

The Basic Steps:

How to Create a Pysanka

What is needed:

- (1) Clean, raw eggs at room temperature.
- (2) Prepared dyes, also at room temperature.
- (3) Spoons.
- (4) Vinegar.
- (5) Beeswax.
- (6) Stylus(es).
- (7) Candle and holder.
- (8) Matches or a lighter.
- (9) Pencil.
- (10) Paper products.
- (* Q-tips.
- (* Cleaning solution(s).
- (* Urethane varnish.
- (* Drying rack.

Prepare your work area:

- (1) Cover your work area with old newspapers. Have your cooled, room temperature dyes in jars on the work area. Put several sheets of paper towel over your work space.
- (2) Make sure there is adequate light. Sunlight is best, but, if it's not readily available, a good lamp will suffice.
- (3) Have everything you need at hand: candle, matches, pencil, styluses, wax, design sheets, paper towels.

Prepare your eggs:

Wash your eggs with warm water (room temperature) using Ivory dish soap. Scrub off any dirt with a Scotch-Brite or similar sponge. Pat the eggs dry gently, and let them dry off.

Carefully inspect your eggs, discarding those with cracks, weak spots, irregular shapes, or too many bumps on the surface.

Keep your room temperature eggs in a paper egg carton or resting on paper tissues while you work.

Select a design:

Plan ahead. Choose a design from a book, or from pattern sheets. If creating your own pattern, sketch out a rough version on paper. Know in advance what sort of division you will need of the egg's surface, and what colors you will be using.

Draw the design on in pencil:

Proceed to draw the basic design on a clean, dry egg at room temperature. Draw on the egg lightly with the pencil. Use the pencil to draw basic divisions and lines; do not draw on every single little detail!!!

If you make a mistake with the pencil, DO NOT use the eraser on it. Remember, the pencil lines (if drawn on lightly) will not show up in the final design. They will usually be removed with the wax, so mistakes are OK.

Apply the design in wax:

(1) **Heat the entire head of the stylus** in the flame of the candle initially for about 10 seconds. If you are using a traditional stylus with a wooden handle, heat only the opening of the funnel, or the handle may catch on fire. I count slowly to eight while heating to make sure I heat for long enough. It is best to heat in the blue, or hottest part of the flame.



Traditional wooden-handled stylus



Modern plastic-handled stylus

(2) **Scoop** a small amount of beeswax into the opening of the reservoir (or into the funnel of the stylus).

(3) **Reheat the stylus**, placing the head into the flame until the wax is melted. (If using a wooden stylus, heat only the writing tip.) If you leave the stylus in the flame too long, the wax will get too warm and “blob” when you try to write. Counting slowly to three will usually give you enough reheating time.

(4) **Test the wax flow** from the stylus on the newspaper or your fingernail before writing any wax lines on the egg. Occasionally, from over-filling or over-heating, the stylus will let out a large blob of wax. If this should happen on the egg, there is nothing you can do. The wax bonds instantly to the eggshell; even if you try to scrape the wax off, the blob will still appear in your final design.

Don't feel badly if this happens — even the most experienced egg artists have the occasional blobs in their designs. If at all possible, try to incorporate it into the design. If you can't, remember: any art made by humans is going to have mistakes in it — that's what makes each egg truly unique. (And also remember that there are two sides to an egg, and you get to decide which side to display!)

(5) **Apply wax to the egg**. Study your pattern. Everywhere that there are white lines in the pattern, apply the wax. Remember that the pencil lines are just meant to be guides, and that you won't be covering all of them with wax. Write your design on both sides of the egg.

Use a fine stylus for fine, delicate lines, a heavy stylus for filling in large sections of color and for dots, and a medium stylus for everything else.

Repeat this process with each subsequent dye color. Once you've reached your final color, quit applying wax.

Remember: The dyes will not penetrate under the wax (unless, of course, you forget an egg in the dye, and leave it in there for several hours). Once an area is sealed, it will remain that color. You don't need to re-apply wax every time you dip an egg into a dye; just apply the new lines for that color.

Dye your egg:

(1) **Clean and acidify your egg** with a mixture of diluted vinegar—dip the egg in a jar of the “vinegar rinse” (about 2-3 tablespoons vinegar to one cup of water). Let it soak until tiny bubbles start to form on the surface of the shell. Pat the egg dry— never rub.

Make sure to put the egg in this vinegar rinse **ONLY** before dyeing the egg in the **first** color. This will remove skin oils and other debris from the surface of the egg, acidify the shell, and prepare it for dyeing. You do not need to repeat this before applying other colors (unless you've bleached or, in some other manner, alkalized the pH of the egg shell).

(2) **Dye your egg.** After applying the wax for a color, double check your egg to make sure you didn't miss any lines. Once you have checked, dip it in the next dye stated. Leave the egg in about 1 to 5 minutes, or until it is the desired brightness. Remove the egg with the spoon, and gently dry with a paper towel.

