

Beginners' Guide To *Woodburning*



A Step-by-Step

Guide to Getting Started in Pyrography

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WHAT IS PYROGRAPHY?



Pyrography is the art of decorating wood or leather by using heat to burn a design onto the surface. For this guide, we'll be focusing on pyrography as

wood burning.

Pyrography can be used to add decorative elements to many wooden things such as dinnerware (like spoons, plates, bowls), kitchenware (like cutting boards), or general home decor (like boxes, chests).

Pyrography — derived from the Greek *pur* (fire) and *graphos* (writing) — has been around since fire itself. While there isn't hard evidence, it's quite likely that cavemen etched the walls of their caves with fire sticks. While today it's primarily done on wood with a heated pen, it's been done (and continues to be done) on leather, clay, and even gourds.

Historically, it was used to decorate and brand various tools and musical instruments. Kitchenware or folk guitars were marked with a little bit of art both to convey the owner's personality, and to distinguish their stuff from other people's. It wasn't really until the late Victorian era that the art form was taken up in earnest, and done on blank “canvasses” of wood and other materials rather than being a decorative embellishment.

In the early 20th century, soldering pens were developed, from which today's woodburning tools were derived. This is a fun project for men, and even kids (under adult supervision, of course). Luckily, the start up costs are cheap, and it's an easy hobby to learn. If you enjoy it, woodburning can be the source of DIY gifts for the family for years to come!

Only a few supplies are needed, and most can be found in a nice little beginner's kit! Generally, the two main things that are necessary are wood and a wood burning pen to allow you to sketch designs into the surface.

THE HISTORY OF WOOD BURNING



Also known as wood burning, pyrography is a centuries-old technique that began pretty much at the time that humans discovered fire. Once fire was discovered, humans realized that it could also be used to burn things like symbols and pictograms into wood.

During the medieval period, it was popular for blacksmiths to also become

involved with pyrography. Since heated metal was used frequently in blacksmithing, blacksmiths discovered that the hot metal could be used to burn intricate artwork into other surfaces as well. This method of wood burning was frequently used to adorn containers and chests.

As wood burning evolved, so did the tools used for this craft. Smaller instruments that could be held like writing utensils were manufactured to make things easier for pyrography artists. These wood burning pens made this activity much more accessible for artisan crafters to learn and enjoy.

WHAT SUPPLIES DO I NEED FOR WOOD BURNING?



There are a few essential tools that you need before you start wood burning.

The wood burning tool will come as a pen-like instrument that can be plugged into an electricity source in order to create heat. It will also come with temperature control so that you can adjust the temperature of the nib. These pens will often come with many interchangeable tips that can be exchanged by screwing the tips off the end of the tool.

WOOD BURNING NIBS

There are two main types of nibs available for wood burning — a solid point tip and a wire tip. Within each category, there are additional types of tips that vary in shapes and sizes. Each of these can be used for a different purpose.

Solid point tips are great for beginners to learn how to develop control while using the tool. The universal tips can be used for intricate line work as well as shading. Letters, numbers, and common shapes also are available as solid point tips to help you burn the exact figure into your wood.

Wired tips are generally reserved for more experienced wood burners as they are a bit more delicate and require the appropriate pressure to create the desired effects. They are usually made from a high-quality nichrome wire and work well with light woods.

