

# How to Paint With Acrylics

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Acrylic paint is relatively easy to work with and dries quickly to a waterproof finish. Acrylic paint is highly versatile and can be used to create many different visual textures and effects. Before you begin painting, set up your supplies and create an outline before working on the finer details. Once you've learned the basics, you'll be ready to move on to more advanced techniques like layering colors and stippling.

## Method

### 1

## Acquiring Your Surface and Brushes

**1 Choose a primed, stretched canvas for a simple option.** If you're a beginning painter, canvas will be your go-to painting surface. Canvas is made from either cotton or linen and comes in a variety of styles, the two most common being stretched and unstretched. Stretched canvases are tightly fixed over a wooden frame. Unstretched canvases are typically not cut to size but are sold as fabric wound on a large roll.<sup>[1]</sup>

- A primed canvas means that it's been treated with a priming substance that will allow the paint to adhere. If you'd prefer not to purchase a primed canvas, you can pick up an unprimed canvas and a tube of a primer like gesso. Paint a layer of gesso on the canvas and allow it to dry before you begin painting.
- You can find a variety of sizes of stretched or plain canvases at a local art-supply store. Look around awhile until you find a shape and size that fits the project you'd like to paint.

**2 Opt for a thick watercolor paper if you'd like to use watered-down acrylic.** If you like the watercolor look but prefer to use acrylic paint, try painting on thick paper specifically designed for use with acrylics.<sup>[2]</sup> Watercolor paper is also cheaper than stretched canvases, especially if you plan on disposing of your first few attempted paintings.

- You can find thick watercolor paper at your local art-supply store.
- Keep in mind that watery acrylic paint can make thinner paper wrinkle or warp.

**3 Select 8–10 colors of artist-quality acrylic paint.** In distinction to students' acrylic paint, artists' paint is rich in pigment and comes in a large variety of colors. If you're just starting out as a painter, 8–10 colors should be plenty. Select 1 each of the primary colors (blue, yellow, and red), and 5–7 additional colors that you'll enjoy painting with. For example, select colors such as:<sup>[3]</sup>

- Black
- Purple or pink
- Brown
- Green
- White

**4 Purchase 5-8 paint brushes to paint in a variety of styles.** If you only paint with a single brush, it'll be hard to achieve the full range of effects possible with acrylic paint. So, buy a handful of different styles of brushes. Some of the most common acrylic brush styles include:[4]

- Round (for lines and detail work)
- Flat (for making big, bold strokes and filling in large spaces)
- Fan (for blending and feathering)
- Bright (for holding close to the canvas to make thick strokes)
- Angular flat (for filling in corners and fine details)

#### Method

## 2

### Working on the Basics

**1 Squeeze only a small amount of acrylic paint onto your palette at a time.** A little paint goes a long way, so squeeze out only about  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (0.64 cm) to begin with.

Squeeze out dollops of 4-6 colors that you plan to work with. Space these colors around the perimeter of your painter's palette.

- This setup will give you enough room to mix and test out various color combinations in the center of your palette.

**2 Paint with large brushes first to outline the shapes of your subject.** When beginning your acrylic painting, use large, flat brushes to outline large shapes on the canvas. For example, if you're painting a scenic mountain view, begin by outlining the bold contours of the mountain peaks.[5]

- You might find it helpful to work with opaque acrylic colors while painting outlines. Then, when you're detailing the painting, work with more transparent colors.

**3 Use smaller brushes to add visual details.** Once you've completed the major shapes of your painting, pick up your smaller detail brushes. Use these to add touches of detail in the painting. Try out a variety of fine-tipped brushes to create different sized lines and visual effects on your canvas.<sup>[6]</sup>

- For example, once you've contoured the large mountain peaks, use smaller, more pointed brushes to filling in details like individual trees, a lake, or campers on the shore.

**4 Add water to your palette every 10-15 minutes while you paint.** Acrylic paint dries quite easily, rendering it harder to work with. Make sure you keep your paint workable by spraying it so it doesn't dry out and harden on the canvas.<sup>[7]</sup> Once dried, the paint cannot be removed.

- Keep a small spray bottle filled with water at hand.

**5 Rinse the paint off your brush before switching colors.** Hold the bristles beneath a stream of tap water to rinse the paint off. Or, swish the bristles around in a cup of water. This will ensure that paint colors don't blend together on the bristles. Then, once you've rinsed the colors out of the bristles, blot your paintbrush on a clean cloth to prevent runoff.

- This will keep water from running up and down the heel of the brush, creating blotchy paint on the canvas.

**6 Let the used paints dry before disposing of them in the trash.** Do not wash your color palette, since the

acrylic paint might clog your pipes. Instead, use a plastic tray as a color palette, and let the leftover paint dry after you're finished using it. Then, peel the paint off from the tray when it's completely dried.

