

How to Make Linocuts!

by [GraduallyGreener](#) on April 12, 2010

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Author: GraduallyGreener

I'm a Wildlife Biology student at Colorado state university. I am very interested in trying to make my life style greener by the day. Plans for the near future include a greenhouse, a chicken coop and run, a compost heap, and other happy things. I also love art and making art, and intend on putting a few instructables up on art techniques.

Intro: How to Make Linocuts!

Purpose : The purpose of this instructable is to teach YOU how to make a linocut of your very own.

What is a Linocut? : Linocuts are very similar to woodcuts. It is a printing method using a sheet of linoleum, in which a subtractive cutting method is used to take away the parts of linoleum where you want to leave the white of the page, and keep the parts you want to be inked! In the result you have a linocut that can reproduce the same image over and over again.

A Short History : While linoleum was first invented in the 1860s, it wasn't used as a medium for printing until the early 1900s in Germany, where it was first used for making patterns on wallpaper! Artists ranging from Pablo Picasso to Henri Matisse have made linocuts, and today it is considered a respected art form. Linocuts are also very popular in teaching children in schools about the rewarding art of printmaking.

Why linocuts? : First off, linoleum does not have a grain like wood does, meaning there is no need to cut in one direction. Also, it is much, MUCH easier to cut than wood, especially when heated. Although linoleum is not *quite* as durable as wood, you can still make hundreds if not thousands of copies of the same image with a single linocut before it is too degraded to use. Linocuts generally remind me of illustrated children books, which is a style I very much like. One can even make several linocuts to be used together to make a print including color, and in some cases (depending on the ink and paper you use) a linocut print can be colored after wards with your medium of choice.

So lets get started!



Step 1: Materials

You will need . . .

1. One sheet of linoleum!

You can get these at your local art stores such as Jerry's Artarama, or even at generic craft stores such as Hobby Lobby. The bigger you go, the more expensive the sheet, but generally they are not too expensive. If this is your first linocut, I suggest getting something around the size of 4" x 5". This way you do not have a giant piece to work on, but you also won't have to work with itty bitty details. For your first linocut, I suggest doing a simple pattern with no positive (left, uncut away) pieces smaller than half a centimeter. I know folks who buy linoleum for flooring when they find good deals, and use this for carving. I have never tried this, but only imagine it is much harder to cut than art store grade linoleum. Stay away from anything pink or white that claims to be good for lino-prints, generally it is a rubber that is much too soft, and you will hack it to pieces within seconds.

2. Linocutting tool with an assortment of blades !

You could buy several different handles with blades and v-cutters permanently attached for about \$7 each. I don't suggest this, as it is very expensive and simply unnecessary. Most art stores and some craft stores will sell a beginners kit that comes with one handle and 5 or 6 different blades for anywhere between \$7 and \$20. This is what I have, and it works perfectly! I bought mine from Jerry's Artarama for \$14. There is a similar product here (<http://www.jerrysartarama.com/discount-art-supplies/Printmaking-Supplies/Speedball-Block-Printing-Supplies/Speedball-Lino-Cutters-Handles-and-Linozips.htm>) for those of you who would like to buy your tools online or who want to get an idea of what they are looking for.

3. A piece of glass! (At least 8" by 12")

You can get your piece of glass anywhere really. Many glass cutting stores will sell you scraps, as artists often use glass for pallets as well. I would get one that is at least the size of your common printer paper. I simply bought an old picture frame from a thrift store for \$3, kept the glass and recycled the frame. You will be using this to roll your ink out onto before applying it to your linocut.

4. A brayer!

A brayer is very similar to a paint roller, but instead of the strange cushy material the roll itself is some kind of rubber. I suggest getting a hard or soft rubber brayer, and these will run from between \$6 and \$20, depending on the size and quality. I suggest getting a brayer that is at least 3 1/2" wide. Once again, these are found at art stores and in some craft stores. Here's an example. (<http://www.jerrysartarama.com/discount-art-supplies/Printmaking-Supplies/Speedball-Block-Printing-Supplies/Speedball-Barens-and-Brayers.htm>)

5. Ink!

You can also get your ink at an art store or craft store, but make sure it says on the bottle it can be used for print making! Any color you like will do. I found a nice little jar of navy blue speed ball ink for \$4. A little bird told me once you can use slightly watered down acrylic, but I have never tried this.

6. Paper!

This is the paper you will be using to put your final prints on. If your ink is semi-transparent, you'll want a lighter color of paper. If the ink is solid and white, try some darker colors! I suggest artist's quality light weight paper, though stay away from anything that is very textured, such as heavy duty watercolor paper.

