Types of Acrylic Mediums

Acrylic mediums come in 3 main types:

- Priming Mediums
- Finishing Mediums
- and Working Mediums, which are further divided into 4 types:
  - Fluid Mediums
  - Gel Mediums
  - Effect Mediums
  - Additives
**Priming Medium – Acrylic Gesso**

What is acrylic gesso? Acrylic gesso traditionally comes as a white, opaque, grainy-feeling product with the consistency of a soft body (or fluid) paint. It’s used to create a textured surface, or tooth, that acrylic paint can grip and stick to. The whiteness is from its inclusion of Titanium White into the mixture, but you can also buy it in clear or black versions.

One coat is usually enough if your goal is to simply prime a surface, or to cover up an old painting for re-painting purposes. If you want a really smooth surface to paint on, (for a portrait or any other painting you don’t want the canvas texture to show through) you may want to use a few coats of gesso, sanding between each cured layer with sanding paper or a sanding block.

**Finishing Medium – Acrylic Varnish**

Varnish is for the last stage of painting, when you want to seal your work to permanently protect it. Varnish protects the paint colors from UV light (preventing fading) and protects the paint surface from the elements like dirt and dust.

3 Reasons to Varnish Your Acrylic Painting:

1. **Easy Cleaning** – If a painting that is varnished starts to collect dust or dirt on its surface, a clean damp cloth can be gently wiped over the painting without fear of damaging the paint film.
2. **Increased Contrast** – Varnishes give an added bonus of increasing the depth and colour saturation of your painting! It makes darks look darker, which increases the contrast and vibrancy of your paint (Gloss varnish does this best, but all varnish will do it to an extent).
3. **A Unified Finish** – If you’ve used other acrylic mediums like blending medium, gel medium, etc. in your painting, you’ll probably notice that the areas you’ve used more of these mediums look shinier than the areas where you haven’t. This creates a “patchy” look to your painting. Varnish eliminates this by giving the entire painting a final finish (either gloss, satin or matte), and really gives your painting that professional look.
Varnishes come in two kinds: **removable** and **permanent**. **Removable varnishes** can be dissolved with mineral spirits or turpentine, taking all the collected dirt and dust with it, then a fresh layer can be applied to replace it *(*we’re talking after many many years here!*)*.

A good idea with removable varnish is to coat your painting with an **isolation layer**—a thin layer of **gel medium**—to separate the paint from the varnish. This way many many years into the future if the painting needs to be cleaned, the varnish can be removed without fear of damaging the paint layer.

**The two most popular choices for isolation coats are** self-leveling clear gel and soft gel because they do not hold brush marks, and will cure to a crystal clear finish.

*Always use gloss finish when applying an isolation coat because they dry the most transparent.* I personally use self-leveling clear gel, and thin it slightly with water before applying to my painting.

Varnishes, like mediums, come in different finishes. If you don’t want any shine to your painting you can choose a matte varnish, or you can use gloss for added depth to your painting, or a satin for something in between—it’s totally up to you and your personal preferences. I like to use either a gloss or matte finish, depending on the painting.

**Applying Varnish to your Painting**

You can use a liquid varnish or an **aerosol sprayable varnish**. Remember to apply the varnish in thin, even applications. It’s better to apply 3 coats of thinly applied varnish than one layer of thickly applied varnish.

Follow the instructions on your bottle, especially if the varnish needs to be thinned with water prior to applying it to your art.

*If you notice you’ve missed a spot while your varnish is drying, do not try to fix it!* Let it fully cure, then apply another coat, making sure you get the spot you missed but without giving it any extra attention. It will even out on its own.

Ashley Picanco Art  
[http://ashleypicano.com](http://ashleypicano.com)
Working Mediums – The Juicy Middle

Now that priming and finishing mediums are out of the way, let’s get into the wide variety of working mediums.

This is where using acrylic paint mediums becomes a world full of options. If there’s a certain texture or way you’d like to use your acrylic paints, there’s a medium for that.

This list of painting mediums is not exhaustive; There are many more mediums available than what I’ll cover in this post, but the following are the most common types of working mediums:

Fluid Mediums

Fluid acrylic mediums thin your paint and make them more easily dripped, spread, blended, and glazed over your painting. The two I use the most are:

**Acrylic Glazing Liquid**

Acrylic glazing liquid is one of my most-used acrylic mediums. It’s perfect for blending colors together, whether they’re both still wet or for blending a fresh layer of paint over top of an already dried layer.

Acrylic glazing with water is possible, but this glazing liquid keeps the vibrancy of the paint intact, creating a bright but transparent layer.

