

## **Watercolors**

**Megan Dolezal**

**With acknowledgement to Deb Monaghan for all her guidance. This syllabus is based on hers.**

### **Overview:**

The class is structured for beginners and more advanced students. I've tried to include enough suggestions to get you started and allow you to then explore as you work now. If you learn best by following step-by-step instructions, there are a lot of great watercolor books out there that you can get from the library, an art store, or online (see book list on the supply to ).

We cover many techniques, all of which require practice to learn how to control. The progress you make depends on how much time you are able to devote to painting outside of class. (But even if you paint just one evening a week for six weeks, you'll get better.)

If you have any questions or need help, please ask – that's why I'm here.

If you want to see a demonstration of a certain technique, please let me know and I can set it up for the next class.

Looking for painting inspiration? Free image sites:

<https://pixnio.com/>

<https://pixabay.com/>

<https://pixy.org/>

## Supply List

**Paper: Prioritize this!** Typing/computer paper and mixed media paper won't cut it. It can't handle all the watercolor learning we'll be doing.

I recommend getting watercolor paper pads or blocks (8x10 or 9x12), **140 lb at least**. If you go to Dick Blick, students get a 10% off card to use on regular-priced merchandise. Bring a flat pallet knife if you get a block as you'll need to cut the paper from the glue once you're done painting.

Watercolor paper's most common surfaces are: rough (heavily textured), cold-press (medium textured), and hot-press (smooth).

I paint on Fabriano Studio Watercolor paper (cold press, 25% cotton, 140 lb) for this class.  
NOT recommended: Fluid, Strathmore 400 series

If you don't have a block of paper, use a piece of **foam core or cardboard** and **painter's tape** so you can mount the paper while you work. (And it makes it easier to transport and work on multiple watercolor pieces at the same time.)

**Paint:** Wet Paint has a 12-pan set of Yarka student paints – these are very good and cost about \$7. Marie's tube paints are another less-expensive choice, probably available at Dick Blick. The tiny travel sets of Cotman paint are good, but it's hard to get enough for a wash from the small tub.

**Brushes:** Get a small variety to start – a round brush #8 or #10 and a mop brush (larger, to cover a large amount of surface quickly. You can get a small hardware store type brush). Many students enjoy using a fan brush, a flat edged brush, and a tiny brush.

**Something to hold water:** a clean 24 oz or 32 oz cottage cheese or yogurt container. Some artists like to have two (or more) so that one always has fairly clean water available (important for working on vibrant white paper and avoiding muddy colors).

**A pallet** for tube paint and mixing paint: a 7-day pill holder(s) from a pharmacy, the larger size is good for larger brushes. You need a slot for each color of paint. A few white plastic plates will hold puddles of various colors as you work, but you can't carry them easily.

**#2 pencil** (or one with harder lead like a 4H pencil so that it makes a lighter line)

**ruler or straight edge**

**Paper towel**

**plastic bag** to hold wet things

**photos** to use for your paintings, preferably some you took. Landscapes are good to do at first.

## Book list

Books by: Wendy Jelbert, Cathy Johnson, or Nita Engle\* (these are more advanced)

The Complete Watercolorist's Essential Notebook by Gordon MacKenzie\*

The Big Book of Watercolor by José M. Parramón, published by Watson-Guption

The Watercolor Artist's Bible by Marilyn Scott, published by Chartwell Books, Inc.\*

The Big Book of Painting Nature in Watercolor by Ferdinand Petrie and John Shaw\*

\*I have these books and will bring them if there is interest.

**Many students like to get a book of exercises and follow through on one or more of them.**

This could work well for you if you learn more easily with lots of direction.

Go to your local library's website and check out their many wonderful artist books; you may find an artist whose work speaks to you.

## **Homework and Outside Exercises**

### **Session One: washes and water techniques**

*Homework:* Create a labeled color chart of your paint and what it looks like when layered with each color. Note which set (columns or rows) is on bottom and which is on top so that you can reference the order while painting later.

*Outside exercise:* Do a simple landscape. Get the paper wet, put in the sky with an even wash. Add a horizon, saving space for the foreground. Add a tree or something you find interesting to paint in the foreground, considering the overall composition.