- Or, instead of disposing of the dried paint, you can apply new, wet paint directly over the dried paints.

#### Method

### 3

## Trying Various Techniques

**1 Mix paints with a palette knife to try out new color combinations.** It's rare for painters to use an acrylic color as-is, straight from the tube. To fine-tune your color selection, pull 2 dabs of different colors to the center of your palette, and mix them with a knife or brush. This will help you create rich hues to give your painting a personalized look.<sup>[8]</sup>

- It wouldn't be a bad idea to look at a color wheel while you're working. For example, mixing red and yellow will give you a bright orange. Then bring in some darker greens for a rich brown.

**2 Lighten the color of the paint with water.** When applied straight from the tube, acrylic paints can look thick and opaque. Change the paint's opacity by adding more water to the dollop of paint you've squeezed onto the palette. The more water added to the paint, the more transparent the color becomes. Use transparent paints for watercolor or airbrush effects.<sup>[9]</sup>

- When mixing acrylic out of the tube, use no more than 20% water by volume (compared to the paint). If you use more than 20% water, the binding agent that makes the paint stick to the surface might fail, causing the paint to

peel off once it's dry.

**3 Thin out acrylics with glaze or paste to change the texture of the paint.** If you only use straight acrylic paint on a canvas, the entire painting will have a bland, uniform texture. Thinning out the acrylics with mix-ins will vary the visual textures. So, mix in other mediums, such as glaze or texture paste, when thinning the acrylic. In general, thinning out your acrylic paint will give it a liquid, watery look once it's dried.<sup>[10]</sup> Find a variety of types of glazes and texture pastes at a local art-supply store.

- A mix of acrylic and glaze can also be applied over charcoal or pencil strokes on a canvas to keep them from being washed out by layers of paint.<sup>[11]</sup>
- Glazes will give the dried paint a satiny color and a bright, shiny texture.
- Texture pastes add a rough, chunky texture to the paint, but may dampen the color a bit after drying.

**4 Layer 2 or 3 different paint colors over one another to add texture.** Instead of mixing your colors together on the palette, layer them over one another on the canvas for a unique blended look. Paint as many layers as you like, but keep in mind that darker colors will cancel out lighter shades. Try painting a flower, for example, by layering red, pink, and blue paints over one another to form the petals.<sup>[12]</sup>

- Leave enough time for each layer of paint to dry before you paint another layer over it. Thin layers will dry in about 30 minutes, while thick layers will take over 1 hour to dry.

**5 Dab on paint with the corner of a sponge for a bubbly effect.** Dip a corner of a sponge into an acrylic paint color of your choice. Then gently press the painted

corner of sponge against your canvas. Try smearing the sponge along the canvas also, for a different visual texture. Paint applied with the edge of a sponge will contain many open dots that allow the color of the paint or canvas beneath the dabbed-on paint to come through.<sup>[13]</sup>

- Apply paint with a sponge if you're painting a body of water, for instance, to create a realistic texture.
- Pair this technique with layering to effectively overlap several colors of paint.
- Art-supply stores will sell sponges with different textures if you'd like to dab paint onto a canvas using multiple sponges.

**6 Splatter paint with a wet brush to make thick chunks of color.** Dip a large brush into water and then coat the bristles with paint. Hold the bottom of the brush between 2 fingers. To splatter the paint on your canvas, strike the paintbrush right below the bristles with the first 2 or 3 fingers on your opposite hand. The paint will fly off in thick clots and stick to the canvas.<sup>[14]</sup>

- Splattering is a great technique to use if you're making an abstract art piece. Or, try splattering to add texture to your painting.

**7 Create a stipple effect by dotting the paint on the canvas.** To stipple, coat the bristles of a paintbrush in paint and hold the paintbrush vertically over the canvas. Tap the tip of the paintbrush gently against the canvas along a straight or curved line to create a feather, dotted effect.<sup>[15]</sup> This would work well for painting birds or animals, or to bring a feathery texture into an abstract work.

- When you're stippling, never slide the bristles along the canvas. This will smear the stipples together and ruin

the effect.

**8 Lay a piece of masking tape on the canvas to make hard edges.** Masking tape can be used like painters use painter's tape when outlining the edge of a ceiling, for example. Apply masking tape directly to the canvas, or to already dried paint without damaging it. Simply press the tape down so that no paint can escape under its surface and bleed underneath. Then, after you've painted your hard edge, remove the masking tape to reveal your perfectly straight line.

- This technique would work well for the sharp sides of a mountain peak.

