Airbrush Strokes and Techniques

No matter what you plan to do with your airbrush—cake decorating, t-shirt design, temporary tattoos, auto painting, etc.—you’ll need to first learn the basics. This will help you as you create more intricate designs. The basic strokes are essential to creating most designs, and shading and drop shadows helps to create designs with greater depth and dimension. This guide will go over the basics to get you started.

Master the basics first. Then move on to more complex airbrushing techniques to expand your skillset. Shading and adding drop shadows will serve you well as you blend colors and add dimension to your artwork, while adding effects such as stippling to your arsenal will give you greater versatility in the types of images you can create.

1. Getting Started

If you plan on airbrushing t-shirts, for example, you don’t need to waste a blank t-shirt when you’re just learning or practicing your airbrush techniques. Any blank surface will do, so choose one that is cheap and readily available.

The best surface to use when you're practicing airbrush painting is newsprint, which is affordably available at most art and craft stores. You could even practice on a piece of cardboard. Before you even start the basic strokes, take a scrap piece of newsprint or cardboard and just doodle with your airbrush. This will help you get the feel for using the airbrush.

If you have an easel to pin your newsprint or cardboard, then you can use that to hold your canvas. If not, you can always improvise. Pin the newsprint/cardboard to a peg board you don’t mind getting dirty, or even tape it to a wall in the garage or basement.

2. Common Strokes

There are four basic airbrush painting strokes that everybody should practice before they begin: dots, lines, fade lines, and dagger strokes.

Note: The following instructions assume that you are using a dual-action airbrush. If you are using a single-action airbrush, you will pre-set the paint flow and do not need to worry about pulling back on the lever to release the paint.

Before beginning, always prepare your airbrush by loading the first color and setting the regulator to the appropriate pressure level. Check your airbrush for any specifications, but most new users can start at about 30 psi. The pressure you’ll ultimately use will depend on your airbrush painting surface, the paint you use, your air source and airbrush, as well as your design. You’ll get a feel for when to increase and decrease pressure. It just takes a little practice and experience.
Always wear your safety mask or ventilator when you’re airbrushing. It’s not difficult to do and it will help keep the fumes and overspray out of your lungs.

**Airbrushing Dots**

1. Position the airbrush about six inches from your newsprint.
2. Push down on the lever to release air.
3. Gradually pull back the lever to release paint.
4. Do not release too much paint. The idea is that you should get a feel for how the paint comes out of the airbrush.
5. The dot should appear slowly. If you use too much paint, it will begin to drip.
6. Continue making dots on the newsprint. As you get more comfortable, try making dots quicker by pulling back a little further.
7. Move the airbrush a little closer to the newsprint to make smaller dots. When you do this, you do not need to release as much paint to get a well-defined dot.
8. Try making dots across the newsprint until you feel comfortable.

**Airbrushing Lines**

1. Position the airbrush a few inches from the newsprint.
2. Push down on the lever to release air.
3. Using your whole body (not just your hand), begin moving your airbrush to your right and pull back the lever to release the color.
4. Be sure to keep the airbrush in motion to create a smooth, even line.
5. Like you did with the dots, move the airbrush closer to the surface for finer lines, and move it further away for less-defined lines.
6. Make a few lines until you feel comfortable. Try moving left to right, right to left, up and down, etc.
7. Try connecting the dots you made earlier.

**Airbrushing Fade Lines**

1. Position the airbrush about six inches from your newsprint. Hold it at a 45-degree angle. The angle helps to create a more natural fade.
2. Push down on the lever to release air.
3. Using your whole body (not just your hand), begin moving your airbrush to your right and pull back the lever to release the color.
4. Keep the airbrush in constant motion to create a smooth, even line.
5. Move your airbrush back just a little bit and make another line right above the one you just made so they are touching. Your new line should be lighter than previous one.
6. Repeat the last step three or four times to create a fade from bottom to top.
**Airbrushing Dagger Strokes**

1. Position the airbrush about six inches from the newsprint.
2. Push down on the lever to release air.
3. Using your whole body (not just your hand), begin moving your airbrush to your right and pull back the lever to release the color.
4. As you move from left to right, move your airbrush closer to the surface so that you’re left with a finer line as you move to the right.
5. At the same time, push the trigger forward gradually to use less color as you move your airbrush closer to the surface.
6. Your line should begin wider on one side and then end in a point at the other.
7. Practice, practice, practice.

