

Define Your Plan: Growing Your Watercolor Skills

*Basic Techniques, Supplies & Challenges to Help You Grow
with Angela Fehr*



Basic Techniques:

There are really just a handful of basic techniques in watercolor, and the good news is, they are all achievable! Anyone can master watercolor technique with practice. Spending time exploring each technique individually will help you know what each one does and how to use it in your paintings.

Technique: Wet in Wet

This technique is a foundational tool for creating soft, flowing blends of color. When your paper is wet, you have less control of how the paint will move, but you avoid hard edges within the moistened area.

Troubleshooting:

- Watermarks (also called cauliflowers or blooms) - are created by adding too much water to a drying wash. An **imbalance of water** means the new moisture (water or paint) will push into the settling first layer and move the pigment, creating a bloom or watermark. Watch also for excess water that has moved to the edge of the paper and created a pool; it will push back and create watermarks along the edge of your painting.



Watermarks in a wash

- Brush strokes not blending - you're working too dry. Your brush should be plump with liquid (water and paint) so that it's eager to release onto the paper. Poor quality paper will also dry more quickly and make it difficult to create an even wash.
- Drying too quickly - if you're trying to fill a large area with color, it might be easier to work wet on dry and move across the paper in stages

Wet on Dry

This all-purpose technique will likely comprise 90% of your painting process, so it's worth spending time learning. When you start with dry paper, the paint will stay within the boundaries

created by your wet brush, while performing similarly to wet-in-wet within the areas filled by your wet brush.



“Feathering out” a wet on dry brush stroke with a wet brush to achieve a soft gradated transition.

Use for:

- Filling large areas with color, working from one side of the area to the other to avoid hard edges within the shape
- Creating mini “wet-in-wet” effects by painting a single shape and dropping color in within that area
- Controlled washes; painting an edge of a shape and feathering out the color with a damp brush for soft transitions of color



“Charging in” a new color into a wash - mini wet-in-wet

Drybrush & Thick Glazes

Most of the time, watercolor painting should feel like its name; painting with water. The consistency of the paint & water should feel fluid or inky, rarely sticky.

When to use it: I use drybrush and thicker consistency of paint at the **end of a painting** to add final pops of detail and texture. When the paint is in a stronger ratio than the water, you lose the transparency that watercolor is known for, so it can be a very dominant technique and thus is best used in small doses.

Drybrush: With your nearly-dry brush, pick up paint and lightly stroke it across the paper. The paint will skip across the textured paper and leave a broken line that creates textural effects. Works well for sand, grasses, walls of buildings, stone, fur, etc.



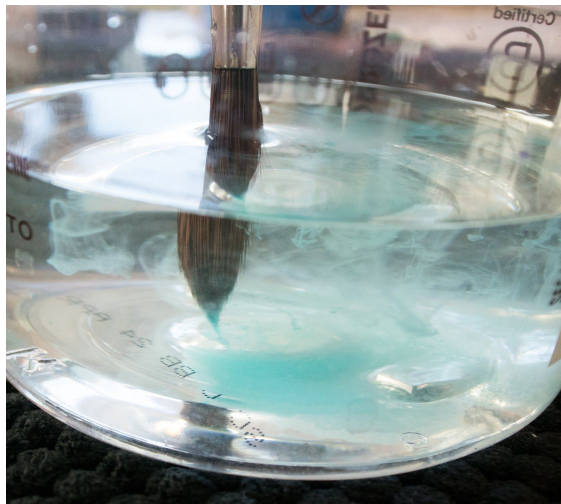
Opaque Paint Effects: When the paint has a high pigment to water ratio, it's going to be less transparent. Transparent colors will still be transparent, but certain colors (cadmiums, ochres, any hue with white mixed in) will be more opaque and this is the only way you can layer a lighter color over a darker color and have it stand out. Because opaque colors tend to demand attention in watercolor, it's a good way to make a focal area pop with the fewest number of brush strokes.



Semi-opaque cobalt teal over a dark value painted area.

How to know if a color is transparent or opaque: Dip your brush in that color and rinse in clear water. Does the water take on a milky look? It's opaque or semi-transparent.

A general rule is to use transparent colors for mixing and early layers of paint, opaque or semi-opaque work best unmixed and at the end of the painting session. Some watercolorists avoid using opaque colors completely.



