

EXPLORING
watercolor +
gouache
SUPPLIES

a materials guide

from Kolbie Blume's writing desk

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THE LINKS

Welcome! My name is Kolbie -- thanks for joining me as we explore all of my favorite supplies for watercolor and gouache.

This first section lists all of my favorites along with links to purchase them. ***Before buying anything, my recommendation is to peruse the rest of this guide (including my suggested “starter sets” at the end) to get a feel for what supplies are right for you!***

Note: This list may contain affiliate links, which means I receive a small commission from qualifying purchases (not all links are affiliate). Using these links will come at no additional cost to you.

WATERCOLOR PAINT

STUDENT-GRADE

Paint in a tube

[Winsor & Newton Cotman](#)

[Royal & Langnickel](#)

Paint in a pan

[Winsor & Newton Cotman Sketchers Pocket Set](#)

[Art Philosophy Watercolor Sets](#)

[Kuretake Gansai Tambi \(12-Color Set\)](#)

[Kuretake Gansai Tambi \(48-Color Set\)](#)

[Arteza Watercolor Paint](#)

ARTIST-GRADE

Paint in a tube

[Daniel Smith Extra Fine Watercolors](#)

[Winsor & Newton Professional Series](#)

[Sennelier French Artists' Watercolor Tubes](#)

[M. Graham Artists' Watercolors](#)

[Schmincke Horadam Aquarell Artist Watercolors](#)

[Holbein Artists' Watercolor Tubes](#)

Paint in a pan

[Daniel Smith Watercolor Half Pans and Sets](#)

[Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor Half Pans and Sets](#)

[Sennelier French Artists' Watercolor Half Pans](#)

HANDMADE

Specializes in natural/traditional paint colors

[Greenleaf & Blueberry](#)

[Wildthorne](#)

[Letter Sparrow](#)

[Blue Pine Arts](#)

[Case for Making](#)

[Lua Handmade Watercolors](#)

[Hushwing Watercolors](#)

[The Sprout Creative](#)

[The Watercolour Factory](#)

Specializes in sparkly/iridescent/etc

[Cloverset Lettering](#)

[Hydracolour](#)

[Tiny Cactus Designs](#)

[The Southern Brush](#)

GOUACHE PAINT

STUDENT-GRADE

[Arteza Gouache Paint](#)

[HIMI Jelly Gouache](#)

[Royal & Langnickel Gouache](#)

[Jeece Finest Gouache](#)

ARTIST-GRADE (Artists' Gouache and Designers Gouache)

[Holbein Artists' Gouache](#)

[Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache](#)

[M. Graham Artists' Gouache](#)

ACRYLA GOUACHE (water-resistant gouache)

[Holbein Acrylic Gouache](#)

[Liquitex Professional Acrylic Gouache](#)

BRUSHES

STUDENT-GRADE

[Princeton SNAP! Golden Taklon Series](#) (synthetic)
[Royal & Langnickel Zen All Media Brushes](#) (synthetic)
[Winsor & Newton Cotman Watercolor Brushes](#) (synthetic)

ARTIST-GRADE

[Princeton Heritage Series](#) (synthetic)
[Princeton Velvetouch Series](#) (synthetic)
[Princeton Aqua Elite Series](#) (synthetic)
[Princeton Neptune Series](#) (synthetic but most like real sable)
[Princeton Hake Series 2900](#) (natural - for large washes)
[Utrecht Synthetic Sablette Brushes](#) (synthetic)
[Silver Brush Black Velvet Brushes](#) (mix of synthetic and natural)
[Winsor & Newton Series 7 Kolinsky Sable Brushes](#) (natural)

SMALL BUSINESS (all synthetic, cruelty-free, and produced by small businesses)

[Wonder Forest](#)
[Polina Bright](#)
[Craftamo](#)
[Betty Hayways](#)

TRAVEL

[Pentel Aquash Water Brush Set](#) (synthetic)
[Princeton Aqua Elite Series Travel Round](#) (synthetic)
[Silver Brush Black Velvet Voyage Travel Set](#) (mix of synthetic and natural)

PAPER

STUDENT-GRADE

[Fabriano Studio Watercolor Paper](#)
[Canson Montval Watercolor Blocks](#)
[Canson XL Watercolor Paper](#)
[Strathmore 400 Series Watercolor Paper Pads](#)

