

Watercolor Basics

Grades 1-6

Student Outcomes

- Be able to demonstrate knowledge in techniques and language of watercolor.
- Analyze and discuss symbols and techniques of historic visual art media.

Key Words

- Saturation: the intensity of a color.
- Flat Wash: a painting technique that tries to get a “flat” look.
- Wet on Wet: a painting technique that layers wet paint on wet paint.
- Dry Brush: using a brush that has very little moisture to get a specific texture.
- Graduated (gradient) Wash: transitioning to a less saturated color.

About the Project

This unit covers the fundamental techniques of using watercolor paint. Watercolor paint is a wonderful medium for young students (and older!), it doesn't stain, the pans are a convenient size, and they are very inexpensive. But, they can create some frustrations for students when they don't know how watercolor works. It has its own mind in some ways. In part B, students create a painting based on the work of Marc Chagall.

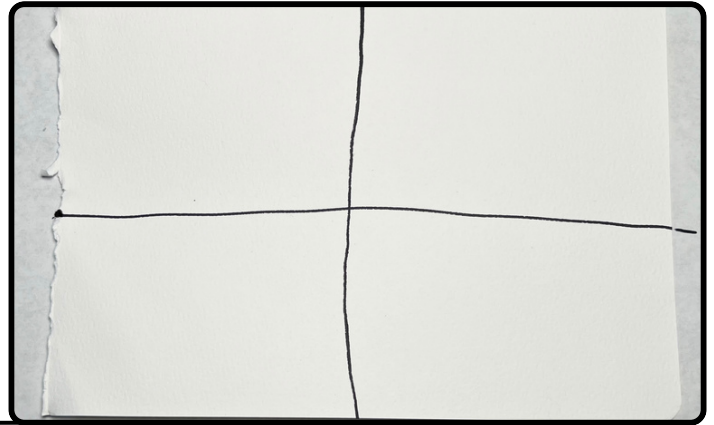
After each technique, it's helpful to ask students what they think it can be used for in a painting, to reinforce learning and help them connect it to their own painting.

Supplies: per student unless noted.

- 2 pieces of paper, preferably watercolor paper of any grade.
- Watercolor paint pans.
- Paintbrush, at least 1 medium sized per student.
- Paper towels
- 1 container for water (filled about 1/2 way to help prevent spillage) for every 2 students.
- Pencil
- Additional supplies for part B:
 - crayons or oil pastels
 - fine tip permanent marker *optional
 - table salt. *optional, but fun.

1 Getting Started

Have students draw two lines, one vertical and one horizontal, through the center of one sheet of paper, creating four quadrants.



2 Play with Saturation

In an out of the way corner or on the back of the paper, have students practice controlling the paint's saturation level (making their paint more or less intense). The more water they use and the less mixing they do, the lighter the paint will be. Using less water and mixing more will make the paint more saturated (intense).



3 Flat Wash

Students will pick a color and use water to mix it to the saturation level they want. They will want to make sure to use quite a bit of water. The idea of this exercise is to make the paint look flat, without a lot of light and dark places. Just one solid color. The look is accomplished by working pretty quickly, and going over their brush strokes more than once to make sure it's nice and even.



4 Wet on Wet

The wet on wet technique is exactly what it sounds like, putting wet paint on wet paint.

I'd suggest using a light color for the first color and a darker one for the second so that the second color shows up well. Get your brush really wet for this, it takes more water than other techniques, and paint with your first color.



Before it dries, get the second color on the brush and touch it to the wet paint on the paper. It should bleed out and spread, creating a texture. If it doesn't, just add more water.

While this is a great technique to do on purpose, it can be frustrating when it happens accidentally. To avoid one color bleeding into another, wait until the parts touching what you want to paint are dry. It means skipping around on the painting from section to section, but that can be good for the composition anyway! You aren't able to focus on just one spot instead of the whole painting.



