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ASK THE EXPERTS

## Product Profiles: "Student Grade" Explained



**Ask the Experts: "Is there a universal rule or standard that makes something "student grade"? Are student grade materials ever okay to use for professional art?"**

**A:** "Student grade" is more of a general description and marketing term than a codified classification, but when objectively benchmarked, most products regarded as "student grade" tend to fall short of the performance and permanence that a professional would expect. Student artwork like sketches and exercises are not always intended to be kept forever, so long-term durability is not always an issue. It's fair to say that, while a "student grade" product is not always well suited to a productive, professional studio, it could still have some training value for a beginner.

The reasons a paint might be classified or marketed as "student grade" are because it contains components that affect permanence or lightfastness, or because cheaper fillers have been used to increase volume at the expense of key performance benchmarks.

In a usage scenario like a school classroom, it can make sense to use a lower grade product if the teaching objective is met while preserving the instructor's budget. Sometimes, however, students have a better experience

using "professional grade" supplies which tint, cover and mix better, as long as waste is scrupulously avoided.

Sometimes student grade materials can be used in the professional studio without sacrificing good results. Skilled professionals may be capable of successfully using "student grade" materials, and can often achieve durable results with lower quality supplies. Diluted, "economy grade" acrylic primer, for example, can be used as an acceptable painting ground, but only if preparation is executed perfectly and the primer is paired with the correct support. Also, a trained professional will be better able to determine which products are formulated with suitable ingredients. A product with 100% acrylic polymer base, diluted for bulk use, for instance, could still be used for permanent painting, whereas something with unknown copolymer base might not be good enough.

So, what are the typical characteristics of "student grade" paints? Oil paints that are considered "student grade" contain large amounts of fillers to replace pigment, and the resulting paint is very fat and has weak tint strength. Stearates (waxy powders) are the most common type of filler used in oil paints. Stearates form a gel consistency when mixed with oil, making a workable paste out of paint that would otherwise be runny. (Stearates can also be present in professional grade colors, but in much smaller amounts, as stabilizers to prevent separation in storage.) Student grade oil paint that lacks pigment and has a lot of oil and fillers may form a weaker film that is prone to shrinkage and yellowing, compared to professional grade, which has a correctly balanced proportion of solids and oils.

The inert fillers used in acrylics don't have as much impact on film strength as in oils, but some "craft grade" acrylics may be too dilute to yield a strong enough film for artistic painting. Also, if the polymer base includes styrenated copolymers or PVA, then embrittlement or yellowing could occur over time. Products sold as "student grade" may also be less generous with binder, so the artist may find that they are not able to further dilute or extend colors as much as with better grade paints.

Colorants used in student grade paints may not resist fading for very long. Some paints in this category may include dyes instead of pigments, which can fade noticeably in a short amount of time. In scholastic watercolors, tempera and some acrylics, fading can occur very quickly, especially if artwork is displayed in full sun.



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One advantage to "student grade" lines is that often a whole color range may be able to carry a "safe for all ages" designation. The majority of colors in professional ranges often meet this standard too, but it's very convenient for an educator to be able to manage this without having to investigate every color.

Most of the time, a solid "professional grade" product is better for just about any artistic painting, student or professional, because many brands in this category are priced very well for the value they deliver. Since professional quality supplies facilitate more control and are more effective in mixing, beginners can often have a better, more productive experience when they use moderately priced, better grade materials.

Despite overall lower quality in the "student grade" category, there are some bargains among entry-level products, but it's important to choose carefully. Even the cheapest tube of phthalo blue, for example, offers strong tint strength and acceptable coverage. In the red and magenta color space, however, many of the less expensive colors fall short in quality compared to professional grade colors.

Benchmark tests for mass-tone, tint strength, undertone, covering power and handling make it easy to objectively determine which products best balance cost and performance appropriate for the studio or classroom. Side-by-side comparison of the same color from two different brands can be conducted by mixing the samples with white, manipulating the color on a palette and drawing down thin deposits across a patterned card. These tests, designed to reveal key performance metrics, quickly reveal which colors meet the standard for professionals, and which ones are strictly for scholastic exercises.