

Illustrator's Tips



TIPS FROM A COLLAGE MAKER'S DESK

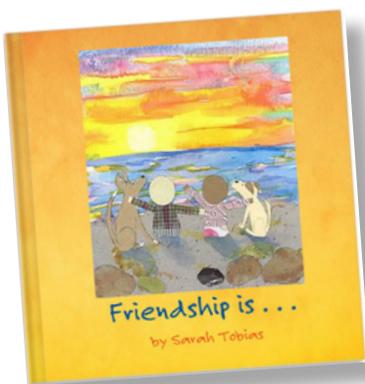
by Sarah Tobias

Note from the *Prairie Wind* team: Leading up to our Winter issue, we lost a couple columns last minute due to COVID and life craziness. We are so grateful to Rich Green for putting the word out and to Sarah Tobias for coming in as pinch hitter and writing up this lovely piece on collage. If this sparks your interest, you might go back and check out Ruth Goring's previous column on different aspects of this rich medium.

I have made art my whole life. It takes me to my happy place. I was a librarian for 30 years in and around Chicago, and throughout my career, even when I was a library director, I found ways to make art and share stories. Now I am at the early stage of calling myself an illustrator. I love this new life path as it allows my multi-passionate personality to test out new things and continue to grow. I am also a writer and have several stories created and ready to become books.

In particular, I love making collage art. So I thought I'd offer a few tips from my collage-making desk...

My creative process occurs in two ways. Sometimes I make a rough sketch of an idea and create a piece of art from that. Other times, I start cutting paper and just see what happens. After I have laid out a piece, I take a photo of it before I begin gluing so I have a reference to go back to. As you pick up one piece to glue it to your canvas, other pieces tend to move around. I have found that this movement often helps my piece as a whole feel more flowing and less static.



PUT YOUR WORK IN BOOK FORM

This past October, I created several pieces, working on consistency and on allowing a story to grow from the series of collages. In the end I created a little book, which I self-published using [Shutterfly](#). It's shorter than a traditional picture book and was made as a gift for my grandnieces. Beyond creating a gift for others, I gave myself the gift of bringing my work together as a complete book. In addition, I sold a few copies and still have it available on my website.

I highly recommend this practice to any illustrator or author who feels they are struggling and wonders if they will ever find an agent or editor to publish their work. This won't make you financially wealthy, but you'll feel the wealth of taking what you love to completion.

CREATE AN ORGANIZATIONAL SYSTEM

I know a lot of people do everything on their computer, and I do have my stories there too, but I am a visual and tactile person, so I really benefitted from an idea a former classmate of mine gave me a couple years ago. She mentioned that she put all her stories in 3-ring binders, sliding each page of her book dummy into protective sheets. This allowed her to move pages around and flip through the story like a book.

I decided to give it a try, and I love it. I keep these 3-ring notebooks handy on my bookshelf, where they are easy to access and keep all the moving parts together. Having a way to specifically organize my work has helped me feel much more organized in general. Folders in my desk drawer just didn't work for me.

Another question collage artists face is what to do with all their collage paper. I had a big box of random papers and scraps. Every time I went to make a collage, I spent more time searching for a paper that would work than I spent on making the art itself. Then I picked up illustrator and collage artist Clover Robin's [Cut Paper Pictures](#) (Rock Point, 2018). In that book she shares how she stores her papers—in a notebook with each color of paper in its own clear protective sleeve.



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I had the notebooks (3-ring binders) and the protective sleeves. I had also purchased some Ziploc envelopes that fit in the 3-ring binders, which work great because you can zip them closed so nothing falls out. It took me a while to get everything sorted, but now the papers are arranged in ROYGBIV order with extras pockets for blacks, browns, and the wild mixed-up papers.

A FEW SUGGESTIONS FOR ORGANIZATIONAL SUPPLIES

5-inch 3-Ring Binders for a large collection of collage papers

Least expensive and only of average quality. They work fine, but the rings seem slightly off for the binder pockets and they also tend to pull apart, so you need to be careful when flipping through the pockets.

Antner Binder Pockets

I love these letter-sized pockets, which come 18 to a set. They keep all the scraps in place and I also use them with my writing projects to store my little dummies and notes.

Antner Leather Notebook

This little A-6 size, 6-ring notebook is great for carrying around in your bag or for when you want to put a travel kit together.

Antner Binder Pockets

These small Ziploc binder pockets fit the Antner notebook listed above, with zips in multiple colors, which can also be really useful.

