

10 Easy Steps to Painting Success



10 Easy Steps to Painting Success ©Rebecca Z- Artist

Hi There! My name is Rebecca Zdybel. I'm a professional artist who loves watercolor and is passionate about teaching watercolor to fellow art enthusiasts. After raising my family and working as a nurse for many years, I made a promise to myself and began to study painting seriously in mid-life. I believe that we all have a creative center capable of amazing and beautiful things. Helping you explore and empower your creative self is something I love to do. It's never too early or too late to begin and the more you do, the more you'll see yourself progress. Some of the best artists I know are actively painting in their 80's and still getting better! How many things can we say that about? I'm happy to share these tips in the hope that you can be more successful in your painting. Perhaps they will spare you some wasted time and hopefully prevent some frustration. Enjoy, and Happy Painting!



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Secret #1. Take the time to design your painting- if the composition is wrong, the painting will never be right. No matter how pretty the colors or romantic the subject, a good design is essential to the success of your painting.

The classic way to do this planning is through sketching with your sketchbook in 3 to 5 values. Playing around with small thumbnail images can allow you to see when the basic shapes and values are creating a pleasant composition. If it works in 3-5 values, it will very likely work in color.

Size Matters!

Don't forget to pay attention to the shape of your paper or canvas. Some images don't work on the standard $\frac{1}{4}$ sheet pad of arches cold pressed paper. Some images benefit from space (busy images or images loaded with lots of shapes often do better large scale). Small mistakes don't seem like such a big deal when they are done on larger paper. If you have a horizontal image- consider an irregular size that exaggerates the horizontal quality of the image. Perhaps something much longer than it is wide. Painting something tall? Consider a more vertical orientation. It's surprising how often we skip over this type of consideration, and it can often make a tremendous difference in the quality of the outcome.

Quick trick: *Once you draw a quick composition you like, photograph it and send it to your printer. You can print 4 images/page by making that choice in your printer settings. Use those 4 prints to sketch different value plans. It's a quick way to do multiple small value thumbnails. Once finished, you can then pick your favorite.*



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Secret #2. As you set out to begin painting your next masterpiece, take another moment to think about WHY you want to paint the painting?

Ask yourself why you want to paint this image and write it down...maybe even write it on the back of your painting. That way it can remind you if you forget. This is essential for me when returning to a painting after being distracted. (And if you're like me, you're easily distracted!)

Finding my mojo again can be difficult after not thinking about a painting for a while. My sketchbook notes or my notes to self on the back of a painting can often help remind me of what my intentions were.

Quick Trick: *Make note of the following:*

What is it you want to convey? Is it a mood? Is it capturing the beautiful sunlight or shadow? Is it an aspect of the personality of your subject? Perhaps you merely want to explore texture, or color, or value. Do you want to paint tightly realistic, loose, semi-abstract, or non-objective? Make that intention clear as you can in your notes to yourself and even consider giving it a title in advance. All these goals will help you realize when and if you are finished with your painting.



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Secret # 3. Commit to a Color Scheme before you get started.

Having a plan regarding color choices is a great idea. Decide what color or temperature will best express the intention you came up with when you made your plans as described in Secret #2. Will the image you want to convey best be rendered with warm, cool, or neutral dominance? Then exaggerate that dominance decisively, especially in the beginning phases of your painting. This will help create an underlying harmony that will keep your painting unified. As you continue to develop your painting, when in doubt, err on the side of your dominant choice.

Quick Trick: When you want to create a focal area, step away from that dominant choice and add something unusual. The use of an alternative color/temperature will draw attention and create excitement at the center of interest.



Secret #4. Be anything but boring! If you find yourself dipping into that same well of paint over and over again, think about getting out a variation of that color and using it. If you're making the same mark over and over again, think about changing it up or switching brushes.

Is it a line? Think about how you can change it up: change the color, make it thick, thin, transparent, opaque, continuous, broken, straight, or curved. Changing something, but not everything will keep it from being dull.

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Is it a shape? Think about how you can alter the scale, direction, edge quality, geometry and interaction with other shapes, including the edge of the paper or canvas.

Quick Trick-

Repeat this Mantra throughout your painting process:

Harmony with Variety- Exaggerate your Dominant Choices

Change Something but Not Everything

Similar but Different

Repetition with Variation



Secret #5. Use both positive and negative imagery.

Watercolorists **MUST** wrap their minds around this concept if they are going to create successful paintings and improve over time. I will say that painters in other mediums would also do well to consider this alternative way of painting. It's hard and requires practice, but it's well worth it.

