How to Make Paper Mache – The 5 Basic Steps

If you want to know how to make paper mache, this post is for you.

Paper mache (or papier-mâché, if you prefer to say it with a French accent) is a versatile sculpting material for artists of all ages. It's a fun way for kids to create their first sculptures, but it can also be used to create museum-quality works of art – and anything in between. (To see some of the paper mache art that our readers have submitted, click here.)
All paper mache projects start with these basic steps:

1. Create an armature for your sculpture, or find an object that has the shapes you want for your project.
2. Make some paste, or mix up some paper mache clay. (I show you how to find the free recipes below).
3. Apply the paper mache to your form.
4. Allow the paper mache to dry all the way through.
5. Use acrylic paint to decorate your paper mache sculpture and seal your sculpture with acrylic varnish.

Step 1: Creating a Form or Armature

Wet paper stuck together with paste has no particular form of its own, so the real sculpting happens when you build your armature. Take your time with this step, because it’s important.

Many of the sculptures on my site were made using a cardboard pattern inside. I don’t go into that here, but if you’d like to try that method, you can see how the patterns are made here.

Armatures Made with Crumpled Paper and Masking Tape:

For years I created my animal sculptures with crumpled paper and masking tape.

That’s how this little dragon was made. Newspaper was crumpled into the shapes of the body, legs and head, and then held together with masking tape.
Armatures Made with Crumpled Foil and Hot Glue:

To get even more detail in your armature, you can use crumpled foil held together with hot glue. This method is a little more expensive, and the glue gun can burn you if you aren’t paying attention.

However, if you’re careful it can be a lot easier to make an armature with foil instead of crumpled paper. The paper tries to un-crumple itself while you’re getting the tape off the roll. The foil doesn’t do that, so it’s easier to use.

If you’re going to cover your foil form with paper strips and paste, you’ll need to cover the foil with masking tape, first. The paste doesn’t like to stick to foil. However, if you’re using paper mache clay, no masking tape is needed.
This little owl was made with a foil armature.

Paper mache owl armature made with foil.

How the little owl looked after he was covered with paper mache clay and painted.

Found Objects:

Many paper mache items can be made over objects you find around the house. This paper mache bowl was made using a small ceramic bowl for the form. Our friend Rex Winn uses plastic bags to make the forms for his pumpkins, and many people make masks using milk jugs or paper plates.

Click here to see Rex’s pumpkins made over stuffed plastic bags.

Paper mache owl armature made with foil.
Step 2: Make Your Paper Mache

You can cover your form with paper strips and paste, or with a mixture of pulped paper that has been mixed with some kind of binder or glue.

Paper mache clay:

On this site, many of the projects use paper mache clay, a mixture I invented that contains soaked paper, Elmer’s glue, drywall joint compound, and oil. You can find the printed recipe (and many variations for it) on this page.

Watch this video to see how the paper mache clay is made.
Paper mache paste:

For the more traditional way to make paper mache, you'll use paper strips and some form of paste to apply the paper strips to your armature. The easiest paste recipe is just flour mixed with warm water.

You can see how easy it is to mix in this video:


Many people worry about mold if they use a paste made with flour and water. This can be a real problem if the paper mache doesn't dry quickly.

However, mold can't grow without water, so make sure your sculpture dries fast, and then seal it with varnish so it can't absorb water from the air.

**Watch this video** to see how to keep mold from ruining your sculpture.

Another (minor) problem is that you'll need to make a new batch of the flour and water paste every day, because yeast from the air tries to turn it into sourdough starter. When that happens, the paste doesn't smell very good and it isn't as sticky.
Flour and water paste doesn’t cost much, though, so just throw it out at the end of your sculpting session, and start with a new batch in the morning.

**Paste with no flour (and no mold!):**

A really good alternative to home-made paste is *Elmer’s Art Paste*. It’s gluten-free and will never attract mold. It’s a great paste to use in a classroom, because the small carton makes up an entire gallon of paste that you can keep using for months without it going bad.

