

the
easy peasy
Watercolor
Startup Guide



Your simplified supply guide
to get started with watercolor!





Ahh! I'm so excited you're here!

Hi, my name is Juliene and I'm a watercolorist living in the mountains! I always considered myself an artist but, like so many of us I stopped creating as I grew older. It wasn't until college while I was studying engineering that my inner child was begging me to pick my paintbrush back up. It took me a while, but eventually I obliged! :)

I was painting with acrylics mostly until a few years ago when the materials for acrylics and the mess I was making with them was taking up too much space in our small home. Watercolor paints were the answer to this problem because the materials needed were small and easy to clean up. Another huge benefit was that I could easily take them on adventures. As you can see in this pic, they fit in one hand!

Honestly, it took me a while to fall in love with watercolors for a variety of reasons. After a few years though, it's become a love affair ... and I want you to join ;)

I put together this startup guide to simplify what you need to get started with watercolors! There are so many options out there and it can get overwhelming. This guide will show you everything you need to get started on your watercolor journey. Hint: you don't need much.

Love,
Juliene

Take inventory

Before you go and splurge (unless that's what you wanna do!), let's take inventory of the supplies you likely already have kickin' around.

Paints

I started my watercolor journey with one of these \$5 paint pan sets for kids. The quality of the paint is low, but they work just fine when you're getting started! I seriously recommend starting with something like this to get you going.



Paintbrushes

Unfortunately, not all brushes are made equal. Watercolor brushes are specifically designed to hold water and so if you use a plastic-y brush designed for acrylics or oils, you'll be disappointed. Even if it's a cheapo, make sure you have a watercolor specific brush.

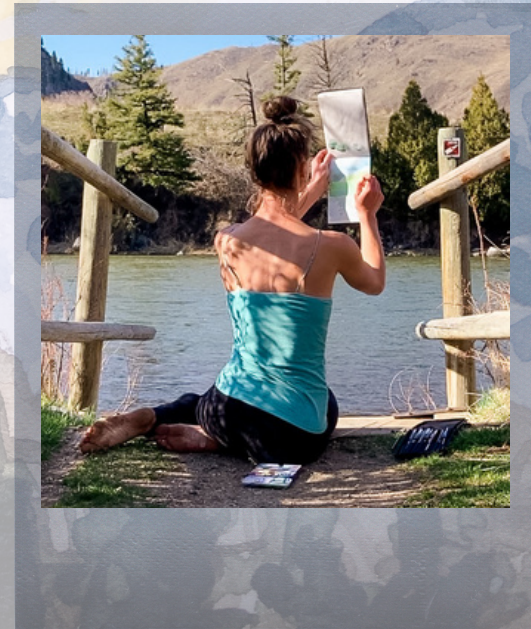


Paper

Watercolors require watercolor specific paper, but beyond that don't worry too much about the different weights. If you have an old pad of watercolor paper, that's perfect for now!

great job!

If you found any of these tools, great! They'll work well for getting started until you grow out of them.



Watercolor Paints

What is it?

Watercolor paint is a colored pigment in a water soluble binder. The paint dissolves when you add water allowing it to spread with a brush.

What do YOU need?

There are professional and student grade paints, and paints in those really cheap kid sets that have a zillion colors.

Honestly, when I really started getting into watercolors I used one of those cheapo sets and it worked great until I outgrew it maybe 6 months later after pretty much using the whole thing up.

I think I painted more in the beginning with a cheapo set because I took it literally everywhere with me and really beat it up. I took it on a river rafting trip and by the end the lid had cracked in half and was being held together by a rubber band :) But because the paints were cheap and there are so many colors in those kid set, I could focus on painting in huge quantity instead of worrying about creating masterpieces. My first few notebooks were full of pretty bleh paintings, but gosh how much I learned just getting paint to paper!



When you do upgrade, go straight for the professional artist paints. This is because student grade paints are cheaper because they contain less pigment and a lot of filler.

pans vs tubes

The only difference between watercolors in pans vs watercolors in tubes is that watercolors in pans have been dehydrated and need to be rehydrated before using. The quality is the same!

