

# Planning Strategies (Handout)

Start from clear, specific intentions.

Good—and painless!—planning comes from a clear idea of what you’re trying to do with the painting. It’s normal to need to keep refining your intentions as you paint, or adjusting to capitalize on a “happy accident”, but it helps to at least start with an attempt to pin down what you want the painting to “say”, i.e., the effect you want this painting to have on a viewer.

Pick and choose appropriate strategies.

Don’t think of these as steps you have to complete. Some strategies may be more useful than others, depending on the painting.

Pause, reflect and adjust as needed.

Planning happens all the way through the painting process. Any time you feel unsure, you can step back, remind yourself of your plan, fill in gaps, adjust your plan to address problems or capitalize on “happy accidents”, and review or extend any steps that seem appropriate.

## Strategies to Consider

exploratory drawing

Let your artist’s eye and hand explore various parts of the scene (or the “big picture” shapes). Just scribble-drawing, doesn’t have to look like anything. 10-30 sec. each. Move on if you get bored or frustrated. You’re just exploring how it feels to consider each option as a

possible subject. Not “making a drawing”. Not “drawing practice”. Not recording information.

## consider your list of “reasons for painting”

Which reason(s) do you want this painting to satisfy? For example, you might plan differently for a painting that is a gift for someone and a painting you are creating to process your own feelings in a visual journal and a painting you plan to create for a group show with a shared theme.

## imagine the effect you want the painting to have

Who is the intended audience (might be you)? Where and how will they encounter the painting? What do you hope their experience to be?

## “auditioning” and “casting” the painting’s components

What will you include and what role will different elements have (what is the “star”, what is “supporting cast”, what is “extras”, what is “set dressing”)?

## gather more references

After you have some ideas about what this painting might be about, gather more photos, sketches, notes, journal entries, color swatches, etc. Whatever you think you might want for reference.

## thumbnails

Brainstorm different compositions and formats; only detailed enough to remind you of the ideas you have generated, doesn’t have to look like anything to anyone else.

## value sketches

Start with just black and white, then maybe add one or two shades of grey; again, just brainstorming arrangements of values. Use opaque white to add small light areas that are too hard to paint around—this makes it easy and tells you where you might want to use masking fluid.

## color studies or swatching

Again, use opaque paints as needed to add any small light areas—this makes your color study easy and tells you where you might want to mask pale colors, or use opaque paint for small details.

## review lists of composition formats and/or “principles of design”

If you get stuck, these “rules of thumb” can help yourself brainstorm. Lots of versions, so I just search online to get multiple ideas.

## ask for “useful feedback”/viewer’s reactions

If you’re unsure whether you’re finished or unsure whether the painting is meeting your intentions, ask for viewers’ reactions, or use the questions on the “useful feedback” handout to help direct your attention. Helps you to get a sense of whether your painting is headed in the direction you intended, or maybe, something you like even better! If you are feeling frustrated with the painting, it helps to put it away for a while until you are calm before evaluating.

## test ideas in a digital painting app

Using a photo of your piece in a digital painting app allows you to test changes before you make them.

## work in “drafts”

Start each painting with the thought that it will be the very best you can make it, but reserve the possibility of starting again on a fresh sheet of paper with what you have learned thus far. Would it be faster/easier/more effective to “fix” this draft or start fresh with what you have learned? If you realize you’ll have to labor long and hard to “fix” things (often resulting in an overworked result), would it be faster and/or more effective to take what you have learned from this draft and start on a fresh piece of paper? (This is not “wasting paper”. Laboring over a painting that you’re never going to be happy with is the real waste!)

## but, don’t give up at the “ick” stage!

There’s a difference between overwork and simply continuing through that middle territory when you’ve laid washes over much of the page, but haven’t yet completed all areas or added your darkest darks. At this stage there’s less contrast and some unfinished areas and it all looks blah. All watercolors go through this. Try to learn to recognize it. (One way to do this is to start a new draft but also keep working on the previous one. If the earlier draft actually works out, you’ll have learned it was just at the “ick stage”. If it doesn’t work out, it’s your “dress rehearsal” for each step on the new draft.)

## lather, rinse and repeat

At any stage of painting, you can return to “earlier” parts of the planning process to refine or adjust your thinking. We often don’t know for sure how something will feel until we see it carried out on paper (“let the hand lead the eye”).

## parting thoughts

### watercolor is a dialogue

Leave room in your planning for responding to the unexpected gifts (happy accidents, and sometimes, not-so-happy) the medium offers. A “mistake” in art is often just the label we apply to something unexpected that we haven’t figured out how to use. Pushing yourself to try to exploit “mistakes” is a wellspring of creativity. Try to stay open to using your “mistakes”. It’s an interesting balancing act between working with what you are given and not obsessing about “fixing” stuff when you should simply start another draft. That balance is inherently difficult to find, but it’s worth cultivating.

### try to understand the nature of each problem

Learn to distinguish between things that are artistically difficult (e.g., expressing powerful emotions and ideas in paper and pigment), technically difficult (e.g., soft-edged shapes with complementary colors right next to each other), and merely tedious (e.g. an intricate underdrawing or a painting constructed from many tiny shapes).

These things are all “hard” but they are hard in different ways and have different solutions. Technical problems can be addressed by learning “tricks of the trade” and through practice. Tedious things are just a matter of wanting the result badly enough to do the drudge work. Powerful and meaningful expression never gets easy (that’s why we value art!), but you *can* cultivate the introspection, mindful noticing and emotional openness that creates fertile ground for it to happen.

### realize no artist is every completely satisfied with a painting

That’s normal and okay. It’s what drives us to keep striving. We compare our own paintings to the “ideal painting” we imagined (technically flawless, powerfully expressive, deeply

meaningful). All real paintings fall short. It's good to remember that this is just the nature of making art, and not a "failure".

Real paintings often exceed our ideal imagined painting in some way, too, although that can be harder for the painting's creator to see. But viewers come to it without those expectations. So viewers are often far more (or less) satisfied with our paintings than we are. And they will often show you things you never recognized in your work. Cultivate relationships with viewers who can describe their reactions without playing "art critic". They'll teach you a lot about your own work.

It's okay to conclude, "I've said all I can say in this particular painting," and move on. And it's okay to conclude, "No matter how much someone else likes this, I believe I can come closer to my ideal," and try again. It's also okay to conclude, "I've taken this painting as far as I can, but I'm going back to this concept to try again." That's how series get started!

## let the viewer play a part

A painting not completed when the last brushstroke is made. A painting becomes whole when a viewer brings their history and perspective to it. There's no need to spell out every single thing. Leave space for the viewer's imagination, interpretation and emotions.