

The Loom: Papier-mâché Instructions

Have you ever worked with papier-mâché before?

It's a gooey, sticky paste in which you soak old newspapers. You can use papier-mâché in basically two ways: as a paste and as a pulp. Either way, a batch will stay wet and useful for only a couple of hours. Then, it will dry and harden in whatever shape it's been formed into. It will be hard, strong, and lightweight when it's dry. You can paint it then, too!

Here are the details:

1. **First, you need the paste.** You can buy a mix, but it is really easy to make yourself. Here are three different recipes for the paste:
 - a. 3 parts water to 1 part flour. Mix thoroughly, adding flour slowly to avoid lumps. To make this recipe last longer, you can add a few drops of oil of wintergreen, which you can get at a local drugstore.
 - b. 1 part wallpaper paste mix to 3 parts water. Stir, and it's done!
 - c. 2 parts Elmer's glue to one part water. (This is the least desirable for most projects because it sets so fast. But, it's extremely strong, and therefore great for last finishing touches with pulp projects.)
2. **Next, the question is strips or pulp?** For most projects, the answer is, "both."
 - a. You'll start with strips. Tear newspaper into strips about 1/2" to 3/4" wide. They should be of varying widths and lengths (from 3" to 10" or so long). Wet the strips in the paste (this is where your fingers get sticky) and then smooth them onto your shape support: a wire frame, balloon, cardboard, or bowl. You'll need to cover the right amount of your shape support with several layers of pasted strips. Some places will need two or three layers that are allowed to dry some between applications (this is for larger projects, generally, where structural support is needed, such as with a large model mummy). When the last layer has been applied, let your work dry for about 10 hours, ideally in the open air. Sometimes drying is faster if you put a fan on your work or set it in the sun on a dry, sunny day. Alternatively, if it's the height of a humid summer day, your work may take longer to dry.
 - b. At times, you'll probably need papier-mâché pulp. "Pulp" really means chewed paper! You make the pulp out of tiny pieces of old newspaper shredded really fine and then blended up (yes, you can use a blender for this part, but not without adult supervision). You can also use a hand-mixer, with help, to make pulp. To make pulp, fill a pail half full with 1" square (or smaller if you use a paper shredder) pieces of old newspaper. Fill the pail to the top with warm water, and let the paper soak overnight. Then, mix the paper and water with a beater. Squeeze out the water and place the remaining pulp paper in a large container. Finally, mix papier-mâché paste into the pulp with your hands, squeezing and mixing it until the pulp feels like clay. It can then be used like clay to build or to cover and smooth objects. For many projects, you'll want to use pulp for the finer details you'll notice in the picture from which you are working.