Remember, the dye sequence is from light to dark. Do not leave the egg in too long, or the dye will begin to seep under the previously applied wax and ruin the egg. If the color hasn't taken in five minutes, the shell is bad, and it probably won't. (Exception: brown eggs have a shinier shell, and may take longer to dye. Also, sometimes the final color may take a few extra minutes to get an even, dark coat.) Leaving an egg in too long risks seepage and scoring/etching of the shell by vinegar.

Dyes and color sequences:

(1) **White** is the first color in most eggs. If brown eggs are used, this (brown) will be the first color, and it will affect all of the following colors. Brown eggs can give interesting effect, but white eggs should be used when first learning the craft.

(2) **Light Blue**, if needed in **very small amounts**, is added next. It is dabbed on with a Q-tip or small brush, a toothpick, or small drops can be placed with a syringe and blunt needle. The yellow will remove the light blue.

(3) **Yellow** is used in almost all eggs. It is the base color; if the yellow does not take well, none of the other dyes will, either. Leave it on a bit longer than the other colors – three minutes at least.

(4) **Light green**, if needed, is applied next, either with a Q-tip (as above) or, if larger amounts are called for, by immersion.

(5) **Light blue**, if needed in **larger quantities** (more than a few dots) is applied now. Light blue will cover the light green completely.

(6) **Orange** follows; it is a “rinse” color, meaning it will remove darker colors and thus can be used as a rinse. I keep two jars of orange around; the first to rinse the eggs (it will get dirty and muddy), and the second to apply the orange color.

(Note: this “rinse” effect applies to orange dye made and sold by the Ukrainian Gift Shop (UGS). Other brands of orange, particularly those requiring vinegar, may not have this effect, and pumpkin does not.)

Pumpkin, a newer color, gives a bright, reddish-orange color. Unlike orange, it is a vinegar based dye, and is worth trying in those cases where the orange dye takes poorly (or to make jack-o-lantern pysanky). Do note, though, that it **CANNOT** be used as a rinse, as it contains vinegar.

(7) **Scarlet** (a bright red) is usually next.

(8) Black, brown, dark red, violet, dark/royal blue, dark green, or brick can be used as **final colors**. Note that not all final colors work with all color schemes. Royal blue, if used with anything but blue colors, will often give a muddy purple.

If all else fails, dye the egg black. For some reason, even the worst eggshell seems to do well in black. Blotchy brown or purple or dark red eggs will turn a nice even black.

Do keep the egg in the final color a bit longer, until the shell is evenly and darkly covered. Don't leave it in too long, or forget about it for hours, as the dyes will eventually start to seep under the wax, and the vinegar in the dye can weaken and erode the eggshell.

IN SUMMARY:

The color order is usually

White → **Yellow** → **Gold** → **Light Green** → **Light Blue** → **Turquoise** → **Orange** → **Brown** (if you want it lighter) → **Brick** (if you want it lighter) → **Pink** → **Scarlet (Bright Red)** → **Red** → **Brown** (if you want it darker) → **Brick** (if

A simplified scheme for beginners is

**White → Yellow → Light Green → Light Blue → Orange → Scarlet
(Bright Red) → Red → Final Color**

Note: not all the colors in any given scheme need to be used. You can leave them out, but need to go more or less in this order.

Remember, color sequence is usually **from light to dark** (with orange being used to switch from blues to reds). Buy a pattern book or two, and get an idea of color combinations that work, and how to sequence the colors. Experiment; you may have a few disasters, but you will also end up with some beautiful and original eggs!

Removing the wax:

(1) When you have finished applying wax to the design, dip the egg in the final color. Wait 5-15 minutes, then remove the egg from the dye, dab it dry, and let it sit a few minutes. Let the shell dry completely before attempting to remove the wax.

(2) **Removing wax with heat.** Take the egg, and hold it near the side of your candle's flame. DO NOT hold the egg over the flame, because soot will deposit on the eggshell. Wait until the wax looks wet (only a few seconds, usually) and wipe the wax off with a clean, folded piece of paper towel. Try to always use a fresh side of the towel (or a new towel) for each wipe, or else you'll just be rubbing wax all over the egg, and it will take a lot longer to finish your egg.

Repeat section by section, until all of the wax has been removed.

(3) **Residual wax.** When removing wax with heat, there is often some residual wax left on the egg at the end of the process. Rather than risk scorching the egg or getting soot on it by chasing down these last bits of wax, chemical removal can be used. A small amount of any degreaser (see 4) can be placed on a tissue, and the surface of the egg wiped down. I often use a bit of Goof-Off on a Kleenex for just this purpose.

Goo Gone, which smells nice and citrusy, works too slowly to be useful as a whole egg degreaser, but is great for removing small amounts of residual wax, as well as soot. Hold the egg in the palm of your gloved hand, put a few drops of Goo Gone on it, and coat it evenly. Wait a few minutes to let it work, and then gently dry the egg with a tissue.

