

Tips for Producing an Amazing GCSE or A Level Art Sketchbook by Amiria Gale February 8, 2017

This article contains tips, examples and guidance to help students produce an A* grade Art sketchbook.

What should an A Level or GCSE Art sketchbook contain?

A sketchbook is a creative document that contains both written and visual material. It is a place for researching, exploring, planning and developing ideas – for testing, practising, evaluating and discussing your project. It is the place where you learn from other artists and express and brainstorm ideas.

The sketchbook is an important part of your project. It shows the journey (or development) towards your final piece and usually contains:

- **Drawings, diagrams, thumbnails, composition plans, paintings and/or designs** (particularly those that are incomplete or experimental)
- **Practise and trials of different techniques and processes**
- **A range of mixed mediums and materials**
- **Evidence of first-hand responses to subject matter and artworks**, demonstrated through observational drawings, photographs and annotated pamphlets and sketches from exhibitions or gallery visits. (Note: the sketchbook must NOT be used as a dumping ground for fliers and pamphlets. If you are going to glue something in, evaluate it, discuss its relevance and explain how it helps to inform your own work)
- **Digital printouts of relevant artist work**
- **Annotation**
- Note: The sketchbook should NOT be used as an all-purpose journal for doodling cartoon characters or scribbling notes to a friend. All work contained within your sketchbook must support your project as a whole.

How to annotate an A Level or GCSE Art sketchbook

The following tips and guidelines should help you understand how to add quality notes to your pages:

- **Reveal your own thinking and personal responses** (rather than regurgitating facts or the views of others)
- **Explain the starting points and ideas**, emphasising personal relevance and connections to subjects
- **Critically analyse and compare artwork of relevant artist models** (both historical and contemporary artists, from a range of cultures).
Discuss aesthetics, use of media, technique, meaning/emotion/ideas and the influence of an artist upon your own work. Conduct research into your artist models and convey an understanding of this information, however avoid copying large passages of information and stating boring facts. Instead, select the information that you think is useful for your project and link it with your own viewpoints and observations. Use research findings to make you sound knowledgeable – to prove that you are aware of the artists and cultural influences around you – and to help you to critically evaluate artworks (by giving you background information and a peek into the mind of an artist).
- **Demonstrate good subject knowledge, using correct vocabulary** (phrases such as ‘strong contrast’, ‘draws the eye’ and ‘focal point’ etc)
- **Reference of all images, artwork and text from other sources**, ensuring that artists, websites and books are acknowledged (it should be obvious to an examiner which work is yours when viewing a page, so cite sources directly underneath the appropriate image).
To help the examiners know the work is yours, clearly label your own photographs.
- **Communicate with clarity**. You can use bullet points, but never use ‘txt’ speak and try to avoid incorrect spelling, as this indicates sloppiness to the examiner.

When critically annotating a GCSE or A Level Art sketchbook, it may benefit you to contemplate the following:

- What subjects / themes / moods / issues / messages are explored? Why are these relevant or important to the artist (or you)?
- What appeals to you visually about this artwork?
- How does the composition of the artwork (i.e. the relationship between the visual elements: line, shape, colour, tone, texture and space) help to communicate ideas and reinforce a message? Why might this composition have been chosen? (Discuss in terms of how the visual elements interact and create visual devices that ‘draw attention’, ‘emphasise’, ‘balance’, ‘link’ and/or ‘direct the viewer through the artwork’ etc.)

- What mediums, techniques (mark-making methods), styles and processes have been used? How do these communicate a message? How do they affect the mood of the artwork and the communication of ideas? Are these methods useful for your own project?
- How does all of the above help you with your own artwork?

Sketchbook Presentation Ideas

Layout and presentation is important – try to avoid wasting time on decorative features in your sketchbook that make little difference to final grades. In appearance, a sketchbook should be reminiscent of what you might expect an artist or designer to create. It should not be tacky, with colourful headings and sparkly backgrounds. It does not need to be heavily structured or ‘over worked’. It does not need to be rigidly ordered, excessively flowery or decorative. You do not need to spend time adding borders, typing out the annotation or working obsessively over pages again and again. The sketchbook is NOT meant to be a complete a book of finished artworks and illustrations; it is meant to be creative document of exploration and investigation. A place where an art student thinks, works things out and learns. Your sketchbook should be relevant, attractive and to get an A* it must look stunning.