ARTIST-GRADE

[Arches Natural White Watercolor Sheets](#)
[Arches Watercolor Blocks](#)
[Blick Premier Watercolor Block](#)
[Fabriano Artistico Traditional White Watercolor Blocks](#)
[Fabriano Artistico Traditional White - Hot Press](#)
[L'Aquarelle Canson Heritage Watercolor Blocks](#)
[Legion Stonehenge Aqua Cold Press](#)
[Legion Stonehenge Aqua Cold Press - Mini](#)
[Magnani Round Watercolor Blocks](#)

TRAVEL

[Canson Montval Field Watercolor ArtBooks](#)
[Hahnemühle Watercolor Books](#)

USEFUL THINGS - HANDMADE

[Reusable Brush Cloths - Her Art & Crafts](#)
[Ceramic Artist Paint Cup - BNCA Pottery](#)
[Ceramic Artist Paint Cup - Sylvan Clay Works](#)
[Handmade Ceramic Palette - Sylvan Clay Works](#)
[Handmade Ceramic Palette - Mrs. Dessert Studio](#)
[Handmade Ceramic Palette - Sugarhouse Ceramic Co.](#)
[Handmade Ceramic Palette - Sun to Sea Design](#)

OTHER USEFUL THINGS

[Tombow Pencil](#)
[Tombow Eraser](#)
[Faber-Castell Kneaded Eraser](#)
[Dr. Ph. Martin's Bleedproof White](#)
[The Masters Brush Cleaner and Preserver](#)
[Uni-ball Signo White Gel Pen](#)
[Sakura Gelly Roll White Pen](#)
[Masking Tape](#)
[Skinny Masking Tape](#)
[Winsor & Newton Masking Fluid](#)
[Silicon Brush Set](#)
[Crayola White Crayon](#)
[Crayola Broadline Markers](#)
[Embossing Heat Tool](#)

[Plastic Mixing Palette](#)
[Blick Folding Palette](#)
[Mijello Airtight/Leakproof Palette](#)
[Nesting Porcelain Bowls](#)
[Butcher Tray](#)
[Prismacolor Premier Colored Pencils](#)
[Faber-Castell Watercolor Pencils](#)
[Sakura Micron Archival Fineliners](#)
[Clipboard](#)
[Art Toolkit Metal Palette](#)
[Gooseneck Phone Holder](#)

MY FAVORITE ART BOOKS

[*Wilderness Watercolor Landscapes*](#), by Kolbie Blume (my book!)
[*The New Color Mixing Companion*](#), by Josie Lewis
[*Watercolor Botanicals*](#), by Eunice Sun
[*Watercolor With Me in the Forest*](#), by Dana Fox
[*Painting Florals with Gouache*](#), by Vidhi Khandelwal
[*Modern Watercolor Botanicals*](#), by Sarah Simon
[*Get Started with Gouache*](#), by Emma Block
[*15-Minute Watercolor Masterpieces*](#), by Anna Koliadych
[*Florals By Hand: How to Draw and Design Modern Floral Projects*](#), by Alli Koch
[*Everyday Watercolor*](#), by Jenna Rainey
[*Modern Calligraphy*](#), by Leslie Tieu
[*No-Fail Watercolor*](#), by Mako
[*Hand Lettering for Beginners*](#), by Sarah Ensign

EXPLORING YOUR SUPPLIES

One of the most fun parts of diving into watercolor is also one of the most confusing and overwhelming: supplies.

There are SO MANY different brands of varying quality and price, and when I first started, I had no idea where to look. To save you some time (and money), I've compiled a short and sweet guide to help you decide which tools you want in your personal watercolor arsenal.

I'll start with a rundown of different supplies + definitions (so you know what you're working with). Understanding these terms has completely changed the way I view watercolor, and they influence every purchase I make.

I did my best to make the descriptions thorough but succinct -- still, if you'd rather just skip to the curated lists of "starter sets," head to the end of this guide.

THE BIG THREE

First, let's talk about the three most important supplies for your watercolor exploring: **paint**, **brushes**, and **paper**.

Paint

When it comes to paint, there are several important characteristics to know and explore. **Here's a quick rundown of definitions and why they're important.**

TERMS

Pigment: Finely ground organic or synthetic powder that puts the "color" in "watercolor."