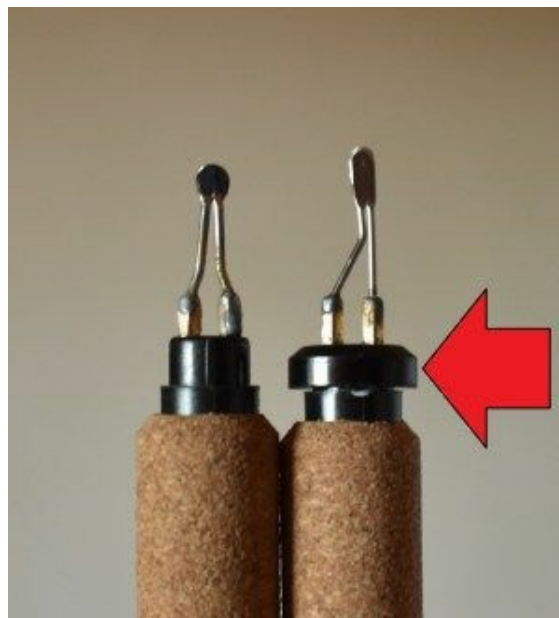
Be careful while using this tool as it can get extremely hot! Make sure to read all the instructions on your wood burning pen before using it, even if you have used one before. These tools can vary depending on the manufacturer, so it's important to be knowledgeable about the one you are using.

Generally, you can get all the necessary equipment as part of a beginner's pyrography kit found at your local craft store or online [here](#). For first timers, I would start with one of those wood burning for beginners kit before investing in more serious tools. If you decide that you would like to explore this hobby more, it's important to understand the different types of wood burning tools.



Below are the basic tools and supplies you would need to get started with wood burning:

Wood



Wood burning pen



Sandpaper



Masking tape



Artist's tape



Painter's tape



Graphite paper



Eraser



Ruler



Mineral or olive oil – Applied on the finished work

Get Familiar With the Tool



A woodburning pen is a very simple tool. It's a pen-like device with a metal end through which heat is transferred to a removable tip. All but the cheapest models are variable temperature tools. With any kit, you'll get 4-7 different tips for various methods of burning: straight lines, rounded lines, shading, etc. You'll also get a metal safety stand for the pen so it's never just sitting on a table or workbench.

The first thing you need to do, before working on any project, is to simply get familiar with the tool. Get a piece of scrap wood, plug in the woodburning tool and let it heat up for about 5 minutes, and test out "drawing" on the wood with the various tips just like you would with a pencil. It's that simple. (Be sure to let the tool cool down for 5 minutes before changing out tips; it'll then have to be heated up again for a few minutes.) The key is to go slow and steady. If you're jerky, it'll show. If you go too fast, the wood won't really burn like you want it to. Just like the tortoise, slow and steady wins the race.



Get familiar with the various tips. The one on the left is the rounded tip — it's the one I use the most, and is pretty all-purpose. On the right is the shading tip; you'll notice its flat bottom, so that you can burn a larger surface area at one time.

HOW TO USE YOUR WOOD BURNING TOOL



Read all the instructions that came with your tool.

Make sure that your wood burning tool is unplugged and cooled.

Screw on the desired tip onto the wood burner.

Plug in the wood burning tool and allow it to heat up for at least 5 minutes.

Place the tip gently onto the surface of the wood to start burning in your design. Keep the pressure constant to burn even colored lines. Avoid applying excess pressure to create darker lines as this can damage the nib. Instead, keep the nib on the same spot until the burn creates the desired shade.

When you are done sketching in a line or shape, make sure to lift the wood burning tool off the wood. Leaving it on the wood surface may cause a burn spot.

If you want to change nibs, make sure that the wood burner is unplugged and cooled down before touching the tip. Keep nibs in an enclosed case to prevent damage. Alternatively, you can use needle-nose pliers to remove the nibs if it is still hot.

Make sure to clean the wood burner nib lightly with sandpaper while wearing gloves. Use a soft cloth to wipe the nib clean. This is to ensure that that wood residue is not left on the nib making it dull.

ADDING COLOR TO PYROGRAPHY ART



Once you start getting the hang of wood burning, you may want to start adding color to your pyrography art pieces. You can do this with a variety of different art supplies including watercolor pencils, wax-based oil pencils or crayons, gel paints, or wood gel stains. You can also use regular wood paint but this might be a bit more challenging to use as a beginner.

A few other pointers to keep in mind:



I like to keep a wet paper towel on hand to wipe off the end of the tip every once in a while as residue from the wood builds up.

If you're getting a lot of smoke, the pen is too hot. Try turning down the heat for a smoother, smokeless burn.

