

# Pastel Framing Tips

Here are some tips on framing pastels that will help you frame your pastel paintings properly and easily.

by Greg Fremstad

## Framing with mats or without (matless)

Let's start with the matted version first.

Mats provide airspace between the glass and the face of the art. They promote air circulation that prevents mold growth and moisture that buckles the art. Mats with a standard bevel as shown in the cross sections in *Figure 1* creates problems. Pastel dust that falls off the painting settles on the bevel of the mat(s).

You can lessen this situation by lifting the mat(s) up off the painting by inserting strips of mat board or foam board behind the mats to make a generous space for the dust to fall into. Make sure the lifters go all the way to the outside edge of the mats to support the backing. (See *Figure 2*) The dust will settle on the mat bevels and every time the frame is jostled the dust will filter down between the mat and the glass.

Another good remedy uses "reverse bevel" mat(s) as shown in *Figures 3 and 4*. The dust will now be urged behind the bevels. Reverse bevel mats also benefit the art by avoiding that glaring white bevel(s). I'll bet that very few pastel paintings need or can stand those stark white accents. A double reverse bevel mat is so much less obtrusive

than those two white stripes. Two slightly different colors for the first and second mats without the neon white stripes really looks nice. See the photos at left to compare the difference.



Figure 1A. Standard "Double Bevel Mats"

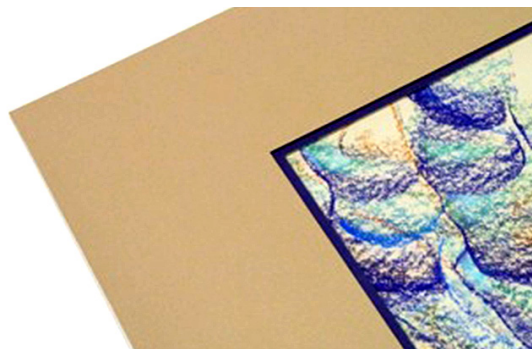


Figure 3A. "Reverse Bevel Mats"

## Attaching your painting when matting

The artwork should be attached to the backing

rather than to the back of the mats. The safest method is to use the clear plastic self adhesive corner pockets or strips. Available from Lineco in Massachusetts (See *Figure 5 on next page*), they are similar to the little black triangle corners used in old photo albums. Although these cover a bit of the art they are clear and do not actually attach to the art so they are archival. (Archival in this sense means reversible without damage to the art).

The down side is if the frame is dropped the art may be damaged by the small corner engagement. Long strips along the bottom of the art will help in this regard. You can make your own corner pockets or strips by folding thin neutral pH rag paper (like good stationery) and attaching those to the backing with either glue or tape. See Figure 5-A. Make sure to leave a little wiggle room to allow for expansion from changes in humidity.

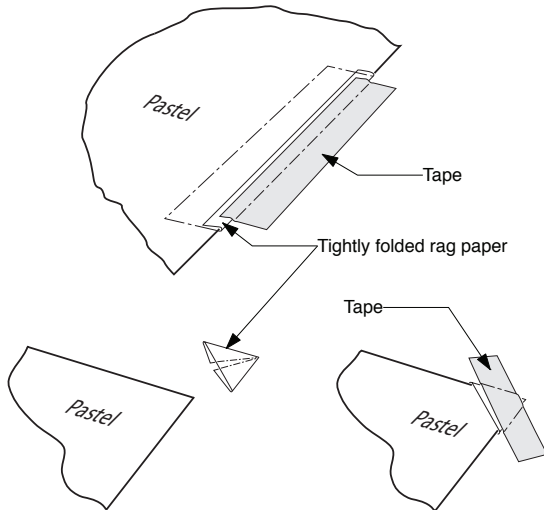


Figure 5-A. Paper Mounting Strips

“peeling” off if the art is turned sideways or up-side-down. The hinges should be the weak link in your assembly. You will want the hinges to tear before the art tears. Linen hinge tape (either pressure sensitive adhesive or the gummed style) is way too strong to be the weak link. These tapes are not considered “Archival” as they are very difficult to remove from the art without damaging the art. *Check out the article on hinging tips and ideas at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com)*

Next best would be gummed Hayaku® hinging tape available from Lineco in MA. It is important to wait a bit from the time you wet it until you apply it to your art as too much moisture will pucker your art. If you wait too long, you won’t get a strong bond. Practice by wetting up 8 small hinges all at once and applying them to a piece of bond paper one at a time every 2 minutes. Use an egg timer as you will probably get distracted. This will show you how long you must wait from the time you wet the hinges until you apply them to your art. The first ones will be too wet, the last ones will be too dry. This timing is very critical. Don’t press hard on wet hinges as the moisture will pucker your art.