7. A dark magic marker!

8. A pencil!

9. An idea for your print!

For your first print, I suggest a pattern or drawing that does not have a ton of detail and without any shading. Try to keep your thinnest positive points (where linoleum is not carved away) about a half centimeter thick for your first print.

10. BANDAIDS

I cannot stress this enough. If it is your first time making a linoleum cut, I highly suggest you have a box of bandaids on hand. You aren't in danger of cutting a finger off while making a linoprint, but no matter how careful I am, I always manage to slice a finger or two. Some antiseptic ointment is a good idea as well!

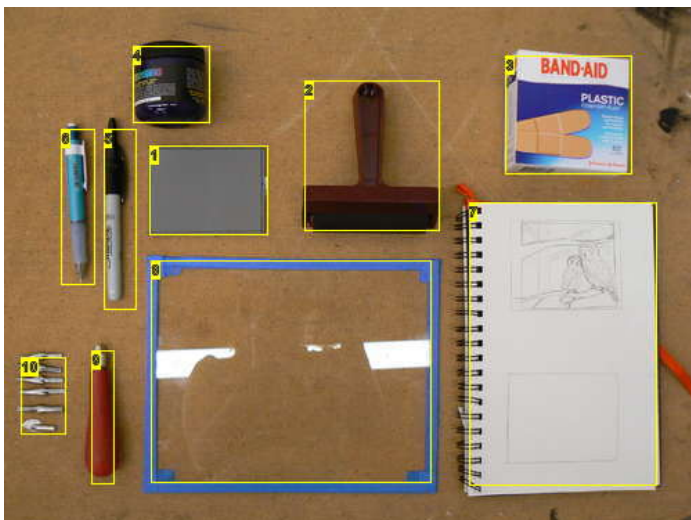


Image Notes

1. Linoleum

2. Brayer
3. Band-aids - very important!
4. Printing ink. Anything that says its for woodcuts or silkscreening will also do.
5. sharpie
6. Pencil
7. An idea + paper for printing
8. Pane of glass for ink rolling - taped edges to prevent cuts!
9. linocutting tool handle
10. linocutting tool blades

Step 2: Come up with a design!

Before you go anywhere near tools you need to come up with a design first! This could be anything you want really, if you can draw it and its not too terribly detailed or thin, you can probably carve it out of your linoleum. I particularly like the look of animal linocuts and anatomical linocuts, but its up to you! You can sketching a rough idea out onto a scrap piece of paper to practice!

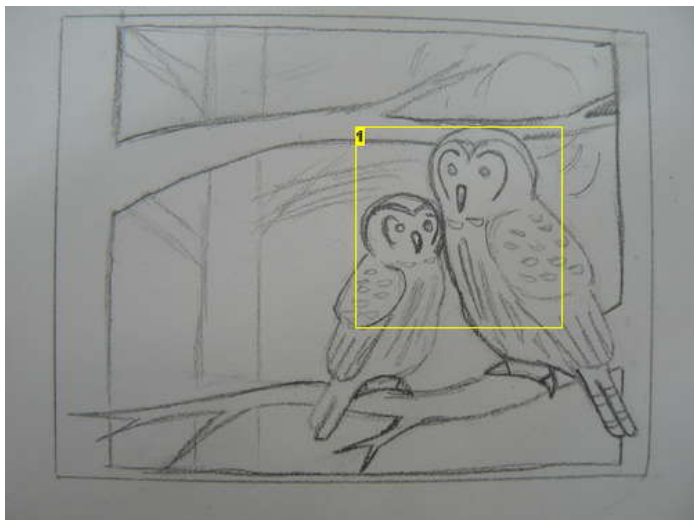


Image Notes

1. These are based of barred owls, if anyone's wondering.

Step 3: Put your design on your linoleum sheet.

BEFORE YOU DO ANYTHING.

Remember this is a print, and **ANYTHING YOU PUT ON YOUR LINO CUT WILL BE BACKWARDS WHEN PRINTED.**

If you have a symmetrical design, this isn't a problem. I personally don't ever work with letters, numbers, or words, so I just draw my design directly onto my lino sheet, flipped from how I want it to be. If you are using letters or numbers, I suggest drawing out your design out, copy it onto tracing paper, and then using a piece of graphite paper to transfer the image onto your linoleum sheet backwards. This way, when it is printed it will be correct.

First, get your image onto your linoleum with pencil. When you like it, trace over it with your black sharpie. I suggest making a border around your image so that you linoleum is flat when you print it and so the image has a nice little border of its own, but this is not necessary.



Image Notes

1. Area I want left intact is colored with a black marker.
2. Places I want to carve away are left blank.

Step 4: SAFETY!!!!