Be mindful of safety. The tip gets extremely hot — several hundred degrees F, at minimum, in fact. So when the tool is plugged in, always be mindful of where the hot metal end is. Be sure it isn't touching anything and always have it resting on the metal stand when not in use. When changing tips, use pliers wrapped in electrical tape, as the tips stay hot for a long time.

Choose a Design



For my first project, I chose the above design of a quaint cabin in the mountains. The options are limitless for what you can burn onto a piece of wood. So far, I've worked with basic, black and white designs, but as I get better, I'm sure I'll get into more advanced shading techniques and whatnot.

To find designs and patterns to work with, just google anything you're interested in with "black and white illustration" added to the end: "mountains black and white illustration," "wildlife black and white illustration," "Minnesota Vikings black and white illustration." You'll more than likely get some great results to choose from.

After you've picked a design, you want to figure out the size you want to use as well. For this above design, I sized it to fit a piece of wood I already had. The other few I've done I just made the size of an 8.5×11" sheet of paper, since that's what

The tools are relatively inexpensive which is nice. I'm a big fan of the Walnut Hollow Creative Versa Tool:



It has temperature control, a comfort grip, and 11 interchangeable points. It's the one I use.

However if you are looking for something about half the price that still has good recommendations, try this Weller Short Barrel Woodburning Kit:



I've not used it, but online reviews are strong for this product so I think you can feel comfortable with it.

In addition to a wood burning tools above, there are also accessories you can get that I love. There are a lot of extras out there but let's focus on two that I like:



Wood burning tips

On the left are Walnut Hollow alphabets. You can use these to stamp letters instead of drawing them! On the right are tip and stencil kits. There are a variety online for a great price.

My first thought was how to change the letters on a hot tool while working? You do it with pliers. I find both of these kits to be invaluable! They are nice little accessory kits to add to your craft.

BEST WOOD FOR WOOD BURNING



Wood is an essential part of this activity. Without it, you'd have nothing to burn! Soft woods can be used for pyrography, but some artists tend to prefer woods that are a little bit more sturdy like pine, basswood, birch or bamboo. Hardwoods like elm and oak can also be used but are typically reserved for more experienced artists.

Pine – Inexpensive but uneven grains

Birch – Smooth surface and burns light

Basswood – Smooth surface with even grains, burns light

Bamboo – Smooth and cheap

Oak – Uneven grains, moisture in wood

Poplar – Soft grains, burns easily, can be pricey

Uneven grains in the wood can make it challenging to burn straight lines. Beginners will usually do better with wood with a smooth surface and even grains. However, more high-quality wood can get pricey. Wood burners who

are just starting might prefer to use inexpensive and readily available wood like pine. However, it's important to avoid being discouraged as the results of your art may also be affected by the quality wood.

Find and Prep the Wood



You can really use any wood for your pyrography project. Soft woods will burn at lower temps, while harder woods will take a very hot pen. The piece in the picture is pine — very easy to work with. To prep your wood, if it's a “raw” piece like this, you'll want to sand it very well, and also decide which way you want the grain. It's much easier to burn with the grain than against it. With my cabin project, it had more horizontal lines than vertical, so I kept the grain horizontal.

You can also use pre-fab wood projects like boxes or pre-cut shapes that you can find at any hobby store. You'll see later in the article how I used those. Anything pre-fab you buy at a hobby store will be very easy to work with, and you won't have to worry about grain as much.