There are virtually no self adhesive tapes on the market that could be considered “archival” (regardless of the claims on the packaging) because they are not reversible without damage to the art. Reversal of pressure sensitive adhesives generally requires solvents that are very likely to damage your fragile pastels. Also, the term “acid free” is nothing more than a marketing term to sell you more expensive stuff. To be either acidic or alkaline (read pH values here) it must be dissolvable in water. Plastic tapes with pressure sensitive adhesive are not dissolvable in water, and thereby cannot be either acidic or alkaline. They are still not suitable for attaching art to the backing.

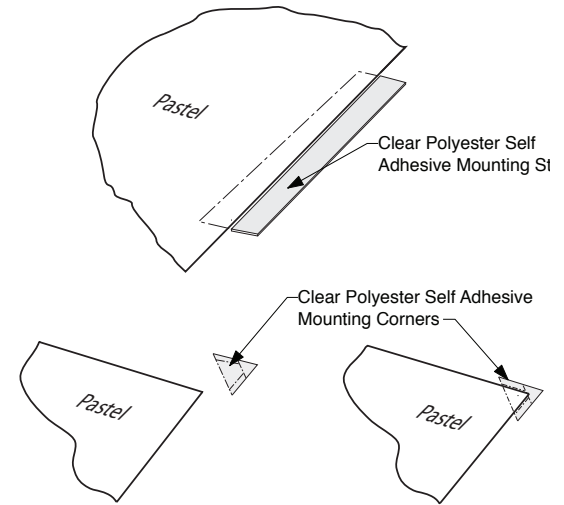


Figure 5. Pastel Corner Strips

For large or heavy pieces I recommend using wet-torn Japanese hinge papers and cooked wheat starch paste. (See Figure 6 below) Wheat starch paste does not degrade with age and is easily reversible with a slightly dampened Q-tip – even after many years. Experienced paper conservators, museum curators, and even quality framers use this method. You should attach the primary hinges to the top of the art so that it hangs in suspension. Gravity will help keep the art flat. Loose “safety hinges” should also be attached to the bottom to keep the primary hinges from

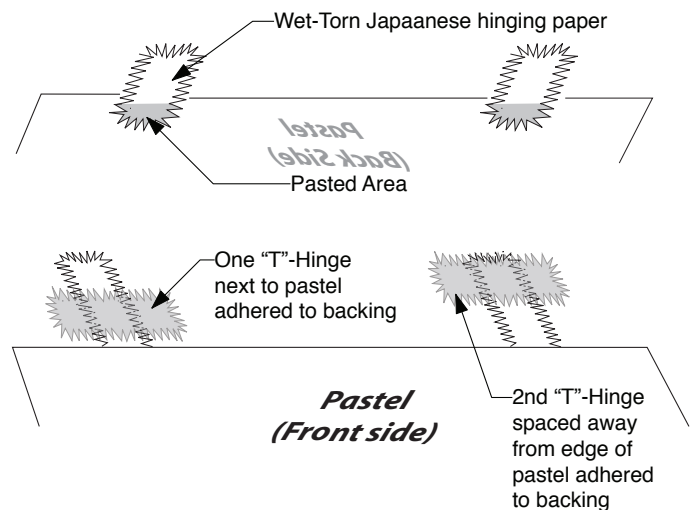


Figure 6. Hinging pastel for matting

## Matless framing

Pastels on either paper or board, must have some air circulation between the art and the glass to prevent mold growth and maintain a constant humidity level across the entire face of the painting. Mold doesn't like air circulation. If the glass is right up against the art, humidity changes will affect the edges of the art long before it works its way to the central area. As the paper swells or shrinks due to changes in humidity, it will cause buckling starting around the edges.

