

Soaking

Often the stamps you buy will be already soaked off the envelope paper. You also can buy "on paper" stamps, and of course the envelopes you save from your own mail or that of a friend have stamps that are firmly attached to the envelope. To make these stamps easier to mount in an album or some other sort of storage container, like a stockbook, they will need to be soaked off the backing paper.



Before picking up your scissors, consider some "Don'ts."

* Do not cut the stamps off any envelopes that appear to be old. They may be worth more left on the envelopes. If you come across envelopes on which the stamp is printed, save the entire envelope. Such stamps obviously will not soak off. Generally they are collected as "entires," meaning the whole envelope is saved.

*You will also want to save the entire envelope when you want to preserve the cancellations or other markings. Various types of "slogan cancellations" are used throughout the year and there are many collectors who save them as well as the stamps. Save any envelopes that have special markings such as the ones that show that they were forwarded or returned to the sender or that have unusual markings of any kind.

Now you are ready to prepare the rest for soaking.



Step One: Cut stamps from envelopes.

Cut the stamps from the envelopes, leaving a margin of about one-half inch on each side of the stamp. Be careful not to cut close enough to the stamps to damage the edges -- the perforations -- as this makes the stamps worthless for collecting. If you come across any stamps that are obviously damaged, discard them or, better yet, set them aside to use for experimentation. Also separate out any stamps that are on colored envelopes.

Step Two: Before soaking, anticipate potential problems.

Soaking stamps is very simple in theory but can present numerous difficulties in practice. The theory is that soaking the stamp in lukewarm tap water dissolves the gum holding the stamp to the paper, allowing the stamp to float free. After drying, the stamp can be placed in an album without paper adhering to it. The problems come from all parts of the stamp-

paper combination: the envelope paper, the gum, the paper and ink of the stamp itself, and the cancellation.

Envelope paper: Most of these problems come from the ink in colored envelope paper staining stamps. Red envelopes from greeting cards are especially notorious, but even the yellow-brown of manila envelopes can "bleed." Since high value stamps are often on such envelopes, you may want to take the chance of soaking them. A good test is to place a piece of paper from the envelope -- not the part the stamp is on -- in warm water in a small transparent container. (A glass custard cup works well.) Place the container on a white sheet of paper. After a few minutes, look at the white paper through the water. You will be able to see if the dyes from the paper have colored the water. If not, you can soak the stamp safely. If the water shows much staining, set aside the stamp for later when you are more experienced or discard it. Sometimes you want to remove stamps from a box or other surface without cutting. There is no foolproof way to do so, but you can sometimes soak the stamps off by covering them with a very wet paper towel. Some stamps will be damaged by this process, so use it only when there is no other way to remove the stamps.



Gum: Except for a few foreign stamps, most stamps with water-activated gum -- the old fashioned lick-and-stick variety -- soak off easily. Many newer stamps, however, are self-stick, and this gum is more tenacious.

Some self-stick stamps will need to be soaked much longer than stamps with water-activated gum, and even after long soaking (a half hour or more), some may not float free.

Patience is necessary. When the paper finally soaks off, reach into the water and rub the back of the stamp with your fingers to remove any gum that remains. Sometimes the gum will form a firm ball that can be rolled off the paper. A few stamps may still be on the paper when your patience runs out. I recommend that you can gently peel the paper from the stamp, rather than peel the stamp from the paper. Trying unusual techniques for removal is best done first on a damaged copy of the stamp, should you have one. (That's why you didn't throw away all your damaged stamps in the beginning.)

Stamp paper and ink: A few stamps -- the first U.S. self-stick, a 1974 10-cent



Christmas stamp showing a weather vane, is one well-known example -- are printed on paper that will separate into layers if dipped in water. The space hologram stamps issued in 2000 are designed so the hologram will float free of the stamp if it is soaked. This design makes the stamp easier to recycle, but it makes problems for collectors of used stamps. Such stamps cannot be soaked. Save them on paper. If you happen to get some old foreign stamps, extra care may be needed in the soaking process. Some foreign stamps

were printed in water-soluble inks, and the colors may run if you put them in water. Others may be on chalky paper, which has a very delicate surface and could disintegrate in water. If you were to wet the stamps that are printed in soluble inks, you could end up with blank pieces of paper, since the designs would wash off. Some stamps of the Dutch Indies have this type of ink.

Cancellations: It is best not to soak stamps while their cancellations are fresh, as the ink may partially dissolve, leaving a messy, fuzzy cancellation instead of a crisp, clean one. Red inks are particularly bad in this regard.

Step Three: Soak only a few stamps at a time.

Limit the number of stamps that you're soaking. If possible, soak stamps with water-activated gum separately from self-sticks. Put the stamps in a shallow pan of lukewarm water. Avoid the temptation to put hundreds of stamps in a bucket of water. This makes them difficult to handle and it also makes it hard to stop the process if you get tired and want to quit for a while. Some "experts" will tell you to soak stamps face up; others insist they should be soaked face down. I prefer face up so I can see what is happening more easily, but it's really a matter of individual preference



Step Four: Change discolored water.

After many stamps have been soaked, the water will become discolored. This is a signal to change the water before adding more stamps. With a little experience you will learn to change the water before it starts looking really disgusting.

Step Five: Remove the stamps from the water.



Removing the stamps from the water is another area where experts can't agree. A wet stamp is fragile, and using your tongs, especially if they are fine-tipped, may tear small holes in the stamp or otherwise damage it. Since oil and water do not mix, the water in the stamp acts as a barrier against fingerprints. I prefer to handle wet stamps with my hands. Many other people feel strongly that tongs should be used. Try both techniques and then do whichever seems most comfortable.

Step Six: Prepare an area and stamps to dry.

Next, lay out some sheets of newspaper on a table or the floor. Use at least a double thickness, and avoid the comic pages or pages with colored advertisements, since those colors also tend to run when wet. Newspaper should not be used until it is at least two

weeks old, as the inks are likely to stain the stamps if freshly printed papers are used. When in doubt, put a clean white paper towel over the newsprint.

Before removing the stamps from the water, swirl them around so that all adhesive will be removed. This keeps the stamps from curling as they dry or from sticking to the newspapers if they happen to land face side up after being removed from the water. Remove the stamps and place them face down to dry. The papers serve as a blotter to remove excess water and speed the drying. Do not let the stamps overlap. However, if one should accidentally fall on top of another, do not attempt to move it while the stamps are still wet. Resoak if necessary. If you let the stamps air dry, they will look a little curled and uneven, but they can be pressed flat easily by putting them in an old telephone book. If they are not badly curled, they can be mounted as is, and the stamp album will do the flattening for you.

Other Drying Techniques

There are many other techniques for drying stamps. My favorite is to use a LOT of newspaper and some paper towels. Put a whole folded section from your newspaper on the table first, then a paper towel, then the stamps, then another paper towel. Put another newspaper on top of the stack and start the process over again. When you have run out of stamps, end with a newspaper and put a book or some other weight on that. The stamps will dry flat, and the newspapers and paper towels can be reused the next day for the next batch of stamps. If any stamps stick to the paper towels, simply resoak them.

You can buy special drying books of blotter paper from your stamp dealer. If you use these, it is wise to be sure that you've removed every trace of gum from the stamps. You'll damage the book if a stamp sticks to it and must be resoaked.

It is a good idea to allow the stamps to dry thoroughly overnight before further processing them. In the morning they will be easy to pick up -- with the tongs, of course -
- for sorting.