

# Heather Harman's Pastel Academy

## 15 Hints and Tips for Pastel Painting success.



### Having trouble with your Pastels?

These are 15 of the top problems I am asked about when using pastels.

1. **Why do I need to do Sketchbook work?**

Because if you fail to plan you will plan to fail. If you work out your painting strategy you will make all major mistakes in your sketchbook not on your painting! Sketchbooks are not just an extra step – they save time and clear your head. But equally so, it can save you money in spoilt pastel supports. (Not strictly a pastel tip but all too important anyway)

2. **What colour paper should I use?**

Choosing the wrong tone of support/paper. Too light or too dark for your painting? Pastel work best on a mid tone ground against which all of your light pastels will look light and all of your dark pastels will look dark. This is especially important if you are a beginner.

3. **Should I use a rough or grainy or smooth surface?**

Will your painting have a lot of texture – maybe choose a sanded surface. A smooth surface might be best for portrait work. There are lots of choices. Try a small selection of different surfaces.

4. **'I can't get any more Pastel to go on'.**

Are you filling the tooth too fast? Maybe try a different surface or use a harder pastel for the under layers. Consider using a brush – a hog hair flat is best – to brush off some of the pastel so that you can easily apply more layers. If necessary a little spot spray of fixative after you have brushed off pastel can help give you a cleaner area to work on.

5. **'I don't know when to stop'**

Many a good painting can be ruined by overworking it. Before you think it is finished put it to one side. Then take a look at it with fresh eyes.

6. **'My painting is dull and has gone 'muddy'.**

Are you afraid to use black? Don't be – it will underpin your tonal contrasts (lights and darks) and can be tinted with other colours whilst maintaining your dark tones. Beware of using 'white' in its pure form however. White can empty your painting of luminosity. Try using 'light' colours instead if you can – white is a 'non-colour'. Light can be made up of many colours. What makes painting muddy is using both a black (or very dark) on an area where you are also going to add white.

7. **'I just don't see colour like you do!'**

A common refrain of my students. Don't be afraid of colour – you can usually tone it down. Learn your colour theory and apply it to your work. Look for the 'ish' colours in nature. We use 'ish' a lot in painting! A pathway can be pink'ish', the clouds can be apricot'ish'. Nature is full of 'ish' tints. Colour theory is not that difficult (I will be dealing with Colour Theory and how to apply it to your painting in an upcoming course.

8. **'My painting has lost all its character and looks like a mask of mush'.**

You have probably overblended it – keep your fingers out as much as possible. Finger blending has its place but not all the time. It is common for beginners to blend too much.

9. **'My paintings are not as interesting as they should be'**

Are you using all the same or similar marks? Take advantage of the fact that pastel is a drawing medium too – use all of the drawing marks you can ; cross hatch one colour over another, short fat marks, long thin marks, layered colours., glazing one colour over another. Manipulate that pastel stick!

10. **'All my paintings are so similar'.**

Are you using the same palette of colours for each one? A really common mistake. Do you have a 'colour' formula that you like to use eg for skies? The beauty of pastel is the availability – at your fingertips of many colours and tones! Use them! Start each new painting with a fresh palette of colours. I look at my subject and pick a selection from my main set – often I will add more but at least the colour base of each painting tends to be individual. (Sticking to a set palette is usually a problem of the watercolourist or oil/acrylic painter – who depend on palette mixes, and can fall into a boring formula)

11. **'My painting has gone dark!'**

Fixative – are you ruining your masterpieces, trying to fix them after completion? Fixative will almost always affect the colours of your painting. It is best only used during the painting process – such as when you wish to overlay one colour from another without them 'mixing'. It is not usually good to use it as a final 'fix'. If used too heavily it will liquefy your pastels and remove their vibrancy and 'light' but much depends on what tone of paper you used and the quality of your pastels.

12. **'My paintings look so flat'**

Check out your tonal values! Quite likely the most common of all painting problems in any medium. A good painting needs to have a good tonal balance – try putting your painting under test – produce a black and white (photo) copy or scan of it. You can do that now in most iPads or smart phones. If it looks 'weak' in monochrome it will have poor tonal values. Ideally it should show a good range of tones from white to black.

13. **'I love to paint big skies and backgrounds, but my fingers hurt with all the blending'**

You should never get to the point when your fingers hurt! Firstly if you are blending large masses on a rough sanded surface consider using a blending tool like a piece of pipe lagging, or a polystyrene 'nugget' (the kid that comes in packing). Secondly many start to blend areas without having put down enough pastel. If your fingers sting and the pastel smudges but doesn't blend well – this is the problem.

14. **'When I draw out my portrait the lines show through my painting'**

This could be a few things. It is not recommended to use graphite pencil under pastel if you work lightly – it will shine through in places. Try using a pastel pencil – lightly – that makes up part of the palette for the flesh. You could also use a very fine stick of willow charcoal which is essentially dust – so you can tissue off the residue prior to painting.

15. **'Im scared of smudging my work as Im working'**

Working on an easel largely eradicates this. But if you prefer to work at a table consider working top down and if you are left handed start at the top right and vica versa. This works well for pastel pencil artists – especially in portraiture. Other than that you can use a piece of glassine from the art shop to rest you hand on. An easel is the best solution though.