Affix Your Design to the Wood

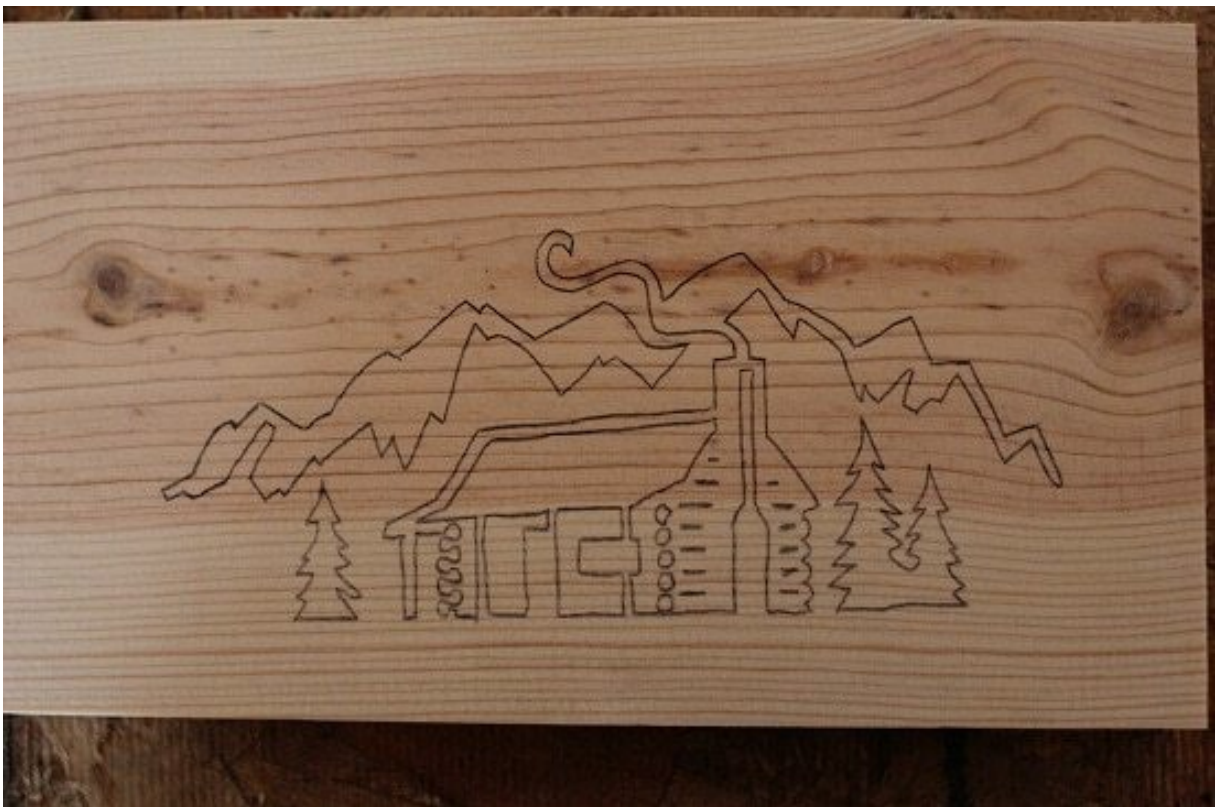


Tape your cut out design (a broad outline is fine as long as it fits on the wood) to the carbon paper, and then to the wood.

Trace Your Design



Using a pen, firmly trace the outline of your design.



After tracing, it should look something like this.

Burn the Outline



Get started! Using the pen, follow the carbon line you just traced onto the wood. Again, go with the grain as much as you can. This was my first project, so you can sort of see some lines in the burn where I was a little jerky.



The outline is complete. Now all that's left is the shading.

Finish Shading and Complete the Project



Using the shading tip, carefully fill in the spots that need it, according to your design or creative brain. You can also stain the piece to give a nice sheen and finished look.

HOW TO TRANSFER YOUR DESIGN FOR WOOD BURNING

Although you have the option to freehand your design onto the wood, you may want to be able to copy a pre-made design that you or someone else has made. To do this, just follow the steps below:



Print out your design onto regular white printer paper.

Place a piece of graphite paper onto the wood surface. Cover the graphite paper with the printed paper that has your own design on it.

Firmly trace the design using a pen or pencil. This should transfer the graphite onto the wood's surface.

Use the wood burning tool to burn the design into the wood.

Erase any remaining graphite from the wood.