Start off with pans because they're more convenient, portable, and easy to setup. Usually the lids of pan tins double as mixing trays. I find that there is less friction to actually painting than with tubes because the paint is already there for you out in the open.

Of course you can fill your own pans from tubes if you want, but this could be something to work up to.

Also, if you're like me and are most inspired to take your paints on adventures with you, then you'll need pans (unless you want to carry way more gear with you!).



Colors

If you're past the cheapo paint setup and want to uplevel your painting game, you may be wondering **what colors of paints should you get?**

I recommend a cool and warm of each of the primaries at the least! A few earth tones are helpful to like sepia brown, Payne's gray, and ochre are nice although not necessary. Some paint sets have a warm and cool of red and yellow, but only one blue. This is because some blues are relatively *unbiased*, or sit somewhere between cool and warm.

To be clear, more colors aren't better! Get to know color theory with a limited palette and you'll be able to mix really all the colors you'd want.

Insider tip ...

I always have a tube of white gouache on me to bring back any light parts or highlights I failed to keep white ;)

Glossary

Here are some terms you'll see. If you're just starting out, don't worry too much about these :)

Permanence/lightfastness: ability of the paint to withstand exposure to light and humidity without fading, darkening or shifting color.

Transparency: the ability of light to pass through the paint. All watercolors can be made transparent by diluting them with water, but certain pigments hide the underlying paper or pigmented wash more than others.

Quality: student vs professional grade paints. Student grade paint is cheaper because they use less and cheaper pigments, and have more fillers. Kid set paint is as cheap as it comes so even if you start out with this, you'll outgrow it soon!

Number of pigments: the ingredients used to make paint include one, two, three, or sometimes more pigments. Pigments are identified by a color index code that can be found on the tube. If the paint label says "PB28", for example, this means it contains "Pigment Blue number 28", which is often used to make cobalt blue.

Granularity: granular paints generally have a grainy texture when dry. This is due to the uneven distribution of pigment particles on the paper surface. Granular pigments create this effect because they are larger, heavier, and more irregular in shape than small, fine pigments.

Paper

What is it?

Watercolor paper is paper specifically designed for painting with watercolors. A special thing about watercolor paper is 'sizing', which is a type of glue used to bind the paper. Sizing helps keep the pigment and water on the paper surface rather than letting it soak straight in, which gives the artist time to paint.

Watercolor papers are made with cotton fibers or wood pulp, or a mixture of both.

loose leaf

pros: available in large sizes and heavier weights (i.e. reduced buckling), individual sheets

cons: really only good for studio work



block

pros: reduced buckling because of rigid edge and backing

cons: expensive, apparently buckling can even occur with larger sizes, can only paint one at a time

journal

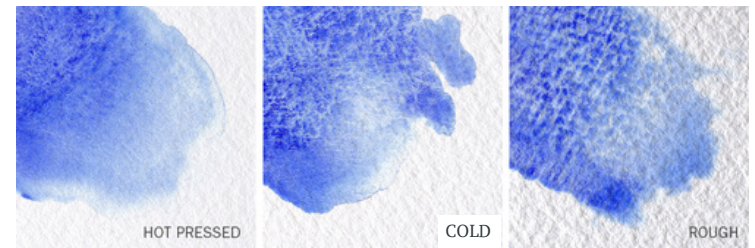
pros: small sizes available (great for practicing!), perfect for on-the-go and plein air, can paint multiple paintings at once

cons: potential buckling



Weight

Watercolor paper is graded by weight, which simply indicates the thickness. It can be given in pounds per ream (lb) or grams per square meter (gsm). For the best watercolor paper, look for a weight of at least 140lb or 300gsm. Heavier weights are less prone to buckling.



pic from www.artsupplies.co.uk

Hot vs Cold Press

There are three types of watercolor paper finish, which are related to their smoothness: hot and cold press, and rough.

Cold and hot presses are most common. The names refer to the manufacturing process. As the paper pulp is pressed into sheets, it can be done with either a cold press, for a more textured surface, or hot press, for a smooth surface.

Cold press paper is sometimes called 'not' paper because it sits in the middle of paper finishes – it has a bit of texture but a more even surface than rough paper. Cold press watercolor paper has small pockets on the surface, which allows it to hold more water and provides the artist time to blend and create wet-on-wet effects.

