

The Bic Cristal pen was invented in the 1950s as a technical solution enabling easy writing. The simple, functional design of the pen starkly contrasted with the more expensive pens designed for the upper classes, which made a statement of individuality through form. This utilitarian design coupled with inexpensive manufacturing allowed the Bic pen to proliferate quickly and obtain widespread adoption by providing easy and inexpensive access to writing instruments.

The Bic Cristal pen was designed to be created as a simple solution to a technological problem. While Bich “worked on the invention for...twenty years,” the years were devoted to the technological needs of the pen, rather than the appearance of the pen (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). Even today, it’s stated that “the Bic Cristal is iconic as an invention due to the genius of the ballpoint mechanism” (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). While the Bic pen may have many design characteristics, the overall most important feature is this functionality. The pen was designed to be a “a compact instrument for marking quickly... without exuding ink where it is not wanted” (Ashby and Johnson). Finally, it was also stated that the pen had to be practical in that, it was “capable of writing continuously for hours without recharging.” Additionally supporting that this was the intention of the pen were various advertisements during the time period. The 1952 Savignac advertisement indicates that “elle court elle court” meaning “she runs, she runs” in French (Savignac). Another advertisement, on television “promoted... the banner “writes first time every time and for only twenty nine cents” (Woodham). Even the name of the pen conveyed the simplicity, as Bich named it Bic a shortened, easy to remember version of the name” (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). The Bic Cristal pen was primarily meant to be a technological solution allowing for high quality, inexpensive pens.

Analyzing the Bic Cristal pen today, the recognition is not for quality, or a new technology, but how commonplace it is. In fact, it is often regarded as inconsequential, as “the throwaway Bic Cristal ballpoint pen has become a ubiquitous everyday item” (Woodham). Using a Bic Cristal pen today, the quality does not seem to be high. Rather than writing evenly or the first time, the pen seems to frequently stop writing, requiring aggressive scribbling to restart the flow of ink. Furthermore, the pen cap is easily lost, the clip on the edge of the cap easily breaks off, and the pen itself seems brittle and likely to be crushed if a heavy object in a bag were to fall on it. The quality of the technology does not seem to be nearly up the standards presented in the fifties. Likely, this is due to other technological improvements. As the Bic was the first ballpoint pen of its time, it was the first pen people could easily carry, and probably did not expect the same standard of script as they would receive with a fountain pen. However, now that many improvements have been made to create more expensive, and higher quality pens that can still be mass produced. These pens set a standard for pens that can be transported and used for long periods of time. Since this is the standard that people are accustomed to, the quality of the Bic Cristal seems less acceptable in comparison.

While the Bic Cristal pen was intended to be a functional, effective pen, it is still important to analyze the other aspects of its design. It has been stated that the three important features of an object are that it works properly, matches physical and mental abilities, and the delight afforded by good industrial design (Ashby and Johnson). Thus, it's important to analyze the pen's form in addition to the function. In fact, it's possible to see how many of the form elements follow the function of the pen. One set of such elements is the ability to have the pen be easily transportable. First of all, the pen is small, fitting easily in the hand. In fact, it's even

easier to place in a shirt pocket, as it has approximately the right length to stay in the shirt pocket with the flip. In fact, it's much noted that this clip is used for the shirt pocket and transit, as it's the "clip that adorns shirt pockets and clipboards" (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). Additionally, the pen is hexagonal rather than completely circular. The "rib-edged cylinder of brittle transparent plastic" has several functions (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). First, the edges prevent the pen from rolling when set down on a table, preventing loss. These possibilities made users more comfortable taking the Bic pen with them.

Additionally, other form elements helped the primary function of the pen, writing. The transparent plastic allows the user to see how much ink is left remaining in the pen. The color used in the creation of the pen is solely in the cap and in the stopper. This too is designed to be functional as they were always the same color as the ink (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). This is frequently seen as helpful in modern design, and frequently people are confused if they pick up a pen and the ink is a different color than the materials the pen is created from. Even the stopper design may have a function, the stopper seems to remain completely fixed in place no matter how much abuse it takes. The pen frequently "succumbs to the ranges of biting and chewing: these traits are recognized worldwide," while individuals are pondering their thoughts, but even this stress does not cause the stopper to fall out of the pen.

