

# Working with Clay

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## Types of Clay

**Oil Based Clay:** This clay will not harden and therefore is not permanent. It may be purchased in a variety of colors and quantities. This is a great clay to use with young children and when working with a clay mold for casting. It may be reused many times.

**Air Dry Clay:** This clay hardens when exposed to air and is permanent. Air dry clay may be painted with standard types of paint after it dries. This clay may also be purchased in a variety of colors and quantities. The clay must be kept moist while working with it and storing it. When dry, it can crack and break. This is the easiest type of clay to use if you want a permanent piece. It requires no additional equipment like a kiln or oven.

**Baked Dough:** This is an elastic clay-like material that can be hardened by placing it in a toaster oven or oven. This clay is good for small and/or very detailed projects. It may be painted when hard or purchased in a variety of colors. It is generally sold in small amounts and is more expensive than the other types of clay.

**Water Based Ceramic Clay:** This clay must be fired in a kiln at very high temperatures to harden into bisque ware. It must be fired a second time for a ceramic glaze. Paints are also available for bisque ware. This clay is used for most pottery and functional clay pieces. It is very flexible and dries very quickly. It must be kept moist while working with it and storing it. It is generally purchased in larger amounts than the other three clays. The clay is only permanent when it is fired in the kiln.

## Suggestions for Working with Clay

Cover the work surface with either plastic, vinyl, oil cloth, or canvas. The clay can easily be removed from these surfaces. A plastic tablecloth cut into mats for each student is a simple and inexpensive method for protecting the work surface.

Clay tools may be purchased in wood or plastic. However plastic knives, forks and spoons work well as clay tools. Wooden craft sticks, tongue depressors, and a sponge cut into small pieces are also good for working with clay.

To connect clay parts, score both ends of the connecting points. Press a plastic fork onto the surface or use a pencil point to score the ends and then attach the two parts together. Blend seams with a clay tool or your fingers.

Creating a slab of clay can be done by simply pressing down on the clay with the palm of the hand or using a rolling pin. Use a plastic knife to cut out shapes or draw into the surface to incise a design. Slabs or flat pieces of clay may also be scored and attached to other forms of clay.

Clay may also be rolled and then coiled to form a piece. Roll clay on plastic surface, working from the middle and roll out to the edges keeping the size of the rope or coil consistent. The rope can be coiled and smoothed into a form. Coils can also be cut and attached to a slab of clay.

Pinching clay is another method of creating a form. Using a small ball of clay, push your thumbs into the center with the rest of the hand on the sides of the ball of clay. Gradually pinch outward creating the hollow form. Keep moving your hands around the surface so the "walls" or sides of the form have a consistent width.

**ALWAYS KEEP THE WATER BASED CLAYS WET.** Keep the clay wet not only when working on it, but also while it is being stored. Keep a sponge and small bowl of water near the work spaces to re-wet the clay while working with it. Wrap a wet paper towel around a work in progress. Then, wrap it in a piece of plastic or place it in a plastic bag for storage.

Oil based clays will get less elastic when cold. If stored by a window or an unheated area the clay will become hard to work with. Put the cold clay at room temperature for a while and it will regain its elasticity. Also modeling clay stored in direct sun will become very soft. Modeling clay is best stored at room temperature.

Follow all safety precautions if using a toaster oven, oven, or kiln to fire the clay. After firing, the clay must be cooled gradually and should not be touched while cooling. Once fired, clay cannot be manipulated and additional soft clay cannot be attached to the piece.

There are special paints for most clays. However, if the finished pieces are not being used for holding water or with food products, most clays may be painted with acrylics and tempera. Once painted, a clear acrylic gloss may be applied on top to give the work a glossy shine.