

## Making a Papier-Mâché Mask



This project is reasonably simple and the only practical difficulty is the drying time between stages. Given the nature of primary school timetables it is envisaged that from start to finish this could be done in three 1 ½ hour lessons, (although four would allow more time for painting) ideally with a week between each lesson. The end result is a strong, durable mask that can be worn or hung up for decoration.

## Materials needed.

Blank plastic masks – 1 per child. (These cost about £20 for a set of 30)

Newspaper (lots of it)

PVA glue (non-toxic school variety)

Petroleum Jelly / Vaseline

(Optional – Tin foil)

## Method.

Week 1.

Take a white plastic mask, remove the elastic strings and cover the front with Petroleum Jelly or Vaseline – this will stop the papier-mâché sticking to the masks. (You can create a tin foil support for the inside of the mask if you like. This makes the mask a bit less wobbly while you add the papier-mâché. To do this tear a large sheet of tin foil – 50-100cm and fold it in half and half again until it is slightly bigger than the mask. Then press it into the inside of the mask.



Mix up warm water and PVA. The exact ratio is up to you. You would need a mixture of 10:1 water:PVA as a minimum, but obviously the more glue you use the stringer the mask will be. (I would use about 8:1)



Tear Strips of newspaper in advance, so that each table has a large pile. Tearing is better than cutting since you get better adhesion with torn strips. Tear along the “grain” of the newspaper for ease.



Dip strips into the water:PVA mixture and lay onto the mask, covering the eye holes and mouth parts. You can choose to cover the whole mask if you want, or choose to leave the mouth free (as in the photo) so that the children can speak (and be heard) when wearing them.

The more strips, the better. The masks will get their main strength from this part of the process. Make sure every strip is wet and sticks to the one above / below.

Make sure that the layers are torn off (when they have been stuck on) at the edge of the mask, not tucked into the back of it – otherwise you’ll never get the mask out when it has dried.



When enough layers have been applied encourage the children to use their fingers to smooth out the edges and make sure it is all sticking together. They can also quickly assess whether the thickness of the paper is reasonably even and add more layers if needed.



Leave the wet mask to dry (in a place where it won’t be moved if possible).

Week 2.

Three or four days in advance you need to prepare a different type of newspaper mix. You need to make lots of very small bits of newspaper. Ideally you use the school shredder (but remember to remove the staples first and get in early one morning before the office staff so they don't get cross!) When you have at least 15 newspapers worth of tiny bits of paper put them in a clean bin and pour boiling water over them. Just cover them with water and give them a good stir. If you can, give them a good stir everyday. On the day you plan to do the second weeks activity drain the mixture as best you can. Ideally pour the mixture onto an old tea cloth, then wrap up and squeeze. When most of the water is out, put the paper back into the bin and add at least one bottle of PVA. At this point roll your sleeves up and mix it up as thoroughly as possible. You should end up with a cold, grey porridge-like mixture. It may seem horrible, but it is easy to mould and sets like concrete!



When the papier-mâché is dry you need to separate it from the plastic mask. Before you do this use a marker pen to colour in the eye-holes from the inside. This will make it easier to keep the eyes in the right place when you cut them out.





Once the papier-mâché mask is separated from the plastic mask, clean the plastic masks and store them for re-use.



Now the eye-holes need to be cut out. Depending on the age of the children and the thickness of the masks that they have made you might want to ask them to do it or do it yourself. This is really the only tricky part of the process. I usually do it for the children using a sharp Stanley knife. Cut from the inside.



Once the eyes-holes are cut take small strips of newspaper (or tissue paper) and dip them in a strong water:PVA mixture (3:1). Try to poke them through the-eye holes, so that one end of the paper is glued on the inside of the mask and one end on the outside. You only need a couple of layers, but this will cover the rough edges round the eyes and strengthen the eye-holes at the same time.



Now for the fun bit!

This is where the children will use the porridge-like mixture to mould noses, eyebrows, cheekbones and anything else that they want.

Encourage the children to use their fingers to smooth edges where appropriate (noses) but leave things rough for eyebrows, beards, moustaches etc.

Leave the wet mask to dry (in a place where it won't be moved if possible).

### Week 3.

Now the mask should be dry and ready to paint.

I would suggest undercoating first with white, and possibly lining the inside of the mask with black tissue paper (or painting black).

When dry paint on the skin tones, hair, make up, and let the children enjoy creating a character as they see it.

You might want to create a few extra masks that have no eye-holes and are full-faced so that you can use them in displays and as examples of the work the children are doing.

