

BLOCK PRINTING

You can think of a block print kind of like a homemade stamp. You take a material like wood (“woodcut”) or linoleum (“linocut”) and carve away every part of the image you want to be white (or whatever color your paper happens to be). Professional printers from throughout art history use layered color and precise tools to make beautiful and detailed works, and you can too, using the simple process I describe below. Although it is possible to make a print with multiple colors, I recommend starting with one color.

My favorite way of block printing is to use Soft-Kut printing blocks that more closely mimic the process of using linoleum and wood but is still easy enough for an upper elementary age student to cut (with close supervision).

First, sketch the design onto the print block. Tracing your design in permanent marker will help you when you start cutting. Also, be sure to draw all text and numbers backwards, as the resulting print is a mirror image.

Next, use a linoleum cutter to carve out all of the areas of the design that you want to be white (or the color of the paper you’re using). This tool usually comes with several tips for different thicknesses of lines. If you have a true linoleum block, this will take some muscle. We will be using the Soft-Kut blocks; they will cut smoothly and quickly, like butter. I’ve had upper elementary age kids use these with little trouble.

Safety Tip: Be sure to push away from your hands and your body when using this tool!

Next, spread some ink on an inking plate, a piece of glass, plexi-glass, or anything non-porous and flat. Water-based printing ink is best. You can use tempera or acrylic paint, but it doesn’t work as well. Use a roller (or “brayer”) to roll the ink flat. Go in both directions to spread the ink evenly on the roller. Roll the ink onto the print block and then put the paper on top of the block. Use the baren, the back of a wooden spoon, or a second clean roller to press the paper onto the block (this is called “burnishing”).

Carefully remove the paper from the block. *Voilà!* You have a beautiful print! Sign, date, and title it in pencil right under the image—not at the bottom of the paper, unless that’s where the bottom of the image is.

Now make lots more! If you make a series of identical prints on the same type of paper, then you need to number your prints in the order that you pull them.

Resources: All are available at dickblick.com

Soft-Kut printing blocks come in sizes from 4 x 6 to 12 x 18”yours is 4 x 6” and cost \$1.65.

Bamboo barens are \$5.92 each.

Brayer: a 4” hard rubber brayer is about \$7.00.

Printing inks are available in lots of colors and sizes of containers. We are using the Blick brand, which is cheaper than Speedball; they range in price from \$4.32 to \$13.49.

Lino Cutter: Speedball Lino Set No. 2 — This set contains two Speedball handles and one each of styles 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, and 6. The end of the handle twists off for convenient storage of cutters inside. This set has two cutters at a cost of \$12.80, which was more economical for this class. If you purchase an individual cutter, the cost is \$9.21. (But you may keep your cutter today!)

Paper: Don’t buy special paper unless you just want to! Blick offers too many good papers to list. You can also just use copy paper, card stock, thin fabrics, silk, book pages, etc.