

How to Stretch Watercolour Paper

Why stretch paper?

We always stretch our paper before attempting a painting (even heavier papers). Paper cockles so easily while wet, and it is all too easy to ruin a painting by having a mountain of paper develop across your work, complete with rivers of paint that refuses to stay where you put it and settles into stripy valleys of colour in all the wrong places. Paper that has not been stretched retains its cockled shape as it dries, and will not go flat again, so that even if you have carefully avoided the first set of problems you cannot frame the painting successfully. Stretching the paper realigns the fibres within the paper so that it does not cockle very much even if you flood the paper. Any cockling that does occur is rectified as the painting dries and the paper returns to its flat shape.

You will need:

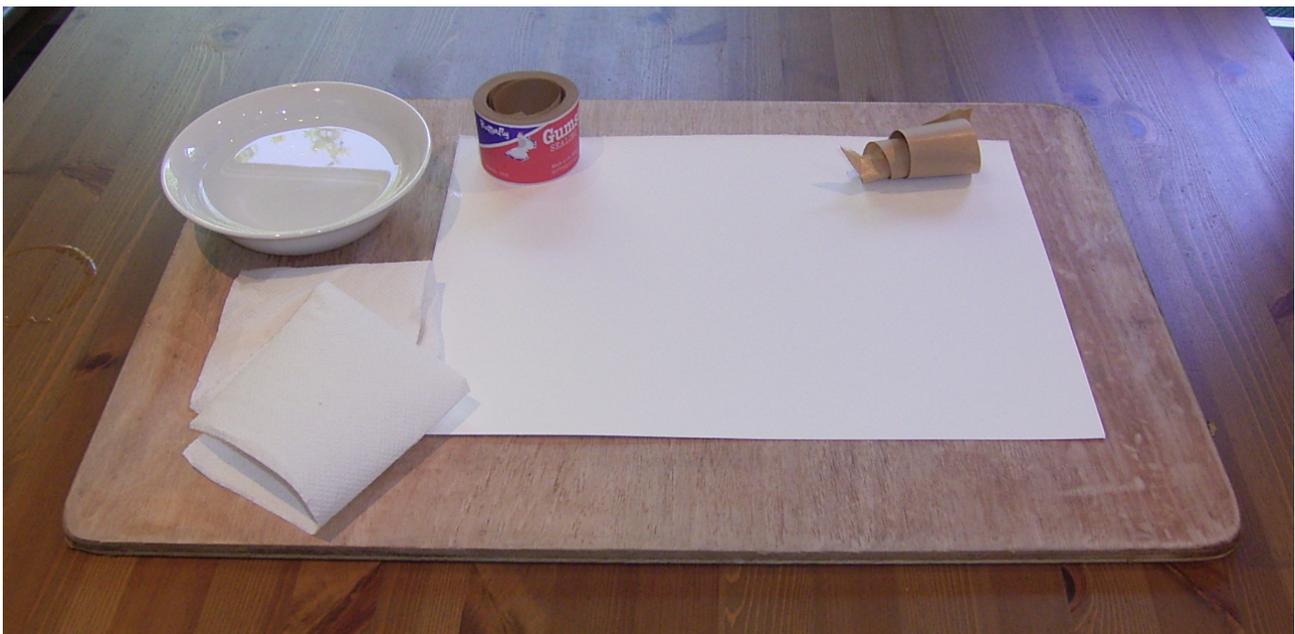
Watercolour paper.

A board to stretch it on. We use exterior grade plywood cut to our specified size by the nice chaps at B & Q, then lightly sanded by us. Any board that can withstand being thoroughly wet will work, and should be strong enough to withstand the tremendous pressure put upon it by the paper as it stretches. (Hardboard bends too easily)

Gum Strip (masking tape will not work.)

Bowl/jar of water

Kitchen roll



Step 1

Cut your paper to your chosen size, including an allowance over the size of your painting on all edges for the width of the gum strip. If your paper has a right side mark this with pencil so that you do not stretch it upside down.

Step 2

Cut four strips of gum strip, allowing a good overlap at each end of the paper (about 6cm longer than the paper edge should do it).

Lay out your equipment as shown. Speed is of the essence so ensure that the paper is stuck down before the cockles start to develop ~ have everything ready before you wet the paper. Uncurl the gum strip (running a thumb down the middle of the non-gummy side helps), and dampen the kitchen roll.



Step 3

Wet the paper thoroughly on both sides. Ideally you should completely immerse it, flat, in water. Rob uses the bath!

Alternately you can hold it under a running tap, moving it around to make sure the entire surface is wet. If you are using a NOT or Rough paper you need to rotate it through 180° at least once to ensure that water has gone into all the little 'valleys' on the paper surface. Make sure any air bubbles that develop have been washed away, Remember to do both sides.