**9 Blend paint colors on the canvas for a splotchy look.** Using your palette knife, partially mix 2 paint colors together on your canvas. Then, use a brush of your choice to paint the partially-mixed colors. For example, this effect could work well when you're painting a mountain clearing. Rather than mixing yellow and green on the palette to create a flat, uniform light green, mix the colors on the canvas.<sup>[16]</sup>

- You'll be left with a canvas studded with bits of yellow, light green, and dark green, similar to how a real meadow would look from far away.
- The finished effect is up to you. In some situations, you'll want to soften the two colors so that the blending is even and uniform. For a more subtle effect, use a flat brush to thoroughly mix the colors together, so that the effect is less noticeable.



## Community Q&A

### Question

**What should a beginner paint?**

wikiHow Staff Editor  
Staff Answer

It's a good idea to start with simple subjects that will help you get a feel for the paints and what they can do. A still life, or a painting of a small collection of objects, is a good exercise for beginning painters. Choose some interesting objects, such as some pieces of pottery or an assortment of fruits and vegetables with different colors and textures, and arrange them in a visually pleasing way. Experiment with painting the objects and capturing things like shape, depth, light, shadow, and texture.

### Question

**How do I get better at painting with acrylics?**

wikiHow Staff Editor  
Staff Answer

Keep practicing and experimenting with different techniques until you figure out what works for you. You may also find it helpful to take a painting class, read books on acrylic painting technique, or watch video tutorials.

### Question

# Do you wet the brush before using acrylic paint?

wikiHow Staff Editor  
Staff Answer

You can, and it's definitely a good idea to keep your brushes wet during the painting process. This will help prevent the paint from drying out and hardening in the brush as you work. Keep a shallow dish or saucer of water next to you and lay the brush down in that when you're not using it. Keep a separate, larger container of water for cleaning the brushes when you want to switch between colors.

## Question

### How do I prepare paper for acrylics?

Community Answer

You don't really need to prepare paper at all for when painting with acrylics. If you'd like a nice boarder around your painting, however, you can put making tape or painters tape around the edges of your paper. Once you are done painting, you can carefully pull the tape away to reveal clean, sharp edges.

## Question

### Can I paint directly to a canvas without gesso?

Community Answer

Yes you can. Gesso will just make it easier for the paint to stick. You can also use gesso to cover up old paint left on the canvas. If your canvas is new and unused, it is not necessary to use gesso.

### Question

**I am painting on a stretched canvas and having problems with coverage. When the paint dries, you can see the canvas in some spots. Is this the paint, or should I be prepping the canvas with Gesso?**

### Community Answer

This is fairly common with any form of painting, especially when using thinners or water with the paint. Adding another layer or two of paint will remedy the problem. You can also try putting more paint and/or less water on the brush when you're painting.

### Question

**How do I paint a bouquet of flowers with acrylics?**

### Community Answer

Choose a picture or live model to paint (such as placing the flowers in a vase or resting them somewhere pretty).

Choose the light source you favor. It can either be natural light or an artificial light setting. If you prefer a natural light setting and do not wish to paint alla prima, then take a picture of the set-up and work from that. Choose the surface that you wish to paint on (canvas, wood, panels,

etc.) It is important that your surface is primed accordingly. If you wish sketch your image on to your surface, watercolor pencils are the most efficient for this, given the fact that they will completely go away when the paint makes contact with it. Once your sketch is on, you can start painting!

**Question**

**Can you recommend an online course or video for beginners?**

*Community Answer*

Google 'Painting with Jane'. It's a great resource for newbies.

**Question**

**How long should I wait before painting over a previous color?**

*Community Answer*

Wait until it is no longer glossy, which is about 10 minutes. If you are in a hurry, you can get a fast drying medium to add to your paint or you can just use a hair blow dryer to speed up the process.

**Question**

**How can I remove a color to replace it with another color on a painting?**

If you wait for it to dry, you could always paint white over it. This might take a few layers, but it'll work just fine. I'm just assuming that you're painting on a white canvas, but if you're painting on a different colored canvas, use that color to paint over your mistake.

## Tips

- Acrylics darken when they're dry, so consider this when mixing colors. It's better to make a color too light than too dark.
- If the color of an acrylic paint straight from the tube is too dark, try mixing it with a dab of white paint.
- Some acrylic paints contain small amounts of heavy metals. All high-quality paints will have something toxic in them! Wear gloves if you use toxic paint, especially the color titanium white (which generally contains lead).
- Consider wearing an apron while working with acrylic. You can't wash it off if you get acrylic on your clothing.

## Things You'll Need

- ☐ 5-8 long-handled brushes
- ☐ Acrylic paints
- ☐ Glaze (optional)
- ☐ Texture pastes (optional)
- ☐ Masking tape (optional)
- ☐ Canvas
- ☐ Spray bottle with water
- ☐ Plastic palette
- ☐ Water to clean brushes
- ☐ Paper towels

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