Binder: The substance (usually gum arabic, sometimes honey) that helps pigment stick to your paper after it's dry. The two most important ingredients in watercolor paint are pigment + binder.

Lightfastness: The degree to which paint will remain vibrant over time. **High lightfast** paints (grade I) will not fade, especially if you take care of your paintings (put them in a frame, don't keep them in direct sunlight). **Low lightfast** paints (grade III) will eventually fade.

Grade: The quality level of your paint.

Artist-grade watercolor paint is top-of-the-line, professional quality. **Student-grade** watercolor paint is less expensive, but it's considerably lower quality. That's because student-grade paint is

made with a bit of pigment + fillers and extenders to make the color go further, while artist-grade paint typically only uses pure pigment + binder.

You can create beautiful pieces with student-grade paints, but the downsides are that they don't mix quite as well (color mixes come out muddied), they're not as vibrant, and they're not usually lightfast.

Series: Price tier of artist-grade paint based on the rarity of the pigment. Series 1 colors are the most common pigments and least expensive. Series 5 paints are the most expensive because the pigments are quite rare and difficult to mine.

Opacity/Transparency: The degree to which you can see through the paint after it's on your paper. Watercolor's transparency is one of its most magical qualities, and the one that sets it apart from other kinds of paint. Some watercolor pigments have a higher transparency than others (one fun word for high-transparency is "**luminous**"), but all watercolor paints are transparent to some degree depending on how much water you add to your paint.

Staining: The degree to which paint cannot be removed or **lifted** (removed using a towel or paint brush) from the paper, even while you're painting. All watercolor can be somewhat moveable while still wet on the paper (this is called the **wet-on-wet technique**), but some pigments stain the paper more than others even during the wet-on-wet technique.

Granulation: The degree of pigment visibility after the paint is dry. Some paints have larger pigment particles than others, so you can visibly see (or even feel) a texture in the paint once dry. These kinds of paints are called **granulating** pigments, and they're great for adding an earthy texture and complexity to a piece if that's what you're looking for (Potter's Pink is one pigment that comes to mind). Others are **non-granulating**, which means they have smaller pigment particles that mostly stay evenly dispersed when dry, leaving a smooth and even texture.

A quick note on handmade paint: as far as I know, most handmade paints are artist-grade because paint makers are mixing the paint themselves with pigment powders + binders. Handmade paint is often more granulated than commercial paint because it's mulled by hand, and most of the handmade sets I own have more of an earthy texture and look about them, which makes them unique and beautiful in their own right.

WATERCOLOR FORMS

You can use watercolor in several different forms, like from a tube or in a pan, or even in non-traditional forms like a stick or a sheet. It can be fun to explore all the different types, but I typically stick to paint in a tube or a pan palette set.

Watercolor in a pan is likely what every beginner is most familiar with -- paint collected in dehydrated cakes, ready to be activated with water. Pan sets are great if you're looking for a wide array of colors all at once or a collection of colors that work well together. They're also handy for traveling and painting on the go.

Watercolor in a tube has a thick paste consistency, and it's almost always my preference because it's the best bang for your buck. The downside is that it feels more expensive compared to pan sets, since you're buying a whole lot of one color rather than a little of multiple colors. It's like buying in bulk at Costco instead of individually at your local grocery store -- you get more stuff to use over the long term, but it costs more upfront.

Even though tubed watercolor is somewhat wet coming right out of the tube as paste, you'll still need to activate it with some water to make it that beautiful liquid consistency. It's also really easy to use more paint than you actually need if you're using it straight out of the tube. That's why I usually squeeze out some paint onto an empty palette and let it dry for a few days before I use it, essentially creating my own DIY pan palette set.

I have a [YouTube tutorial demonstrating this process](#) for your reference.

(Note that this method only works for artist-grade tubed watercolor -- student-grade tubed watercolor usually cracks and degrades after it's dried out, rendering it useless.)

GOUACHE VS WATERCOLOR

Gouache is a wholly underrated paint medium, in my opinion -- but it's making a comeback! Thank goodness.

One of the reasons I (as a watercolor artist) love gouache is because it's so similar to watercolor -- it's kind of like a baby step between watercolor and acrylic or even oil paint.