### **Session Two: brushes and composition**

*Homework:* Create a chart comparing brushes and techniques. What does wet-on-wet look like versus wet-on-dry or dry-on-dry? What does it look like when different brushes are used for each technique?

*Outside exercise:* Create 3 mini-landscapes on the same piece of paper, experimenting with brushes and water (wet-on-wet, etc.). Any favorite ways to create texture in your painting? How does the landscape change depending on what brush and technique you use?

### **Session Three: rescue techniques and value**

*Homework:* Find a picture with limited color variation (foggy scenes, snow scenes, etc.) and try breaking the values down into 6 to 10 different values. It can be helpful to create a color scale on one edge of the painting, showing the lightest value and increasing in darkness until the darkest value. This way you can see the actual breakdown of values and not be distracted by the infinite values in-between!

*Outside exercise:* How far can you push your paint and paper? This could include practicing lifting out, blending, softening edges, and dropping in paint. Over and over again. Plan to destroy your paper for the sake of learning.

### **Session Four: paint and color; line and wash**

*Homework:* Create a color wheel using your palette to see how your paints compare to each other.

*Outside exercise:* Create a painting using only two complementary colors. Experiment with building up values and then putting in strong lines vs. doing a line drawing and adding value later.

### **Session Five: perspective, still life**

*Homework:* Paint a still life from two to four objects you find interesting.

*Outside exercise:* Paint a scene containing obvious perspective (think of atmosphere, structure of buildings, and/or scale of objects in relation to each other)

### **Session Six: texture techniques, other materials**

*Homework:* *Just keep painting, just keep painting!*

### **Ways to keep painting after class ends:**

- Take more painting classes
- Join painting groups, like Urban Sketchers (Twin Cities Chapter)
- Create a habit of daily painting
- If you have questions, you can email me. I love seeing your paintings!

---

## Session One: Washes and Water Techniques

### Demo: Basic landscape painting, clouds with different amounts of water

If you're using a loose sheet of watercolor paper, tape it down on all four sides to keep it from buckling when wet and to create a nice border when the painting is finished.

Have your work station ready to go, including water for cleaning brushes, paper towel for blotting, a variety of brush sizes, your color palette, and possibly an extra palette for mixing. Watercolor can be a time-sensitive process, so it's important to have everything at hand in case of accidents.

John Singer Sargent: "Watercolor painting is making the best of an emergency."

### Washes

The goal of a wash is to create an area of color(s) with no obvious brush strokes. Always mix more than you think you'll use.

*Flat wash:* a wash that uses one even color over an area

*Graded/graduated wash:* a wash that uses pre-diluted paint or water in later brush strokes so that it gets darker or lighter

*Variiegated wash:* a wash that uses two or more colors (watch out: over-mixing colors can result in a muddy complexion)

It's important to control where your wash goes. If there are any white areas of paper that you want to save, make sure to lightly mark with pencil or wash around. Once you paint over the white, you will not be able to get it back to its original vibrancy without scraping it away (literally).

### Techniques (only a few of many!)

*Wet-on-wet:* Using a wet brush loaded with paint on a wet surface. Great for backgrounds and bleeding textures.

*Wet-on-dry:* Using a wet brush on a dry surface. If done on a previous layer of dried wash, you will get *glazing*, where the colors will layer over each other and create a new color. (Be careful to not over-layer or you might end up with muddy colors.) Great for detail work.

*Dry-on-dry:* Using a dry brush on a dry surface. Great for creating another texture.

**Water moves from wet to dry.** Water will move from a wet brush to a dry surface, from a wet surface to a dry brush, from a wet area of paper to a damp area.

**Water sticks together.** It takes encouragement to move into a completely dry area.

### General Notes

Take care of your tools – don't leave brushes in water. Keeping the weight of the brush on the bristles causes them to split apart, ruining the brush's ability to draw a consistent, clean line. It also causes the wood to swell, breaking the lacquer and loosening the ferrule (metal band connecting the bristles and wood handle). Rinse brushes completely and blot dry before storing.

If you sell or publish a watercolor based on a photo, you need the photographer's permission.