Guidelines for presenting an A* quality sketchbook:

- **Select a good quality sketchbook** and/or a collection of artist papers and found materials. Recognise the difference between work produced upon cheap, flimsy sketchbook pages that warp at a hint of moisture and that produced on thick, rich, ‘wet strength’ paper. Even a garish cover design can negatively influence enthusiasm. Try to buy a quality sketchbook and/or collection of paper / drawing surfaces. Begin with something that inspires you.
- **Let the artwork shine.** Do not distract from your practical work by using large lettering, decorative borders, or unnecessary framing or mounting. Do not spend weeks researching, preparing and reworking beautiful backgrounds – wild drips of coffee, torn paper, layer upon layer of careful speckled mediums – if this compromises the amount of time you spend on the artwork itself. Producing quality art or design work is your number one goal.
- **Vary page layouts to provide variety and visual interest.** Some pages should have many illustrations; some should have single, full-page artworks; others should be somewhere in between. Position items carefully on the page as you work: making sure pages are well-composed.
- **Use a consistent style of presentation**, so that a consistent visual language unites the sketchbook. Some students prefer hard-edged, ordered presentation methods (often those studying graphic design, for example); others prefer messier, looser, gestural presentation styles. Neither is better than the other: both can be amazing. However pages jumping from one presentation style to another can result in a submission that is distracting and too busy.
- **Be selective. More is not necessarily better.** Although examiners look to reward candidates but bulking up your sketchbook with poor work does you no favours. Weak work can set off alarm bells for an examiner, leading them to be on the lookout for potential weaknesses elsewhere. Work should rarely be thrown away, as most things can be worked over and saved for far less effort than would be required starting anew; but you must discriminate and don’t automatically include everything. Select work which shows the journey your project has taken and presents your skill in the best light.
- **Prioritise visual work above annotation.** Focus on producing good practical work initially. Only once images on a page are complete (or as complete as needed) should you fill some of the gaps with notes. Make annotation look harmonious, making a sketchbook page look thorough and well-balanced. Use text as a compositional element. Write neat and small (this way spelling or grammatical errors are less obvious), and in pencil (so that mistakes can be easily changed); otherwise, write in black or white pen: not ink that switches colour every sentence or is ‘enhanced’ by hearts on the ‘i’s.
- **Give every page of your sketchbook some love.** Use each page as an opportunity to remind the examiner that you are a hard-working, dedicated student who cares passionately about this subject with each part of your sketchbook produced with care and dedication.

Exciting and creative use of media for Painting (1) February 8, 2017 by Amiria Gale

If your project feels stagnant, repetitive, or downright boring, you may benefit from increased experimentation with media, techniques and processes. While it is important to remember that art-making mediums should be used in a way that supports your ideas, there are times when a dash of unpredictability and thinking-outside-the-box can help.

Paint on something interesting

Some students paint or draw on white cartridge paper and nothing else. There is nothing wrong with cartridge paper. Some cartridge papers – especially thick, gutsy, wet-strength ones – are beautiful. Sometimes, a thin, flimsy sheet (the kind that warps at the mere hint of moisture) is all you need. But, often, experimentation and creativity with media brings considerable advantage. There is a joy and aesthetic discovery that takes place when you paint on something unexpected: a surface with history that brings with its own colours, textures, marks and irregularities.

Artist Juan Gris teacups: a mixed media painting upon a collage of coloured papers. The shapes of the pieces of paper are very deliberate, mimicking the angular table edges and table cloth forms.

Draw on coloured paper

Papers of other colours can be tried; select those that integrate seamlessly with your coursework project (creams, browns, greys and blacks are likely to be more appropriate than psychedelic pink, for example). Dark colours can be great for drawing on with light mediums; mid-tone papers (those that are a 'medium' tone – not too dark and not too light) are also excellent. As with the work of Juan Gris and Indian ink, the colour of the paper acts as the mid-tone for the drawing; dark and light areas are added as required (this results in a piece that appears three-dimensional very quickly).

Embrace textured paper

There are lots of textured papers available; some are machine-made, pressed with a uniform mesh of bumps or grooves; others are handmade, with flecks of fibre, thread, tissue and other items intertwined within the paper pulp. If you don't have access to textured papers, you can easily find or make your own. Tear apart packaging or disassemble things you find in the trash. Source whatever scraps you can and draw on them, or cut, tear and glue them into a painting.