In fact, gouache and watercolor are so similar that gouache is sometimes called "opaque watercolor."

But what are the differences, really? Here's the breakdown.

Gouache and watercolor have the same basic recipe, with two important exceptions:

- 1) **Gouache has larger pigment particles**, which allows the pigment to be more opaque and used as a paste
- 2) **Gouache has an additional white pigment**, like chalk, to help increase its opacity

Those differences allow gouache to have many of the magical characteristics of watercolor (luminosity, transparency, ethereal textures) when you use it with enough water, while also maintaining the ability to create vibrant blends and opaque textures as a paste, like acrylic.

Also unlike most watercolor and acrylic, **traditional gouache can be reactivated after it's dry on paper** (similar to oil paint). This quality makes transparent layers tricky, but it also gives an incredible versatility in terms of when you can add details, highlights, and shadows to your artwork.

And finally, like watercolor, gouache can be squeezed onto a palette, left to dry, and then reused later. The only thing is: it likely will only have a translucent watercolor effect at that point, as it won't be a paste anymore.

So, basically, gouache can look like watercolor, but it can also be a matte, flat, more water-soluble acrylic substitute (kind of like poster colors) when used as paste.

Note: If you want gouache that is water-resistant when dry, acrylic gouache is the way to go. It's a mix between acrylic and gouache -- water-soluble when wet, water-resistant when dry, but also dries matte and flat, like gouache.

GOUACHE QUALITY + FORMS

Gouache comes in two main grades: student-grade and professional-grade.

Student-grade gouache, also like watercolor, is perfectly usable and a great budget-friendly option if you're just trying out the medium. The main downsides are similar to watercolor -- color mixes are a bit muddy because you don't have the pure pigment, and it isn't as reusable after it's dried on a palette (the paint usually crumbles and cracks).

This just means you should be careful not to squeeze out too much paint onto your palette if you're using student-grade because you might not be able to use the extras later. (Although, I have been pleasantly surprised in the past by some student-grade pigments, so never say never, I guess.)

Professional-grade gouache comes in two different kinds: **Designers Gouache** and **Artists' Gouache**. To be completely honest with you, I've done at least a couple hours of research on the difference between the two, and I've gotten mixed conclusions, LOL. I didn't go to art school, so Google is my library, and sometimes, it comes up inconclusive.

Based on my own experience, Designers Gouache is just a *little* below the quality of Artists' Gouache. That said, I use both of them extensively with no problems. Some pigments are not as opaque as other pigments, but that's true of paint across the board.

As far as I can tell, gouache mainly comes in two forms: **in a tube (most popular)**, and **as a paste in an airtight container (rarely)**. Generally, I recommend purchasing in a tube and using individually as necessary because sometimes airtight containers can leak -- but you do you!

COLOR

Finally, let's talk about color. If you're anything like me, you may be sorely tempted to BUY ALL THE THINGS when it comes to color, but did you know that you can make 100+ colors from only a few pigments?

Red, yellow, and blue are the traditional **Primary Colors**, and depending on the hues you buy, you can mix them to create just about every color you'll need. The traditional Primary Colors often mix to create more muted, earthy tones, which are great for landscapes or portraits.

Magenta, yellow, and cyan are the **Modern Primary Colors**, the color combo most often used in your printer. Combined with **black**, the CMYK color wheel makes every hue on the spectrum. The Modern Primary Colors mix more vibrant, bright tones than the traditional Primary Colors.

[Check out this YouTube video where I demonstrate how to make both color wheels.](#)

There's a lot of debate about what color combinations make up the "real" primary colors, with valid arguments on all sides. Basically, I'm of the opinion that you can make great art no matter what color combos you use -- but it's good to know how different colors react together. That's why I use the traditional Primary Colors for landscapes and the Modern Primary Colors for more vibrant illustrations.

Regardless of which way you land, starting your base palette with these six paint colors (found in most brands) will give you a solid foundation for learning about color and paint!

Lemon Yellow, Carmine, Quinacridone Rose, Prussian Blue, Phthalo Blue, Lamp Black

Brushes

Paint brushes come in many shapes and sizes, but when it comes to watercolor and gouache painting, I usually only use three different shapes: **round, filbert, and flat**.