With matless pastel framing, you will need to incorporate spacers to keep the glass off of the art. You can make your own spacers from strips of mat board or foam board however it is much easier to use pre-manufactured spacers. Some are solid plastic, some are hollow plastic, and one called FrameSpace® is an "S" shaped plastic. If you can control the exact size, thickness, and squareness of the glass and the size of the frame, Framespace® is the way to go. FrameSpace® adds about 1/16-inch to the length and width of the glass but if the glass is square and there is room in the frame it is by far the easiest to use.

See Figure 7.

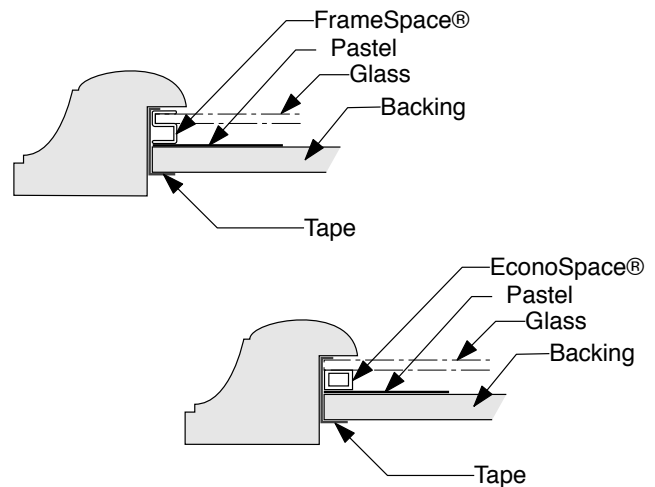


Figure 7. Cross section of FrameSpace and EconoSpace.

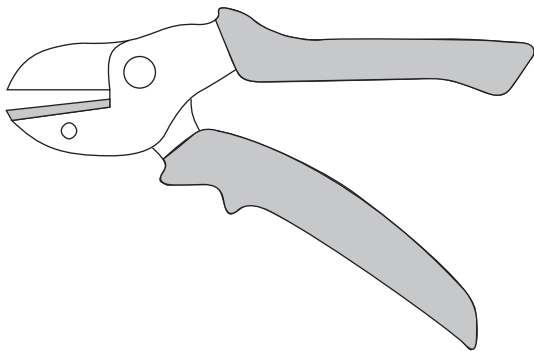


Figure 8. Anvil Pruners (rose trimmers)

FrameSpace® is mechanically permanent, it will never sag or come loose and it keeps the glass from shaving bits of paint, gold leaf, and wood off the frame. It is also easily removed to clean or replace the glass.

FrameSpace® cuts easily with garden shears called "anvil pruners" (rose trimmers) or a sharp razor blade. (See Figure 8 at left) Watch a demo video about FrameSpace® here: [www.frametek.com](http://www.frametek.com)

Of the rectangular shaped plastic spacers with the pressure sensitive adhesive, only the EconoSpace® (See Figure 7 above) brand has a 5 mil (5 thousands inch) thick adhesive. All the rest on the market have a 1 or 2 mil adhesive.

The EconoSpace® comes in 4 sizes from 1/16- to 3/8-inch airspace and full 60 inch lengths. Most pastel artists use the 1/8 inch EconoSpace® as it provides the same airspace as a double mat. EconoSpace® also has a satin finish on one side and is available in clear, black, and white.

EconoSpace® is hollow and, therefore, much lighter than the solid ones and is stiffer than if it were made solid out of the same material. This is important because gravity is always sucking on that top piece in the frame trying to make it sag. EconoSpace® also cuts easily with garden shears called "anvil pruners" (rose trimmers) (See Figure 8 above) or a sharp razor blade. EconoSpace® is very forgiving about glass thickness, size, and squareness.

A word here about the method of framing pastels directly against the glass and taping all around holding it all together. Great! Cheap, easy, fast. The problem is mold growth, paper buckling and pastel adhesion to the glass. We old framers can tell you hundreds of horror stories about this method. Just because it's been done for years doesn't mean it's right or proper.