You are going to be working with very, VERY sharp tools in order to cut your linoleum. They might look like nice and innocent little blades, but they can do some real damage.

Rules for using linocutting tools

1. ALWAYS CUT AWAY FROM YOU.

This is a general rule when using any sharp object, but its a good thing to remember

2. KNOW WHERE YOUR FINGERS ARE AT ALL TIMES.

This sounds stupid. How do you lose track of your finger? I promise you, it will happen. When you are carving, your non-carving hand will need to hold the piece of linoleum down to keep it from slipping and moving across your table. Instinctively you will want to hold it at the edge furthest from you, but if you are carving away from yourself, this puts your hand right in the path of your blades. No matter how much control you think you have, I promise you will slip from time to time. If your fingers are in the way, you will cut them. Trust me, your blades are sharp.

3. KEEP ANTISEPTIC AND BAND-AIDS AROUND

With such a sharp blade, you will make a tiny cut that is somewhat deep and will bleed a lot, if you do cut yourself. Apply pressure! Make sure you clean the cut by running it under hot water and applying antiseptic with a cotton swap or Q-tip. Place the band-aid on top of your cut to stop the bleeding and keep your finger from getting infected.

4. CAREFULLY WATCH CHILDREN

Linocutting is a great activity for kids who are mature enough to be around sharp objects. That being said, keep an eye on them!

5. DON'T BE STUPID

In the unlikely event that your cut is fairly deep and will not stop bleeding, don't try and be the tough guy and wait it out. While it has yet to happen to me, I could easily see a foolish carver injuring themselves enough to need stitches. If you can see yellow fatty tissue in the cut, you probably need stitches. If applying pressure isn't slowing the bleeding, you probably need stitches. If your wound cannot be shut, you probably need stitches. With stitches, you cannot wait, you need to get them before the wound starts to heal. A large cut may heal without stitches, but is much more likely to get infected. When in doubt, call your doctor or visit a local ER.

Step 5: Cut Away!

In this step you should CAREFULLY start cutting away your negative space, or the part of your linocut print that you want to show the white of the page, with no ink. This is the part of the print we did NOT ink with a sharpie. Remember, you can always cut away more, but once you have cut something off, it is gone for good!

For larger areas, use one of your larger U-blades, the scoup like attachment to your linocutter. For fine detail, use the smallest of your U-blades and/or your straight blade. Some people like to trace all their outlines with their straight blade, first, but personally I don't think it really makes a difference. Be patient, as rushing will leave plenty of mistakes! Be especially careful on tight curves, sharp edges, and narrow cuts. The more you practice at this, the easier it will become!

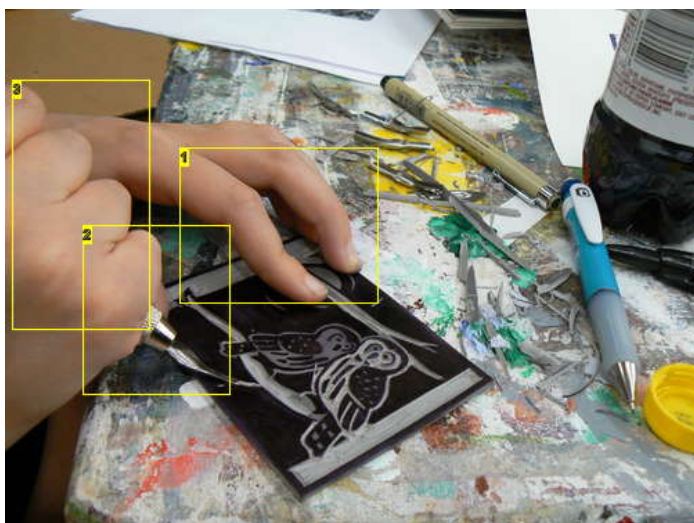


Image Notes

1. Fingers are not in the path of the blade.
2. I am being a good girl and carving away from myself.
3. You do not have to hold the carving tool like a stabbing knife, I just find it more comfortable for some parts of carving.