Round paint brushes have the bristles bound together in a circle and tapered up to a point. They are my everyday brush, and I have them in a lot of different sizes! For beginners, I recommend starting with **round paint brushes in sizes 0, 6, and 12**.

I keep a few flat paint brushes to paint geometric shapes and patterns, and I'd recommend beginners start with a **flat paint brush in size 6**.

Filbert brushes (bound together like a flat brush but with a rounded shape to the bristles), I use mainly with gouache because they're a little more versatile depending on how I'm using the paint. I'd recommend starting with a **filbert brush in size 8**.

If you're starting to paint large pieces where you need a lot of water to begin with, I also recommend a large wash brush. My favorite is the Princeton Hake brush because it holds a lot of water at once and spreads it pretty evenly across the page.

QUALITY

The differences between student-grade and artist-grade paint brushes mainly have to do with how well they keep their shape and how well they hold water. Artist-grade round paint brushes have excellent water retention (they can hold a lot of water) while still maintaining an even flow as you paint (so the water doesn't plop off the brush all at once). They also keep their shape well over time, including the point at the tip of the bristles (that point should snap into shape as soon as the brush is wet).

Student-grade brushes still work, but they don't keep their shape very well and usually don't have a very sharp tip, so I've found they make it difficult to really dive into watercolor techniques. They're also not that much cheaper than artist-grade brushes, so I typically recommend spending the few extra dollars for quality brushes.

BRUSH CARE

Investing in good brushes means taking good care of them. Here are some tips to keep your brushes in top shape:

Do not leave your paint brush bristles-down in a cup of water for any period of time. Eventually, this will ruin the shape of your brush, and it may even cause the bristles to loosen from the ferrule. Instead, lay your brush down flat or on a brush rest when you're not using it.

Always wash your paint brushes in clean water after using them. If you don't, the pigment may degrade the binding in the ferrule. I do this most often by holding them under a gentle stream of water (usually the kitchen sink) and lightly moving my fingers from the ferrule to the tip of the bristles to shake loose any pigment. Use as little pressure as possible. You can also use a brush cleaner to get some of the more stubborn pigments out.

Let your brushes dry flat. If you don't store them flat (I keep mine handles-down in a mug on my desk), let them dry flat for at least a few hours before storing them away. Otherwise, water will seep into the ferrule and eventually loosen the bristles from the brush.

Hold your round brush at an angle when painting. I've ruined my fair share of round brushes by tapping them straight down onto the paper -- keeping the tip sharp is vital to mastering watercolor techniques like hairline strokes and varying pressure.

Wash off your brush in a figure-eight motion. Instead of jamming your brush down to the bottom of your water cup to get off paint between strokes, use quick figure-eight motions to loosen the pigment from your brush. If necessary, you can gently swipe against the side of the cup to help, but using the bottom of the cup is hard on the bristles and may loosen or dull them over time.

HAIR TYPE

Finally, let's chat about synthetic vs animal hair brushes. Traditionally, paint brushes are made from weasel, squirrel, or sable hair. Real sable-hair brushes are expensive, and while they have excellent painting qualities, I know many of us are looking for cruelty-free alternatives. Luckily, there are a lot of options there -- and it's important to note that **I prefer synthetic sable hair regardless, especially for beginners.** In my experience, it's easier to control water flow with synthetic brushes, and they snap back into shape on their own a bit better.

Paper

Paper is often the most overlooked material in The Big Three, *but it's just as (if not MORE) important than paint + brushes.*

Most of the time, if you have a frustrating watercolor problem (paint is too dull, can't get colors to blend, paint dries too fast and leaves paint lines, the paper is warping, the tape is tearing the paper, etc), the problem can be solved with higher quality paper.

QUALITY

Like both paint and brushes, you can purchase student-grade or artist-grade watercolor paper. **Student-grade** watercolor paper is made from **wood pulp** (meaning, a bunch of different cheaper materials). **Artist-grade** watercolor paper is **acid-free 100% cotton.**

Student-grade watercolor paper is great for practice, and it can work well for beginners. It's pretty inexpensive (compared to artist-grade), so you can freely explore without worrying so much about the cost.

Artist-grade watercolor is considerably higher-quality. While more expensive, 100% cotton watercolor paper makes your paints much more vibrant, and it holds water much better. Occasionally, I'll use student-grade paper for practice, but **I almost exclusively use artist-grade paper for my paintings.**

TEXTURE

Watercolor paper comes in three main textures: **rough**, **hot press**, and **cold press**.