**Attaching your pastel when matless framing**

For most small pieces painted on fairly stiff paper, under 18" x 24" or so, attaching the art to the backing is unnecessary. On larger pieces if the art is just resting on the bottom rail of the frame, it may "belly out" near the bottom with time and gravity so you may want to hinge the art over the top of the backing so that gravity will help keep it flat.

Bonding the paper to a substrate is not recommended for archival purposes because it is not reversible. The art cannot be saved if the substrate bows or gets degraded by moisture. Spray adhesives are not at all permanent and are weakened by heat and humidity. Water based glues are often the cause of substrate bowing. When you make an un-equal lamination (like bonding something to only one side of a board) the opposite side will absorb moisture and swell slightly causing bowing.

**Double backed tape**

Suppose you stick a piece of paper art down to a board with double backed tape (like ATG tape) in two places at the top. When the art expands or contracts with changes in humidity, the art will buckle between the spots of tape. In fact, you will probably be able to see exactly where the tape pieces are right away. It will get worse. See *the article on hinging at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com)*.

**A bit about glass**

Regular Single Strength Window Glass (nominally 3/32-inch thick) is the glass most framers use. It is also available from hardware stores like Home Depot, Lowes, as well as your corner glass shop. Tru-View makes several "speciality" glasses that have UV filtration, reflection control, and other features.

If you buy glass from a frame shop, they will mark it up (as they have to) but it's the same glass from the same factories that is available to you elsewhere without the markup.

Don't get sucked in by UV filtering marketing. Read it carefully! Regular glass filters out about 45% of UV. The "museum" type glasses filter out over 97% of UV. However, the visible part of the light spectrum (red, blue, green) will still fade artwork. I have tested UV filtering glass and acrylic against regular window glass and the fading was just about the same. If you can afford it, sure, the UV protection is better but still don't hang ANY art in bright lighting. It will still fade! (That's why museums are kept so dark).

"Non glare" glass is the type with an etched (frosty) surface on one or both sides, spaced away from your pastel with either mats or spacers will result in a fuzzy look. Some pastel artists like this look.

"Anti-Reflection" or "reflection control" glass. (There are several tradenames referring to this coated glass.)

This stuff is amazing. You just can't see the glass and reflections seem to go away. The down side: It's really expensive and hard to clean. Especially fingerprints. And everyone will touch it because they can't believe that there's glass on it. If you can't handle the reflection that comes with regular glass, move a little to one side or the other.

There is a new anti-reflection glass made by Gro-Glass called "ArtGlass" that is "water white" (no green tint) and is much easier to clean and doesn't show fingerprints. They also offer UV blocking versions.

**Framing pastels with acrylic**

Some shows require that your pastels be framed with acrylic for entry. There are some tricks you can use to make this work.

First, I recommend cleaning the acrylic with a very soft cloth (no paper towels as they are too abrasive) and a cleaning/polishing/anti-static product available wherever you bought your acrylic. A couple of the brand names I've used are "Brilliance®" and "Novus®" but there are several others.



When cleaning the acrylic, try not to rub briskly as you will create static. The fluid needs to be applied to get the anti-static effect, so take your time and rub slowly. Treat both sides of the acrylic sheet.

When framing either with mats or mattless, you'll want to insure that the acrylic is held as far away from the surface of your art as far as possible in the frame you've chosen. This will decrease the affect the static will have on attracting loose pastel dust.

There is a free article on framing with acrylic at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com)

Be cautious when buying acrylic glazing from some internet frame suppliers as they usually sell rather thin sheets that will bow if your frames are large. Stick with the 1/8-inch thick stuff (3mm). Make sure that you are getting acrylic and not styrene as styrene scratches very easily.

### Tape sealing

Tape sealing your glass-art-backing package is very important.

By tape sealing I mean applying tape to stop the flow of air (dust and critters) in or out of the frame. The tape should cover about 1/16-inch of the front of the glass and reach round to the back of the backing. The tape should go all around all four sides of the frame and seal it completely. This will prevent any rapid changes in humidity inside the frame cavity. See Figure 9 for a typical tape sealing method.