It also extends the working time of your paint on the canvas (you can apply some to the canvas with a mist of water before the paint, or mix it into the paint on the canvas or on your palette).

I use it in every acrylic painting.

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http://ashleypicanco.com
Golden OPEN Acrylic Medium

OPEN acrylic medium by Golden was introduced with their OPEN Acrylics line, which stays workable longer than standard acrylic paint. This is an acrylic slow drying medium, and it’s quite similar to retarder, except it’s a medium and not an additive (more on additives below).

I love this medium and use it in my misting bottle along with some flow release. This way whenever I spray my palette or my canvas, I’m getting more than just water on my paint, and I find it’s much easier to keep my paints wet and blendable while I’m painting.

Gel Mediums

Gel mediums are used to either extend your acrylic paint by mixing some with your paint before applying it to your canvas, or by thickening your paint to the texture you’re looking for.

Golden gel mediums are my usual pick, but these types of acrylic mediums are available from other brands as well.

Self-Leveling Clear Gel

Self-leveling clear gel, now called Clear Leveling Gel by Golden, is used to extend your acrylic paint without holding brush marks. This is perfect for using soft body acrylic paint, where holding brush marks may not be something you’re looking for, especially if you’re painting a portrait where you want a smooth finish.

As previously mentioned, self-leveling clear gel is also my personal choice for an isolation coat before varnishing.

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Heavy Gel

Heavy Gel is one of many gel mediums available on the market. It’s thicker than standard heavy body paint, so it can be used to make your paint thicker to hold peaks and brush marks.

If you want something the same thickness as heavy body paint, go for Regular gel, and if you want to make your paint even thicker (for textured palette knife applications), you can choose Extra Heavy Body Gel or even Molding Paste.

Heavy Gel comes in both a gloss or a matte version, with the gloss being the most transparent.

Tip: If the lids on your jars of acrylic medium are getting too hard to twist open, run a bit of petroleum jelly around the threads before twisting the cap closed to make it easier to open next time!

Effect Mediums

Effect mediums are acrylic mediums that give a painting special texture effects. They can be fun to play with, but are by no means essential to painting with acrylics.

If textured acrylic painting techniques are your goal, these are the mediums for you.

I don’t use effect mediums as much as I used to in my paintings, but here are a couple I still play with every now and then:
**Pumice Gel**

*Pumice Gel* creates a sandy, grainy texture to a painting (example provided in the above video). It ranges in texture from fine to extra coarse (the one I have is the middle option, coarse pumice gel).

**Tip:** If you find your pumice gel is too dry and not sticking to the canvas, you can mix a bit of heavy body clear gel into it to give it more “glue.”

**Glass Bead Gel**

Another grainy textured medium, *glass bead gel* creates a similar effect to pumice gel, but it contains small glass beads that catch the light and create a pretty sparkle effect (example shown in the video above).

It’s a unique medium that can add a bit of fun to your painting.

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Acrylic Additives

Our final category of acrylic mediums are additives – which are not really mediums at all, but they’re commonly grouped together with them. Follow the directions on the bottle and be sure not to use too much.

**Acrylic Flow Release or Wetting Agent**

Acrylic flow release, now called Wetting Agent by Golden, is an acrylic additive that reduces the surface tension of the water in acrylic paint, letting it flow faster than it would simply by adding water alone. It makes the paint swish and flow smoothly for creating drip effects or mixing colors together on the canvas.

I like to use my flow release along with glazing liquid in my misting bottle to enhance the runniness of my paint when I spray it.
Retarder

Acrylic Retarder is an additive that slows the drying time of the paint. It's useful to mix into your palette to keep your paints wet while you're painting. It's also helpful when using wet-into-wet acrylic painting techniques.

I would argue that if you already have the **OPEN acrylic medium**, you probably don't need retarder. It's a good idea to have at least one of them on hand, though.

How to Use Acrylic Paint Mediums Recap

So to summarize what we learned in this guide, acrylic paint mediums come in 3 main types:

- Priming Mediums
- Finishing Mediums
- and Working Mediums, which are further divided into 4 types:
  - Fluid Mediums
  - Gel Mediums
  - Effect Mediums
  - Additives

Each type of medium has a specific purpose, and when it comes to acrylic additives, care must be taken to make sure proper ratios between additive:paint are followed. Working mediums

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other than additives can be used in unlimited amounts, and can be mixed with each other as well.

So that's it for this guide! You can read the full post (including a video!) at this link:
http://ashleypicanco.com/guide-to-using-acrylic-paint mediums

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Happy Painting!