



FREE PRINTABLE GUIDE

Patty's Complete Beginner Watercolor Guide

Practical lessons from Patricia Elliott Seitz

*See simply.
Paint boldly.
Leave it fresh.*

Let watercolor behave like watercolor.

This guide is not about making a perfect painting. It is about learning to see the big idea, use water and pigment with purpose, and enjoy the process enough to return tomorrow.

“Painting is supposed to be fun and enjoyable. I want you to finish with a sense of accomplishment—and still want to paint again.”

MY SIMPLE PROMISE

- I will show you what matters first.
- We will practice one skill at a time.
- We will use good materials without wasting them.
- We will let washes move, mingle, and stay fresh.
- We will stop before fussing drains the life from the painting.

WHAT'S INSIDE

- 03 Materials that help
- 04 Patty's palette setup
- 05 Brushes and brush holds
- 06 Water and timing
- 07 Three essential washes
- 08 How I begin
- 09 Keep the first wash fresh
- 10 Three-value roadmap
- 11 Reference to painting
- 12 Edges and luminosity
- 13 Shadows and connected darks
- 14 A complete workflow
- 15 Common troubles
- 16 Daily practice
- 17 Fourteen-day plan
- 18 Final checklist

Use this guide beside your paper. Read one section, try the exercise, and let the result teach you. Watercolor skill grows through small paintings—not through waiting until you feel ready.

Materials that let watercolor behave.

Good supplies do not paint the picture for you, but they remove needless frustration. Buy fewer dependable materials and use them often.

PAPER

Choose 100% cotton watercolor paper. A dependable starting point is 140 lb cold press. Cotton accepts water, allows soft edges, and gives you more time to work. Cut a full sheet into small 8 × 10 pieces so the good paper feels usable—not precious.

PAINT

Use artist-quality tube color. A small palette of strong, luminous pigments will carry you farther than a huge inexpensive set. I normally preserve the paper for white rather than mixing white into transparent watercolor.

THE POINT

A beginner should be learning water, timing, value, and brushwork—not fighting paper that will not accept a wash or paint that dries dull.



My working mint-tin palette holds moist tube color in small pans.

START SMALL, NOT CHEAP

Good materials can last a surprisingly long time when you paint small. One tiny palette can support many 8 × 10 studies—and those studies are how you improve.

A tiny palette—and room for generous washes.

My mint tin sits inside my larger John Pike palette. The little tin keeps tube color compact and moist; the large center gives me room to prepare the wash before I touch the paper.



My working setup: mint tin above, large mixing area below, and a generous puddle ready for the brush.

- 0 Wake the paint
- 1 Give the colors a light spritz and allow them a moment to soften.

- 0 Mix enough
- 2 Prepare more wash than you think you need. A large passage needs a real puddle—not a dab.

- 0 Tilt the board
- 3 A gentle angle lets gravity carry the bead down the paper.

- 0 Reload constantly
- 4 Return to the same puddle while the wash is moving. Do not make the brush run dry halfway through.

Fresh paint, less waste

Close the tin when you finish. You can recycle several tins and fill each with a different color scheme for travel, plein air painting, or small daily studies.

The brush is more than its point.

I begin with a larger mop, move to a smaller mop, and finish with a synthetic round around size 8. The shrinking brush reminds me to move from big shapes to selective accents.



My brushes include mops and pointed rounds. The tool changes as the painting becomes more specific.

THREE USEFUL HOLDS

Back of the handle: Hold loosely for sweeping, lively shapes. Let your arm move.

Middle of the handle: Use for controlled shapes that still need freedom.

Near the ferrule: Save this for a few careful accents—not the entire painting.

POINT • BELLY • SIDE

The point draws a fine line. The belly carries plenty of wash. The side of a round makes broad, broken, organic marks. Change pressure during one stroke to move from thin to thick and back again.

Practice

Fill one page with ten marks from the same round brush: point lines, belly strokes, side strokes, twists, dry marks, and pressure changes. Learn what the brush can do before asking it to paint a subject.

Hold it lightly. A clenched hand makes a clenched mark.

Watch the shine of the paper.

Timing matters as much as color. Before adding another stroke, look at the surface and decide whether it is glossy, damp, or dry.

GLOSSY — movement

Color spreads freely and edges disappear. Use this stage for mingling, charging, and broad atmospheric passages.

DAMP — softness

Color moves less. This stage gives controlled soft edges, but it is also when excess water can create blooms.

DRY — clarity

Marks stay where you place them. Use dry paper for crisp edges, small accents, and a fresh new layer after the first wash has settled.

THE THREE-RECTANGLE TEST

Paint three rectangles with clean water. Add the same color to the first while it shines, the second when the shine becomes satin, and the third when it is nearly dry. Label the results. Your paper, room, and weather will change the timing.

