

Artist Painting Canvases & Priming Technical Handout

A practical, creative guide to selecting painting canvases, understanding fabric supports, stretching frames, sizing, and choosing the right primer (gesso) for oil and acrylic painting in Create Space London.

1 UNDERSTANDING PAINTING CANVAS FABRICS & SUPPORTS

Selecting the right canvas fabric is the foundation of any painting project. Different woven fibers offer distinct textures, absorbency, and longevity:

- **Cotton Duck Canvas:** The most popular, versatile, and economical choice for artists. Woven from natural cotton fibers, it is flexible, easy to stretch over wooden strainer/stretcher bars, and available in varying weights (e.g., 8oz for general work up to heavy 12oz/14oz for large-scale paintings). Cotton expands and contracts slightly with humidity, making proper sizing and priming essential.
- **Linen Canvas:** Made from natural flax fibers, linen is the premium choice for professional oil and acrylic painting. Its long, strong fibers make it far more durable and resistant to sagging than cotton. Linen has a rich, irregular surface grain ranging from smooth fine-weave (great for portraiture) to heavy rough-weave (ideal for expressive impasto work).
- **Synthetic & Poly-Cotton Canvases:** Blends of polyester and cotton that offer a very smooth, uniform surface without natural slubs or imperfections. Highly resistant to moisture expansion and sagging, but less absorbent when applying traditional sizing coats.

2 CANVAS STRETCHING, SIZING & PRIMING FUNDAMENTALS

- **Wooden Stretcher Bars & Stretching:** Raw canvas is pulled taut over beveled wooden stretcher frames using canvas pliers and secured on the back with staple guns (stretching from the center of opposite sides outwards in a diamond pattern to avoid corner puckering).
- **Sizing (Sealing Raw Fabric):** Raw natural canvas must be sealed ('sized') before painting to prevent raw fabric rot (especially from linseed oil in oil paints) and to stop moisture from warping the fabric. Traditional sizing uses PVA size or animal hide glue (rabbit skin glue), while modern acrylic gesso often serves as a self-sizing base.
- **Priming (Gesso Grounds):** Primer (Gesso) creates the receptive surface ground for paint adhesion, controls absorbency, and prevents paint from soaking through the canvas weave.

3 CREATIVE USES, PRIMER TYPES & PRACTICAL EXAMPLES

Canvas & Primer Type	Creative Project Uses, Application Techniques & Studio Tips
Acrylic Gesso (Universal Primer) (Water-Based Polymer Ground)	• Creative Applications: Universal ground suitable for acrylic painting, oil painting, oil pastels, gouache, and mixed media on raw cotton or linen. • Preparation & Technique: Apply 2–3 thin, criss-cross coats with a wide flat brush or foam roller onto stretched raw canvas. Sand lightly with fine sandpaper between dry coats for a buttery smooth painting surface. • Practical Tip: Tint white gesso with a touch of acrylic paint to create a toned ground (e.g., warm mid-grey or burnt sienna) to establish values easily before you start painting.
Oil-Based & Alkyd Primers (Traditional & Fast-Drying Oil Grounds)	• Creative Applications: Strictly for oil painting on linen or cotton. Creates a slick, non-porous ground that allows oil paint to glide smoothly and keeps colors vibrant. • Preparation & Technique: Natural raw canvas MUST be sized with PVA size or Rabbit Skin Glue FIRST to protect cotton/linen fibers from oil acid rot. Allow size to cure completely before applying oil primer. • Practical Tip: Oil grounds take 3–7 days to dry completely before you can paint over them, but offer superior long-term archival permanence.
Clear Gesso & Absorbent Grounds (Specialty Artistic Grounds)	• Creative Applications: Clear Gesso preserves the raw natural weave texture and warm tone of raw linen or cotton canvas while sealing the fibers. Absorbent Grounds create a paper-like surface on canvas suitable for watercolors, ink washes, and fine pen work. • Preparation & Technique: Apply clear gesso directly over raw fabric for a natural raw-canvas aesthetic. Apply 2 coats of absorbent ground over pre-ghessoed canvas for watercolor washes. • Practical Tip: Clear gesso is fantastic for mixed-media drawings with charcoal, pastel, and acrylic paint where you want the natural fabric color to show through.
Raw Cotton Duck vs. Belgian Linen (Choosing the Right Fabric Weight)	• Cotton Duck (10oz–12oz): Ideal for daily studio practice, large-scale abstract painting, and stretched canvases up to 1.5 meters. Budget-friendly and easy to stretch taut. • Fine Belgian Linen: The ultimate support for fine detail, portraiture, glazing, and archival gallery paintings. Extremely stable, warp-resistant, and maintains tension across all weather conditions. • Practical Tip: Always ensure stretcher bars have a raised bevel edge facing outward so the raw canvas doesn't press against the inner wooden frame edge when painting.

Note: Keep this handout as a practical workshop reference. All physical studio equipment access must be booked and supervised through CSL staff.