



THE LANGUAGE OF

ACRYLICS

UNDERSTANDING PAINT TYPES

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First Edition 2026.

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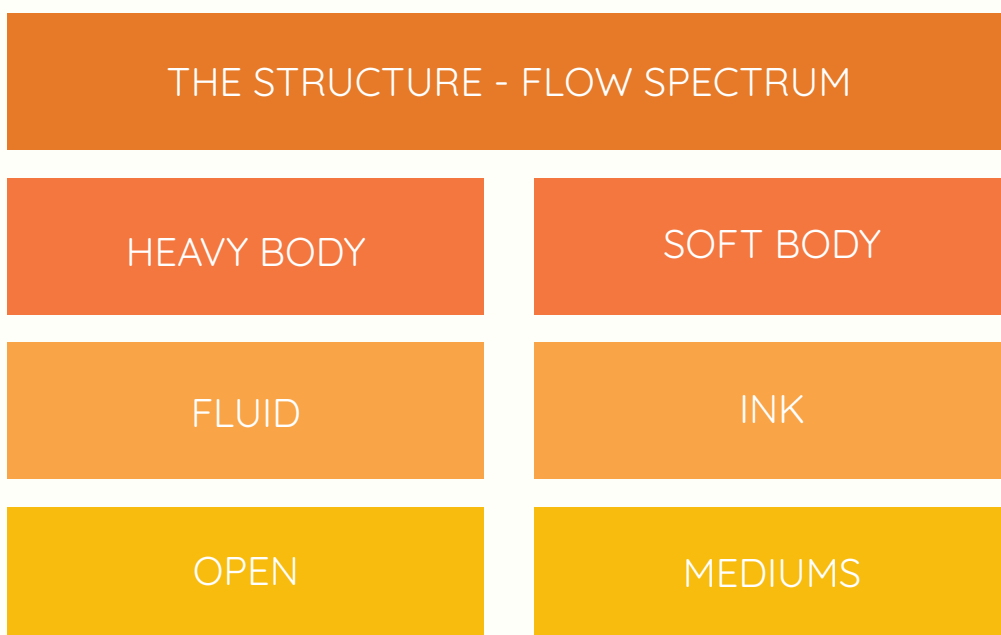
ISBN: 978-1-7646081-3-8

What is Acrylic Paint?

Acrylic paint is a fast-drying, water-based paint made from pigment suspended in an acrylic polymer emulsion. In simple terms, it's colour (pigment) held together by a liquid plastic binder. When the water evaporates, the paint dries into a flexible, durable, water-resistant film. What makes acrylic paint unique is its versatility:

- it can be thick (like oil paint) or thin (like ink);
- it dries quickly, allowing for rapid layering;
- it adheres to a wide range of surfaces including canvas, paper, wood and fabric;
- it can be modified with mediums to change texture, flow, transparency, and finish.

Because of this, acrylic sits somewhere between traditional paint and an experimental medium. It can behave predictably, or be pushed into more fluid, textural or mixed media approaches depending on how you use it. Let's take a look at:



The Acrylic Spectrum


Not all acrylic paint behaves the same. Some hold their shape, some move freely. Some sit thickly and textured on the surface, while others sink in and stain. Acrylic paint can be thick and sculptural, thin and fluid, transparent or opaque, smooth or textured.








Structure vs Flow

Each type of acrylic paint sits somewhere on the spectrum between **structure** and **flow**; each has different properties, is engineered for different uses and behaves in different ways.

It's important to understand where your paint sits on this spectrum, so that you can choose paints that work with and compliment your painting process.

the acrylic spectrum



Thick, heavy, high viscosity	 CONSISTENCY	Fluid, thin, low viscosity
Holds shape, stays where placed	 MOVEMENT	Moves freely, spreads and settles
Visible texture, brush/knife marks	 SURFACE EFFECT	Smooth, even, or stained finish
Palette knife, impasto, layering	 BEST TECHNIQUES	Pouring, glazing, washes
Dimensional, tactile	 DRYING APPEARANCE	Flat to softly layered
More controlled	 CONTROL vs CHANCE	More unpredictable
Texture building, mixed media, bold marks	 COMMON USES	Backgrounds, transitions, fluid effects

Structure



These acrylics are designed to hold their form and physical presence on the surface. They are thicker, more viscous and retain brushstrokes, knife marks and built-up texture as they dry. This makes them ideal for light relief texture work where the paint itself becomes part of the material surface, adding depth, relief and weight to the composition.

relief

palette
knife

texture
surface

Flow

Flow acrylics are low-viscosity paints designed to move easily across a surface. They carry strong pigment but in a thinner consistency than structure formulas, allowing for smooth coverage, staining effects and seamless blends. They are engineered to spread naturally and settle, rather than hold shape and at their most fluid are ideal for pouring, glazing, airbrushing and creating soft transitions or areas of gentle organic marks within a painting.

pour

airbrush

uniform
surface



Heavy Body

Heavy body acrylics are designed to hold textured marks and maintain structure in palette knife work, and bold paint laden brushstrokes.