The tape will also capture any fresh glass chips as well as dust coming from the edge of mat boards or foam boards. Once the package is sealed, you'll probably never have to open the frame to chase dust. Most framers use 3M's #810 "Magic Tape®" as it is available in 3/4 or 1 inch wide by 36 or 72 yard rolls from office supply stores. This tape is "Acid Free" if you like that term.

You'll find a great article on tape sealing titled "Stop The Dust Pump" at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com).

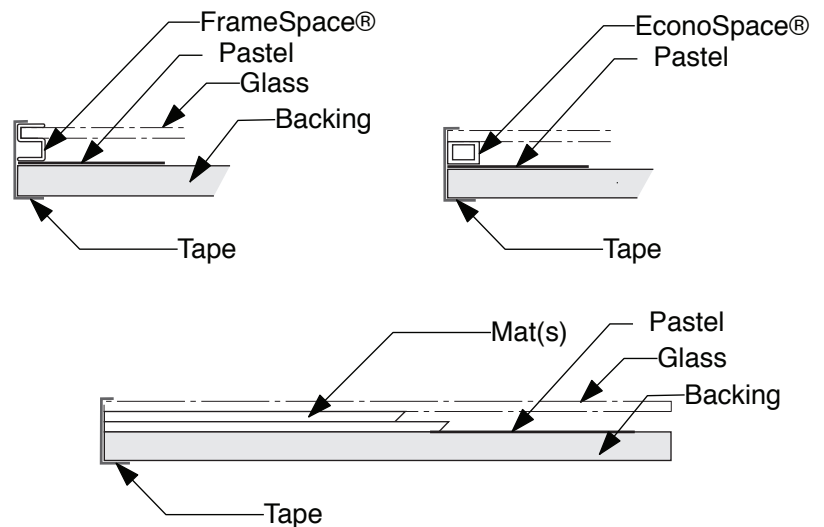


Figure 9. Tape Sealing

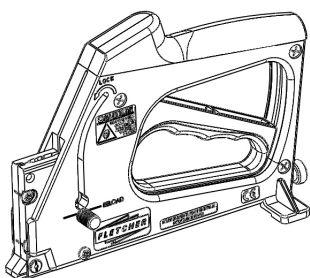


Figure 10. Point Driver

### Fitting the art in the frame

Fitting is the term framers use to describe securing the glass-art-backing package into the frame.

There are several tools used for this: point drivers, brad pushers, framers pliers and even a screwdriver.

Point drivers can impact the frame so much that they shake pastel dust onto the glass if used as shown in the instructions. The better way to use point drivers is to stand the frame up on edge on a table and shoot the points down towards the table. The mass of the table will absorb the impact. See Figures 10 and 10A.



Figure 10A. Shoot the points down towards the table to avoid shaking pastel dust off the painting.

Brad pushers push brads (a slightly headed nail) into the inside of the frame rabbet. These are several available on the internet for under \$10. They work well if you have the strength. Put the frame up against the backsplash of your kitchen counter or wall baseboard so that you don't have to hold the frame so tight when you push the brads in. See Figure 11.

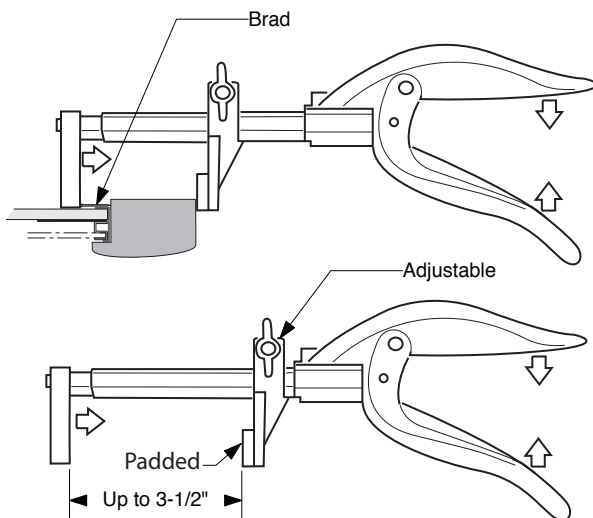


Figure 12. Framing Pliers

Some readymade frames come with "bendy points" already installed into the frame rabbet. The theory is that you bend the points back out of the way so you can remove the glass and backing out of the frame. Then, when you install your glass-art-backing package you "merely" bend the points back down over your art. But wait! Your glass-art-backing package is thicker than what you took out of the frame. You can carefully make this happen but try not to put ANY pressure on the backing. Caution – these points are very sharp. Try not to bleed on your pastel.