Working with Watercolor Materials

Another learning curve involves learning to use the tools of watercolor; paint, brushes and paper, and knowing which to choose. I believe it's best to keep your supplies as basic as possible in the early stages of learning to avoid being overwhelmed by choice, and even now my favorite watercolor supplies are one type of paper, two different brushes and about a dozen paint colors. [Download my preferred supply list here](#) or [check out my shopping page](#) on Amazon.com.

Brushes

Most new artists choose brushes that are too small. When your brush is too small, you will struggle with your washes drying before you have completely filled them with color; it takes more strokes to fill the page, and your brush doesn't hold as much color.

I like a large round brush with a fine point. The large size (#10 or 12) holds lots of paint, while the point is capable of fine detail.

Natural hair brushes (sable or squirrel) are softer than synthetic and hold more paint and water, one reason they are preferred by professionals.

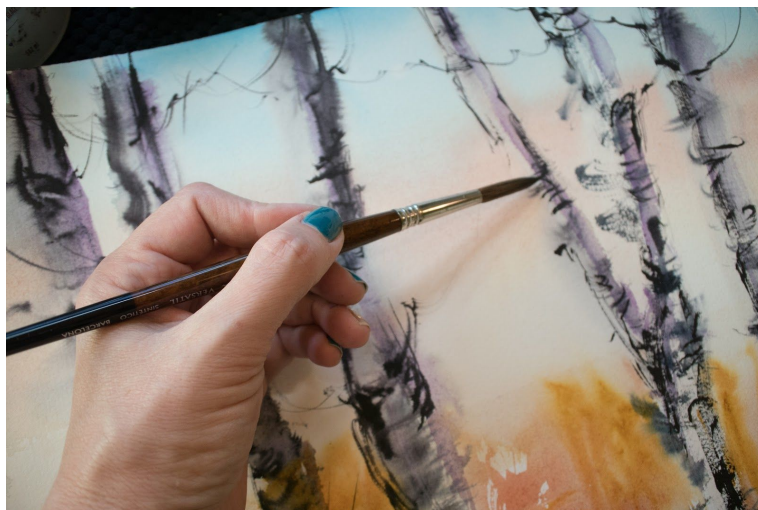


Brush Technique

Using a brush is like learning to hold a pencil; the more you do it, the more natural it will feel. Hold your brush around the middle of the handle when wanting to paint loose, expressive strokes, and choke up on the ferrule only when needing maximum control in tiny detail areas. Use the side of your brush as well as the point. The side of the brush can help fill a large area with paint more quickly as well as creating wide, interesting lines. It also helps keep the point of the brush from wearing out too quickly!



Practice ‘mark making,’ giving yourself time on scrap paper to play with the lines and shapes each kind of brush can make. It’s the artists who have logged thousands of “brush miles” who make the most interesting and confident brush strokes, and a confident brush stroke is worth more than a hundred painstakingly careful ones.



Paint

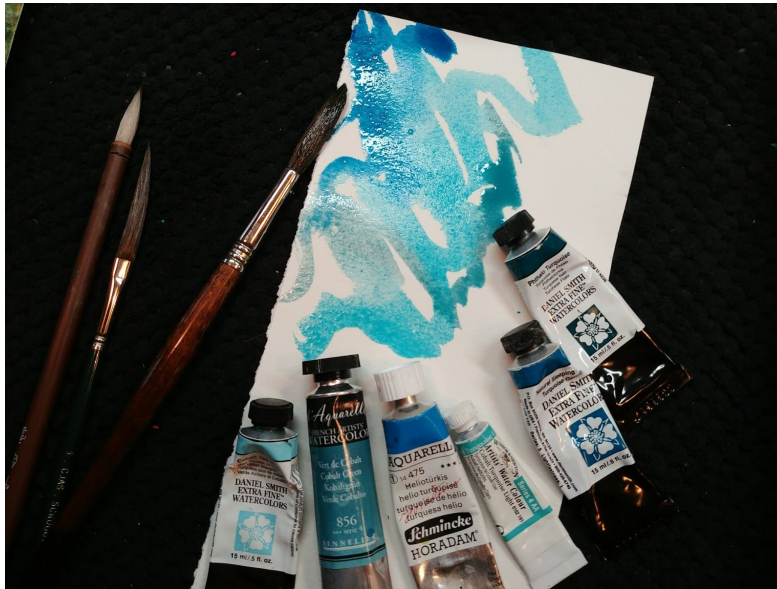
Choosing paint is a small part about brand, and a large part about colors. While I have over a hundred colors in my collection, I encourage new painters to start with no more than a dozen. You won't use what you don't know, and so working with a small range of colors gives you the opportunity to really get to know them with the goal of using them more confidently and mixing them more effectively.