Use the back of your hand to test your paper's dryness.

Don't use white paint, use water to dilute the color until it is as light as you want when painted on your white paper.

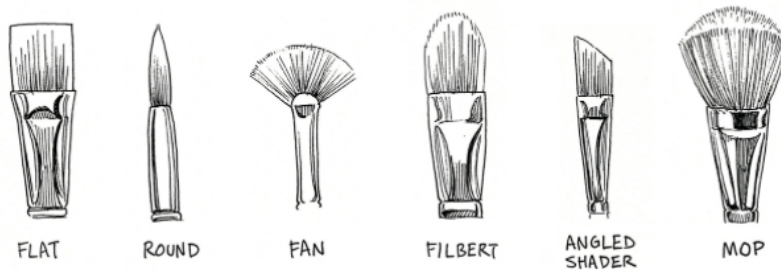
**Some ideas to help you get started:** mountain and valley, forest, flowers, clouds and treeline, pasture

---

## Session Two: Brushes and composition

**Demo:** Sunrise/sunset washes, analyzing pictures to understand what brushes and how much water to use, trees - painting main area and then adding details

### BRUSH BREAKDOWN

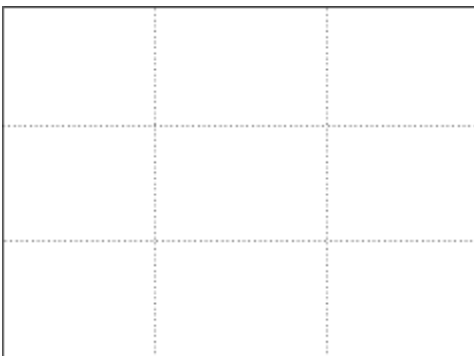


Get to know your brushes by experimenting with each of them (note this session's homework). Don't worry about having each type of brush. Some artists use only one or two of their favorites for whole paintings. It's good to experiment to find out what you like and what each brush can do best. A mop brush is great for creating an even wash, while the angled shader can let you do versatile detail and texture work. Which brushes have a good spring back, which hold the most water?

**Practice:** Make a chart with different brush strokes, label which brush you used and how you held it (vertical, underhand?).

## Composition

Rule of thirds: Divide your painting into three equal parts horizontally and vertically. Place things of interest along the dividing lines or their intersections.



Simplify and prioritize. Don't get too caught up in all the details. Pick and choose what you want the viewer to focus on. Remember the big picture.

Plan – do a simple thumbnail sketch on scratch paper so you can experiment with several different layouts before you start laying down the paint. Refer back to it once in a while as you work.

## Happy Accidents

A lot of beautiful textures and organic patterns can occur almost accidentally while painting. Having the confidence to use these moments will help as you experiment and learn how to make these moments happen consistently.

---

## Session Three: rescue techniques and value

**Demo: monochromatic painting, drop shadow, use of rim light, fading out, blotting/lifting out, maple leaves, flowers**

**Value**, the lightness or darkness of color, is an incredible way to create depth and space in your paintings. By varying how much water you use with your paint, you can use a single color to give the impression of a deep forest or complex city scene.

- Squint! Squint! Squint your eyes to help choose the essential values.
- Use shadows (darker values) to create a sense of weight and to ground objects that could appear to be floating in the air.

**Water moves from wet to dry.** You can also use paper towels to blot colors (lifting out), a slightly wet brush with clean water to lift or blend colors, dropping paint in water on the page to create organic shapes, scraping the paper to reveal a previous layer of paint or even the original vibrant white, and more.

### Rescue techniques

Use water, brush, and paper towel to erase mistakes.

Go over with an even wash to help even out areas with too much texture.

Use value contrast to help emphasize (or de-emphasize) different sections.

Rinse everything off in the sink.

Use a mirror to double check your work for proportions, composition, and legibility.

---

## Session Four: paint and color; line and wash

**Demo: complementary color painting, waterscapes (waves, rivers, reflections)**

### Characteristics of Paint Pigment

*Hue*: the color of the paint (ultramarine, burnt umber, lemon yellow, etc.). Warm hues are closer to reds while cool hues are closer to blue (with a lot of area in-between!).

