

Basics: Watercolor Brushes-Tips for Beginners

Like all of my “Basics” information sheets, this contains a pared down summary of what I recommend to beginning and early learner students. It comes from my experience and that of other teachers and various online expert sources. Other experienced teachers may tell you different information based on their viewpoint. Don't worry about it. If you are starting on your own these notes will help. If you are taking lessons, follow the teacher's advice.

If you're on a tight budget, spend money on good paper and paint. You don't need to buy expensive brushes to get good enough ones. Start with synthetic *watercolor brushes* (not multi-use brushes). They are economical, come in every bristle shape you might want and can take a lot of punishment. Good brushes hold a lot of water. Round brushes should hold a good point at the tip while flat brushes should hold a narrow edge when wet. Always shop at well-known online stores or established fine art stores. Add more expensive brushes when you can.

Brands I like for students include: Princeton (I use a lot of these myself); Cheap Joe's several kinds White Synthetic (very inexpensive) & American Journey Interlocked Synthetic (moderate price) & Golden Fleece Synthetic (higher price); Robert Simmons white sable; Royal and Langnickel; Winsor & Newton. Pick the economical variety of these brands. Some of them also have more expensive lines. You don't need sable brushes as a beginner. You don't need a bunch of specialty shapes, like cat's tongue or dagger or a fan, though later you may want to try these.

You can get a lot done with this selection of brushes: 1" or 3/4" flat; 1/2" flat (buy two 1/2" if you can afford it; 4 or 5 and 8 round and a 10 round, if you can afford it; one size 2 or 3 rigger/script/liner (for making long, fine lines). If you're just wanting to buy the bare minimum to test your liking for watercolor you can get by with a 3/4" flat and an 8 round. If you find a set you like and the sizes are a bit different, but the brush types are the same as here, it's okay.

Optional but useful is some type of scrubber brush for removing mistakes (Cheap Joe's Soft Scrubber 1/2") or Royal & Langnickel Zen Watercolor Synthetic Scrubber Brush. You can lift with your painting brushes but you don't want to scrub a lot with them or it ruins the bristles. Cheap Joe's Ugly Brushes are good for putting on masking fluid and the flat ones are good scrubber brushes. *Never use your good brushes to apply masking fluid.* Use your brushes only for watercolor. Acrylic or oil will ruin them.

Brushes will last a long time if you treat them properly. Treat the bristles with care and protect them when transporting them. Don't smash them down hard on painting surfaces or while cleaning. Never let the bristles dry bent or splayed out of shape. Don't let your brushes stand bristles down in water. Buy a nylon folding brush holder (Cheap Joe's or other online store) and keep your brushes in it unless they are drying after use. See more information at Cheap Joe's online site <https://www.cheapjoes.com/blog/artist-brush-care-love-or-leave-em>.

To clean brushes, rinse well under running water while gently bouncing the bristles against the sink bottom or in the palm of your hand. Watch for the water to run clear. No soap is needed. After rinsing brushes draw them across a clean paper towel and check for color residue to ensure they're really clean. While they're really wet, hold by the handle and snap your wrist to fling off excess water. This will help reshape the tip. If needed, reshape the bristles very gently with minimal handling. To dry, lay flat or slightly tilted with the *bristle end lower than the handle tip*. You want to help water flow away from the metal ferrule when drying. Don't put wet brushes handle-down in a jar to dry.

You can find a great Art Tutor, Bob Davies (former teaching site) free handout with paper, paint and brush information at <https://ihueman.files.wordpress.com/2017/03/watercolour-cheat-sheets.pdf>