It is VERY IMPORTANT that whatever means you use to secure the art in the frame that you don't put ANY pressure on the backing while fitting.

Your art WILL expand and contract with changes in humidity. If you apply ANY pressure on the backing, you will pinch the art all around the edges. Now, when it expands and contracts, it has no place to go so it will buckle.

When you have finished fitting your frame you should be able to slide a business card between the lip of the frame and the glass. This will insure the free expansion/contraction of all the materials in the frame.

### Turn buttons

Turn buttons come on some readymade frames. These are small metal or plastic tabs that are fastened to the back of the frame and rotate over the backing to hold everything forward in the frame. These will work or not depending on the total thickness of your glass-art-backing package and the depth of the frame. If it all works out they are pretty handy for changing art out in your frame easily.

Other readymade frames come with turn buttons attached to a hardboard backing. These tabs rotate and their tips fit into a slot milled into the inside of the frame rabbet. This will work only if your glass-art-backing package is the same thickness the slot is designed to accept.

Framers pliers squeeze brads into the frame rabbet with zero impact. They have a good mechanical advantage so even weaklings can use them. See Figure 12. You can also see a pair at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com).

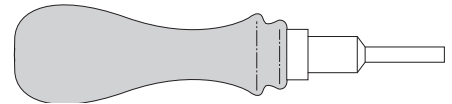


Figure 11. Brad Pusher

"Glaziers points", Figure 13 below, are clever little metal pointed bits that are pushed into the inside of the frame rabbet with a screwdriver. They are most commonly used by folks who replace windows. They also take a bit of strength. Once again, push against the sink board backsplash or wall baseboard.

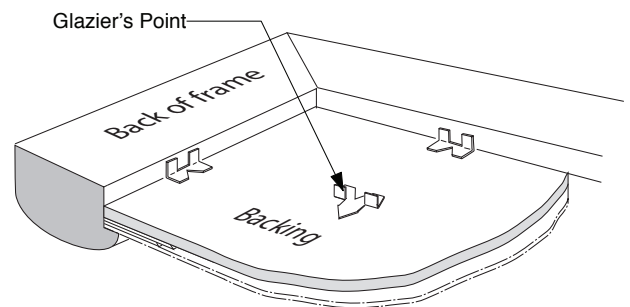


Figure 13. Glazier Points

If your glass-art-backing package protrudes out past the back of the frame you have several options. There are offset clips that you screw to the back of the frame. These hold everything forward in the frame. Doing a paper dust cover over these comes out looking way less than professional. Leaving them uncovered even looks worse. You can screw/bond narrow wood strips to the back of the frame to extend the depth of the rabbet. Your points or brads will then be pushed into these strips. Put a paper dust cover over the back as if it were just a regular frame back.

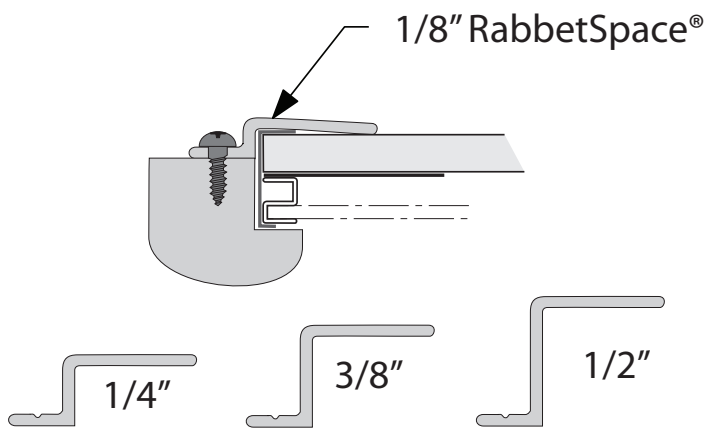


Figure 14. RabbetSpace® cross-sections.