*Intensity*: how strong the color is. Pay attention to this while mixing colors and in composition – some colors are so strong that you only need a little to balance out a less intense hue. Intensity is also affected by how much water you use with a color. Lighter value means less intensity.

*Staining*: how easily it is to remove the color after putting it down. Some colors can be scrubbed away while others will leave a permanent mark.

*Transparency*: how see-through a color is when dry on the paper. Some colors let you see right through to what is under them, but others are opaque.

*Granulation*: the appearance of separate particles in a dried paint, often when the paint has been diluted with water and laid down with a generous brush stroke. Ultramarine is known for its granulation.

### Color Design

If you are doing a painting with only a few colors, think about the color wheel. The three primary colors are red, blue, and yellow. Between each main color is a mix of the two; these are the secondary colors. Colors are complementary when they are on opposite sides of the wheel from each other. Blue is opposite its complement orange, red is opposite green, and yellow is opposite purple. Setting a color and its complement next to each other in a painting make the colors pop.

When mixing colors, you can build from your original mixture gradually by adding different colors so that the final picture has a consistent tone.

## **Demo: animals, metals/glass**

### **Line and wash (brush drawing, pen work)**

There are a few different ways to contrast the linework of a painting with its washes.

One is to do a strong pencil or ink drawing first, and then go over it and fill it in with wash. Another is to build up values with wash and finalize the image by putting in a darker outline to define shapes or work out highlights. This second way is also known as brush drawing.

Experiment with both ways. It can be easier to save white space when you have a line drawing in place, but you can also use wax crayons or masking fluid if you want to build up washes and then go back in to add emphasis with line.

---

## **Session Five: perspective, still life**

### **Demo: perspective in nature, using diagonals/overlaps, birch bark**

Create depth in a painting through perspective: atmosphere, size difference and overlap between objects, structural lines)

**Atmospheric perspective** and value work hand-in-hand to create depth.

Atmosphere (and the human eye) cause things in the distance to look blurrier than things that are closer or the focus of the viewer. Often, things in the distance are also lighter in value.

Think about:

What is the atmosphere like? Is it foggy or clear? What is interacting with the light as it filters through the air? Consider the effect of fog on skyscrapers or what mountains in the distance look like.

What color is the sky? This will impact the entire color scheme of a painting.

If you are using a reference photo, look at it critically to see where the light is coming from and what the atmosphere is doing to every object in the picture. How do the objects' values change? Where are the shadows and highlights? Are there sharp contrasts or blurred edges? Restrict yourself to a single color and you can focus on how the value can create

### **Size difference and overlap between objects**

Objects that are closer are typically larger; objects that are farther are typically smaller. Experiment by adding something in your painting that either makes another object seem much larger or smaller (e.g. human for scale next to a building).

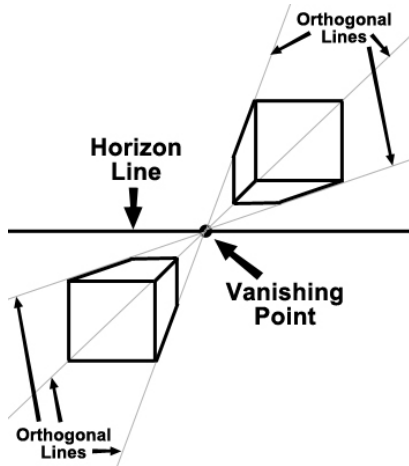
Overlap objects, shapes, or grounds - think of rolling hills, or series of trees. By overlapping them (and making them smaller the farther back they are), you can create a sense of depth.