Common Paint Issues

- **Not enough pigment.** I prefer to work with too much pigment than not enough, as it's easier to dilute and spread a too-bold splash of color than to add more pigment and throw off the flow of a wash. A juicy brush can be mostly water, mostly pigment, or any combination in between, and each of these will create different effects on your paper.
 - **“Wake Up the Paint”** If you are using paint dried in your palette and haven't painted lately, you might need to work a little longer to activate your paint and loosen up a rich wash of pigment. Stroke the paint with a juicy brush to loosen the surface of the pigment.
- **Pigment waste** - While there are some artists who successfully work with pigment fresh from the tube every time they paint, often this approach means a lot of paint gets washed away in your rinse water, as your brush picks up more pigment than you need much more easily when you're working with fresh pigment. I prefer to load a palette with tube paint (tubes are dollar-per-gram more affordable than pans) and let it dry, so I have more control over how much paint I pick up with my brush.

- **Pigment hoarding** - Artists who squeeze only a pill-sized amount of paint onto their palette are likely going to see paler washes and less vibrance of color. Fill your palette with a good dollop of paint so it's easier to create intensity in your paintings.



Paper

Most new painters struggle with the idea of paying for good watercolor paper. Almost every professional artist (I can't think of one who disagrees) will insist that **paper makes a difference!** More than anything else, your painting style will be dictated by what your paper is capable of.



Rough textured watercolor paper

Student Grade Paper: Not 100% cotton, usually has some wood pulp in the mix. Texture will often look regular, like a waffle or a woven fabric, and the surface will feel a bit slippery.

Pros: Affordable. Easy to find in art supply and craft stores.

Cons: Paint does not flow as readily. New layers of paint will lift/move the layers beneath. Masking fluid will often tear the paper when removed. Paper will pill more easily when trying to lift color and fix mistakes. Often single-sided (one side takes paint much better than the other).



Student grade paper with a “waffle” weave

Artist-Quality Paper: Look for 100% cotton, mould made paper. The surface should feel rough, hot press should have an absorbent consistency like peach skin. No obvious “waffle” weave in the appearance of the texture.

Cons: More expensive than student grade. Often not available outside of art supply stores.

Pros: More durable, holds up to masking fluid, scrubbing, lifting, layering. Fluid washes flow more beautifully. Colors appear more vibrant. Better balance between absorption and flow. Can usually paint equally well on both sides.

You deserve to learn on good paper! I watch for sales and buy full sheets of paper than I can tear down to the size I want. Usually these are a better value than blocks or pads.

[Check out my shopping page of favourite art supplies on Amazon.com.](#)

20 Exercises to Grow Your Watercolor Skills and Make Your Paintings Better

Intentionality can speed your learning process as you work to master watercolor. I believe in **SIMPLIFYING** - working on one technique/idea at a time - **POSITIVITY** - finding something to love (even just one brush stroke) about every painting you create - **PLAY** - emphasizing enjoyment of the process to help stay motivated and engage your heart.



These exercises combine these three elements and will strengthen your watercolor skills. Plan to warm up with a learning/playing exercise **every time you paint**.

1. Wash Control: Challenge yourself to master a smooth, single color wash. Start with a small square of wet paint and challenge yourself to make it as smooth as possible, like a perfectly blue sky. Increase the size of the area to be filled with each successful wash.
2. Graduated Wash: the challenge here is to perfectly blend two colors to create a third. Start with one hue at the top of your painting area, blend down toward the middle. Add another hue at the bottom and blend upward. Allow the two washes to overlap to create the third color. The challenge here is to perfectly balance the moisture level so that the colors blend evenly without watermarks. These two exercises are major skill builders and will take time to master. Be patient!