*Elmer’s Art Paste* isn’t quite as sticky as traditional paper mache paste, but if you’re teaching kids how to make paper mache sculptures, or if you live in a hot, humid climate where nothing ever seems to get dry, this is the paste you’ll want to use.

**Make paper mache with glue:**

A lot of people like to use *Elmer’s Glue-All* or *Elmer’s School Glue* for paper mache. Mix it with a little water before using it. That helps soften the newspaper so it will lie down flat on your form.

You can also use Titebond Wood Glue, for a **really strong, fast-drying paper mache**.

Be sure to [see this page](https://www.ultimatepapermache.com/how-to-make-paper-mache) for more recipes and videos for paper mache paste.
Step 3: Apply the paste or paper mache clay to your form.

Applying paper mache clay:

To use the paper mache clay, just mix it up and apply it over your armature with a knife. It’s a lot like frosting a cake, but you’ll want to use a very thin layer so it can dry quickly. The Egyptian Blue Hippo below was made with a foil armature covered with a very thin layer of paper mache clay.

![Egyptian Blue Hippo](image)

A copy of the famous Egyptian Blue Hippo, made with foil and paper mache clay.

You can find many tutorials for animal sculptures made with paper mache clay on this page, and in my book *Make Animal Sculptures with Paper Mache Clay*.

Applying paper strips and paste:

You’ll want to use paper that’s soft enough to bend over the curves of your form. You also need to tear off all the cut edges, because they will show as straight lines on the finished sculpture. The torn edges kind of melt into the shapes, so they look better.

There are some tricks to getting the paper strips to lie down flat (or should I say “lay down flat?” I don't think I ever get that right! 😊 ) You can see some tips for applying your paper mache in the video below:
Watch this video for tips for applying paper strips and paste to your armature.

Step 4: Let your paper mache get dry all the way through.

The one biggest mistake people make with paper mache is not letting it dry long enough before painting it. If you seal any moisture inside, there's a very good chance that mold will start to grow. You'll eventually see it as dark spots on the outside of your sculpture, and at that point there's very little chance of saving it.

So give your sculpture plenty of time to dry! Paper mache is not an ‘instant’ sculpting material. Here’s a video that talks about how long it will take for your paper mache project to dry:

This video answers one of the most common questions I’ve received in the ten years this blog has been online – how long does it take paper mache to dry?
Step 5: Paint it!

This is the exciting step that brings your paper mache sculpture to life.

I often use an acrylic gesso before I paint my sculptures, because it seals the paper mache and gives you a nice white surface to paint on. It seems to make the colors brighter, and you don’t need as much paint to achieve the look you want.

However, I have painted a lot of sculptures without gesso, so it’s really optional.

I always use acrylic paint, but you might want to experiment with oil paint or watercolors.

When your paint is dry, be sure to seal it and protect the paint with a coat of acrylic varnish. I love using the Deco Arts Ultra Matte varnish, because I don’t like a gloss varnish on my animal sculptures.

However, there are many types of sculptures or decor objects that look best with a shiny varnish, so choose the one that will give you the look you want.

Now Your Paper Mache Sculpture is Done!

Be sure to show it off on the Daily Sculptors page so we can all see how it came out.

After all that work, you deserve to brag a little!
Questions?
If you have any questions about the paper mache project you’re working on, be sure to post a comment on the Daily Sculptor page on my site. We love to encourage our fellow paper mache artists, and to see the projects you’ve made with paper mache.

Subscribe to my blog and receive a free printable PDF containing five of my most popular paper mache paste and clay recipes. Of course you can unsubscribe at any time. 😊

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Want a head start on your next project?
Create realistic paper mache sculptures and masks, even if you’ve never sculpted anything before, by using my sculpture and mask patterns.

They create all the shapes for you. Just cut them out, tape them together, add a layer or two of paper mache, and paint.

Have fun!

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