### Then there is RabbetSpace®

RabbetSpace® is an extruded black plastic strip that you screw to the back of the frame. (See Figure 14). It comes in four sizes from 1/8-inch offset up to 1/2-inch offset. This looks the most professional if it is mitered at the corners. You can see more at [FrameTek.com](http://FrameTek.com).

If you frame with metal frames do not use the spring clips that come with the frames. Yes, they're easy and fast, but they apply way too much pressure to allow for the free expansion/contraction of the art.

Better is to glue 3/8-inch wide strips of mat board, foam board, etc. to the back of your backing to ALMOST fill the space in the frame.

### Dust covers

Dust covers generally apply to the paper backing that custom frame shops attach to the back of the frame. As the name implies, it's to keep dust (and critters) from getting into the frame cavity. Since you are now a "tape sealer", a dust cover is only needed to hide your fitting points and make the back of the frame professional looking. Taping across the gap between the frame and the backing is a terrible idea. Any pressure sensitive tape you would think about using will not last long and as the tape either dries out or gets gooey it will probably leave marks on your wall. Acids migrating out of the wood adversely affect pressure sensitive adhesives. Although most framers use ATG tape to apply dust covers they often come loose because of this. White glue is better for this.

Apply a small bead of glue, smoosh it smooth with your finger tip and wait until it tacks up a bit before you apply the paper as it will pucker if the glue is too wet.

### "Bumpons®" and felt pads

It's always a good idea to place a couple of 3M's "Bumpons®" or felt pads at the bottom corners of the frame. These provide additional air circulation to the back of the frame and prevent dust from settling on the juncture between the frame back and the wall. They also help keep the frame from swinging out of level.

### Hangers

You're on your own here. There are hundreds of different hangers available. Shy away from single "Saw Tooth" hangers on narrow frames as gravity will bow the top frame rail in time. They never stay level either. Two saw tooth hangers near the corners would be much better.

If your hanging system includes wire, rather than using screw eyes, go for the D-Ring style wire anchors as they won't tend to pull out as easily and will stay closer to the wall. If possible, rig the wire for 2 wall hooks with the wire rigged to go almost straight up from the D-rings.

This puts the least amount of strain on both the wire and the frame. It will always stay level too.

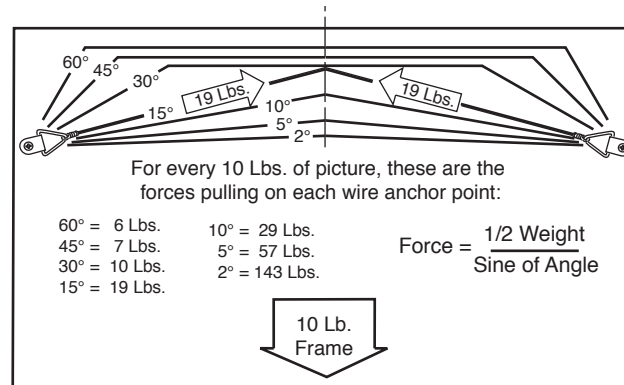


Figure 15. Picture hanging wire/weight placement

### So now a little re-cap

- Always provide airspace between the glass and the art with either mats or spacers.
- Use “reverse bevel mats when possible.
- When “mattless” framing with smaller pastels done on paper do not attach them to the backing.
- On larger pastels done on paper, it is best to use wet-torn Japanese hinging papers and cooked wheat starch paste.
- Don’t bond your pastel to any backing. It is not archival as it is not removable.
- Don’t use ANY pressure sensitive tapes to attach your pastels. They are temporary and not considered archival.
- Tape-Seal your glass-art-backing package before it goes in the frame.
- Don’t put ANY pressure on the back of your backing when fitting your frames.
- Use “Bumpons®” or felt pads on the bottom corners of your frames.
- Hang your frames on two hooks whenever possible.