Discover the beauty of drawing on tracing paper

Tracing paper is not just useful for tracing – it is an exciting drawing surface in its own right (examples by Debby Kaspari and Mercedes Baliarda). Tracing paper can be used to make translucent overlays or glued onto white backing paper (be careful when gluing, as some tracing papers warp hugely when in contact with moisture). The shiny surface creates rich, glossy images that love to smudge and blacken your hands.

Permatrace – a thick, waterproof drafting film – is particularly exhilarating: it produces some amazing outcomes with ink.

Use ripped, scrunched, folded, ripped, or stained paper or tissue

Tissue paper can be scrunched and glued onto a painting (shaping as required) to create a textural surface that can be painted over. As with other textures, dry-brushing will exaggerate them and make the fine web of creases more visible.

Paint or draw on patterned or textured wallpapers or other decorative surfaces

Care needs to be taken when integrating patterned items; it can be easy for the pattern to dominate and overpower a work. When appropriate imagery is selected, however, patterned items can provide excellent drawing surfaces or collaged material.

Integrate newspaper cuttings

If you experiment with drawing on newspaper, remember that the text becomes a part of your work; this needs to be an intentional and considered decision. If the words are legible, the message contained within the writing should be relevant or, at the very least, not distracting.

Jonathan Darby's art commonly explores humanitarian themes, depicting vulnerable children. In his work painting on newspaper is highly appropriate, as it suggests the child is lost in a landscape filled with litter: discarded. The beauty and innocence of the child are in stark contrast to the gritty, sorrow that surrounds him.

Draw on book pages, pieces of rubbish or other text-based items

Many artists are achieving great popularity for their drawings upon found, text-based materials.

Artist Mark Powell has produced a series of stunning ballpoint pen drawings on envelopes and other found materials.

Paula Swisher's drawings of birds on book pages have gone viral on the internet. Certain parts of the background on

her work have been highlighted in blue to link with the bird and balance the work. Note also how the circle in the background links with the curving form of the bird which is positioned directly beneath it. In other words, the book page becomes a carefully considered aspect of the composition – it is not just mere pattern that is used and then forgotten about.

Draw on cardboard

MDF or hardboard is a great surface to paint on. Cardboard is a suitable, lightweight replacement. Card can provide a sturdy base for a painting and, when cut-outs are glued into a work, can create elevated surfaces that segment a composition, adding depth and shadows.

Textured painting ideas: A2 Painting student Nikau Hindin glued MacDonald's hamburger boxes to her artworks and painted over them. The dramatic cityscape on the right by Olivier Catte was created on corrugated cardboard. The vertical lines of the corrugation are integral to the work.

Artist EVOL creates amazing spray paintings on cardboard. The texture of the cardboard becomes an integral component of the painting: a decaying, crumbling wall surface.

Paint on linen, hessian, canvas or fabric

Pieces of fabric can be cut and glued onto paper and painted upon. The fine mesh of woven thread can be left as is or hacked at and unravelled, fine threads spiralling into the artwork. It is also possible to 'stretch' canvas yourself over a sturdy piece of cardboard, with the canvas edges folded behind the back of the card and stapled.

Tony Fomison paints on hessian: a gritty, absorbent texture.

Go wild with modelling compound

Modelling compound – used for creating thick, sculptural elements in an artwork. Whether used with masking tape to create straight edged areas, or slapped on and scratched erratically with a stick, modelling compound is the stuff of magic. Items can be pressed into it and carefully lifted out when dry, revealing an indented pattern and form; it can be sanded and cut with a craft knife when dry. Texture created on the surface of a painting using modelling compound scratched with the end of a paint brush. When the surface is dry, a watery acrylic wash can be brushed over it; pigment settling in the grooves as it dries.

Throw in everything else

Be inspired by artist Robert Rauschenberg; create an assemblage of objects not normally associated with making art. Robert Rauschenberg artworks are sculptural, mixed media collage pieces that merge cuttings, photographs, clothing, rubbish and other found objects.

When you shape or create a painting surface, there is something of you invested in the work, before you even begin.