Smooth or hot press watercolor paper has a smooth surface, which means it dries faster.

Which watercolor paper you choose comes down to personal preference. Starting with cold press is a happy medium!

What do YOU need?

First of all - where do you want to paint?!

Painting at home is very different from on location, so you need different papers.

If you plan on taking your paints on adventures with you, pre-stretched blocks or a watercolor journal are ideal.

In your studio, you have more paper stretching and drying time, and no wind! So a few pieces of tape will keep a 140# paper stretched well enough to paint on. Or you could go with heavier weight paper (like 300 lb) and not have to worry much about buckling.

The only basic guideline you really need is 100% cotton and minimum 140# (300gsm) weight. You could go to a lower weight if you just want many pages for practicing.

When you're first starting off, you should be whipping through paper to get lots of practice in so going with a lower weight paper works well because it is cheaper and more of it comes in a pad or journal (because it's thinner).



A watercolor painting on a light-colored paper. On the left, there is a bright yellow sun with rays. In the center, there is a green tree with a textured, layered appearance. The background features soft, blended washes of blue and purple. A paintbrush and a palette are visible at the bottom of the page.

Soaking/ Stretching

Lots of tutorials online recommend stretching your watercolor paper, but it's not necessary for beginners. This isn't something practical to do when you're on adventures but something you may want to experiment with in your studio (or dining room table, or little corner in your room ;)). I generally use a journal and just put rubber bands around the edges to keep it from lifting.

A background illustration of a starry night sky. It features a gradient of purple and blue tones, with numerous small, multi-pointed stars and larger, soft, glowing circles in shades of pink, purple, and blue scattered across the scene.

Buckling

Buckling is when your watercolor paper warps, lifts, and bends because of uneven drying of the applied watercolor paints. Once buckled, you won't be able to apply your paints evenly because the paint will flow into the low spots, and you'll get awkward hard lines of color around the puddle.

Watercolor paper warps because the water soaks into the paper fibers causing them to swell in size. This expansion is what causes the buckling. While it isn't possible to find watercolor paper that never buckles, heavier weighted paper holds their shape much better.

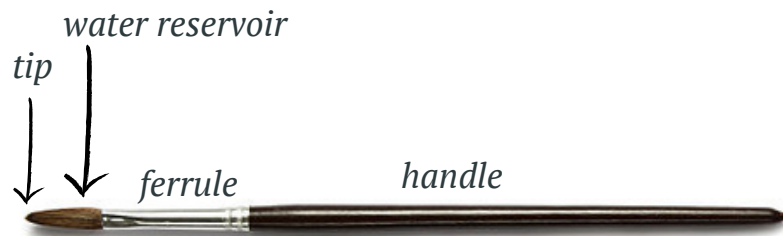
Brushes

What are they?

Watercolor brushes are generally made with softer materials because they're designed to hold water, which is what is used to transfer the pigments to the paper.

You will generally see watercolor brushes made out of things like soft synthetic materials and natural sable or squirrel hair.

Oil and acrylics brushes are made with things like hog hair and stiff synthetic materials because the paint is really thick and just needs to get transferred to the painting surface - no water necessary.



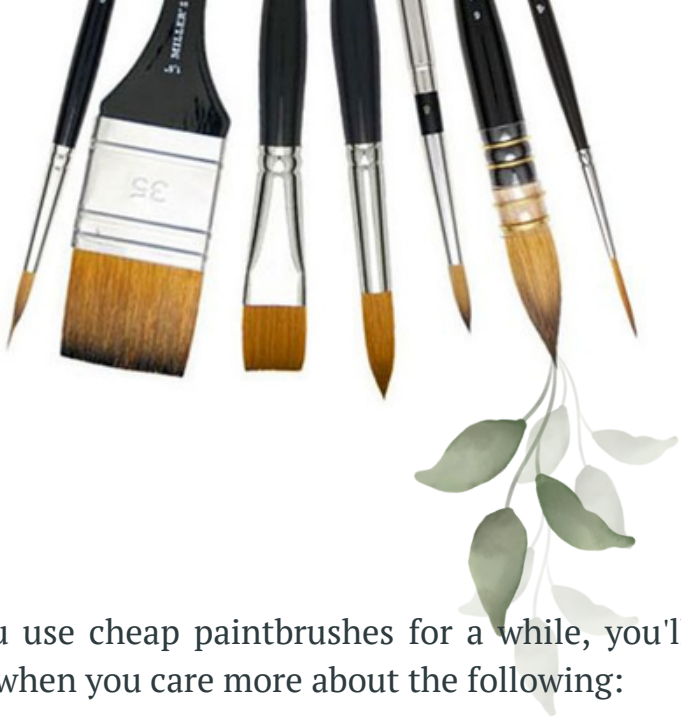
What do YOU need?