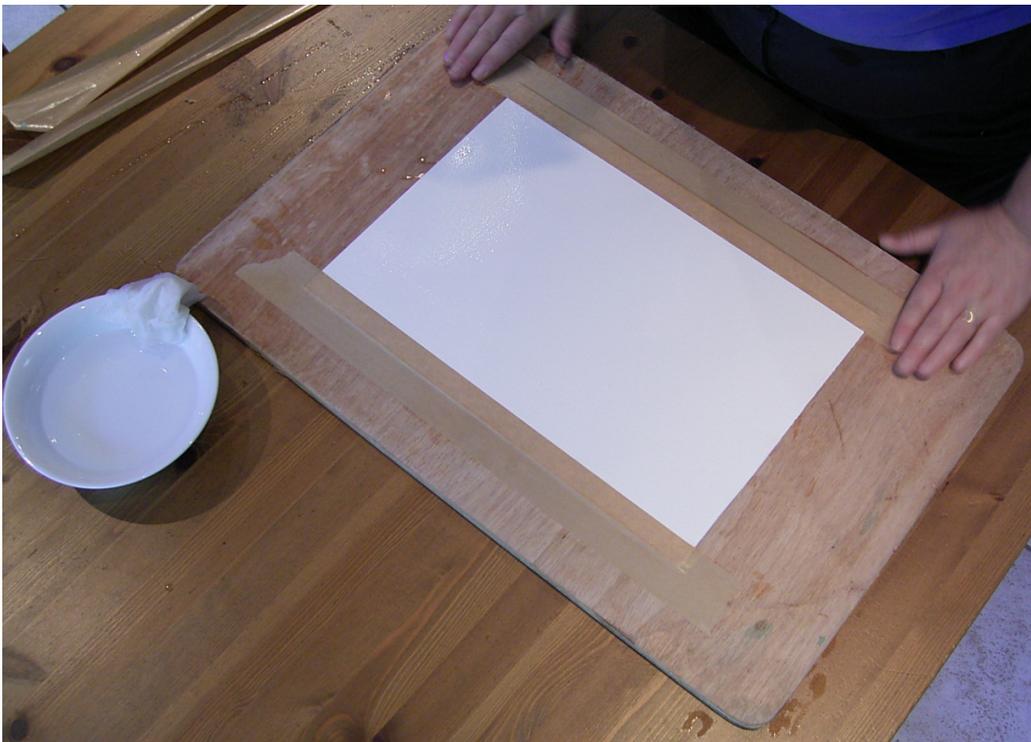


This blue tray is an Oven Rack Soaking Tray, which we purchased from Lakeland Plastics. It will take paper up to 15" x 22" (a 'half-sheet'). The piece shown here is a quarter sheet, 11" x 15".



Step 4

Lay the paper on the board, rolling it down from the middle outwards. Stick the LONG edges FIRST, shorter edges second. Dampen a long piece of gum strip with the kitchen roll. (Make sure it is all dampened, but not so wet you wash the glue off.) Place the gum strip half on the edge of the paper, half on the board. Press down with your fingers, working from the middle outwards. Repeat with the other long side, then the two shorter sides.

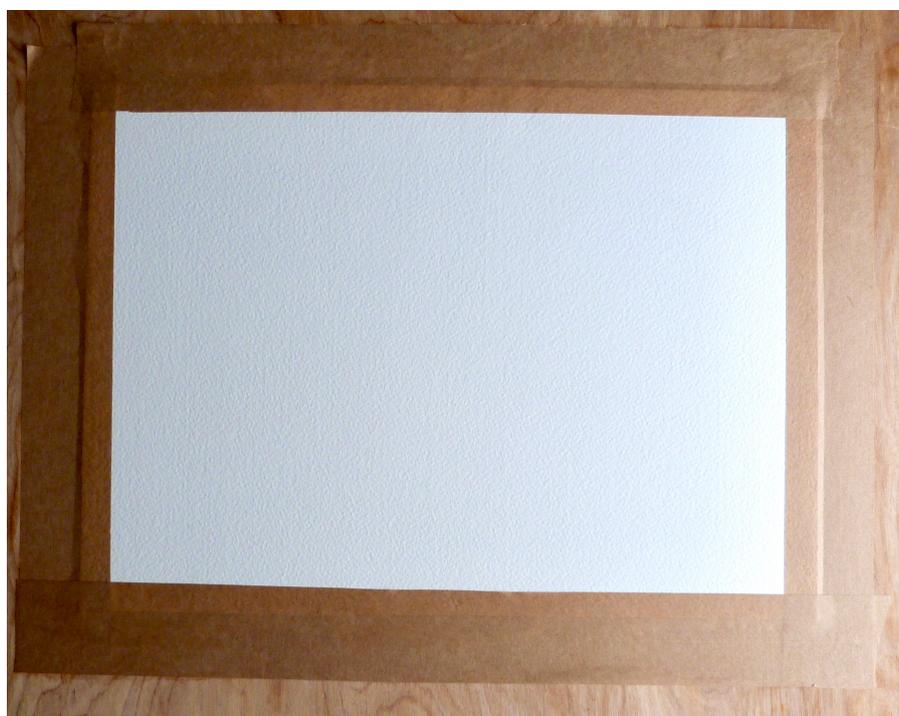


Step 5

Lightly mop any large puddles with dry kitchen roll—do not rub the surface of the paper.



Leave to dry FLAT. (Standing it up, e.g. next to radiator, will mean the water runs down the paper and loosens the gum strip.) Do not panic as cockles appear! They will dry flat again. The paper shown above dried completely flat : see below.



Leave well alone until it is completely dry! We are often asked how long this stage takes ~ it depends entirely on the humidity of the room in which it is drying. On a hot dry day it may take as little as two hours; in wet weather you may need to wait overnight. Plan ahead!

Step 6

Paint your picture!

When your painting is completed cut it off the board using a craft knife, and trim away the brown gum strip.

We know how tempting it is to rush in to a painting, especially when your time to enjoy your painting is limited. We are convinced that stretching paper is definitely worth the effort involved to avoid ruining what might have been a good painting. With practice it becomes second nature, and takes only a few minutes. Why not use the time waiting for a wash to dry to stretch paper on another board? Once dry protect it with clean paper (use computer paper and masking tape around the edges) and store it somewhere safe until you need it ~ then you'll always have a stretched piece to hand.

Enjoy your painting!