



The Pencil: A History of Design and Circumstance

By Henry Petroski

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Henry Petroski traces the origins of the pencil back to ancient Greece and Rome, writes factually and charmingly about its development over the centuries and around the world, and shows what the pencil can teach us about engineering and technology today.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Like most other human artifacts, the common pencil, made and sold today by the millions, has a long and complex history. Henry Petroski, who combines a talent for fine writing with a deep knowledge of engineering and technological history, examines the story of the pencil, considering it not only as a thing in itself, but also as an exemplar of all things that are designed and manufactured.

Petroski ranges widely in time, discussing the writing technologies of antiquity. But his story really begins in the early modern period, when, in 1565, a Swiss naturalist first described the properties of the mineral that became known as graphite. Petroski traces the evolution of the pencil through the Industrial Revolution, when machine manufacture replaced earlier handwork. Along the way, he looks at some of pencil making's great innovators--including Henry David Thoreau, the famed writer, who worked in his father's pencil factory, inventing techniques for grinding graphite and experimenting with blends of lead, clay, and other ingredients to yield pencils of varying hardness and darkness. Petroski closes with a look at how pencils are made today--a still-imperfect technology that may yet evolve with new advances in materials and design. --
Gregory McNamee

From Publishers Weekly

This delightful history of the lowly pencil offers a mind-sharpening look at the intersection of engineering, economics and culture. Illustrated.

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From School Library Journal

YA-- An incredibly rich and complex history of this entirely unremarkable instrument of communication. Petroski explains the origins of its name, traces the search for suitable supplies of lead and wood, and explains why most pencils have six sides. He does all of this in an informative and entertaining style in a book made richer by its illustrations. The author does, however, have an ulterior motive. He uses the history of the pencil to provide numerous illustrations of the process called engineering, from design to manufacture and marketing. He also points out that engineering is a social phenomena, influenced by economic conditions, national rivalries, and other, often surprising elements. Many high school students, especially those with an interest in design, will enjoy this book. Portions of it could be used to provide lessons in economics as well as engineering and design.

- *James Rose, Jefferson Sci-Tech, Alexandria, VA*

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