It's easiest to keep brushes down to a minimum once you've found out what works best for you!

Start with one good size round brush to get the feel for things. A 14 round brush is a good starting size. Some artists paint best with a full range of brushes, some only need one or two good brushes. I have loads of brushes but only tend to use a couple.

Next best would be getting a variety set of paintbrushes and when you've spent time with that, you'll know what you want and need to uplevel to.

If you plan to take your supplies on adventures, you'll definitely want some kind of protective case to hold your brushes.



After you use cheap paintbrushes for a while, you'll want to upgrade when you care more about the following:

Snap refers to filling a brush with water and flicking the water off sharply. The brush should snap to a sharp point (or its original shape in general).

Spring means how flexible the brush is at different strokes. Can you paint a curvy zigzag and have the brush move with your hand smoothly or does it remain in the shape it started?

Capacity/load refers to how much water a brush can hold. This varies depending on the size and shape of the brush, but certain brands and series of brushes have a better capacity than others.

Your brush strokes become more intentional the more you paint and thus you start recognizing these things.

Materials

No animal cruelty is good, though all natural brush hairs are apparently industry byproducts. Synthetic brushes are all petroleum byproducts and there are plenty of great synthetic brushes out there, too!

A smarty pants trivia tip: cold climates lead to longer haired animals whose hairs are best for watercolor brushes. That's why so many superb brush hairs are sourced from Siberia!

Some good natural brush materials include sables, squirrel, ox and goat. Steer clear of camel hair brushes, which is just an umbrella term for really cheap natural brushes.

Clean Up

Keeping your brushes clean prolongs their life (and your patience with them!). When pigment particles build up at the base of the brush, it gunks up and pushes hairs apart and stops the point from forming.

For proper clean up, rinse your brush in clean water. Maybe not every time, but often enough rinse your brush with mild soap and cool water, swirl the soapy brush in the palm of your hand and rinse. Repeat the washing and rinsing process until the waters run clear.

Don't leave your paintbrushes in rinse water for prolonged periods of time.

Watercolor Paints

When the joyful time has come for you to upgrade your paints, I recommend investing in professional grade paint tubes and filling your own half pans. This process gets you that much more intimate with your paints, and tubes go further than purchasing pans alone since you can refill them. A whole set of professional paint tubes will last you a very long time.

These are the professional paint brands you'll work up to:

Schminke (manufactured in Germany):

[Schmincke HORADAM® AQUARELL Color Box, 18 x 5 ml Tubes, Painting Set, Finest Premium Watercolors](#)

Daniel Smith (manufactured in Seattle):

[Daniel Smith Watercolor, 5ml tubes, Jean Haines Master Artist Set 10 Watercolor Tubes](#)

Winsor and Newton (manufactured in London):

[Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor Paint Set, Lightweight Sketchers' Box, 12 x 5ml Tubes](#)

[Winsor & Newton Cotman Watercolor Paint Set, 12 Colors, 8ml Tubes](#)

The following pages contain affiliate links. If you choose to purchase after clicking a link, I may receive a commission at no extra cost to you. If you plan on purchasing anything, using these links is an awesome way to support my small business! :) Stores like Dick Blick's and Cheap Joe's Art Supply stores are also excellent resources for your painting supplies.



