

SKETCHBOOK ADVENTURES

Chapter 3: Watercolor Techniques

Watercolors are one of my absolute favorite tools to use in my sketchbook. I shied away from them for years when I first started making art because I always associated watercolors with more traditional representative art like those watercolor landscape painting you see in beach hotels. I finally started using watercolors because they're compact. I was headed off to Europe for the first time and couldn't fit my acrylic paints in my suitcase. I picked up a small 4-inch by 5-inch travel watercolor set and the first time I pulled it out in a café in Spain I fell in love with the versatility of painting with watercolors. I didn't have to worry about running out of paint because when you're working with watercolors a little goes a LONG way. I had that first tiny travel set for four years!

At first I just used watercolors to add color to my drawings but then I began experimenting with starting a page in my sketchbook with a watercolor background, using watercolor strokes to add pattern to pieces and trying out different techniques like splattering and using salt. Below we'll explore some of my favorite watercolor techniques and at the end of this chapter you can watch a video showing these techniques as well as download my top watercolor tips and tricks, color mixing examples and more.

How to use watercolors:

Watercolors require five things: watercolor paint, paintbrush, water, paper towel or towel, and paper. If you want to use watercolors in your sketchbook I highly suggest either getting a sketchbook with paper that works with wet or dry media, or using watercolor paper and then adhering it to your sketchbook. If you use regular paper the water doesn't soak in as well and will run off. To begin, you'll dip your paintbrush in water, then in paint. The amount of water and paint will depend on how dark or light you want your colors to appear.



Flat wash:

A flat wash creates a solid colored background on the page. To create a flat wash, prop your sketchbook up so that the top is farther away from you than the bottom. Dip your paint brush in water, then in paint, and paint a line across the top of your paper from left to right. Repeat dipping your brush in water and paint, trying to use the same amount of water and paint as you used the first time, and paint a line across the paper from left to right again. Paint it just underneath but slightly overlapping the bottom of the first line. Repeat until your paper is full. If the background isn't consistent, dip your brush in water and then dab some of the water off on a towel and starting at the top, paint your brush across the whole page from left to right, starting from the top and ending at the bottom.



Graded wash:

A graded or ombre wash is very similar to a flat wash except as you move across the page the color gets lighter or darker. Follow the same steps as a flat wash but after the first line of paint gradually decrease the amount of paint and add more water. By the time you get to the last line there should be mostly (or only) water on your brush.



Brush strokes:

Brush strokes are great for creating patterns (revisit the inspirational shapes download from the elements of design chapter to get ideas) and letters in the background of your page or in open areas. To make brush strokes, you'll need a paint brush that is thinner at the tip than it is at the base where it connects to the handle. Brushes like this create thin or thick lines depending on the amount of pressure you use when you're painting. For a thin line use less pressure, and for a thick line use more.



Color fill:

Watercolors are an efficient way to fill a space with color. If you practice with watercolors and have good pressure control, you can do this freehand and paint shapes directly on the page. If you don't, I suggest lightly drawing the shape on the page in pencil then filling them in with watercolor. Once the watercolor is dry you can erase your pencil lines. Note: When you erase your lines, some of the watercolor will also get erased so be prepared for what you painted to be a bit lighter.



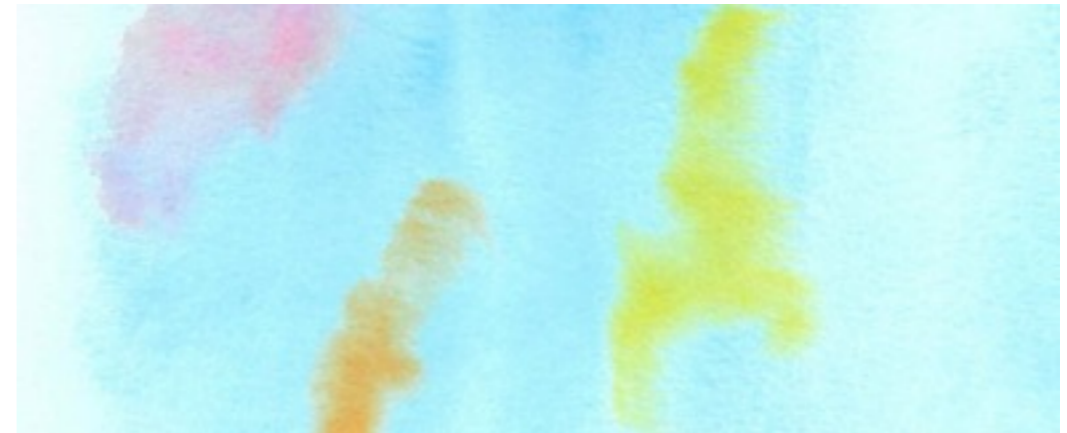
Salt:

