Masking for Watercolors by Susan Bradford

The white of the watercolor paper is critical to light values in watercolor paintings. Unlike other mediums, where white paint can be added anytime to a painting, white in watercolors is the unpainted paper. Light values of any color are paint thinned with water to let light bounce off the white paper under the paint. For this reason, masking areas you want to be white or very light is often necessary. Masking is also helpful for creating crisp hard edges. Masking is not only used in the beginning of a painting, but also applied on painted area to protect them while painting adjacent areas.

Be sure to test each masking technique first on the paper you are using. When removing the mask if it tears the paper, don’t use it. Sometimes you will see bits of paper stuck to the mask. Stop! It is ruining the surface of your paper making it unpaintable. Upgrade your paper if possible. I recommend at least 140 lb. Arches or Stephen Quiller 100% rag papers or blocks. The next best would be other 140 lb 100% cotton rag paper. Limit masking techniques to those that work with your paper.

1. DON’T PAINT. Many artists choose to simply avoid painting white or light areas. Painting around white areas requires a tightly controlled, very careful technique; you lose the ability to paint freely. Wet in Wet techniques without masked whites leads to disaster when paint bleeds into the white areas.

2. MASKING FLUID The most widely used solution is masking fluid. It is a great choice for organic shapes, small highlights and thin lines. Masking fluid is latex suspended in ammonia. Never shake masking fluid; bubbles will form and leave holes in your mask. Fill a small airtight container with masking fluid and work from that. Leaving the big bottle open long enough to apply masking fluid will quickly result in dried out unusable fluid. It can be thinned with a drop or two of water stirred into the small container. Masking fluid works on all the papers I have tested.

Controlling masking fluid takes practice. Think of applying masking fluid as paint strokes. There are many tools to use to apply masking fluid but my newly discovered favorite is silicon tipped “brushes” called Colour Shapers. The fluid can also be applied with a brush (work soap into the bristles first and clean immediately.) Use a cheap brush you are willing to lose; they are often
ruined. Other application implements include the Incredible Nip, a ruling pen, a crumbled paper towel, a Q-tip, Chinese bamboo “pens” and splattered from a brush or with a toothbrush. The fluid is usually applied to dry paper, but dropping it onto wet paper gives nice feathery shapes when desired.

After masking fluid is applied, you must wait for it to dry completely before painting. A hair dryer held several inches away from the fluid on a low heat setting can speed up the drying process.

When you are ready to remove masking fluid use a rubber cement pickup. Don’t panic when you see the hard edges left when masking fluid is removed. You can soften the edges with clean water on a brush.

3. CLEAR PACKAGING TAPE One of the reasons I use Arches or Stephen Quiller paper exclusively is that you can use the same technique described above for Contact Paper using clear packaging tape instead. Buy the thinnest clear packaging tape you can find at your office supply. Arches and Stephen Quiller papers have a lot of external as well as internal sizing and when you pick up the packaging tape mask you will see bits of sizing on it, but no paper.

There is a clear film also made for masking by Frisket. The edges have to be sealed with masking fluid, so I don’t recommend it. Contract Paper and packing tape both work better and cost much less.

Both Contact paper and clear packaging tape can also be use to cut a stencil to expose only one part of the painting. Paint can be lifted from the exposed area with a wet sponge without effecting adjacent areas.

4. CLEAR CONTACT PAPER is great for masking larger areas. It works on a many papers, but test it on your paper first. Rough cut the contract paper to size you need with scissors. Peel off the backing and place it over the area you wish to mask. Use an Exacto craft knife to carefully cut off the part of the Contact paper you do not need. A metal edged ruler is the best option for cutting straight lines. Burnish down the edges of the Contact Paper mask to seal the edges. Be careful not to cut the watercolor paper with the Exacto. When the blade slices though the Contact Paper to watercolor paper you will feel and hear a rougher texture. Practice will help you develop a feel for this.

Contact Paper works on cold pressed paper but is not very successful on rough textured paper. In case you do accidentally cut into the paper, put a little Yes! Paste (thinned with water) on the cut. It will seal the cut and let you paint as usual over it.
5. **TAPE** There are several kinds of tape that can be used as a mask. Tape is especially convenient for keeping a white border around your painting. Tape can also be cut or torn into shapes to protect an area. The following commonly used tapes are listed from those with the most to the least tack (stickiness): masking tape, blue painters’ tape and drafting tape. Masking tape and blue painters’ tape tear up inexpensive paper badly but drafting tape usually does not. On the other hand, drafting tape will not stick to Arches paper because of the sizing.

White artist tape is more expensive but works the best on 100% cotton rag paper (I tested it on both Utrech and Arches papers.) but tore up the Canson paper which was not 100% cotton rag in my test. Artists Tape is the only tape that is acid free, which ensures putting it on your paper will not affect the light fastness of the painting. With Arches or Stephen Quiller paper, you can also use clear packaging tape.

6. **WAX** is used as a resist for water colors. It can be used effectively for highlights in water. Clear wax crayons are sold for this purpose and a white candle will also work. Using wax crayons is best since they can be sharpened to make narrow lines. Another way to apply wax is to put a sheet of waxed paper over the painting and use a pencil to draw lines that transfer wax onto the watercolor paper. This results in fine lines of wax. Be SURE you want the area where you apply wax to stay white or the color you have painted it before applying the wax. Applying clear or white wax is challenging because it is impossible to see where you have applied it. The wax crayons or candle skip over the paper and mark the raised parts of the textured paper, not the “valleys,” so you will get broken lines.

If you decide you do not want the white paper or the color you painted first where you have applied the wax, getting the wax off is a big problem. One method is to put several layers of paper towels over the painting and use an iron to apply heat to the paper towel. This will melt the wax and the paper towel will absorb it. I have also used a heat gun designed to use for embossing inks in a similar way. The gun heats up the wax well. Use a paper towel quickly after applying the heat to absorb the wax.

I have had some success removing wax with several applications of Bestine – a rubber cement thinner used by colored pencil artists to blend wax based colored pencils. Oddly enough, Bestine only affects the wax but does not activate the watercolor paint. Apply
the Bestine with a paper towel, let is set a few seconds and soak up the wax with a dry
towel. This seems to spread the wax over the area where you use the Bestine, if you
experience this, keep cleaning it with Bestine until it comes off.

I have also heard that adding soap to your paint will let it adhere over waxed surfaces
but have not tried it.

**Stencils** are another way to keep from painting certain areas. Stencils can be cut from cover
weight paper stock or even custom cut from a plastic sheet with a heated stencil cutting tool.
When painting with a stencil, avoid paint running under the stencil by stroking away from the
edge

**RESISTS** are not technically masks since they are not removable but instead become a
permanent design element of the painting. Regular wax or oil based colored pencils, oil pastels
and china markers for example act as a resist for watercolor paint, so you can paint over them.
Watercolor is also sometimes used as light colored washes over drawings done with a non-water
soluble ink pen. Neither technique is a mask but they are interesting options to consi