Do not obey the clock more than the paper. Trust what your eyes are telling you.

Three washes every beginner should know.

Prepare the puddle first, tilt the board, and keep reloading. A wash stays cleaner when the brush carries enough liquid to continue the bead.

		
EVEN WASH — one consistent mixture	GRADUATED WASH — dark to light	CHARGED WASH — color placed into color
Reload from the same-strength puddle. Overlap each band while it is still wet and let gravity move the bead.	Begin with a strong mixture. Add a little water to the puddle as you move downward so the value gradually becomes lighter.	Place a richer second color into the glossy first wash. Let the colors mingle on the paper—do not scrub them into sameness.

A clean sky wash

Mix plenty of color. Keep dipping into that same puddle and laying down the wash while the board is angled. For a graded sky, add more water as you descend. You can also introduce another color into the wet passage for a more interesting effect.

I do not begin every painting the same way.

The right start depends on the subject, the whites I need, the surface, and whether I am working in the studio or outdoors.

0 VALUE STUDY
1 I usually work on dry paper. I place simple light, middle, and dark shapes without wetting the whole sheet.

0 FULL-COLOR PAINTING
2 I often wet most or all of the paper first so the first wash can travel. I keep selected areas dry when I need to reserve clean whites.

0 INK AND WASH
3 I usually wet and paint selected passages rather than covering the entire sheet. The drawing helps organize the separate washes.

0 PAINTING OUTDOORS
4 Time, sun, wind, and subject movement may require a more direct start. I choose the simplest method that protects the big idea.

Before you wet the paper, ask: What must stay white? Where do I want soft movement? Where will I need a crisp edge later?

One bold, juicy beginning.

The first wash should establish atmosphere and connect the painting—not explain every object.



A pale first wash connects the scene while the drawing remains visible.

*Let the watercolor fuzz and move.
Drop other colors into the wet
passage and allow them to find one
another.*

KEEP IT FRESH

- Use a brush large enough for the shape.
- Prepare enough wash before starting.
- Make one confident passage instead of many timid passes.
- Allow neighboring shapes to touch and bleed where softness helps.
- Preserve only the whites that truly matter.
- Let the wash dry before judging it.

As the paper already contains water, later color usually needs to be richer—not thinner. Thin paint dropped into an equally watery wash can push pigment aside and create unwanted blooms.

Do not chase every pale spot with a tiny brush. A few clean whites are stronger than dozens of nervous white halos.

Your three-value roadmap.

A value study organizes a complicated scene into light, middle, and dark families. It tells the color painter where the structure belongs.



My value study: white paper, a middle family, and a connected dark family.

1 • LIGHT

Reserve the largest light shapes and the brightest parts of the story.

2 • MIDDLE

Connect supporting shapes with one broad middle-value wash.

3 • DARK

Place the strongest darks where they clarify the focal point and join important forms.

Squint until names disappear

Do not think 'tree, man, bicycle, car.' Think 'light shape, middle shape, dark shape.' If the study reads from across the room, it can guide the color painting.

The value study is a map—not a prison.

The photograph is raw material.

You are allowed to crop, remove, move, combine, and simplify. The photograph records everything; the artist chooses what the painting needs.



REFERENCE — more information than the painting needs

ASK BEFORE DRAWING

- What is this painting really about?
- Where should the viewer look first?
- What can I crop or leave out?
- Which shapes can be connected?



PAINTING — the house, sunlight, and connected shadow become the story

WHAT I CHANGED

- Cropped closer to the house.
- Removed wires, signs, and clutter.
- Simplified windows and shrubs.
- Strengthened warm light and cool shadow.

Let some edges disappear.

A painting feels fresh when every boundary is not described with equal sharpness. Edge variety gives the eye places to rest and places to look.



Hard, soft, and lost edges work together in the finished Cazenovia Chickens watercolor.

HARD

A crisp edge attracts attention. Save the clearest ones for the focal area and a few important overlaps.

SOFT

A softened edge turns form, suggests atmosphere, and keeps supporting areas quiet.

LOST

When neighboring shapes share a similar value, let part of their boundary disappear. The viewer completes it.

KEEP THE LIGHT ALIVE

- Let clean paper provide your brightest white.
- Use artist-quality transparent color.
- Charge richer color into a glossy wash.
- Avoid numerous passes over the same area.
- Do not add white merely to make a mixture lighter; it can make transparent watercolor look chalky.

Every edge does not need to announce itself. A lost edge can say more than an outline.

Paint the shadow shape—not the objects.

Shadows describe the ground, reveal the direction of light, connect separate objects, and lead the eye through the scene.



The broad foreground shadows lead into the sunlit house.

