

# Potato Stamp Activity

Created by Kirsten Gyllenhaal, Printing Press Operator



To begin this activity, watch a demonstration by Kirsten Gyllenhaal by clicking the play button on the video!



Johannes Gutenberg (c. 1400-68) is famous for developing a printing press in Mainz, Germany that revolutionized the making of books in Europe. One of the key elements of his invention was “movable type.” Each letter of the alphabet was cast in metal, in reverse, with a raised profile. His expertise in working with metal is thought to have helped him develop whatever method was used to cast the letters. It is extremely important to note that the first book—that still exists—produced on some form of printing press, with movable type, was not the bible Gutenberg produced in the 1450s, but a Korean book on Buddhist teachings in 1377. Inventions do not happen in a vacuum. There are always stages of development that precede new technologies, and very often similar inventions are happening in different parts of the world.

A fun project you can do at home to help you understand moveable type is to make potato stamps!



## Materials:

- Potatoes
- A small cutting knife (make sure an adult is supervising)
- Something to draw with (pencil, permanent marker)
- Paper towels
- Paper
- Some form of paint (Poster paints, your own homemade recipe for paint, acrylic paint, food coloring)
- Paintbrush

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## Instructions:

- Cut potatoes in half and place the pieces cut side down on a paper towel to absorb excess moisture.
- Use a pencil or permanent marker to draw your design (don't forget it has to be in reverse) directly on each piece of potato. If you want to use letters from your name, you might want to first write them on a piece of paper and then go look at them in the mirror. This will show you what your letters should look like on the potato. You might also want to use a separate piece of potato for each letter so that they can be larger.
- Once you have drawn your design, you need to cut away the potato around it so that the design is raised above the rest of the piece of potato.
- Mix up your paint in a shallow dish.
- Get a fresh piece of paper ready on a flat, solid surface.
- Dip your potato stamp in the paint and make sure the design is evenly covered. If the paint is too thick, it could smear your design. If it is too thin, your design will be faint or missing in areas. Use your paintbrush to help you to even out the paint.
- Stamp your design on the paper and let it dry. You can create all sorts of design combinations! Because your stamp is made out of potato, you will not be able to use it for very long before it breaks or shrivels up. But imagine if it was made out of metal; you could use it over and over and clean it each time. So next time you use or make any kind of stamp, think of the printing press and movable type.

