

## Ten Tips To Improve Your Watercolor Paintings

Watercolor is a fast-working, spontaneous medium that requires confidence and some fast work alternated with periods of letting the painting “rest” and respond in it’s own way.

1. **USE THE BEST QUALITY MATERIALS YOU CAN AFFORD** - Using inferior materials – especially paint, paper and brushes will make this tricky medium even trickier. Professional grade, cotton rag paper that is moderately absorbent will also make it easier to handle and be confident with your very wet, very fluid washes. Both Arches and Saunders 140lb Cold Press Paper are great choices.
2. **PLAN FOR SUCCESS** – Watercolor is unforgiving and inflexible once the color is on the paper. Plan and explore your composition with small, thumbnail Value Composition Sketches and Color Studies. They will reveal compositional, color and value problems before you face that large blank sheet of paper. Making "corrections" and decisions at this stage saves trouble and frustration later.
3. **USE PLENTY OF WATER** – It’s not called watercolor for nothing! Water is the medium and is what allows the color pigments to disperse evenly and create the glowing transparent beauty that is unique to this medium. Even many experienced watercolorists use too little water. Good quality materials, especially paper, will help manage those fluid, free flowing washes.
4. **USE THE LARGEST BRUSH** – Use the largest brush you have for 80% of your painting. Large brushes hold more water and discourage fussiness. Using a large brush compels the use of lots of water and color and an emphasis on the overall composition.
5. **APPLY FLUID WASHES TO LARGE AREAS** – If you are using the largest brush, it will allow you to cover large areas with fluid washes that cover large areas quickly. Use the largest brush you have for 80% of your painting. Large brushes hold more water and discourage fussiness. Using a large brush compels the use of lots of water and color and an emphasis on the overall composition.

6. **LIMIT YOUR COLOR PALETTE** – It is easy to use every color on the palette, especially if you are working from a photo. Photos tend to tell us everything – relying on them for color decisions is likely to result in a painting that suffers ‘dis-unity’. Limited color palettes like those suggested by common color schemes will create harmony and allow you the chance to work with other aspects of “color”.
7. **LET COLOR MIX ON THE PAPER** – When using large brushes and lots of water, colors will mix and mingle on the surface of the paper organically. Let them! The action of water moving around on paper and in the process, mixing and mingling different colors in unexpected ways creates those passages that attract so many people to this medium. That single property is unique to this medium – one should take full advantage of it! Even better, these subtle shifts are visually interesting and represent interesting shifts in light that occur in nature.
8. **LET THE MEDIUM ‘SPEAK’** – Watercolor has a mind of its own – or so it can seem. This is a medium that invites one to at least share control. Its unique character is directly related to its ability to be spontaneous, shifting and to create the ‘unexpected’. Transparent watercolor manifests its voice in this character. Many of the most compelling watercolor paintings emerge from a conversation between artist and medium – the artist does this, the medium says that.
9. **“PUT DOWN THE BRUSH AND SLOWLY BACK AWAY”** - It's easy to keep fussing especially with details, and even more especially when you are not sure what to do next. The better choice, when you don't know what to do, is to DO NOTHING. Put down the brush, stand the painting up and step back. Take a good look at the painting and decide what to do, before doing anything. This takes practice and patience. Sometimes the next step becomes clear after hours or even days. Allow the process to play out.
10. **FINISH EVERY PAINTING** – Not every painting will end up being a success. But failed paintings often teach us more than successful ones. Let those failures be constructive. Take the time to consider what went right and what went wrong. Stand or hang it up in your studio. Take good long looks at the work and take time to consider what didn't work so well – you will learn a great deal in doing so.

Watercolor Methods lessons encourage adoption of all ten of these tips. #1 is covered in our [Basic Materials tutorials](#).

Nos. 2 – 10 are covered and emphasized in every lesson. Most of the full length lessons that are available with a Watercolor Essentials Membership include a value composition sketch tutorial and a color study tutorial as part of the painting lesson. These two preliminary steps are sooooo important! Including them in your painting process lets you make many decisions about your painting before facing that expensive, scary blank sheet of watercolor paper. More important is that these two steps let you approach the painting with confidence and freedom since so many important decisions about the composition, value arrangement and color choices have already been made.

The [Watercolor Methods Masterclass Membership](#) includes several learning track on advanced topics like Color, Value and Value Composition.

The Color learning track includes basic information on color including common color schemes.

The Value and Value Composition learning tracks cover the basics and help you discover how to use value contrasts more effectively in your paintings.