I love the fluidity of watercolors and the way they can create texture on the page without adding thickness. Using salt is a simple way to create texture in watercolors. While your page is wet, sprinkle some salt on it. The salt will absorb the water. Once the page is dry, just brush the salt off. You'll have a page dappled with organic pattern and dark and light spots.



Wet in wet:

The wet in wet watercolor technique involves painting just water on the page and then adding color. This creates pale fluid colors on the page that bleed into one another with undefined edges. The colors will spread into each other and you'll end up with unintentional patterns of curves and lines.



Dry brush:

This technique is a misnomer because you can't use watercolors without using a bit of water, but the dry brush technique means that you're using a very small amount of water. Dip your brush in water then pat it on a towel before you dip into your watercolors. This will produce deeper colors and is a great way to use watercolors to create defined lines and edges.



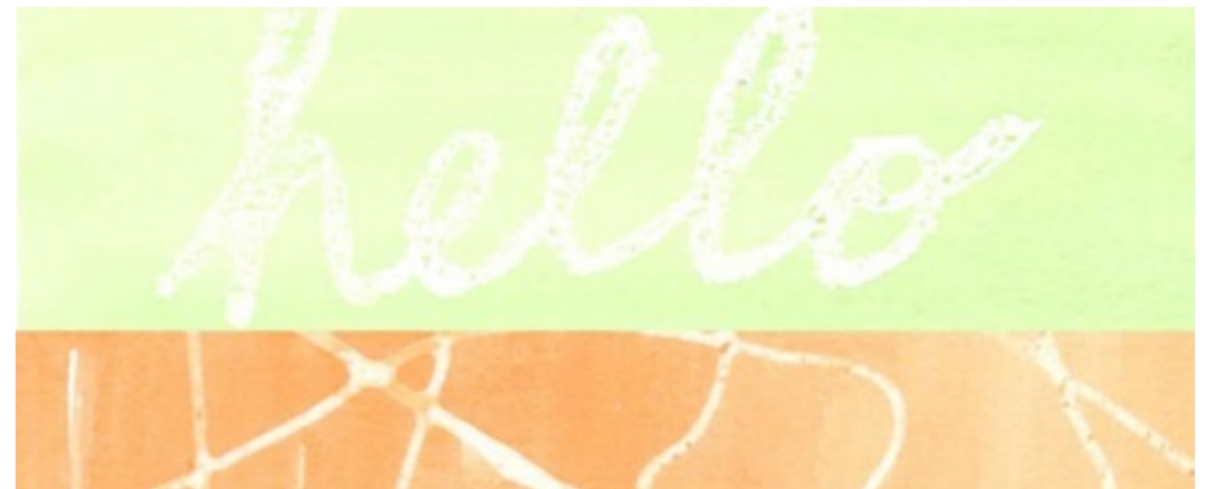
Splatters:

This is one of the simplest watercolor techniques and it produces awesome results. To splatter paint on the page, dip your brush in water then in paint, hold it over your page and then use your other hand to tap on the handle. Different sized drops will jump onto your page in random variations.



Resist:

This is where the basic tenet that water and oil don't mix comes in. Oil or wax repels water, meaning that if an area of your page has oil or wax on it, water will not adhere to it. I love using this technique for text, shapes and simple line drawings. Write or draw something on the page with a light colored crayon or another wax/oil tool (like candle wax or rubber cement) and then paint over the area with watercolors and the color will only go where you didn't put the wax/oil.



When it comes to watercolors, the best way to start is by jumping in so grab your supplies and paint along with me as you watch the video below. Take some time to test and experiment with these techniques to find the ones that resonate with you.