COLLECT FROM ANYWHERE AND CREATE YOUR OWN

Almost any kind of paper might potentially work in a collage. That said, one of my favorite papers to collect are security envelopes that come in the mail. It takes a bit of the sting out of a bill when you get free art supplies. I have also found inspiration in shiny candy wrappers, wrapping paper, beaten up book pages, and paper bags.

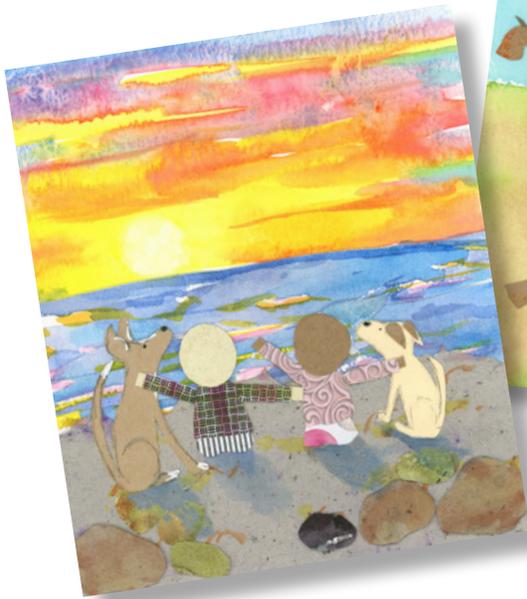
Illustrator Vanessa Brantley Newton and Robin Clover both make many of their own collage papers. I have started doing this as well. I've used watercolor paintings that didn't quite work, and I play with paint on a variety of papers, including tracing paper and tissue paper. And sometimes I print my photos on plain white paper and cut out parts to use for collage. I find the best papers end up being the ones I make with no pre-determined plan for their use. They are spontaneous and make me smile.

This past summer, I finally got around to making my own paper. Papermaking is a messy endeavor but *So. Much. Fun.* So for now I will probably wait for warmer days when I can play outside. Meanwhile, I've been saving pages of stories I've printed up for review and feedback with my critique group, which I want to make into new paper that will be infused with the imagination of my friends. Also, Vanessa Brantley Newton mentioned that she and some friends exchange papers. I'd love to connect with others who'd like to start a collage paper exchange as well. Contact me if you are interested.

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FOUR WORDS OF INSPIRATION

When you set out to begin a new project, having an idea journal can be a big help. That journal becomes a well to dip into when you sit down to create. It makes the empty white of your “canvas” exciting—just waiting for you to turn your idea into an image or a story. If you are feeling lackluster and need a boost, these four mostly uncommon words may give you even more help in turning your work into play and sparking very uncommon new ideas for stories and art.

Storystorm

Storystorm is Tara Lazar’s 30-day story brainstorming challenge—come up with 30 story ideas in 30 days! (Similar to NaNoRiMo.) It kicks off at the beginning of every January so even though it’s finished for 2022, you can still read the inspiring (almost daily) blog posts anytime. Her blog is geared to picture book writers and her archives go back many years, so pick out a few posts at random and come back for more when you need them. Also, you may find inspiration in Tara’s new book, *Absurd Words* (Sourcebooks Explore, 2022).

Pareidolia

Seeing funny faces in strange places. Shapes in clouds, smiles on trees or toast, or... Where do these things take your imagination? What can you create from what you observe in the world around you?

Ekphrastic

An ekphrastic poem is one that creates vivid imagery, so think about this word as being all about creating story from art. What does your art say? Does it have a poem to share? Who is that character you created? What’s their story?

Challenge

Search Pinterest for lists of thirty-day creative challenges. Choose words that raise the hair on your arms or spark an immediate idea. Make the list yours. Keep the list and work through the words. Choose your own timeline. You can add to the list anytime and you can skip words that don’t inspire. This is your list—no rules or boundaries.

WHY COLLAGE INSPIRES ME

I got started making collages for three reasons. One, I wanted to find ways to use scraps and “garbage” paper rather than just throwing the bits and bobs away. Two, when you make a collage, you break the image into parts. This helps simplify your idea into shapes. And three, I can get too caught up in details. Using simple shapes forces you out of the details and into seeing the bigger picture. For me, it’s a bit like writing a haiku or other piece of micro-poetry. You have to distill your idea to its essence and then allow the viewer to add in their imagination, creating a bigger story. 🌟

SARAH TOBIAS was a librarian for many years. She is a storyteller, writer, artist, photographer, creative chef, baker, and gardener. She can be found donating blood, rescuing worms, and protecting butterflies. Sarah is a Midwestern woman with one foot in the ocean who believes kindness rocks and all people are equal.

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