Rough watercolor paper has a lot of **tooth** (the surface feel of the paper), so it's extremely textured. You can get some cool washes on rough paper, but it's difficult to get smooth strokes because the texture of the paper will cause the bristles on your brush to flick around.

Hot press watercolor paper has little-to-no tooth. It's made using a heat press process that results in a smooth surface. (Great for gouache when you're using it as a paste.)

Cold press watercolor paper is somewhere in the middle. It has tooth and texture, but not as much as rough paper. Cold press is my favorite!

WEIGHT

Watercolor paper also comes in varying weights, indicating how much the paper weighs in a full ream. I'd recommend painting with at least **140 lb (300 gsm) watercolor paper** to keep warping to a minimum.

Still, warping is inevitable. Regardless of how heavy your paper is, it's still, you know, *paper*. Water will always damage it at least a little bit.

STRETCHING

The traditional method to avoid warping is to stretch your paper beforehand. **Watercolor paper stretching** is a process that involves fully submerging your paper in water and then taping it to a table or stiff board to dry completely before using it. Stretching is kind of an arduous task, and I know most beginners don't have time for that, so I have a couple workarounds.

First, you can use masking tape (or painter's tape, or washi tape -- any tape that's not too adhesive) to tape down your dry watercolor paper and keep it taut while painting.

*If you're using tape to keep your paper taut, note that **student-grade paper does not hold up as well as artist-grade paper**. The tape will likely lift or tear student-grade paper as it comes off. My best advice is to take the tape off slowly and at an angle to avoid tearing.*

Second, you can purchase your paper in a **watercolor block**, which is a collection of sheets bound and glued together on all four sides. You can paint right on a watercolor block and then cut out your sheet after you've finished painting. (I typically use a letter opener or a palette knife.)

Note: If you're looking to save a little money on professional paper and don't mind stretching/taping down the paper while painting, consider purchasing it in large sheets or rolls and cutting it to a manageable size (like 5x7inch or 8x10inch) yourself. It's much more cost effective -- buying it in blocks is more for convenience.

OTHER USEFUL THINGS

In addition to paint, brushes, and paper, here are a few other things I like to have on hand.

2 cups of water: one to wash off your dirty brush, and one that stays clean so you can mix colors with clean water. You can use any kind of cup, but I like to use something heavy that will easily stabilize on my desk -- like a ceramic artist cup, mason jar, or old mug.

Pencil + eraser: for sketching beforehand if necessary.

Kneaded eraser: a special kind of malleable eraser that you can roll over your sketch to gently lift some of the pencil. Kneaded erasers are helpful because if a sketch is too dark, it will show through the paint.

Brush cleaner: a soap cake you can use with water to deep clean your brushes. Instructions from Blick: Start by wetting your brush and working up a lather on the hard cake. To clean your brushes, simply rinse the cleaner off, repeat as needed, and reshape the brush.

Q-tips: useful for mopping up excess water.

White gouache: traditional watercolorists use the white space of the paper to form white in their paintings, but as a self-taught rule-breaker, I like to use white gouache sometimes for things like stars and snow.

White and/or gold gel pen: gel pens are fun to use for mixed media pieces. Once your watercolor wash is dry, you can draw right on the wash to make fun designs pop!

Masking tape: for taping down your paper to keep it taut while painting.

Towel/Sponge: for blotting off excess water and/or paint from your brush during painting.

Masking fluid: a liquid latex mixture that's used to keep the paper dry and white over large washes. Apply masking fluid anywhere on your paper (*not with a paint brush you care about because it'll likely ruin the bristles*), and let it dry. Then, keep painting your scene as if the spot with masking fluid was white. After your painting is dry, remove the masking fluid (either by rubbing with your fingers or with an eraser) to reveal the white of the paper underneath.

Note: I find masking fluid difficult to use, so I usually try to go without it if possible.

Silicon brush: for use with masking fluid. This is a “brush” made with silicon, which is a handy way to apply masking fluid without ruining any bristled brushes.

White crayon: for a fun mixed-media water resist technique.

Salt: for adding texture to wet washes.

Embossing heat tool: for drying layers manually rather than waiting for them to dry naturally.