While this simplistic design did follow function, there is the chance that it also occurred due to limitations of the time. In fact, it was until past 1950 that synthetic thermoplastics became available, and these materials are what allows for the dyed, patterned and molded pens that are common today (Ashby and Johnson,). However, the Bic Cristal has not been updated with this technology, so the design may have been intentional. Some updates have been made to the pen

since the original design, but even these updates remain solely functional in nature. In recent years, the pen cap has been redesigned to have a hole that was not present in earlier versions (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). The intent of this cap is to prevent individuals from choking on the cap if its accidentally swallowed (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). These updates are less true to the original function of the pen, but remain utilitarian, rather than aesthetic, in nature.

This is more significant in contrast to previous generations of pens, in which pens attempted to make an impression or association about the user rather than about the pen itself. Pens were meant to “attract consumers through the personality of the product” (Ashby and Johnson,). This placed far more value on the form as an aesthetic design, and far less about function. It was as though the designers had considered “the product has a function... what associations does that function carry? ...which of these associations are seen as desirable attributes of an individual? ...what features... can be applied... to suggest... these associations?” (Ashby and Johnson,). While this initially considers the function of writing, rather than making the pen easier to write with, the design of previous generations of pens played off of the concept of the significance of writing. In fact, the design was meant to discreetly demonstrate the author was worth far more than its price (Ashby and Johnson,). In fact, the pen was “an intellectual statement...or wealth, or good taste, or individuality, or youth, or fun” (Ashby and Johnson,).

It is unrealistic to assume that only the form dictated widespread adoption of the Bic Cristal pen. The form was functional, but not nearly as ornate, personal, or significant as many of the other pens at the time. One additional source of information is advertisements at the time that may have drawn individuals to purchase a Bic pen. The 1952 advertisement demonstrates

one protagonist seizing the pen (Savignac). This action indicates that they are taking charge and achieving something momentous, much like they might if they wrote. This adds a sense of achievement along with Bic pens. The runner also seems to emphasize reliability. The pen continues to work, as a trained runner would continue to run. These advertisements emphasize how functional and useful of a tool the Bic pen could be. However, even function and advertisements will not always make a product successful.

The reason the Bic Pen obtained its legendary status as a universal object was the affordability of the pen compared to others at the time. When the pen was released, an industrial process was developed that lowered the unit cost dramatically and it still provided for some measure of quality (Phaidon Design Classics, 380). Individuals who would not have purchased a luxury pen could afford and not worry about maintaining a Bic Cristal. Even individuals who may have primarily used fancy pens for their writing might have used Bic Cristal pens when traveling or in a situation where it would be easy to misplace the pen. The fact that the Bic pen had quality writing, but was not a significant investment meant it became easier to use, leave, and allow Bic pens to spread through society. For those previously using expensive pens, the question could be asked “why pay \$200 for a pen when you can buy one that works well for \$2?” (Ashby and Johnson).

The Bic Cristal pen was more than just an average pen of the era. Its utilitarian design and form allowed for it to be meant for writing, rather than communicating a message about the owner. The pen became an object that anyone could know, both due to its simplicity and function, but also due to the low price point. Further examination of this pen might attempt to analyze the implications and results of the wide adoption of the Bic Cristal pen. For instance,

literacy increased over the second half of the century (NAAL). One could hypothesize that easy access to writing instruments caused this increase, but this could not be demonstrated from the evidence at hand. Additionally, as pens become more affordable in general, it's possible that the Bic pen today conveys different implications than the Bic pen fifty years ago. This could be discovered by examining current advertisements for comparison, or by the type of users who used Bic pens during both time periods. Overall, the interesting layer of the story may not be that the Bic pen was widely adopted due to function, form, and cost, but what happened as a result of its adoption.