

Vince Pitelka, 2016

Making Paper Clay

The recommended proportions of pulp to dry materials were generously provided by Marcia Selsor.

Purchase a supply of TP. Make your pulp in the big Vita Mix blender that I keep in my studio.

Fill the Vita Mix reservoir about 2/3 with water, start the motor, and feed TP in through the tapered feed tube in the top. If you hold the roll on your fingers or on a rod or dowel directly above the Vita Mix, it will self-feed.

Keep feeding until you sense the motor starting to slow slightly. Let it blend for another thirty seconds and turn off the machine.

Pour the contents of the reservoir into the large kitchen strainer and press down on it with your hand to remove most of the water.

Dump the pulp onto a piece of cloth, fold the cloth around the pulp, and gently squeeze it out.

Combine as much pulp as needed to make grapefruit-size lumps.

Repeat this as many times as necessary to get the amount of pulp you need. You will need six grapefruit-size lumps of pulp per 100 pounds of dry materials in the clay to make the best paperclay. For a full load in the Soldner mixer you will need sixteen lumps, and that is a lot of pulp.

You can make the pulp a day or two before you mix clay, but no longer. Keep the lumps of pulp damp until you mix your clay.

Mixing Paper Clay with the Soldner Mixer

When you are ready to mix the clay, add the specified amount of water (from the Mixer Load Amounts handout) to the Soldner mixer. Disperse the lumps of pulp in the water, agitating them well. For best results, use a drill impeller mixer to get the pulp thoroughly dispersed in the water.

Add your dry materials as you would for any other claybody, and mix the clay to a consistency slightly softer than whatever is appropriate for your work. Remember that the clay particles continue to absorb water for several days after mixing, and thus you must mix slightly softer than what you really want.

The cellulose pulp will eventually start to decompose, so it is best to mix quantities of paper clay that you expect to use within a month or so.

Mixing Paper Clay without a Soldner Mixer

For whatever weight of dry clay materials you are planning to use, add 70% of that weight in water to an appropriate-size plastic bucket or barrel.

Disperse the appropriate amount of paper pulp (as per the proportions given above) in the water using a drill impeller mixer.

Add the dry materials, clays first, dispersing and mixing constantly with a drill impeller mixer. If you are mixing a large quantity of paper clay slurry, this will likely require a ½”-drill and a large ½”-shaft impeller mixer.

As you are adding and mixing the dry materials, add more water if necessary to end up with very thick slurry.

Once all the materials are added, mound up the slurry in rows on a plastic sheet on a table or the floor and allow the clay to stiffen to workable plastic consistency.

As mentioned above, the cellulose pulp will eventually start to decompose, so it is best to mix quantities of paper clay that you expect to use within a month or so.

NOTE: When working with paper clay, always use paper clay slurry for joining pieces. If you are preparing your paper clay by the slurry method, keep some of the mixed paper clay slurry in reserve and thin slightly to use as a joining medium. If you mix in the Soldner mixer, allow some of the finished paper clay to dry, slake it down in water, and then blend smooth to get your joining slurry.