Mixing palette: for mixing colors and/or curating custom palettes of paint. I’ve used plastic foldable palettes, ceramic and porcelain palettes, and I’ve even used dinner plates or plastic bags in a pinch!

Plastic palettes can be tricky for mixing because the coating on them often makes the paint bead up instead of mix together. One way to avoid this is to sand the palette beforehand with a bit of sandpaper until it’s smooth. For your reference, I used plastic palettes for years before upgrading to ceramic.

The ceramic palettes were worth the upgrade for me because:

- a) they blend paint beautifully
- b) they usually wash completely clean and don’t stain (though there are some exceptions depending on the palette)
- c) they’re heavy, so they stay in place on my desk
- d) as long as I don’t throw them across the room, they should last forever (artist heirlooms, anyone??)
- e) I love supporting small businesses, and
- f) I love making pieces of art with pieces of art

Because of all the benefits listed above, ceramic palettes are more expensive. They are also heavier, so they don’t usually travel well. Currently, I keep a large ceramic palette (and a few smaller ones) on my desk with my favorite colors for everyday use, and I use a plastic or tin palette for travel.

Water-based, water-soluble markers: for makeshift or substitute watercolor! Just scribble some ink on a palette or plastic bag and activate with water and a paint brush.

Water brush: for painting on the go. It’s a handy little brush that holds some water in the barrel of the handle and drips it onto the bristles -- no need for a cup of water. These can be tricky to use, and I wouldn’t replace your paint brushes with them, but they’re useful in the wild.

Colored pencils: for more mixed-media fun! Draw on top of your watercolor doodles for a cool sketchy effect.

Watercolor pencils: colored pencils made from watercolor pigment. Scribble these onto your paper and then activate with water for a handy watercolor effect. Can be a useful tool for sketching beforehand to avoid pencil lines in your work, or to make artwork as a standalone medium.

Archival ink fineliner pen: for fine sketching and mixed-media work. Watercolor and black ink sketches make for a fun combo! Make sure to use archival (aka permanent) ink if you want to sketch first and paint on top, or else the ink will reactivate and go blurry.

Clipboards (varying sizes): for managing multiple pieces at a time. Tape down your paper to the clipboard, paint a layer, and then set it to the side to dry while you work on something else.

Gooseneck phone holder: for easy video recording of your paintings! Even if you don't want to share to social media, it can be fun to make videos of your process as another creative venture.

THE STARTER SETS

Phew! That was a lot to take in. Now for what you've been waiting for... here are my curated "starter sets" for The Big Three (paint, brushes, and paper).

These are not hard-and-fast lists -- mostly, they're what I thought would be fun and convenient at the time I made this guide. Any of the supplies in my favorites list, even if they're not in any of my "starter sets," would work just as well.

WATERCOLOR

STUDENT-GRADE

#1 - No-Budget Starter Pack (under \$15)

If you have next-to-nothing to spend but want to try out some techniques, this list includes inexpensive supplies you can usually find around the house and/or purchase for very little money.

- Crayola Broad Line Washable Markers (to use for makeshift watercolors)
- Plastic bag or dinner plate for a mixing palette
- Princeton SNAP! Round Brush, size 6
- Canson XL Watercolor Pad

#2 - Small Budget Starter Pack (under \$30)

If you have a few more dollars to spend on quality student-grade supplies instead of scavenging around the house, here's what I'd recommend.

- Winsor & Newton Cotman Watercolor in Tubes
 - Permanent Rose
 - Lemon Yellow Hue #1
 - Intense Phthalo Blue
- Princeton SNAP! Round Brush, sizes 6 & 12
- Canson XL Watercolor Pad
- Legion Cold Press Mini Pad

Birthday Gift Starter Packs (around \$50)

These packs are great options if you're a beginner on a tiny budget, but you have friends or family who might be willing to part with a few extra dollars for a special occasion.