(4) **Alternatively**, there is a much more modern and less labor-intensive way of removing wax: chemical dissolution of the wax with a degreasing agent. Unfortunately,

all of the non-flammable degreasers have been shown to be deleterious to the environment and have been taken off the market..

Many of the remaining cleaning solutions are benzene derivatives and are toxic as well as flammable. Others, like mineral spirits, are combustible. The best of what's left seems to be Goof-Off, a blend of toluene and other organic solvents. Make sure any solution you use is not water-based.

To chemically clean an egg, I place a completed pysanka into a plastic container of Goof-Off, shut the lid, and let it soak until the wax has dissolved off. For eggs with fine lines, this may be all that is needed. For eggs with heavier waxing, I sometimes need to wipe the softened wax off of the egg and return it to the Goof-Off for a longer soak.

Removing Pencil Lines:

- (1) Most pencil lines will **come off with the wax** if you are removing wax using a candle. Really!
- (2) An art gum or white architect's **eraser** can be used to erase pencil lines. Do not rub too hard, as you might scratch the cuticle of the egg and cause unsightly marks.
- (3) **Goof-Off**, an all-purpose residue remover, also does a pretty good job of removing pencil lines, I apply it with a tissue, and rub gently. Make sure you use the oil-based version, and not the wipes, as they are water based, and will remove the color, too!
- (4) If you are making a two-color egg, and one of those colors is white, or are making an egg with a lot of white in it, it may be worth while to remove as much pencil as possible before dyeing the egg in the first dye. This is especially true if you want a non-black final color. Black usually hides pencil lines well; colors such as red or light blue do not.

In this case, I use **Goof-Off Wipes** (they are water-based) and wipe down the egg well after I am done waxing. This will remove the pencil from the areas that will be colored. Once the wax is removed, I remove those lines, if needed, as above.

Note that you **cannot** use **regular** Goof Off before the wax is removed, as it will remove wax and destroy your pattern.

Finishing up:

- (1) You may wish to **apply a glossy finish** to the egg once completed. I use clear gloss urethane, a synthetic varnish. Apply a very thin layer of varnish with your fingers (I wear disposable gloves, as it is very difficult to wash off) and set on a drying rack to dry. It usually takes at least 24 hours for the varnish to dry completely (longer if the air is damp, as in the summer).
- (2) At this point, you should decide whether to leave the egg intact, or **drain** the egg contents. Eggs which have not been emptied may leak or explode. This is not pleasant.

If you don't wish to empty the eggs, you probably should not varnish them, to decrease the probability of explosion. The inside will dry up over time.

(3) If you wish to empty the pysanka, you can buy an **egg-blowing device** (it's fairly cheap) or use a syringe to drain the egg. I used to use a Dremel tool to drill a fine hole at each end of the egg, and then blow out the contents.

I now use a Blas-Fix single hole egg blower, and use the small hand drill included to make the single hole in the bottom of the egg.

(Note: eggs which have become cracked during the pysanka-making process should not be cleaned with heat, nor emptied with an egg blower, as the pressure from the heat and/or blower will cause the shell to spit and the egg contents to run out. Use a syringe and needle to slowly and gently suck the egg contents out through either a single or double hole.

(4) Once the egg has been drained of its contents, you should **rinse it out thoroughly**. Small bits of egg left behind can smell, and may leak eventually out of the drain hole. This may be done by injecting water into the emptied shell with a syringe (10 to 20 cc), shaking the water around to loosen and dissolve the remaining egg contents, and then blowing (or suctioning) the water out.

(5) Once the egg has been emptied, it needs to **dry out**. Let it set on a drying rack or in an egg carton at least overnight. This will allow the last of the water or egg contents to drain out. If using an egg carton, use a paper one, as the paper will wick the water away from the egg, much as a disposable diaper wicks water away from a baby's bottom. A foam egg carton will allow water to pool, and the water can seep under the varnish and dissolve the dye, leaving white blotches around the hole.

To aid in drainage, you can insert a twist of paper towel into the drain hole. This will aid the water in wicking out. I remove and insert such twists until no more water wicks out.

Afterwards, you can clean the surface of the *varnished* egg with water or even a mild detergent, to remove any yolk or white spatters.

Storing the eggs:

(1) Keep the eggs out of direct light and heat. The light can **fade the colors**, and both light and heat can cause unemptied eggs to leak and explode.

(2) Do not shake or agitate unemptied eggs; this can cause them to explode. NEVER pick up pysanky and shake them!

(3) Do not store unemptied eggs in air tight containers; it is best if air can circulate around the eggs. Paper egg cartons are best for this.

(4) Enjoy the eggs—display them and show them off, and give them as gifts. The eggs stand up to time quite well; I still have eggs that I made almost thirty years ago!