3. Combined Wash: warm up by exploring fluid color. Drop two colors into a wash and let them mingle. Tilt the paper, adjust amounts of water and pigment to create various values and increase or decrease movement.
4. Double Loading: Load your brush with one color, then pick up a second (usually darker) color with the tip of your brush. Explore how this double-loaded brush moves on dry paper and on wet.
5. Mark Making: Choose a shape that can be made with a single brush stroke (i.e. a petal or leaf shape). Fill a page with variations on this shape - some made by pressing and lifting the brush, some by moving the brush. Try different brushes to compare marks. Compare a juicy brush mark to a drier brush mark.
6. Expressive Line: Line and mark making is often a later-stage part of adding detail to a painting, however it should not be neglected as a confident line can say much more than a perfect line. Play with mark-making and channel your inner "Chinese calligrapher!"
7. Object Challenge: Focus on a single object for an extended period of time (I spent a year painting trees.). Challenge yourself not just to paint it more realistically, but in innovative and unexpected ways.
8. Value studies: Contrast between dark & light is the number one way to create impact in your paintings. Learn to see value by painting your reference photo in a single color before you do your "serious painting."
9. Simplification challenge - Shapes: The foundation of a strong painting is the underlying structure of the shapes it consists of, and how they fit together. Challenge yourself to simplify down to the most basic shapes in your reference; think minimalism!
10. Complementary colors: Get to know your palette by choosing two complementary colors (i.e. a violet and a yellow) and let them flow together on the paper to see the range of mixtures from neutral to pure color that is created organically, rather than mixed in advance on the palette.
11. Palette knife: Interesting marks can be made using a variety of tools. Set the brush aside and try some found objects from your studio or household. I've painted with wads of string, palette knives, sticks and grass to create more dynamic effects in my paintings and get outside of my comfort zone to a place of further creativity.
12. Stencil: Using a craft stencil, try painting over the stencil onto your paper. Then, try "lifting out" using a paper towel to blot dried paint through the holes in the stencil to lighten the color and create a pattern.
13. Cling wrap: Press cling wrap into a wet wash, scrunching to create a pleasing pattern. Remove when partially dry for a soft effect, or when complete dry for more line, and then imagine your painting subject out of the shapes you find there.
14. Start with a big brush stroke: Use a large brush and strong color to create a single, powerful brush stroke on your paper. Turn the paper until you see a suggestion of a possible subject emerge (I usually see trees & flowers). Let that stroke lead you into a subject for your painting.
15. Knee-jerk painting: An unsuccessful result can propel you in your next painting. I try to immediately respond to a painting that didn't work with a next attempt, looking for ways

to do the opposite of what I tried previously. Be reactionary, and do the opposite of what didn't work before.

16. Take away the #1 Rule: Often when I start a new painting, I have a specific goal, for example, "The focal point of this painting is a big winter tree." In situations where I'm struggling to make the painting work, I have had huge breakthroughs when I've given myself permission to deviate from the original plan ("What if there was no tree at all?").
 17. Crop it! Paintings become more powerful when the focal point fills the page. If your paintings traditionally have a lot of "outside space," try using a mat to try different ways of cropping your paintings. When my focal point touches 3 sides of the paper, it's usually much more dynamic.
 18. Say one thing. I think sometimes we try to do too much in one painting. Rather than trying to paint a perfect sunset AND a detailed horse, AND a farmyard, remember that when we view a scene in life, we can only take in one part of the scene at a time, so let one thing be your focus and save some of the story for your next painting.
 19. Repeat yourself. If Monet could paint over 250 water lily paintings, we're not too good for repetition, too! When you paint the same thing over and over again, you gain skill and confidence, and when you start to get bored, you can improvise variations that are experimental, exciting and challenging.
 20. Work small. Or large. Do what you want! Seriously, I have taught students from all over the world, and seen learners take all kinds of different approaches to develop their watercolor skills. One thing every one of them has in common; time. Invest time in your watercolor practice, and no matter how you choose to spend your painting time, if you are painting, you can trust that you are growing. Be playful, be focused, be patient.
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Resources to Help You Learn

While you can teach yourself to paint, sometimes the journey is just a little more efficient with a supportive instructor. Here are some classes you can take online to get you started on the journey to becoming your own favorite artist:

Basic Techniques in Watercolor

Video demonstrations of beginner techniques (save 50% by enrolling now!)

Watercolor Jumpstart

A free, four-week program to help you discover your painting style.

More Classes online with Angela Fehr

Want more? I send a weekly email with watercolour techniques, new lesson videos and encouragement for artists. **It's an art coach in your inbox!** [Sign up here.](#)

Best wishes for many wonderful watercolor adventures!



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