10 WOOD BURNING TIPS AND TRICKS FOR BEGINNERS

1 – INVEST IN THE RIGHT TOOLS.

A good wood burning tool is one that is lightweight and easy to hold. This tool is ideal for wood burning letters and designs, as it is easy to hold and manipulate. It comes with several nice tips to use in projects: a chisel tip (my personal favorite), a cone-shaped tip, a rounded tip, and a teardrop-shaped tip. Wood burning for beginners is so much easier with the proper tool on hand!



In addition to the tool above, I strongly recommend purchasing a set of letter tips for wood burning letters on personalized projects. These tips make adding monograms, names and inscriptions to projects so much easier than doing it freehand. I used a set of letter tips with my wood burning tool for my monogrammed wood keychains.



2 – IF POSSIBLE, AVOID WOOD BURNING PROJECTS AROUND KIDS AND PETS.

To say that wood burning tools get hot is a serious understatement. Severe

burns can happen in an instant, and working with these tools requires a great level of caution and diligence. One of my best wood burning tips: only work on pyrography projects when children and pets are not going to have immediate access to your wood burning tools!

3 – NEVER LEAVE A WOOD BURNING TOOL UNATTENDED.

Related to #2 above, pyrography tools are incredibly hot, and they should not be left unattended, even for a few minutes.

4 – ALWAYS USE THE STAND WHEN SETTING THE WOOD BURNING TOOL DOWN WHILE IN USE.

One thing I love about the tool linked above in tip #1 is that it comes equipped with a handy stand for propping up the tool while in use. Never lay the heat burning pen on a table or other surface, as it will burn the surface in an instant!



5 – NEVER TOUCH THE TIP OF THE WOOD BURNING TOOL, EVEN JUST AFTER INSTALLING A NEW TIP.

Word to the wise: the tips on these tools heat up nearly instantaneously, so

NEVER touch a heat tool tip with your bare hands, even one that has just been inserted.

6 – TO REMOVE/ADD A TIP, HOLD TIP WITH PLIERS AND TWIST THE TOOL TO LOOSEN/TIGHTEN.

A nice pair of flat-nosed jewelry pliers is the very best tool to use for adding and removing tips from a heat burning tool. Never attempt to do so with your bare hands! To add or remove a tip, hold the tip firmly in the pliers, and twist the tool itself—and not the tip—to loosen/tighten.

7 – HAVE A BOWL OF COLD WATER READY FOR INSTANTLY COOLING USED TIPS.

Instantly cool hot tips in a bowl of cold water to prevent burns on hands and work surfaces. Be sure to wipe tips dry before reinserting into the tool.



8 – PRESS LIGHTLY.

Avoid the urge to press too hard when working with a tool for wood burning letters and designs. Often, it takes just a second for the wood burning tool to do its job!

9 – PRACTICE, PRACTICE, PRACTICE!