Pack #1 (All the Colors)

- Winsor & Newton Cotman Sketchers Pocket Set
- Princeton SNAP! Brush Set 1
- Canson XL Watercolor Pad
- Fabriano Artístico Cold Press Block

Pack #2 (The Masterpiece)

- Art Philosophy Watercolor Confections (Essence)
- Princeton Heritage Round Brush, size 6
- Canson Montval Block
- Legion Cold Press Watercolor Block

Pack #3 (So Extra)

- Kuretake Gansai Tambi Watercolor Pans
- Kuretake Gansai Tambi - Starry Colors
- Princeton SNAP! Brush Set 2
- Canson Montval Watercolor Block
- Fabriano Studio Watercolor Pad

Pack #4 (The Traveler)

- Winsor & Newton Cotman Sketchers Pocket Set
- Pentel Aquash Water Brush Set
- Hahnemühle Watercolor Book

ARTIST-GRADE

When you want to take your watercolor game to the next level, here are some suggested sets of artist-grade supplies. Note that these starter kits start a little more expensive than the student-grade sets -- that's because these supplies are higher quality!

#1 - The Sampler Set (\$15)

- Daniel Smith Watercolor Sample Card
- Legion Cold Press Mini Pad
- Utrecht Synthetic Sablette Round, Size 6

#2 - Budget-Friendly Professional (around \$50)

- (3) Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor Tubes, 5mL
 - Carmine, Lemon Yellow Deep, Prussian Blue
- Utrecht Synthetic Sablette Round, Sizes 6 and 10
- Legion Stonehenge Aqua Cold Press

#3 - Professional Lite (around \$100)

- (8) Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor Tubes, 5mL
- Carmine, Scarlet Lake, Lemon Yellow Deep, Yellow Ochre, Hooker's Green, Prussian Blue, Payne's Gray, Lamp Black
- Princeton Heritage Synthetic Sable Set of 4
- Blick Premier Watercolor Block

#4 - Professional Plus (\$150+)

- (20) Daniel Smith Extra Fine Watercolor Tubes, 5mL
- Opera Pink, Quinacridone Rose, Carmine, Pyrrol Scarlet, Yellow Ochre, Green Gold, Lemon Yellow, Hooker's Green, Perylene Green, Olive Green, Phthalo Turquoise, Phthalo Blue (Green Shade), Prussian Blue, Indigo, Payne's Gray, French Ultramarine, Rosamarine, Perylene Violet, Burnt Umber, Lamp Black
- Princeton Heritage Round, Sizes 0 and 4
- Princeton Neptune Box Set of 4
- Arches Watercolor Block

#5 - Professional Travel (\$150+)

- Winsor & Newton Professional Watercolor Compact Set
- Princeton Aqua Elite Travel Round, Set of 4
- Paul Rubens Watercolor Paper Block with Leather Cover
- Hahnemühle Watercolor Book

GOUACHE

#1 - Beginner Set (under \$50)

- Arteza Set of 24
- Princeton Velvetouch Filbert, Size 8
- Princeton Snap!, Flat Wash, ¾"
- Canson XL Watercolor Pad

#2 - Intermediate Set (around \$50)

- Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache, Set of 6
- Craftamo Water Edition Set
- Canson XL Watercolor Pad

#3 - Professional Set A (around \$100)

- Holbein Artists' Gouache, Set of 12 (5mL)
- Princeton Velvetouch, Set of 4
- Fabriano Artístico Watercolor Block, Hot Press

#4 - Professional Set B (\$150+)

- Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache, Set of 10
- Holbein Artists' Gouache 15mL tubes: Rose, Prussian Blue, Ash Blue, Ash Green, Lilac
- Princeton Snap! Golden Taklon, Set 2
- Princeton Velvetouch Filbert, Size 8
- Princeton Heritage Flat, Size 6
- Legion Hot Press Aqua Block

#5 - Professional Set C (\$150+)

- Holbein Artists' Gouache, Set of 18 (15mL)
- Winsor & Newton Designers Gouache, additional tubes: Cyprus Green, Pale Rose Blush, Indigo, Oxide of Chromium, Perylene Violet, Perylene Maroon
- Princeton Aqua Elite Brushes, Set of 4
- Princeton Velvetouch Filbert, Size 8
- Craftamo Water Edition Set
- Legion Cold Press Aqua Block
- Arches Hot Press Block

And... that's a wrap! Thank you for taking a stroll with me through all things watercolor and gouache supplies. My aim for this guide is to give you the best footing, no matter where you are in your painting journey.

If this guide helped you and you want to share, feel free to tag me on Instagram (@thiswritingdesk) -- I'd love to see how you put this knowledge to use.

Happy painting!
-KB