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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Studio Craft: Professional Grade or Student Grade?



**Ask the Experts: “I am still learning to draw and paint, and the teacher says we should only be using professional grade supplies. I wonder why we can’t use student grade, since we are students and don’t really need this stuff to last forever.”**

**A:** It’s certainly a fair point, that student work is made for a different purpose and to different standards from professional art. Not every sketch, study or class assignment is something that will be kept forever. So, why use professional-grade art supplies at this early stage of a career?

For one thing, permanence isn’t the only advantage gained from using better quality supplies. Professional-grade art materials can also yield better results through better handling, more responsiveness, enhanced durability and other physical properties. Because new artists often possess less manual control over their tools and supplies, using the best materials within a budget is a way to achieve the best results while learning the craft.

Professional supplies are generally very economical, often a better value than “student grade”. Paint is definitely a category where this difference is easy to notice. Higher quality artists’ colors are more

concentrated than entry level ones, so a little goes a long way. This category of paint is made without the “fillers” that are present in economy grade, additives that allow manufacturers to stretch more expensive pigments by adding bulk at the cost of color strength and covering power. Because paints containing fillers are already diluted, they don’t go as far on the palette and may not perform well in sensitive mixtures.

Paper quality ranges from strictly disposable to highly durable. Unlike paint, however, even the very cheapest grades have legitimate applications in the professional studio. For quick sketches and studies which will be consumed in the process of making finished art, newsprint remains a popular choice despite its inevitable degradation and destruction. For artists who don’t want to risk losing successful sketches to yellowing and embrittlement, there are intermediate-quality sketch papers nearly as cheap as newsprint, which offer better permanence. Many actually prefer the surface of rough newsprint, which is quite nice, and will accept the disadvantages in durability.

If there is a single category of art supply where professional quality is almost always the best choice, it’s probably brushes. Handmade brushes with premium filaments out-perform machine-assembled, clipped-filament types in all but the roughest, most rudimentary tasks. Better brushes give more control and better paint distribution. Especially for beginners, it’s important to understand that better brushes can last for years with scrupulous cleaning and maintenance, so an early investment in quality can provide years of service.

The “student grade” category isn’t etched in stone, however, and can include items of surprising quality. Some scholastic-grade drawing supplies, for example, can be very enjoyable to use, and some even yield permanent results. As an added benefit, products sold for scholastic use are normally non-toxic and extremely safe, so artists wishing to exclude riskier materials may want to explore this category. Look for the AP seal of the ACMI indicating “safe for all ages”.

Most professionals know that it’s not necessary to shop the most expensive brands in order to get great results. To find out which brands offer the best value, ask your teacher or a more experienced student about their favorites.