

FINDING YOUR SKETCHBOOK

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When searching for a sketchbook, ideally we find something that is both easy *and* fun to use. In the sea of available sketchbooks, this can be an overwhelming task. There are so many options. I suggest narrowing your focus to the three components of a sketchbook: **binding**, **size**, and **paper**.

1. **Binding**

This is perhaps the most straightforward of the components because, essentially, the only thing that really matters is that you **find a sketchbook lays flat easily**. I've struggled with sketchbooks that either don't open easily or that break apart. It isn't worth the struggle. My biggest recommendation is to avoid sketch books or pads that are bound mostly with glue. Instead **look for a sketchbook with wire binding or thread binding**. Personally, I enjoy a thread bound soft cover sketchbook (my love is the *MD Paper Idea Journal*), because they're light-weight, lay flat, and the pages stay in the sketchbook. Hardcover sketchbooks (think Moleskin) are great if you want more protection for your sketchbook. Wire bound sketchbooks (Strathmore 400 Art Journal) have the advantage of separating the pages so that each page becomes more of an individual piece, but they are can be more cumbersome, and I find the paper rubs together more (less than ideal for graphite).

2. **Size**

With size, the main focus is to have the sketchbook be physically comfortable to use.

First, if you have arthritis or another physical limitation that makes it difficult to draw small, find a large sketchbook. The largest sketchbook I have is about 8"x11" and that may work, but there are larger pads out there.

If you don't have physical limitations, everything comes down to preference. In my experience, **it's more about the proportions of the pages rather than the size**. I prefer a sketchbook with wider pages. The narrowness of a "regular" sized moleskin sketchbook (for example) feels claustrophobic to me, even though I know that size works for many artists. Here's a chart with some pertinent thoughts on size. The sizes I'm writing down are for mostly MD Paper products, but these notes should work for other products.

Sketchbook Size	Advantages	Disadvantages	Other
Small - A6 6"x4"	Fits in pocket, pages fill quickly	Small enough to discourage longer projects or messier media	This size mostly comes with thin paper, but there are variations
Medium, Narrow 8"x5"	Interesting composition space, usually hardcover	Narrowness can feel claustrophobic, difficult to compose well in	Great for landscapes, more comfortable if you work across pages
Medium - A5 8"x6" (or F0 - 7"x5.5")	Easy enough to carry, large enough for more experimentation, wider proportions	May be too small for wet media, less portable than a smaller size	A decent middle ground! Something of the Goldilocks of the sketchbook sizes.

Sketchbook Size	Advantages	Disadvantages	Other
Larger- A4 10"x8"	Large enough for messier medium, good for pieces with more time including long pose figure drawings	Not as easily transportable, slow to finish	This is probably the size I'd use for painting

*Another thing to keep in mind is the number of pages. To be honest, choosing a sketchbook with less pages could be ideal. Working in a sketchbook requires a marathon-like mentality. You're in for the long haul and celebrating the small accomplishments, but if you have a shorter sketchbook you're "running" a shorter race.

3. Paper

Paper in sketchbooks is complicated. You can't just take a page out and test it, so here are some basic things to look for, some sketchbook recommendations, and a suggestion if you want to do some more research.

Some basics of paper

-Tone- Most papers in sketchbooks will be a white or an off-white (usually one with a yellow tint). I usually prefer to work with the off-white, the warm color adding a little more life to my drawings. There are also sketchbooks with grey or brown toned paper. Look for one's that are acid free, as the paper won't change color drastically with time.

-Weight- This correlates the **thickness** of the paper. The heavier a paper is, the more it can handle wet media like watercolor, or gesso. The heaviest paper you're likely to find in a sketchbook is 140 lbs. (300 gsm), better for water based media. If you want to paint a fair amount in watercolor, that's the paper you should look for. Mixed media applications and gesso can be done on thinner paper 90 lbs. (140 gsm) or heavier. Dry media like graphite can go even thinner, since little to no water will be used.

-Tooth- Tooth is the **texture** of the paper. Watercolor paper has the clearest indicators of tooth of the paper. Cold-press paper is rough with a lot of texture, great for absorbing watercolor and not great for drawing. Hot-press paper is smooth, more illustrative looking, and lovely to draw on. In non-watercolor paper, things are a little more obtuse. In general, I look for something that holds graphite, usually with a little tooth, but basically a thin, hot-press paper.

Conclusion

There's a lot of variety in sketchbooks. We want to pick something that's easy and fun to use. Look for flat laying binding, an easy to use size with proportions that are easy to compose in, and paper that works with the media of your choice.

With all of that in mind, here are my recommendations for sketchbooks. (If you don't find something you enjoy on this list, my recommendation is to find an artist whose work excites you and who works in a sketchbook... then figure out what sketchbook they're using and try that!)

SKETCHBOOK LIST

Dry media (start here if you are a beginner)

- **MD Paper** - Blank or Artist Sketchbooks- The Blank was designed for writing and has off-white paper. The paper is thin, but oh so lovely for graphite and ink. The sizes are standard A4, A5, B6 (narrower), and A6. The Artist is made for artists with whiter paper and proportions that are supposedly based on the golden ration. The F0 size is almost the perfect size for me. Can be found here:

<https://omoionline.com/collections/md-paper-products>

- **Strathmore 400 Series Field Sketch Books**

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/strathmore-400-series-field-sketch-book/>

- **Strathmore Hardbound 400 Series Drawing Art Journal** - the paper that Strathmore puts into their Art Journals is incredibly nice, which is great because many sketchbooks use less nice paper

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/strathmore-400-series-drawing-art-journals/>

Mixed media

- **Moleskin Sketchbook (Art/Art Plus)** - heavier paper than the classic, the sweetheart of loads of artists, narrower proportions, handles gesso, graphite, and ink well. Can hold a little watercolor application. Can be found here:

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/moleskine-sketchbooks/>

- **Talens Art Creation Sketchbook** - Similar to the moleskin, but the paper is slightly thinner. More sizes available than the Moleskin Sketchbook from 4.5" squares to 8.5"x11" sketchbooks.

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/talens-art-creations-sketchbooks/>

- **Strathmore Hardbound 500 Series Mixed Media Art Journal** - I'm not sure this is the exact one I used before, but my previous experience with the 400 and 500 series sketchbooks from Strathmore is that the paper is really quite lovely. It even handles watercolor decently well for lighter paper.

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/strathmore-softcover-500-series-mixed-media-art-journal/>

Watercolor-

- **Pentalic Aqua Journal** - I've not used these, but I have a friend that absolutely adores the paper. Having looked at the specs for the paper this meets my paper weight standard and it looks like it holds watercolor beautifully.

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/pentalic-aqua-journals/>

- **Hand Book Paper Co. Travelogue Watercolor Journals** - Thinner paper than I'd like, but it holds watercolor decently well and they have a lot of different sizes.

<https://www.dickblick.com/products/hand-book-paper-co-travelogue-watercolor-journals/>

- **Make your own or find a hand made one** - For all other media, I would recommend finding a standardized sketchbook you can get from Blick, Plaza, or Jerry's Artarama, but nice watercolor paper is difficult to find in a sketchbook. The most success I've ever had finding a watercolor sketchbook is in leather bound, handmade ones that my family has given me over the years. Binding your own is another option. It's a lot of work, but it would make it possible to get a sketchbook you like with paper you love.