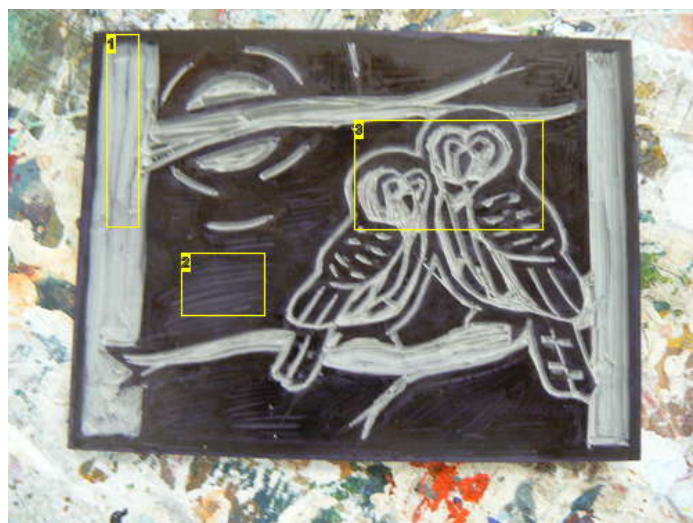


Image Notes

1. Parts of the print I want left blank to see the paper are carved away.
2. Parts of the print I want inked and black are left intact.
3. Hooooooo hooooooo.

Step 6: Ink up your linocut!

So you've finished carving out your linocut, and now its time to ink it!

1. Get that ink on there!

Put about a spoonful (depending on how big your print is) of ink into the center of your glass pane.

2. Start rolling!

Start rolling your ink around. Experiment with your brayer a little bit to make sure it is rolling the paint, not simply pushing it around without turning. If at first you can't get it to turn, keep going, sometimes it takes a few minutes for the ink to smooth out enough for the brayer to start rolling. Try and spread the ink evenly across the pane. If your paint is super sticky and hard to roll out, try squirting a tiny bit of water on it with a squirt bottle.

3. Aim for that smooth, velvety texture!

When rolling, its best to go at a quick pace. If you take too long, your ink will start to dry, which is no bueno! After you have rolled for a bit, you will notice that rolling starts to become noisy, and the texture of the ink will change. Ideally, you want to roll until your ink starts to look velvety.

4. Ink the linocut!

Once you have your desired texture, use your brayer to roll the ink onto your linocut. This may take a few passes and you may have to briefly roll your brayer on your glass pane again to pick up more ink, but don't take too long or the ink will dry!

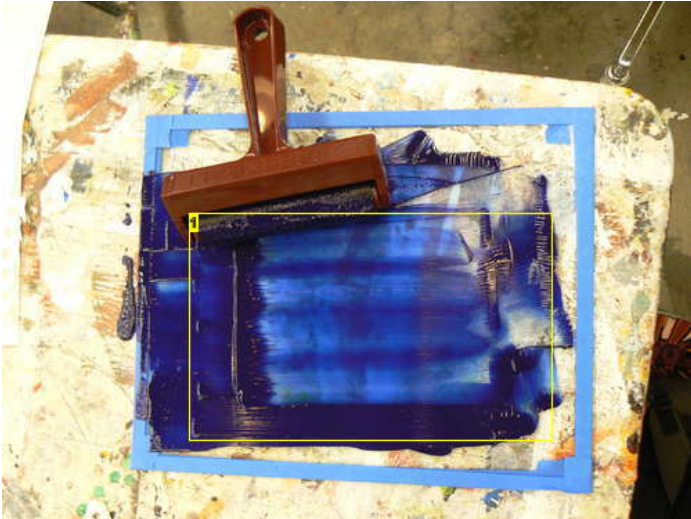


Image Notes

1. In the beginning, your ink will probably look like this, as if the brayer is just moving ink around. Don't give up! Try to even out the ink across your glass pane and keep pushing for that velvety texture!

Step 7: Print!

Time to transfer that baby to paper!

1. Take your paper, and gently place it over your inked block.

Even if its sort of off, don't try and move it. You can always cut the paper down later to get it nice and evenly centered

2. Tap down in the center

This is just to get the paper to stick and keep it from sliding!

3. Roll it flat/ smooth with hands

You can use a house hold object such as a rolling pin, piece of PVC pipe, or water bottle to roll across the top of the paper, like one would while rolling out cookie dough to make shaped cookies. I personally just gently start rubbing the top of the paper in circles to get a nice even distribution of ink.

4. Peel away!

From one end only, peel your paper off gently.

5. Practice!

Its unlikely you'll get a perfect print your first go. Keep trying, as well as experimenting with different methods as to what works best for you. Also, make a few for friends and family!

Step 8: Admire!

You worked hard at this, so take pride in your work! Since you should have made a few, show off your work by giving copies to friends and family! Don't forget to date and sign either in the bottom right corner or on the back!



