

# Illuminated Letters

# 3D

## A Brief History

Illuminated letters are large, decorative initials that were used at the beginning of texts in handwritten books. The word illuminated means "lit up," which fits—these letters were often decorated with gold, silver, and bright colors to make them shine on the page.





# Illuminated Letter Examples

## The Assignment

- Create a 3D clay letter of your choice using slabs.
- Your letter must have a theme based on things that start with that letter. Think about qualities of Illuminated letters that could inspire your project.
  - Example:
    - H is for Harper and Happiness (add things that make you happy).
    - B is for Beach (create a whole beach scene).
    - F could have fox, flames, fruit, etc.



## Step 1: Plan your design

1. Pick a Letter - Choose one letter from the alphabet that you want to turn into a 3D ceramic piece.
2. Choose a Theme - Think of a fun or meaningful theme (like nature, music, sports, space, etc.) that you want your letter to represent.
3. Brainstorm Ideas - In your sketchbook, write down words or draw quick sketches that show how your theme and letter can go together.
4. Draw Your Letter - Sketch your letter at least 3 inches by 5 inches in size. Make the bottom flat so it can stand up on its own.
5. Add Details - Draw decorations, textures, or patterns that match your theme. These will be part of your final ceramic design.



## Step 2: Create the Slab Letters

1. After drawing your letter, make a template to trace.
2. Roll out a clay slab using a roller and 1/4 inch guides.
3. If you want texture or stamp, roll it onto the slab now (before cutting).
4. Use your template to cut out the letter from the slab.
5. Repeat to cut a second matching letter from a new slab.



### Step 3: Create the Connecting Slab

#### 1. Measure the Perimeter

- Use a flexible ruler or a piece of string to measure the perimeter of your letter. This will help you determine the length of the slab piece you'll need to connect your two letters.

#### 2. Determine the Width of the Slab

- Decide how wide you want the slab to be—it must be at least 1 inch wide. For example, if you're making a letter like an "H," a good slab size might be 12 inches long by 1 inch wide.

#### 3. Cut Out the Slab

- Roll out a slab of clay to an even thickness (about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch is ideal). Use a ruler and needle tool to carefully cut out the slab to your measured dimensions.

#### 4. Attach the Slab to the First Letter

- Slip and score the edge of the first letter where the slab will attach.
- Line up the slab and press it firmly onto the scored area. Smooth the seam with a modeling tool or your finger.

#### 5. Let the Slab Set

- Allow the slab and first letter to firm up to leather hard before attaching the second letter. This will help the structure stay stable and avoid warping.

⚠ **Do not attach the second letter until the slab is leather hard!**



### Step 4: Attach the Second Letter

1. Slip and score the edges of the connecting slab and second letter.
2. Press and smooth the second letter onto the slab, lining it up carefully.
3. Check that your 3D letter stands on its own without support.
4. If desired cut the top of the letter out to create a secret compartment.



### Step 5: Add Details and Decorations

1. Apply slip now if you plan to carve sgraffito designs.
2. Carve or add texture before attaching slabs, coils, or decorations.
3. Attach decorative pieces using slip and score.
4. Decorate all sides so the letter looks interesting from every angle.
5. Reflect your theme in all details you add.



### Step 6: Finishing with Color

1. After bisque firing, add color using underglaze, stains, washes, and/or glazes.
2. Do not glaze the bottom of your letter or the inside of the lid if you made a compartment.
3. Wipe off any glaze that is on the bottom of the letter with a damp sponge.





## Secret Compartment Option

1. Cut off the top of your 3D letter where you want the compartment.
2. Save the top piece to use as the lid.
3. Create a lip by attaching a flattened coil or slab strip around the inside edge of the opening.
4. Slip and score the lip carefully to the cut edge.
5. Test the fit to make sure the lid sits neatly on top.



# Project Examples



## Requirements

- Letter must be freestanding and **at least 5 inches tall**.
- Include at least **5** added features like:
  - animals, objects, textures, coils, stamps, sgraffito, secret compartments, etc.
- Your grade will be based on:
  - Clear theme and idea
  - Craftsmanship
  - Meeting size and detail requirements
  - Ability to explain your theme in your portfolio
- Use any combination of washes, stains, glazes, or underglazes to finish.

