veneer is pushed down flush with the work surface. I loosely mount the first clamp and squeeze the blank with my thumb and index finger; I use my middle finger to hold the clamp back to prevent it from moving (Photo 7). Tighten the clamp just enough so it will hold the assembly in place. As you tighten the clamp, push down on both ends of the blank so that both halves of the blank are flat against the work surface (Photo 8). At the same time, make sure the blank halves are not staggered along their length. Failure of either of these steps will result in the flow of your serpentine pattern being disrupted.

Cut and glue twice on plane 2

After the glue has dried on your second veneer strip, trim the excess veneer as before. Then rotate the blank 90 degrees and repeat the same cutting and gluing process you just completed

on the first plane. You will end up with four pieces of veneer glued into the blank (Photo 9).

If you cut the curves in the blank too steep, the veneer could break during clamping. The solution to this problem is to apply a heavy coat of glue to the veneer and let it sit for five minutes before clamping. This will soften the veneer and make it more flexible. As you clamp, tighten slowly to let the veneer bend.

Final thoughts

A process like this lends itself to making multiples, which increases efficiency (Photo 10). This technique can certainly be used on other types of turning blanks and projects. ■

A member of the Central Illinois Woodturners, Terry Quiram has been turning since 2000. He began making pens in support of the Freedom Pens project.

Cut and glue



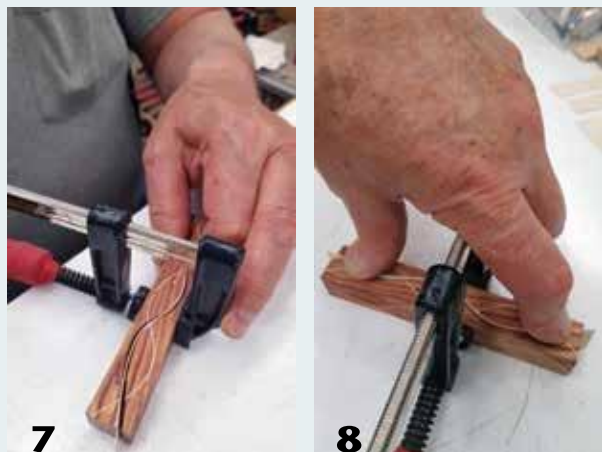
4 Cut a curvy line along the length of a pen blank, then glue in a contrasting strip of veneer. Begin clamping in the middle and work outward.

Trim excess veneer



6 A sharp utility knife makes quick work of trimming any veneer standing proud of the blank.

Careful clamping subsequent strips



7 When gluing in the second and fourth veneer strips, take care to ensure proper alignment and that the assembly remains flat on the work surface. Otherwise, your serpentine lines could be disrupted.

A finished blank



9 A pen blank with four strips of veneer glued in on two planes, ready for turning.

Making multiples



10 The author typically glues up thirty pen blanks at once to improve efficiency. The veneer strips are glued in one at a time, as the glue must be allowed to dry before proceeding to the next curvy cut.

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