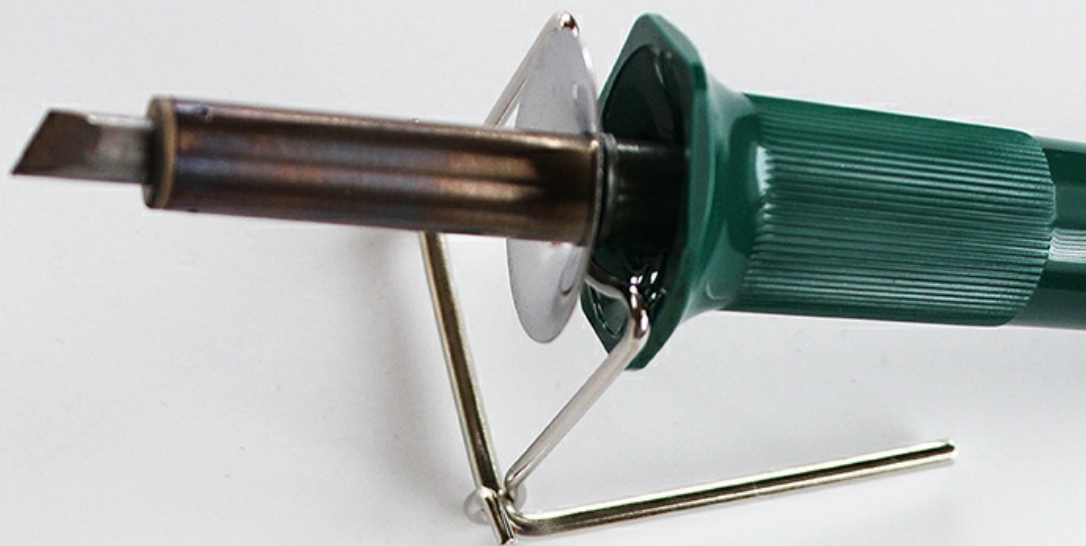
One of my best pyrography tips: always practice with the tool on a surface of the same material as your finished project before starting on the final project. Different woods respond to the heat tool in different ways, so learning how much pressure to apply, how long to hold the tool against the surface of the wood, etc., is critical to the success of a finished project. I often will use the same tip to create a number of the same design over and over again until I instinctively know just the right amount of pressure and how much time is required to get the desired result.



When using the wood burning pen, hold it as you would a regular pen in your dominant hand. Press the surface of the tip evenly against the surface of the wood, holding just until the heat of the tip penetrates the wood. There might be a little bit of smoke, and that is okay! Just make sure not to hold the tip

against the wood too long, as it is possible to burn through the wood entirely.

The chisel tip is my absolute favorite, as it creates straight lines quickly and easily simply by holding the tip flat against a surface, as I did to create the honeycomb design below in my wood burned earrings. You can also use the sharp point of the chisel for more intricate, detailed wood burned designs.



10 – USE STENCIL DESIGNS AS A TEMPLATE.

Freehanded designs and letter and number tips are not the only options for creating show-stopping wood burning projects. Another fun idea is to trace a stencil design onto the wood surface with a pencil, and then use the wood tool to outline and fill in the design. (Avoid tracing around a plastic or paper stencil directly with the wood burning tool, as the tool will melt or burn the stencil.)

Now that you know my top tips for wood burning, here are the basic steps I follow to complete a project:

Take a piece of transfer paper and tape the design to the wood with the transfer paper in between

Trace the image – remove the design and transfer paper

Begin burning your image!



Now that you've gotten my tips above, I want to show you my first wood burning project! My first project to tackle was a wood plaque with my initials on it – I think a monogram piece is something anyone would like to try and display in their home.

I particularly love the wood plaque that I used for the burning. It's a real slice of a tree, with the bark and everything! It adds a woodsy and natural touch to any décor . . . and it smells good while you are burning it!