These paints are thick, smooth and have a buttery consistency similar to oil paints and will hold peaks with visible edges.

impasto

palette
knife

tactile
surface



Soft Body

Soft body acrylics are highly pigmented, lower viscosity paints with a smooth and creamy consistency. They're designed for uniform, seamless and even canvas coverage without leaving visible brush marks. This makes them ideal for blending large areas, glazing, and adding fine details to your artwork.

blend
& glaze

brush
work

smooth
surface



Fluid

Fluid paints are highly pigmented and less viscose, allowing for smooth application while retaining colour intensity, tinting strength, film integrity and adhesion. They blend easily and can be used to tint gels, mediums, gessos and grounds.

Fluid acrylics are extremely versatile, and ideal for fine brushwork, glazing, staining, and watercolour techniques. These paints can be mixed with airbrush medium for airbrush application and can be used on any surface including textiles.



tint
& stain



fine
detail



flat
surface

Ink

Acrylic inks are designed for maximum flow whilst retaining high pigmentation. With a slightly translucent quality, that is waterproof when dry, these are best suited for expressive brushwork and mark making, glazing and creating drip effects. They are the most liquid form of acrylic and will move across the canvas surface organically if applied generously, encouraged with a mist of water when the canvas is tilted.



drip
& wash



paint
pens



water
proof



Open

Open acrylics, though they are water-based, behave more like oils. Offering extended 'open' or working time these paints are best used when more time is needed for blending colours, than would ordinarily be available using regular acrylic paint - which is relatively fast drying.



They are perfect for artists who prefer to approach their painting at a slow and considered pace with time to create soft transitions, smooth gradients and blended depth. Open acrylics allow time for adjustments before the paint dries.

soften
& blend

brush
work

slow
dry

Mediums

There are a wide variety of acrylic mediums which can be added to paints to shift their properties on the structure ↔ flow spectrum depending on the medium you choose and the effect desired. As a basic and general rule:

- add gel → more structure
- add pouring medium → more flow

Think of your acrylic paint as adjustable, not fixed. For an in depth look at acrylic paint additives and how they work, check out my 'Language of Surface - Acrylic Mediums & Gels' eBook.

Paint Opacity

It's also useful to understand the difference between opaque and transparent paint, as learning to recognise and use these paint qualities to best effect in your work will help you make paint choices that compliment your working style and support your creative intention. You'll find a version of this opacity scale on most paint tubes:



Opaque	Transparent
Colours will cover previous layers; ideal for creating contrast, defining shapes, and bringing clarity to a composition & making bold, graphic statements.	Paints will allow underlying marks to show through, enabling visual depth to build over time; ideal for complex layered prints.
Semi Opaque - Semi Transparent	
Semi-transparent paints allow underlying layers to remain visible to varying degrees. Instead of covering, they tint, soften, and merge with what's beneath. This quality makes them perfect for building subtle layers, atmospheric effects, luminosity and a sense of depth.	

Which Paint?

Choosing your paints based on your working process and the way in which you work (quickly and spontaneously or slowly and more considered), is a good way to go. Instead of asking, 'what will this look like on the canvas?' ask 'how do I want to work?'

Use structure paints when you want physical texture, depth, visible marks. Use flow paints when you want movement, softness, or visible layering.

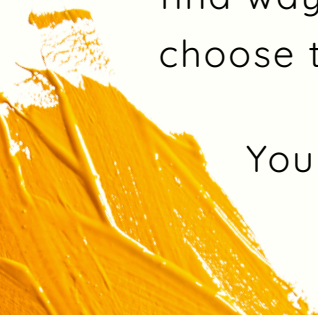
Visually dynamic paintings often use paints from both ends of the spectrum.

Fast, layered, intuitive → fluid + liquid mediums
Slow, textural, physical → heavy body + gels & pastes
A mix of both → combine structure and flow

The Last Word

Acrylic paint is incredibly flexible and adaptable. It can hold marks, flow like water, build tactile surface texture, wash like watercolour, glaze, blend and drip. The more you understand the range of different paint properties available with acrylics and find ways to work with them, the more consciously you can choose the right paint for your project.

Your materials should support your process, not limit it.



STUDIO GUIDE

ACRYLICS

TYPES OF ACRYLIC PAINT



STRUCTURE

- Thick, holds shape
- Builds texture
- Great for dimension



SOFT BODY

- Smooth, creamy
- Good for brushwork
- Easy to layer



FLUID

- Thin, free-flowing
- Perfect for pouring
- Creates movement



INK

- Very fluid
- Staining & transparent
- Great for drips & detail

KEY CHARACTERISTICS



FAST DRYING

Dries quickly, allowing for layers.



WATER-BASED

Cleans up with water.



VERSATILE

Use thick or thin on many surfaces.



TRANSPARENT TO OPAQUE

Build from see-through to solid.



DURABLE

Dries to a flexible, water-resistant finish.

HOW TO USE



PREPARE

Choose your surface and gather materials.



APPLY

Use brushes, knives, sponges or pour.



LAYER

Build up layers. Mix structure and flow.



FINISH

Add details, seal if desired, and enjoy.

Explore. Experiment. Express.



For further resources visit:



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