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## 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 a general term for products that are made for classrooms, where art materials need to be safe for all ages, and affordable for volume use. Sometimes artists also use “student grade” to mean lower quality supplies that don’t meet professional standards.

While it is true that most products made for classroom or children’s use tend to fall short of the performance and permanence of professional art supplies doesn’t mean they’re inferior or “bad”. The main priorities with student art are practice, skill-learning, and freedom to create without pressure to produce finished art. Lightfastness and long-term durability are not normally very important in this early learning process, so it would be hard to justify the expense of professional grade materials in this usage scenario. Higher quality products might also be difficult or even risky for children to use. Student grade materials are designed to provide a safe, fun experience without frustration and worry.

Reasons why “student-grade” supplies might not be appropriate for professional use usually have to do with durability, performance, and appearance. Scholastic quality art materials sometimes (but not always) include ingredients that affect permanence or lightfastness. Inert solids (“fillers”) might be used to reduce the amount of pigment needed to produce a usable product. Many student paints are packaged at a ready-to-use consistency, so unlike professional-grade products, they

can’t be diluted further. The colorants in scholastic quality art materials might not meet the standard of lightfastness for use in professional artist’s colors. These measures keep costs low for educators and young artists at a stage when practice is especially important.



Professional artist’s colors have different performance and appearance from student grade

Skilled professionals may be capable of successfully using “student grade” materials, if they are able to determine the ingredients. Even if scholastic art supplies meet minimum standards, however, in a professional studio, there might not be a real cost savings if the artist has to use more to achieve the desired result.

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, 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, the paint base for student or craft acrylics might include polymer binders that could make paint turn yellow or get brittle with antique age. If this type of paint has binders that are more dilute or less strong,

they might also result in paint appearing less colorful and bright.



Fading with light exposure should be a matter of concern for professionals considering trading down to student grade. In scholastic watercolors, tempera and some acrylics, fading can occur very quickly, especially if artwork is displayed in full sun.

One major 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 the best value for a professional, because most products in this category are priced very well for what they deliver. Advanced beginners may also have a better, more productive experience when they use professional 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.

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. Learning how to perform side-by-side comparisons between different brands is a great way to ensure you can always determine which colors meet the standard for professionals, and which ones are strictly for scholastic exercises.

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