Painting on Grounds: Inventive uses of Media for Painting Students (2) February 8, 2017 by Amiria Gale

Painting on grounds are common in contemporary art; many students continue to draw or paint solely on unprimed, undecorated surfaces (usually plain white paper). This approach can be wholly appropriate – and, indeed, sometimes wondrous – however, for many projects, there are considerable benefits to being creative with the treatment of a painting surface (as there is in painting or drawing onto different materials, which was discussed in Part 1 of this series). This article shows you how to integrate a ground within your artwork and illustrates just how beneficial this technique can be.

A painting by Andrew Young completed on a dripped, mixed media ground: artist Andrew Young depicts tightly controlled images of people bicycling across a ground of streaming drips and collaged materials. The realistic figures and bicycles have a clever ambivalence towards one another, as they hurtle across the chaotic, unpredictable dance of running paint.

What is a 'ground'?

A white ground in a skilful A Level art print by Alexander Pavely from Richmond upon Thames College partially obscures a layer of collaged newspaper. This makes the text less visible and allows the red buildings to stand out when printed over the top. It also makes the newspaper less absorbent, creating a better surface for the ink to print upon. Short for 'background', a ground is the very first layer of paint (or other wet medium) applied to an artwork. It is an undercoat, which can either be covered entirely by subsequent media, or left visible in the final work.

Using a ground has several practical advantages, as well as some important aesthetic ones. For example:

- **Blending colours is easier.** Most papers, canvases, timbers and fabrics are very porous. If you paint directly upon them, the moisture from the paint is absorbed almost immediately, resulting in paint that is difficult to spread and difficult to blend.
- **Paint dries richer and more vibrant.** Without a ground to 'seal' a surface, paint dries prematurely and becomes slightly flat and dull in appearance; absent of its natural glossy sheen (if you have never used a ground, you won't be aware of how full-bodied and beautiful paint can look when it is allowed to slowly evaporate dry).
- **paint on a greater range of surfaces.** Many shiny materials, particularly composite boards (such as hardboard, which contains oil) repel acrylic paint. A professional primer such as Gesso is designed to adhere to such surfaces and to create a ground that is perfect for painting upon.
- **Texture.** A ground can be used to smooth over imperfections in the underlying surface or to create new texture.
- **Flimsy papers can be strengthened.** A sheet of paper becomes stiffer and more resilient when covered with a thick ground (sometimes painting both sides is necessary, in order to minimise warping). A sturdier piece of paper is especially beneficial if later adding collage or heavy elements to a work.
- **It allows you to easily cover underlying colours.** A thick primer reduces the number of layers needed to cover an intensely coloured surface. Artist Ian Francis has painted on a black ground. Black forces you to apply thick (or many) layers of paint and it can help create deep, brooding shadows.
- **Paintings can be finished faster.** If a ground remains partially – or completely – visible in a finished work, the painting can often be finished much faster. At a very simple level, your work is already partially done: the canvas is covered entirely from the start.
- **Paintings can look more 'authentic', as if they belonged to a 'real' artist.** Why? Because grounds encourage layers and in doing so, give a greater opportunity for the artist to really interact with the work; their soul to be tangled within it. Layers give history and depth. Artist Michael Shapcott: features layers of colour: splashes / washes / drips that have been worked over, creating a rich, vibrant, multi-layered work.

Gesso

A graphite drawing, upon a mixed media ground can be sealed in places with a thin layer of gesso. In areas where the gesso is applied the gritty surface makes pencil lines very dark and impossible to erase (although they can be partially smudged away).

Gesso is a professional primer, a paint-like product that has been designed specifically for preparing a painting surface. It binds well to a range of materials and has a chalky texture that is great to paint on. It is usually thinner than paint, spreading over larger areas easily, although different brands have different consistencies. Extra thick varieties can also be used to create sculptural effects or sanded to a smooth finish (Atelier gesso is recommended). A gesso ground is advisable whenever you are painting on something that is extra absorbent or paint-resistant. It is not necessary with most papers (although it can be advantageous).

Gesso is typically white; however it comes in a range of colours as well as black and clear, and can be mixed with paint to create other colours. Note: Gesso doesn't have the same glossy 'finish' as acrylic, so it is generally not suitable for leaving as part of the finished visible work, unless covered with a protective surface such as glossy impasto gel or varnish.