Negative painting is basically painting something by painting around it. In watercolor, we will never keep our whitest, lightest values unless we learn to spare them by painting around them. If you take the time to master it, I promise you will watch your work improve.

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*Quick Trick- Masking whites with masking fluid, tape, wax, crayons, or other masking materials can be ways to quickly protect the whites or light values you'd like paint around. *These are all ways to paint around things while protecting your whites, but don't let the use of masking keep you from practicing and mastering the art of negative painting.*



Secret #6- If Something is Wrong, Think Value First! When evaluating your Painting and trying to fix problems, first assess Values (Lights and Darks).

I have found that 9 times out of 10, if something is wrong with my painting, it's a value problem. I've also found that you can almost paint something any color under the sun, but if you get the values right, it will still look right.

Assessing value is also a great step to take when deciding whether or not your painting is finished,

Quick Trick: Assess values quickly by viewing your painting through a red piece of acetate. It removes the perception of color and allows you to see things simply in terms of value. If you don't have a piece of red acetate, then take a photo and use the black and white filter to assess your values in gray scale.

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Secret #7- Vary your edge quality. Too many painters have not wrapped their minds around the concept of creating both hard and soft edges. Poorly handled edges ruins many watercolor paintings.

A good basic rule to follow is this:

If the object is in focal and important, then make the edges crisp and sharp. If the object is far away, out of the focal area, and/or near the edge of your paper or canvas, then consider keeping the edges softer.

Quick Trick: For soft edges on paper surfaces, try wetting the area you plan to work with clear water prior to putting paint on the paper. If the surface is wet, you will have a much easier time creating soft edged shapes. Conversely, if you work on dry paper, you will always get a hard edge unless you take the time to soften edges as you paint.

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Secret #8- Know your Paints. Play with them. Make color charts. Find out how they behave together. Observe it through playing around with them. Read the packaging. There is a difference!

Using good paint is like driving a nice car vs. driving a clunker. Both will get you there, but one may break down on the way making the journey much less enjoyable. By good paint, I mean *Artist quality* paint. These paints contain more pigment, more permanent pigments, and fewer cloudy fillers in their formulation.

Know if your paint is transparent or opaque. Transparent paints are great mixers and glazers. They are luminous and allow what is beneath them to show through. I recommend using transparent paints as much as possible. This means avoiding pigments with names that include Cadmium. Many Mineral Based paints are also filled with mineral particles that can make them more opaque or granular.

Quick Trick: I generally save opaque paints for “dessert”- using them after the main course of transparent color application.

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Secret #9- Keep a Sketchbook. Play around. Experiment. Test. Write a note to yourself. Try something you're unsure of on its pages.

Sketch often and with abandon. My journals are full of all kinds of valuable information on my journey as an artist and as a person. They are safe places and I can share them if I want to, or keep them strictly to myself if I prefer.

Quick Trick: Read this blog: [10 Great reasons to keep an art journal.](#)

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Secret #10- Commit to yourself to become the best artist you can be and then make sure to have FUN along the way!

The true secret to getting better is making the time to play in the paint. If you can find a way to enjoy the process and make it fun, then you'll spend more time doing it. The more you do it, the better you'll get.

I'm the perfect example of this philosophy. I don't think I'm that special or talented, but I do know I've made the commitment to myself to become the best artist I can be, and I've kept that promise now for many years. I believe it's that commitment that accounts for my success rather than any special talent I might have. I believe it's possible for most anyone, and for YOU if you make a similar commitment.

Do you have trouble finding the time or the discipline to paint? Do you enjoy the company of others? Then I suggest you find a group that supports you in your commitment to becoming a better artist. When someone asks you to put something else ahead of your art, tell them you have an appointment, or you have a class.

“Never Apologize, Never Explain”

They don't need to know that it's an appointment with yourself, and for yourself. You and your personal growth matter as much as anything else on your “TO DO” list.

Of course, if you're looking for someone to study with, my studio offers classes in Watercolor on Wednesdays and my Saturday sessions not only welcome watercolor, but the studio also opens up to other media as well. On Saturdays, mixing media and experimenting in other realms is a real and fun possibility. I also offer Weeklong Workshops with Visiting Artists twice yearly. Check out my calendar for upcoming events: Click here: [RebeccaZartist.com- Classes and Events](http://RebeccaZartist.com-ClassesandEvents).

Happy Painting!

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