**Diagrams on next page.**

## Structural lines

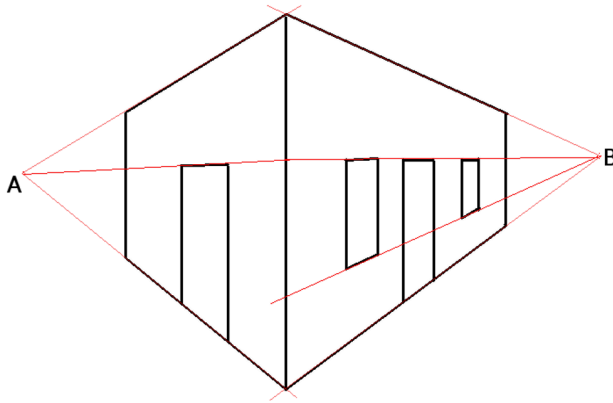
### Single-point perspective:

(Image created by Maura Valentino, commons.wikimedia.org)



### Two-point perspective:

(Image created by Mmroberts, commons.wikimedia.org)



Think about the eye level - are you close to the surface area of what you're painting and looking across it, or looking down?

Are you always painting from the same eye level? Change it up!



Low eye level



Mid-eye/raised eye level



High eye level

Working from **still life** is an excellent way to develop your critical eye when drawing from life and to control your painting environment. Before painting, consider your view of the still life and the composition of your overall painting. Do you want to focus on a particular object? Do you like the lighting? Move around the still life (if working in a group), or adjust the objects to your liking (if working alone).

Unlike a photograph which is already two-dimensional, your brain will have to do the work of turning a three-dimensional object into a two-dimensional painting.

**Remember to use your thumb or brush (with a straight arm!) to take measurements and keep proportions accurate.**



---

## Session Six: texture techniques, other materials

### Demo: everything listed below

#### Texture

Keep experimenting with how you apply paint:

Spatter paint from a brush to create tree leaves instead of using a wash.

Instead of a brush, work with a sponge or other material.

Paint over a piece of torn scrap paper to save whitespace.

Paint through lace, the netting from onions, or hosiery.

Scrape paint away with cardboard, razor, or seam ripper.

Use the handle end of your brush to indent the paper then let a wash go over and settle in those lines.

Make a background that is less blurry than the foreground, or darker.

See how to use *backruns* (aka blooms) by putting a very wet wash on one that has been drying for a little while.

Put a wash down and then move plastic wrap on top of it, allowing it to dry in place.

Put a wash down and then press fabric down to lift away a unique texture.

Wash off your paint under the faucet; pour water over a strongly painted image.

Practice creating washes with as few strokes as possible.

Create a cardboard stamp - cut lines into it, tape a masking tape handle on, dip in paint and go!

There are a lot of rules that can be broken in watercolor, it's just a matter of knowing how to do it well. So keep experimenting!

#### Other materials

Coarse salt – when sprinkled on a wet wash, it will absorb some of the pigment and leave lighter spots behind.

Wax – a great resist to water, wax will let areas of paper stay vibrantly white. Be careful how you use it as once it's on the paper, no water will want to be on it.

Gouache – opaque watercolor paint that can be used to quickly build up dark colors, add highlights, or texture. Gouache, unlike acrylic paint, is still movable after it dries but can cause permanent staining like watercolor.

Watercolor pencils – pencils whose pigment can be diluted with water. By leaving some areas of pencil untouched by water, you can create a nice contrast of texture.

Masking fluid - removable resist, comes in a bottle or in a pen.

You can use masking fluid over existing areas of paint or the white of the paper. It's great to save areas of detail. If using from a bottle, use a skewer (toothpick or shishkabob skewer work great) to dip into the bottle and then apply to dry paper. You can use a synthetic brush, but the brush bristles may become clogged with the masking fluid so be careful! Wait for the masking fluid to dry, paint over it as much as you want, wait for the paper to dry completely and then gently remove with your hands or an eraser. It should peel off easily and should not tear the paper. If it is hard to remove or tears the paper, your masking fluid should be replaced.

**Practice:** Repaint the first landscape you did for this class. What new techniques will you use? Is there a way you can make the painting more dynamic and interesting?

## **Learning and working with mistakes**

If your colors are getting muddy, let the paper dry and then push it in another color direction. Think about the color wheel and consider how you can add in complementary colors.

If your whole painting is blah, let the paper dry and spin it around. Be fearless – previous layers of paint can provide interesting glazes and background textures for a whole new painting.

While saving white space is important, working through washes that didn't go the way we wanted them to, figuring out how to bring back the focus in the painting, and understanding how to make the picture work for us is more important.