

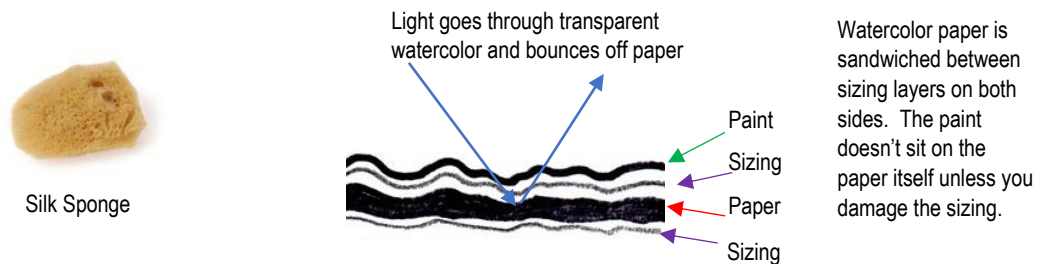
Basics: Watercolor Paper-Tips for Beginners

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. When you are taking lessons, follow the teacher’s advice.

The most common advice from many watercolor teachers is “Don’t use cheap, *student grade* watercolor paper.” This also applies to paint (See: Basics: Watercolor Paint). The reason is that you will be setting yourself up for poor results and a beginner will be led to think it’s because of their inexperienced technique. Don’t use cheap paper for practice. You should practice on the kind of paper you will be using for your paintings to learn how that paper works. You can use both side of your paper. Paint can be washed off good paper by putting it in the sink or tub and *gently* rubbing the surface with a natural silk sponge (see below, left) under running water. There will be faint paint remnants, but it will be useable for practice. The residual paint can be a good background for another painting.

Cheap paper (wood pulp paper) doesn’t take paint as well as rag (usually cotton) paper. The paint won’t flow as well across the paper’s surface/sizing nor does paint look its best when dried; the surface finish will come off with lifting and scrubbing causing the paper underneath to peel off in little rolls; and it buckles more when wet. Cheap paper doesn’t facilitate reworking and all watercolor painters want to be able to lift, scrub and otherwise remove paint without tearing up the paper. See <https://etchrlab.com/blogs/news/lifting-techniques-101> for lifting tips.

You’ll use at least two types of paper: sketchbook and watercolor. Sketchbook paper is 60#, lightweight, for pen, pencil or watercolor sketching, taking notes, etc. You may also use heavier Multi-Media (98# such as Canson brand) paper for your sketchbook, but you don’t need a sketchbook made of watercolor paper. The 60 # and 98# designations refer to the weight of a designated amount of paper and generally relate to thickness. Acid free paper is preferred because it lasts longer without degrading and won’t yellow. Spiral bound sketchbooks are handier because they lie flat easily and you can fold the cover under for easier holding if you’re onsite sketching.



Watercolor’s transparency is helped by the coat of *sizing* that seals the surface of the paper’s rag fibers. The thin layer of paint you put on sits on top of the sizing. The smooth coating of sizing helps the paint flow across easily. If you remove the sizing, the paint will just absorb into the rag paper like it’s a paper towel. Light can pass through the transparent paint and sizing and bounce back to your eyes. The bumpy surface of cold press or rough paper helps bounce the light back and its pockets hold paint. Hot press paper has a smooth surface which facilitates making finer brush marks but makes it more difficult to create a wash over a large area like a sky.

Watercolor paper comes in various weights which you can read about online. The most commonly used paper for learners is 140# cold press which has a medium rough, bumpy surface. Though 300# cold press paper doesn’t buckle when wet, it is expensive and you can tape down the 140# to help avoid buckling while you paint (see last paragraph for how to fix buckled paper). Full watercolor paper sheets (22”X30”) are more versatile and economical than watercolor blocks and you can tear them into any size pieces. Watercolor blocks are especially good for plein air or travel sketching because the paper is held flat.

Tear your big 22”X30” sheet into smaller pieces (as opposed to using scissors). Carefully crease it in half, then tear along the crease. Carefully fold the paper in half, meeting corners at the edge, then gently press down on the stiff roll of the fold to flatten the folded edge. Use a bone or plastic folding tool (or a large, stainless steel spoon) pressed along the folded edge to aid creasing and to help keep the paper clean by keeping your hands off of it. **Always wash your hands before handling watercolor paper** to ensure your hands don’t have lotion or natural body oils on them. Oil on your paper won’t let the paint hold on to the paper. That is called a “resist.” As you tear the paper, keep halving the paper pieces to get 22”X15” pieces; 11”X15” pieces, etc.

Some people soak, stretch and re-dry their watercolor paper onto a work board to make a very tight, surface like the head of a drum. While learning the basics you don’t need to do that mainly because you’ll probably work in small formats (5”X7”, 8”X10”, etc.). Tape watercolor paper to your working board (foam core, gator board, contact paper-covered heavy cardboard, etc.) with good masking tape or artists tape.

Good brands of acid free, rag watercolor paper include: Arches, Fabriano Artistic, Saunders Waterford, Hanemühle, as well as the more economical, Cheap Joe’s Kilimanjaro. Various online sites have information on paper, brushes, and more. See <https://etchriab.com/blogs/news/coldhot-press> and <https://www.scratchmadejournal.com/blog/watercolor-supplies-for-beginners>. Some sites will tell you that Strathmore paper is okay, but I don’t recommend it.

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>.



Photo Credit Elena Moshvilo, Unsplash

You can use your clothing iron (set on dry, linen/cotton) to iron the **back** of a dry, buckled watercolor painting. Don’t use the steam setting. Spritz the **back** of the watercolor painting lightly with a fine sprayer and let set a minute. Don’t get it soaking wet. Sandwich the painting between 2 clean cotton or linen press cloths (like a piece of old cotton T-shirt or linen dish towel, or old sheet scrap) before ironing. You can lightly spritz the press cloth upon which you iron. Press quickly once or twice. Don’t hold the iron in one position for extended periods. Dry flat on a smooth, non-absorbent surface. You can put books on top of the backside of the drying painting to flatten but put clean paper between them and the painting to absorb dampness. Don’t leave for more than a day to avoid mildewing, especially if your live in a humid area.