**3. Shading with Your Airbrush**

Practice your shading skills by using basic shapes like the sphere. When creating a sphere, the color fades from dark to light in a circular motion to give it dimension. Use newsprint or a piece of scrap paper to practice.

1. Use a jar lid to draw a circle on a piece of paper.
2. Cut out the circle using a sharp utility knife.
3. Place the negative stencil (paper with hole cut out) on your surface and tape the four corners to keep the stencil from moving. You might also use weights or sticky tack to hold it down if you are worried about tearing your surface when removing the tape.
4. Figure out from where you want to light source to hit the sphere. For our example, the light will hit the sphere from the top.
5. First spray around the edges, going darker on the bottom of the sphere (furthest from the light) and getting lighter as you move towards the upper part of the sphere (where the light is coming from). This doesn’t mean that you should completely turn off the airbrush at the top, however.
6. Start moving inwards, continuing to move in a smooth, curving motion that follows the contours of the sphere and easing up on the color near the top. Remember where the light is hitting the sphere.
7. When finished, the sphere should fade from darker on the bottom to lighter near the top where the light hits it.

**4. Drop Shadows**

A drop shadow can give depth to any design, and with proper airbrushing technique, they’re very easy to create. Using a stencil results in a more defined drop shadow than freehanding it, which typically appears more faded. Either works well, so it’s up to you to decide which works best for your design.
Without Stencils

Most add drop shadows without the use of stencils. Add drop shadows freehand by lightly spraying a black or another color next to the edges of your design. Hold the airbrush a bit farther back to create a less-defined line, but be careful not to hold it too far back or you’ll get a lot of overspray that can ruin the design. How far you hold the airbrush back will determine definition in your line, which is a personal preference. Add a drop shadow to flames, lettering, shapes, or any design you create.

With Stencils

The positive stencil is the part of the stencil you cut out, and the negative is the material with the design cut out of it. Refer to the following steps to create a stencil drop shadow. For our example we’ll create a red ball with a drop shadow, but you can use this technique to apply a drop shadow to just about anything.

1. Trace a jar lid onto a piece of paper to create an even circle. You have a few options for making stencils, but since we’re just practicing, go ahead and just cut the circle out of the paper using a sharp X-Acto knife. (You could also fold a paper in two and cut out half a circle.)
2. Save both the positive stencil and the negative stencil.
3. Prepare your airbrush by loading your first color (black to create the shadow) and setting the regulator to the appropriate pressure level.
4. Position the negative stencil on your surface. Attach it to your surface with tape or tack.
5. Position the positive stencil on the surface offset a little bit from the negative stencil so there’s a small opening.
6. Spray the small opening with black, using the tip of your finger nail to hold the stencils in place. This creates the drop shadow.
7. Remove both stencils to check out your work. Then place the negative stencil so its edge covers the shadow, and spray your red color.
8. While shading with the red, shade the ball so the darker side is the one closer to the drop shadow. Spray in a curved motion, letting up on the paint as you approach the light area of the ball. (Remember our tutorial on shading? We used a sphere. Same idea.) Lightly spray black on the shadow side of the ball to give it added dimension.
9. Remove the negative stencil and you have a red ball with a drop shadow.

5. Stippling

Stippling creates very small dots for a unique effect. It can add a degree of realism to your artwork, and it's relatively easy to do. You'll need an object such as a popsicle stick, pencil, small piece of cardstock, or a clothes pin. The paint will bounce off of the object and onto your canvas, creating the stippling effect.
1. Hold the nozzle of the airbrush on the end of your object at an angle so the paint will bounce off of it.
2. Release the paint and you'll see the paint stipple onto the canvas.
3. Adjust the distance from the end of the object or the angle at which the paint hits your object to increase or decrease the fineness of your atomization.
4. Try holding the airbrush at different angles and at varying distances from the end of the object to get a feel for what you can do with this effect.