Supplies for wood burning

How to Wood Burn

Gather These Supplies

Printer and paper

Walnut Hollow Versa-Tool for wood burning

Walnut Hollow Basswood Country Round – Large

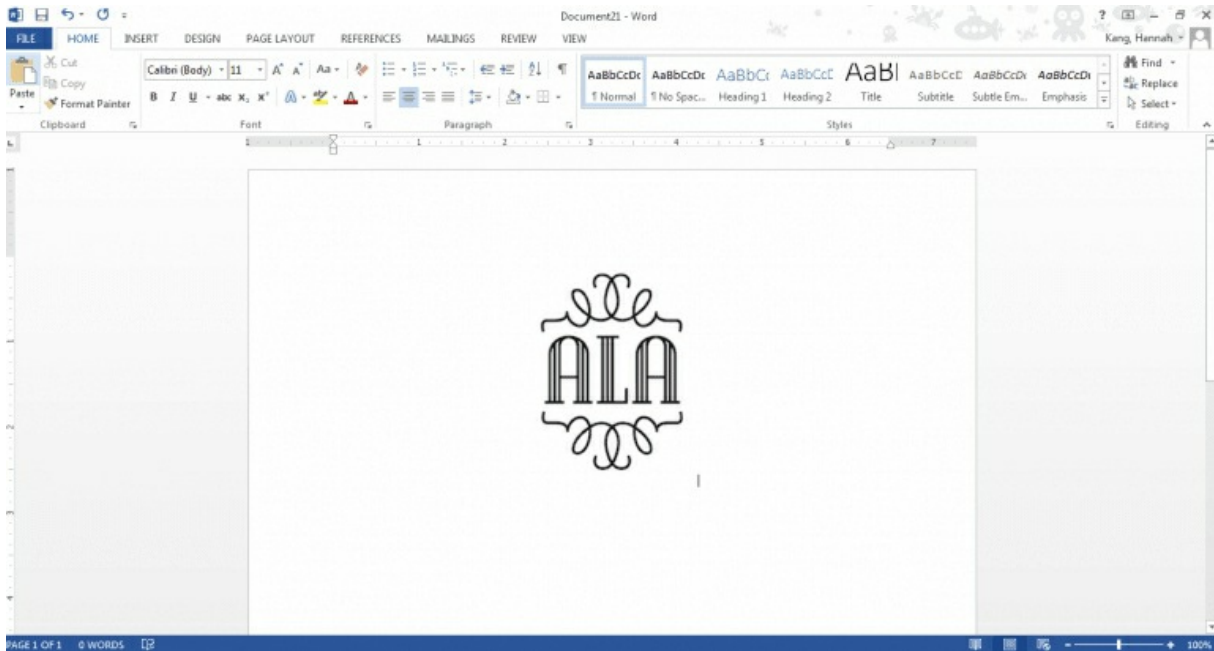
Scissors

Stencil tape or stickers

Transfer paper

Pencil

Command Strips for hanging (optional)



Step 1

The first step is to design your monogram on your computer in a word processing program. I opened my word processing program and used some fonts and symbols on my computer to create the monogram you see above.

I didn't resize the paper; I left it the exact size to fit an 8.5" x 11" sheet. This is your chance to get creative, play, and have fun!

TIP #1: This is the best time for you to personalize your monogram so don't be afraid to play around with different fonts, sizes and designs!



Step 2

Print out your monogram and trim around the edge with the scissors. Place a piece of transfer paper between the monogram sheet and the plaque and tape

down.

TIP #2: Placement is important. Lay down the monogram and transfer where you want the design to get burned on.



Step 3

Trace the edges of the symbols and the letters with your pencil – you don't need to fill them in. This will provide a guide for your wood burning.



Step 4

When you lift up your transfer paper, this is what your plaque will look like. The pencil transferred the graphite from the transfer paper to your plaque! Now you have a guide for wood burning.



Step 5

Safety first! Make sure you read the instructions on your wood burning tool carefully before beginning. This tool gets hot, so be careful and use all of the recommended precautions!

Once your tool is heated, begin burning. Start with straight areas to get practice, and then work up to the curved areas.

TIP #3: I found that using the basic tip that came on the tool worked best for me (as opposed to some of the other tips that came in the package). I also had the best results at the highest heat setting!



Step 6

Continue burning the wood until you have completed the plaque. Wood burning is a slow process so do not try to rush it or you will make mistakes.

Take a break if you need to.

TIP #4: If you do have a few mistakes in your plaque, it's fine – it simply adds to the character of the piece.

I love the finished result, and I have to say, I'm addicted to burning wood now! I can't wait to try some other patterns on wood plaques . . . even beyond letters.

CONCLUSION

Wood burning is a great hobby for those who like to create art with organic material. Beginners can grab a wood burning kit that comes with a wood burning tool, tips, and a few other helpful supplies. You can also find small wooden slices to practice with at your local craft store or online.

There are an endless amount of items you can decorate by using a wood burning tool. Many people like to wood burn items like kitchen supplies (spoons, cutting boards, etc), home decor, or jewelry.

Try it out and see if you enjoy this hobby! Let us know in the comments below if you are a beginner wood burner or would like to get started!