5 Dry Brush

This is another technique that is just what it sounds like, painting with a dry brush. The idea is to get a sketchy texture. To get the look, just barely get the paint wet and mix it to the desired saturation, then get most of the moisture off of the brush with a towel. Drag your brush through the paint you just moistened. Lightly brush it onto the paper. The mark it makes should be sketchy. It's easy to tell if the paint is too wet, it will go on solidly. Simply dry your brush a bit and try again.

This technique is great for leaves on trees, bark, etc.

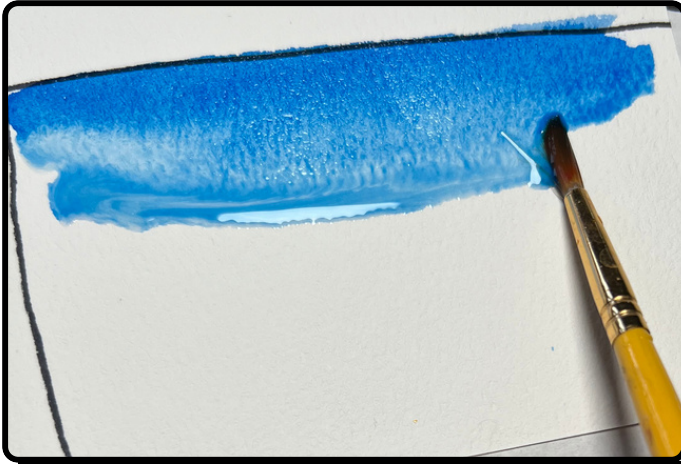
6 Gradient Wash

Students should wait until the demonstration of the entire gradient wash process is complete before starting to paint, as it must be painted quickly.

Gradient wash is somewhat similar to flat wash, but instead of one solid color the idea is for the color to get lighter as it's painted, a gradient.

This is accomplished by getting the brush really wet, and mixing the paint to the desired saturation (intensity). Then brush a line where the gradient is to start, keeping it nice and wet.

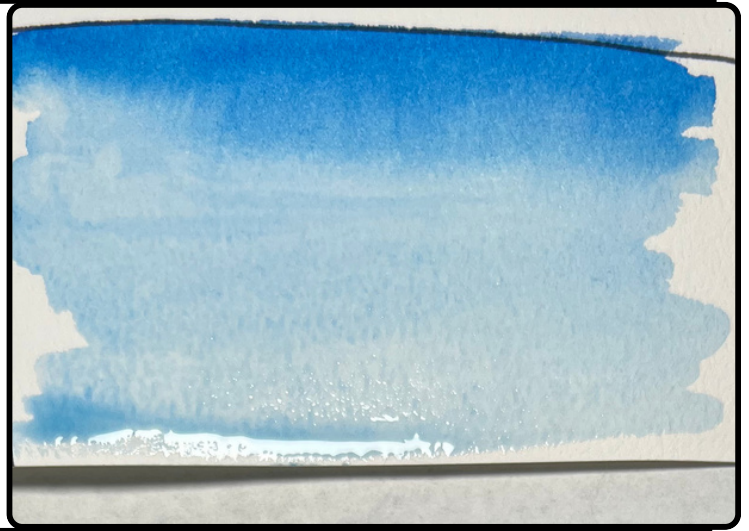




Working fast enough that that first line stays wet, dip the brush in water only, not paint, and brush another line just under the first. Continue to dip the brush in water, and paint consecutive lines until reaching the bottom or lightest part of your desired gradient.

If the paint is nice and wet, it will bleed into the next/lighter lines and blend, but some blending may need to happen with the brush as well.

This technique is great for skies, water, petals on flowers, etc.



The finished techniques. The wet on wet continued to spread, making a nice secondary color (orange) because I used primary yellow and primary red. This can be a great way to teach some color mixing, but I would only touch on it as a “look, isn’t that neat?!” moment for this particular exercise. Color is fun, and will quickly steal the show away from the other techniques and be all that students remember.

As a lover of color, I wouldn’t blame them!