Image Notes

1. Anatomical diagram of a heart. Personally, I think this is best linocut I've ever made.



Image Notes

1. First linocut I ever made!

Related Instructables



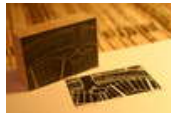
How ANYONE can make a linocut by trucdart



Linoleum Block / Art / Printmaking by bopp



Custom Save the Date Cards by scoochmaroo



Creating, cutting and printing your own woodblock by rbanks



How to make an upcycled art quilt by trucdart



Santa Block Print Card by Noah by den10studio

Comments

14 comments

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davee52uk says:

Apr 15, 2010, 11:50 PM [REPLY](#)

Also I use paper from my office for prints. This has been used on one side but works O.K. on the other - again free.

Heavier art paper may need wetting a bit but the office paper can be used straight off.



dutton12 says:

Oct 14, 2010, 11:05 AM [REPLY](#)

You do not use wet paper for lino cuts as it has "lots" of ink on the surface compared to other ways of printing.

Printmaking paper has less sizing (read glue to hold paper together) that would be the big difference in the ability to transfer ink to the paper.

The amount of ink that can be transferred has to do with the amount of pressure applied to the block as well. I have used printmaking paper and water color paper as well as drawing paper with great results. It does seem that it takes some time for the block to season and transfer the ink better. .



GraduallyGreener says:

Apr 16, 2010, 9:30 PM [REPLY](#)

I have used office paper before, and while it doesn't look horrible, I find that unless the print is mainly empty space with a few lines, the paper warps as the ink dries.



Pretty Idiot Productions says:

May 30, 2010, 8:39 PM [REPLY](#)

Nice. This brought back some memories for me... I remember doing this at camp when I was a kid!



whitehawk says:

May 21, 2010, 4:01 AM [REPLY](#)

This is a great tutorial!! Thanks so much. Also love your focus on safety :)



GraduallyGreener says:

May 22, 2010, 5:01 AM [REPLY](#)

Thanks! Safety is very important! About a week ago I was carving a large 16' x 20' piece of linoleum for a final project at university. I was talking to a friend and not paying attention and gave myself a nasty cut on my palm. Very deep, I almost got stitches! But right before we hopped in the car it stopped bleeding, so I opted for anti-biotic cream and a band aid.

This is usually more of an issue for people like me, who are incredibly clumsy. Still, better safe than sorry!



LittleWolf says:

Apr 27, 2010, 4:31 PM [REPLY](#)

Owls! =D

What's your experience with carving words in this medium? I don't mean the tiny little ones, but a good sizable chunk of font.



thepelton says:

Apr 17, 2010, 10:53 AM [REPLY](#)

This gives me an idea. I have an Epilog laser, and I was thinking of using it to make woodcuts.



GraduallyGreener says:

Apr 18, 2010, 12:59 AM [REPLY](#)

I'll be honest, I know nothing about Epilog lasers. However, I would assume that it would make more accurate cuts, as well as making woodcutting much easier. Let me know how it goes if you try it!



davee52uk says:

Apr 15, 2010, 11:48 PM [REPLY](#)

1. Is it possible to use acrylic paint instead of printing ink ? I tried this yesterday but results were not good.

2. It is possible to do the same kind of thing using balsa wood. It is just as quick as lino but there is a problem of cutting across the grain. Balsa is cheaper than lino so it is good for trying out designs before committing to lino. Balsa does work with acrylics

3. Even cheaper, in fact free, is to use styrofoam. This is used as food packaging. In the UK. It is used for boxes for takeaway food and for packaging pizzas.

Styrofoam is quick and will take acrylics if it is sealed with printing ink first.



GraduallyGreener says:

Apr 16, 2010. 9:29 PM [REPLY](#)

1. I have heard it is, but I personally haven't tried. It probably depends on the type of acrylic. If I have some left over from a painting class I'm in right now I'll try it!
2. I have heard using Balsa wood, but I just figured it would be harder to use considering one has to consider the grain and I think it might dull your blades down a little quicker.
3. We have styrofoam here as well, though I've never tried it. Generally speaking I stay away from the stuff because it is pretty horrible for the environment, but finding a way to reuse it would be nice. I feel like it would be too easy to cut though, and that I would be bound to make more mistakes than I do with linoleum.



bettbee says:

Apr 15, 2010. 12:35 PM [REPLY](#)

That soft lino block stuff is great. Just be a little careful not to push hard, it takes almost no pressure to cut it. The best thing is that it minimizes cutting yourself! Better to ruin the block than injure yourself. Since it takes a good bit of pressure to cut linoleum, if the blade skips out of the lino and into your hand, it's going to cut deep. I know this from experience.

The easy cut stuff also can be made into shaped blocks with ease, giving more flexibility and possibility for modular designs.



sir_yoda says:

Apr 15, 2010. 11:07 AM [REPLY](#)

Very cool



GraduallyGreener says:

Apr 15, 2010. 11:21 AM [REPLY](#)

Thank you!
