

Materials in Practice

Painting

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video series here



Materials

- Table protection such as newspaper
- Sheet of paper or canvas
- Palette
- Brushes in different sizes and shapes
- Acrylic paint including white and sets of both cool and warm yellow, red and blue
- A rag
- Container of water

Optional

- Backing board
- Clips

Techniques

The initial stages of the painting process can feel messy, but it's essential to push through the 'ugly stage' with confidence, embrace the imperfections, take risks, and trust that the final details will bring everything together.

To begin, encourage students to loosen their grip and hold the brush from the end of the handle for greater fluidity and expressive strokes. Experimenting with different brushes and water content will help students to create varied marks. Students can achieve a range of expressive effects with various tools and techniques, for example:

- continuous solid strokes can be achieved with a round brush
- square brushes held vertically or horizontally will create a variety of stroke widths and shapes
- manipulating a line by altering the brushes position and the amount of pressure applied
- **palette knives** can be used to spread paint in varying amounts and directions, creating texture and depth
- **sgraffito** – scratching through the top layer of paint to reveal the underlying coat for added contrast and texture

- sponging to create soft, hazy marks and blend paint
- **dry brushing** using minimal water and paint, allowing the brush to create broken, scratchy strokes on the surface
- when **blocking in** an area with paint, hold the brush perpendicular to the edge of a shape, using the tip of the bristles for a clean, defined outline. This ensures a solid boundary line for precise painting within an area.

Safety

- Encourage handwashing after painting lessons.
- Wipe up spills immediately to prevent slipping hazards.
- Keep brushes, sponges and other materials clean to avoid mould growth or contamination.



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Processes

1. A **viewfinder** can help students frame their **subject** and focus on **composition principles** such as the rule of thirds. Breaking down subjects into simple shapes encourages students to look beyond the details and focus on composition and the **balance of values**.
2. Drawing helps artists plan their paintings and determine what elements are most important to include. Small preliminary sketches help students visualise **compositions** and clarify artistic intentions.
3. **Underpainting** with a **diluted wash** can help students visualise and set the foundation for their painting. Starting with a complementary colour, for example, pink underpainting for a predominantly green landscape will enhance contrast and help students to make informed colour choices. Overall cohesion can be achieved when some areas of the underpainting peek through the final layers.
4. Creating a quick sketch with diluted paint or charcoal will allow students to simplify or abstract their subjects, leading to more interesting painting outcomes focusing on essential forms and shadows rather than realism.
5. Loosely mapping out darker values and gradually building lighter **tones** helps maintain depth and is a structured system for students to work with while exploring their creative options. Encourage students to push beyond image references and enhance colour relationships, exaggerate forms and adjust compositions as they progress.

Top tips

- You can create a sense of space and atmosphere in a painting by using warm colours to bring objects forward and cool colours to push them back.
- Strong colour and value contrasts in the foreground, along with softer transitions in the background, help add depth.
- Although vibrant colours are alluring, they should be used thoughtfully. Mixing a vibrant colour with small amounts of its complementary colour will achieve a more naturalistic hue. For example, a vibrant green mixed with a small amount of red paint will create a green more suited to foliage. Keep in mind that acrylic paints tend to dry a bit darker, so students should take this into account when recreating colours.
- Avoid adding white paint too soon when mixing colours, as it can make them look dull or murky. Instead, build up lighter tones by mixing with other colours first to keep the colours rich and vibrant for as long as possible.



Viewfinder and preliminary sketches



Underpainting



Diluted wash on underpainting



Painting in progress, with key features blocked in – the ugly stage

Vocabulary list

Painting

Term	Definition
Balance of values	The distribution of light and dark values to create harmony, depth and visual interest. A well-balanced range of values enhances the overall composition.
Blocking in	An underpainting technique where artists use diluted paint and a large brush to map out basic shapes and colours, establishing the painting's structure before refining details.
Compositions	The arrangement of elements within the artwork.
Composition principles	Strategies used to arrange visual elements in an artwork. Key principles of composition include balance, contrast, rhythm, unity and focal point.
Diluted wash	Water added to paint to create a semi-transparent layer of colour.
Dry brushing	A painting technique where a dry brush with very little paint is applied to a surface. This creates a textured or scratchy effect, allowing the underlying layer or texture of the surface to show through.
GSM	Grams per square metre (GSM) is a unit used to measure paper weight. Tissue and newspaper tend to have a low GSM whereas stiff cardstock has a high GSM.
Mediums	Additives that alter the texture, drying time, or transparency of paint.
Palette	A surface for mixing your paints. Plastic, wood or even a newspaper can be used for a disposable paper palette.
Palette knife	A trowel-shaped piece of plastic or metal mounted on a handle, designed for mixing, scraping, lifting and spreading paint.
Sgraffito	Sgraffito means 'to scratch'. It is a painting technique where the top layer of paint is scratched back to reveal a base layer.
Subject	The main theme, object or focus of the artwork. The thing that the artist is representing.
Tones	The lightness or darkness of a colour, which can affect the mood of a piece and is used to create depth and dimension in a painting.
Underpainting	The initial layer of paint applied to a canvas.
Viewfinder	A tool used to frame a scene and help artists focus on specific areas of interest. It typically consists of a small, rectangular frame with a viewing space.
Viscosity	The measure of a fluid's dynamic resistance to change in shape or to movement. High-viscosity paint is thick and retains brush or palette knife marks, while low-viscosity paint is more fluid and spreads easily.