A SHADOW CHECKLIST

- Decide the direction of light first.
- Draw the complete shadow shape before painting it.
- Connect small shadows into a larger family.
- Keep the wash transparent and colorful.
- Let some edges soften as the shadow travels.
- Make ground shadows follow the surface and perspective.

CONNECTED DARKS

A strong dark behind a light subject can make the focal point read immediately. Connect scattered dark patches where it helps the design, then use only a few small accents.

One connected shadow shape is stronger than a collection of little dark marks.

From value plan to color painting.

Keep the same large value relationships while allowing many colors to live inside each family. Color can change; the structure should remain clear.

- 0 CHOOSE
- 1 Decide what the painting is about. Crop and simplify the reference.

- 0 PLAN
- 2 Make a small three-value study. Reserve the lights and connect the middle and dark families.

- 0 PREPARE
- 3 Mix generous puddles. Wet only the areas that support the kind of edge and movement you want.

- 0 FIRST WASH
- 4 Use a large brush. Connect big shapes and allow colors to mingle.

- 0 MIDDLE VALUES
- 5 Follow the roadmap. Keep passages broad and avoid restarting the design with detail.

- 0 DARKS
- 6 Use a smaller brush to strengthen the focal area and connect important shadows.

- 0 ACCENTS
- 7 Add only the few crisp marks required to make the subject read.

- 0 STOP
- 8 Step back. If the painting reads, leave it alone.

When color becomes confusing, ask which value family the mixture belongs to. Then trust your eyes: they can usually tell when the form feels three-dimensional.

When a watercolor starts fighting back.

Pause before correcting. First identify the actual problem; then make the smallest useful change.

SYMPTOM	LIKELY CAUSE	TRY THIS
MUDDY COLOR	Too many passes or overmixing.	Let layers dry. Mix fewer pigments. Place the stroke and leave it.
UNWANTED BLOOMS	A watery brush entered a damp passage.	Match the moisture or wait until dry. Later additions usually need more pigment and less water.
STREAKY WASH	Not enough mixture or a dry brush.	Prepare a larger puddle, tilt the board, and reload continuously.
FLAT PAINTING	Value families are too similar.	Squint. Strengthen one useful dark or preserve a clearer light near the focal point.
CHALKY COLOR	Opaque white or weak paint is dulling mixtures.	Let paper create the white and use clean artist-quality color.
TOO MUCH DETAIL	The small brush arrived too soon.	Return to the big shapes. Use a larger brush and stop when the idea reads.

Let it dry first

Wet watercolor lies. It looks darker, shinier, and busier than it will when dry. Give it time before deciding that it needs rescue.

Small paintings build big confidence.

Try a focused 10–20 minute exercise each day. If the work becomes a long tangent of frustration, the lesson gets harder to see.



A small color study can be complete, lively, and valuable without becoming a long project.

Paint small jewels

ONE PURPOSE PER SESSION

- One even wash.
- One graded sky.
- One charged-color rectangle.
- One three-value thumbnail.
- One page of round-brush marks.
- One simple shadow shape.
- One tiny reference crop.

MY RHYTHM

I often work in 30-minute intervals, except when a large wash needs uninterrupted attention. Then I take a break and return with fresh eyes. You may be amazed by how different the painting looks after you step away.

Finish wanting to do it again—not burned out from trying to force a masterpiece.

Two weeks of useful little victories.

Use cotton paper, keep the studies small, and write one sentence about what each exercise taught you.

- 0** Point, belly, and side
- 1** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 0** Glossy, damp, and dry
- 2** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 0** One clean even wash
- 3** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 0** One graduated wash
- 4** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 0** Charge two colors
- 5** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 0** Three-value still life
- 6** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 0** Fresh-eyes review
- 7** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 0** Crop one photograph
- 8** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 0** Connect shadow shapes
- 9** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 1** Hard, soft, lost edges
- 0** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 1** Value study from a photo
- 1** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 1** Color follows the value map
- 2** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

- 1** One 20-minute painting
- 3** Make the exercise small, direct, and observable.

- 1** Choose your best lesson
- 4** Stop on time and write down one discovery.

Patty's "Leave It Alone" checklist.

Let the painting dry, step back, and answer these questions honestly.

0 Can I tell what the painting is about from
1 several feet away?
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Do the large light, middle, and dark families
2 read clearly?
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Is the focal point easy to find?
3 ☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Are some edges soft or lost—or is everything
4 equally outlined?
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Will the next mark strengthen the design, or
5 merely add information?
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Can I name the exact job of the next stroke?
6 ☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

0 Would fresh eyes tomorrow give me a better
7 answer?
☐ Yes ☐ Not yet

If you cannot name the job of the next mark, leave it alone.

KEEP LEARNING WITH PATTY

learn.pseitzartist.com

Lessons, demonstrations, and personal watercolor critiques from
Patricia Elliott Seitz.

© Patricia Elliott Seitz