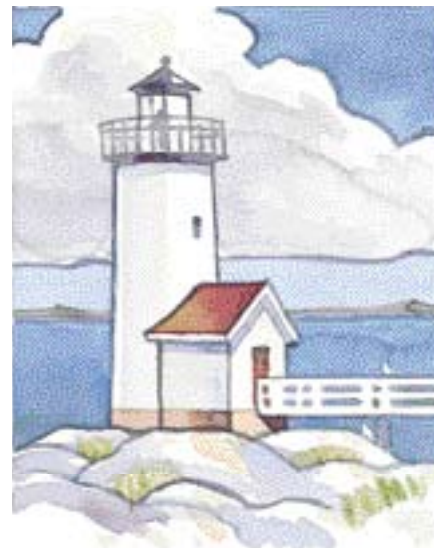


5 Rules to Paint By

From inspiration to final brushstroke, you'll get better results every time you paint if you follow these simple guidelines.

By Mark Willenbrink

You know something's wrong, but you're not quite sure what. In the demonstrations that follow, I'll show you how to spot five common pitfalls that many artists struggle through—and the rules that'll help you avoid them in your next painting. With a little practice and attention to detail, these simple guidelines for using line, color and value will become second nature and will dramatically improve your painting results.



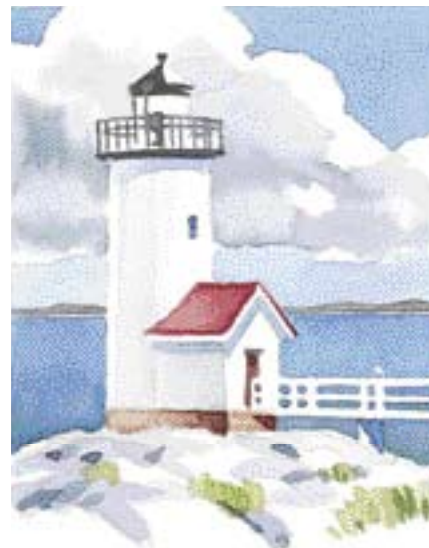
1 Define Without Lines
Using lines to define the forms in your composition diminishes the realistic look of the painting and distracts the viewer. Instead of using watercolor to outline shapes, draw the composition completely in pencil before you begin to paint, thinking about how you'll give objects form and dimension later. When you start painting you can then use contrasting values and colors to define specific elements rather than rely on bold lines. The watercolors will cover the pencil marks and no obvious lines will be left in your final painting.

In the example above, see how boldly outlining the objects with color distracts from the the natural appearance of the landscape.



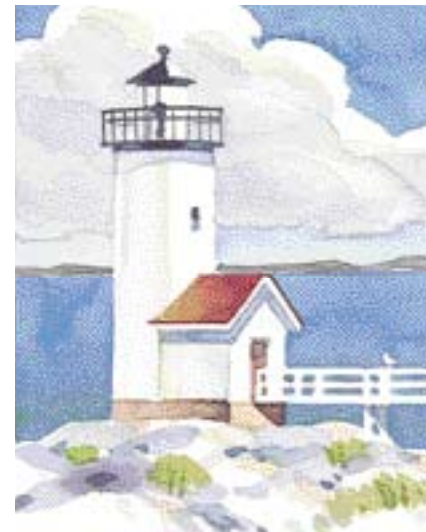
2 Focus on Your Subject
You can't always replicate exactly what you see and come away with a painting that works. Often you need to alter background colors, eliminate detail or add contrast to keep the viewer focused on your main subject.

The lighthouse is intended to be the main focus in this example, but note how the top of the building gets lost in the clouds. Although that part of the lighthouse and the clouds may have looked equally white in person or in a photograph, to keep the viewer's attention focused on the lighthouse (and away from the red roof below it) it would have been better to choose colors for the less important background clouds that enhance the top of the lighthouse.



3 Maintain Color Continuity
Using a color only in an isolated area of your painting gives the piece a feeling of imbalance. Colors look more natural if they appear throughout the painting.

Here, the green grasses in the foreground would seem more realistic if there were also some yellowish grass in the area. You could then add yellow to the clouds, lighthouse and foreground to make the overall color scheme of the painting more cohesive.



4 Beware of Tangents
A tangent occurs when the edges of two or more elements touch. Tangents grab the viewer's attention and distract from the intended focal point of the painting.

In this rendering of the lighthouse scene, the top of the red roof lines up with the opposite shore. This tangent distorts the depth perception for the viewer and competes for attention with the focal point (the lighthouse).



5 Save the Right Amount of White
Without enough light in your watercolor, it'll appear dull and lifeless. To ensure that your painting has pure white highlights, plan where you need to keep your paper white—look for the light.

With no visible white areas in the example above, the entire composition lacks a focal point. There's no movement in the painting and the viewer must search, unsuccessfully, for the light.

Putting It All Together

Following these rules may feel cumbersome and stifling at first. But as you grow accustomed to thinking about these five important concepts they'll quickly become a natural part of your painting process and as a result, you'll see a dramatic improvement in your work.

I followed all five rules in this version of the painting, successfully creating a unified scene with the lighthouse as the focal point. ♦

Mark Willenbrink is a Cincinnati-based illustrator, instructor and the author of Watercolor for the Absolute Beginner (2003, North Light Books).