Customization

If you would prefer to customize your own palette by purchasing individual tubes, you can always start by purchasing a dot card:

[Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor, Dot Card w/ Full Range of Colors](#)

[Daniel Smith 238 Watercolor Dot Color Chart, 4 Sheets](#)

[Schmincke - HORADAM® AQUARELL Dotcard with 140 Shades](#)



Brushes

This was my first cheapo paintbrush set, which was good enough to get me going but definitely on the cheaper side (both price and quality):

Sable Watercolor Brushes, Fuumuui 9pcs Detail to Mop Kolinsky Sable Brushes Round Pointed Professional Watercolor Brushes Perfect for Watercolor Gouache Acrylic Ink Painting

Eventually, you'll want to work up to higher quality brushes that will take your painting to the next level:

Royal & Langnickel Majestic Deluxe Watercolor Artist Brush Set, 5-Piece

da Vinci Brushes Watercolor Russian Red Sable Includes Series 36 Sizes 0, 1, 2, 4 & 6-Round Shape, Set, Black

Silver Brush Limited SLM 3099 Susan Louise Moyer Basic Watercolor Brush Set, Set of 3, Black Velvet Round Brushes, Sizes 4, 8, and 12

Escoda 1548/3 Versatil Series Artist Watercolor Travel 3 Brush Set, Synthetic Kolinsky

Professional Watercolor Squirrel Hair Paint Brushes by DUGATO

Paper

Journals:

Strathmore 300 Series Watercolor Paper Pad, 9x12 inches, 24 Sheets (140lb/300g).

Strathmore 483-5 Softcover Watercolor Art Journal, 24 Sheets

Canson Artist Series Watercolor Paper, Wirebound Pad, 5.5x8.5 inches, 20 Sheets (140lb/300g).

Watercolor Journal, 3.5x5.5", 140 LB, 300 GSM, tumuarta Cotton Paper, Cold Press, 24 Sheets

Blocks:

Arches Watercolor Block 9x12-inch Natural White 100% Cotton - 10 Sheets of Arches 300 lb Cold Press

Fluid Artist Watercolor Block, 300 lb (640 GSM) 100% Cotton Cold Press Pad, 4 x 6 inches, 10 Sheets

Extras

- Water cup
- Towel
- Palette (any non-porous surface will do)
- Pencil for sketching
- Water brushes when you don't want or have a water cup (especially great on-the-go or in tight spaces like an airplane!) (these are inherently cheap products)
 - [Upins 12 Piece Water Color Brush Pen Set](#)
- White gouache or masking fluid for making white in your painting
 - [M. Graham & Co. 2-Ounce Tube Gouache Paint, Titanium White](#)
 - [Winsor & Newton Designer's Gouache, 14 ml \(0.47oz\) tube, Permanent White](#)
 - [Holbein Gouache 15 ml Tube - Permanent White](#)
 - [Winsor & Newton Watercolor Medium, Art Masking Fluid](#)
 - [Daniel Smith Artist Masking Fluid](#)
- Empty palette tin (make sure there are enough half pans for the tube colors you think you want)
 - [Looneng Empty Watercolor Palette with 14 Empty Half Pans](#)
 - [53 Pieces Watercolor Paint Palette and Half Pans Set](#)

Pep Talk

I really hope you enjoyed this startup guide! Getting your tools and supplies together is the very first step in your new creative painting practice.

Sometimes in the beginning, getting your paints out can feel like a mission but I promise you the more you paint, the easier and more fun it becomes.

I recommend getting a small plein air setup (brushes in a protective kit, small watercolor journal, and a pan set) and taking it with you wherever you go! Nothing like a little painting session to enjoy the art of slowing down and seeing the world around us.

Remember: painting, and art making in general, is supposed to be RELAXING, freeing, enjoyable, stress-reducing, and overall just really amazing for your mental and physical health! So don't worry about creating masterpieces every time, or making it perfect - just enjoy the process and PLAY.

If you ever find yourself in a little painting rut, just remember the super simple 4-Step Process ...

- 1) Take out your supplies
- 2) Get your paintbrush wet and dip it in paint
- 3) Apply the paint to paper
- 4) Repeat :)

It's that easy. Enjoy! *-Juliene*

"The creative adult is the
child who survived."

-Unknown



PS: It's easy to feel like painting is not a priority, but there is nothing more important than getting in touch with your inner child and prioritizing JOY. Adulting is easier when your spirit feels lighter, and painting does just that. I truly hope you *create* the space and time for your painting practice.

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