Coloured Grounds

When selecting a coloured ground, it is advisable to use a colour that will be prevalent in the painting, as shown in the artist Adrian Gottlieb's work upon a brown ground, over a base coat of lead white oil primer. The hue was intentionally chosen to match the darker tones on the subject's face. The earthy colour shows through faintly in the finished work, giving a faint warm earthy tone.

Acrylic Grounds

Pure acrylic paint (of any appropriate colour) instead of Gesso can be used to create a ground. This can be cheaper and more convenient however it creates a glossy surface that is sometimes difficult to paint or draw upon (although some people prefer the slicker surface to gesso's chalky texture). Watering the paint down will eliminate this problem. An acrylic ground can also be used over the top of gesso, or to under-paint specific areas, as in an example by Linda Mann with a different ground applied in the warm and cool areas. In this case, the ground takes the form of an 'under-painting' where tones and basic colours are applied. The artwork Lyndon Hayes shows a contemporary approach to a ground. Not only is the brown a useful mid-tone for the flesh of the runner, a large expanse is left visible in the foreground of the work.

Messy, Textural Grounds

Treat grounds with as much enthusiasm and dedication as you give the subject of the painting itself. Messy, gestural grounds can be very appropriate for sketchbook exercises and, in many cases, provide welcome contrast to a tightly controlled observational drawing. Textural grounds can also be used as a method for imparting texture to the objects within the artwork and for creating a visually interesting surface.

Artist Jane Mitchell created a beautiful painting upon an old Javanese boat panel from Indonesia.

Artist Jane Mitchell has been painted a semi-translucent baby's pram over a textural background – creating the impression of a decaying wall surface. The work suggests urban decay: forgotten moments in time; a snapshot of human existence in a crumbling, eroding world.

A pastel drawing exercise by Adiefineart: expressive drawing with pastel on acrylic ground: perfect use of media for sketchbook exploration.

Acrylic Washes / Ink Washes / Watercolour Grounds

Stella Im Hultberg: When you make a ground using a watery medium, it dries in beautiful, unexpected patterns.

Interesting grounds are produced with watery, unpredictable mediums; watery paint, ink or dye, with its wild splashes, irregular runs, seeping and pooling. When making such a watery ground, you embrace a sense of freedom and endless possibility. You can make a pile of beautiful, splashy, crazy grounds using thick, wet-strength paper (300gms, for example) – or scraps out of the bin – or other random things and dunk bits in water, ink or acrylic wash and lay them, dripping, on a table. Splash colour everywhere you could splatter a fine mist of inky rain.

A drawing by Amiria Robinson was completed using graphite and white pencil upon acrylic wash. The ground was created using three different colours of watered down acrylic (yellow ochre, then red umber then cool blue), applied while the previous layer was still wet, with a large, flat, dry-bristled brush.

Graphic designer Graham Smith: carefully placed blocks of coloured wash can be used to direct the viewer's attention. Artist Andrew Young's work shows drips that have run off the painting and onto the wall.

Crackle medium

Crackle medium can be used to create a ground that has an 'old' weathered appearance. Dry-brushing can be used to exaggerate the appearance of the cracks. While care should be taken to avoid using mediums like this just for the sake of it, this can be a fun medium to experiment with.

Tutorial about how to make homemade crackle medium using glue: [Makethebestofthings](#).

Shellac

Shellac is an 'olden day' varnish, available through art shops in the form of dried shellac flakes. It is amber in colour and can be used to seal an artwork prior to painting. It is usually applied after a sketch, as shellac is translucent, and the pencil lines show through (sometimes they smudge a little). It is usually necessary to complete any sketches first, as it is very difficult to draw onto shellac with a pencil, due to its shiny, hard surface. It is sometimes difficult to paint on too, as certain paints 'peel' off it.

Translucent Grounds

Artist Janet Nechama Miller completes encaustic paintings (layers of wax mixed with oil paint). Far below these wax layers, the original ground can be seen peeking through.

Gel medium can be particularly useful when painting over a surface (such as a map or speckled piece of timber) that has awesome marks that you want to keep.

Encaustic (wax mixed with oil paint) can also be used when working over old salvaged materials, as in an example by Janet Nechama.

Using a ground often results in the creation of rich, multi-layered works that have a history to them; buried marks that fill them authenticity. Instead of being superficial or surface-deep, your painting becomes the work of an artist: filled with song.