

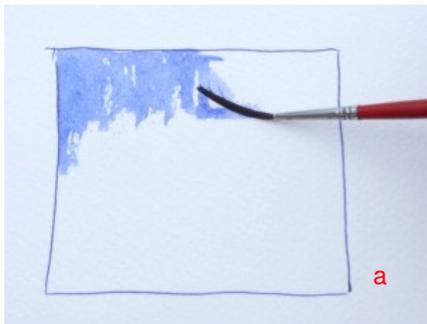
# seeing the big picture

I want to address two really important issues here which I have seen many students struggle with. You could call them bad habits. You may think they are obvious pitfalls, but it is surprising how often we fall into them! If we can learn to simply apply the two principles that follow, we will definitely see our paintings improving. And that's guaranteed!

## Principle 1. Use Large Brushes then Small

Think of when you last decorated your house. What brush did you use on the walls? I'm pretty sure you didn't use a small 1/4" (6mm) brush, but you chose a much larger brush or a roller. You only used a small brush to get a neat line around the edge or for painting the window sills. In other words you chose the appropriate brush size for the area you were painting. A big area demands a big brush, and a small brush is only used for details.

Now, exactly the same principle should apply to our painting, whether in watercolours, acrylics or oils. Always use a big brush first to establish the large main shapes, and only move on to a small brush when you absolutely have to for the details. Never start with a small brush, it will just encourage you to fiddle and mess up any large areas of colour.



Try this exercise to get the message home. It's an exaggeration of what we do but serves well to help us realise the problem of using the wrong brush for the job.

Draw two rectangles (mine were roughly 8cm x 6cm or 3" x 2 1/2") onto a sheet of watercolour paper. Use the back of a failed painting if you want to save paper.

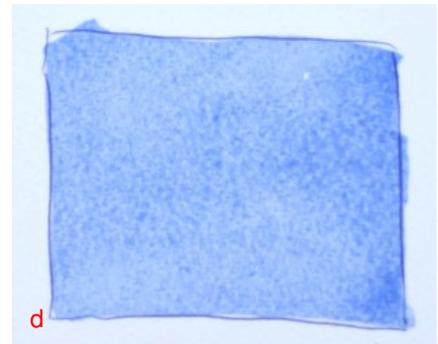


Then mix up some paint and choose your smallest brush. I used my rigger. Paint in the rectangle. (a)

You will find it difficult to do. It will take a long time and the paint will begin to dry before you finish, resulting in streaks, cauliflowers and a very uneven mess! (b)



Now choose your largest brush (mine was a size 20) and paint the second rectangle. This will take just a few seconds and should result in a lovely flat area of paint. It's the right size of brush for the right area (c and d).



## Principle 2. Stand up and Stand back

This second principle is also one that trips us up in many of our paintings. We tend to paint with our noses very close to the paper or canvas. This encourages us to use small brushes and add details far too soon. What we need to do is to stand up and stand back from our paintings at very frequent intervals. If you think about it, most people view a painting from the distance of a few feet, and will only come in closer to a foot or so to see the details if the painting has already 'grabbed' them and caught their interest. The painting has to work from this distance (again it's the big shapes that are so important).

We, on the other hand, often paint with our faces just a few inches from the canvas or paper and sometimes never look at our paintings from a distance until they are finished. And then we see what has gone wrong or hasn't quite worked – but too late! By looking at our paintings from a distance, and even by using our brushes at arms length as we paint, we are in a better position (literally) to see how they are progressing and make the changes as we go along.