



## Kente Cloth Pens

Designed by Marji Gates for Polyform Products



Kente Cloth is the unique woven fabric of the Ashanti people of Ghana, Africa. It was traditionally worn only by royalty. It is made of multicolor strips of stripes and bold geometric designs of silk or cotton threads. The colors have traditional meanings (yellow for prosperity, orange for happiness, red for courage, black for spirit, green for growth, white for purity, blue for peace). Making kente canes is a great way for students to learn how to condition, layer and cut clay.

Goals - Students will:

Explore an African art form.

Condition and roll polymer clay slabs in a chosen harmony of colors.

Stack color slabs to make two or three kente-style pattern blocks.

Optional: Learn to reduce clay canes to smaller motif sizes.

Cut thin, careful tiles from each block and combine them in rhythmic patterns on prepared pen bases.

Make a functional, decorative object with unique, creative clay work.

## Materials:

Sculpey III clays in brights – yellow, orange, red, green and blue, as well as white and black. Each student will need a total of about 2 oz. of clay.

Scrap clay makes a good pen base, though it is optional.

Scraps of matt board, ceramic tiles, or aluminum roof flashing tiles for work surfaces, one per student.

Pasta machines (1 per 4-6 students) with table clamps, or Firefly Tool Set hand rollers, one per student.

One ball point pen such as BIC RoundStic Grip™, the ink core carefully removed with pliers.

*SAFETY NOTE: Office supply store brands of stick pens do not withstand the heat of curing. Test an empty pen barrel at actual curing temperature to make sure they will not warp or melt.*

Firefly Tool Set and a plastic ruler.

Polyester quilt batting as an oven cushion for pen barrels during curing.

## Getting Started

Preheat oven to 275 °F. Test temperature with oven thermometer for perfectly cured clay. Condition all clay by kneading until it's soft and smooth or running it through the Clay Conditioning Machine for several passes on the widest setting. Fold the clay in half after each pass and insert the fold side into the rollers first.

## Process:

1. Examples of Kente Cloth and information about the people who weave it help students understand the culture and tradition of its makers.
2. Students condition all colors, roll sheets and use an Firefly knife tool with a ruler to guide the straight cuts, make stacks 1x1" (or larger if students can share their canes collaboratively).



3. Optional: Students can learn to reduce canes by squaring up the blocks, and rolling each side carefully to gradually reduce the size of the canes, cutting and discarding the uneven ends. Resting the canes on a tile or metal surface before reducing helps to keep the canes from distorting.
4. Making sure canes are similar in face size to allow them to be combined easily into patterns, carefully cut thin, even slices and experiment with ways to combine the patterns in rows that imitate Kente-style bands of colors.



5. Pens (with ink cores removed) can be prepared with a very thin layer of scrap clay. Demonstrate overlapping the clean edge of the scrap clay and cutting the seam line to butt edges neatly without overlap. Make sure any air bubbles are opened with the tip of the Firefly knife tool and air squeezed out.



6. For a more slender barrel, the pens can be covered without a clay base, but there is often more distortion of the cane patterns. However, this uses less clay.
7. Cane slices are butted close together as they are added to the length of the pen barrel. Do not allow overlap or gaps between slices, and make sure the slices are aligned as carefully as possible.
8. On a flat, cool surface, gently roll the completed pen barrel to smooth the canes into a continuous pattern. Complete the pen by adding a design at the top and opening the empty barrel at the bottom for later insertion of the ink core.
9. Cure the pens on a bed of quilt batting, making sure they do not touch one another or the baking pan beneath, for 20 minutes at 275° F.
10. Replace the ink supply core and gently push it into place on a pad of paper to seat it completely within the barrel. The pen is ready for writing!