Introduction

My name is Emil Sennholz. I graduated Slippery Rock University with a degree in Art in 2012. I had of course had art lessons and been interested in art long before that as well. I'm a person of many interests, and I love to learn from a variety of fields, art just happens to be one of those fields that interest me. I did some traveling to Germany and Taiwan, learning their cultures and artistic styles before returning to the United States. Since my return, I have been working hard on my artistic endeavors, building a reputation locally and globally. I have learned many things in my search for artistic enlightenment.

While I was unsure of my path, I had several artist friends encouraging me, even going as far as giving me free canvases. These canvases were large, one was six feet by four feet, and the other was five feet by four feet. I was at first hesitant to use something so large, but after giving it a try, I found that I enjoyed it. I've been using canvases for painting anywhere between two feet by three feet, and four feet by six feet.

Using such canvas sizes makes it difficult to have proper frames. So I learned how to make my own frames, stretch the canvas, gesso them, how to do everything from start to finish when it comes to making art.

In this short article, I'll be teaching you how to stretch your own canvas onto a frame, and how to gesso it as well. Techniques may vary depending on materials used, but I will also give a list of the materials I use for those who want to follow my method more closely.

Supplies needed for this step of preparing a canvas for painting.

1. Heavy duty frame
2. Canvas cloth
3. T-square and pencil
4. Utility knife
5. Staple gun/staples
6. Gesso
7. 4 inch paint brush

I generally build my own frames, but this should work with any frame. As for canvas material, I bought a 100 Yard roll of canvas material, it is little expensive, but it lasts for a long time. Using heavier canvas material isn't necessary, but I prefer it because it isn't easily torn. The canvas material I bought is 60 inches wide, unprimed, cotton, #12 weight or also called "Numbered Ducks" 100 yard roll.

     If you have a local distributor, that's great. Otherwise, I would go online. Where I get my canvas is from "allenscanvas.com" but of course then you have to pay not only for the expensive canvas, but also for shipping, which can cost upward of $100.

     Different weight and lengths will cost differently, if #12 doesn't fit your budget, a lighter material might better suit your needs. The higher the number, the lighter it is, so #12 is very thick, and #20 might be very thin.

     I wouldn't recommend getting primed canvas because the primer makes the canvas harder to stretch and more easily torn when putting on a frame. Priming your canvas after it has been stretched is perfect because the primer also tightens the canvas more.
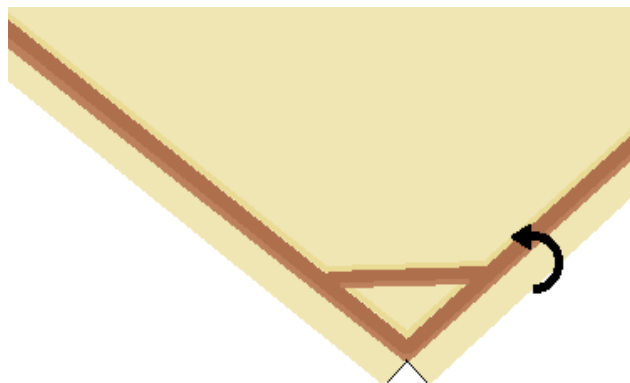
     Make sure that whatever size canvas you order, the width is larger than the shortest side of your frame. The canvas should be at least six inches wider than the frame, otherwise it will not wrap around properly.

     For this reason, I would use a 60 inch wide canvas roll with a 48 inch wide frame. If you have frames or canvas that are better matched, (60 in. canvas with 56 in. wide frame) then less material will be wasted or cut off later.

     Once you have the proper materials, the first step is fairly straight forward. I would unroll a large amount of canvas and place the frame on top to know where to cut. Use the T-square and pencil to mark a line 6 inches off the end of the frame. Or you could roll the canvas around the bottom board of your frame, then measure 3 inches off the other end.

     Either way, once the canvas is cut to the proper size, now you have to decide what kind of artwork this is going to be. I generally don't like frames on my work, so I use a simple hospital fold, but if you want your works to be framed after it is complete, a hospital fold is too bulky.

     For a framed artwork, to reduce the bulk around the canvas, I recommend cutting little wedges out of the corners of your canvas. Like shown below.
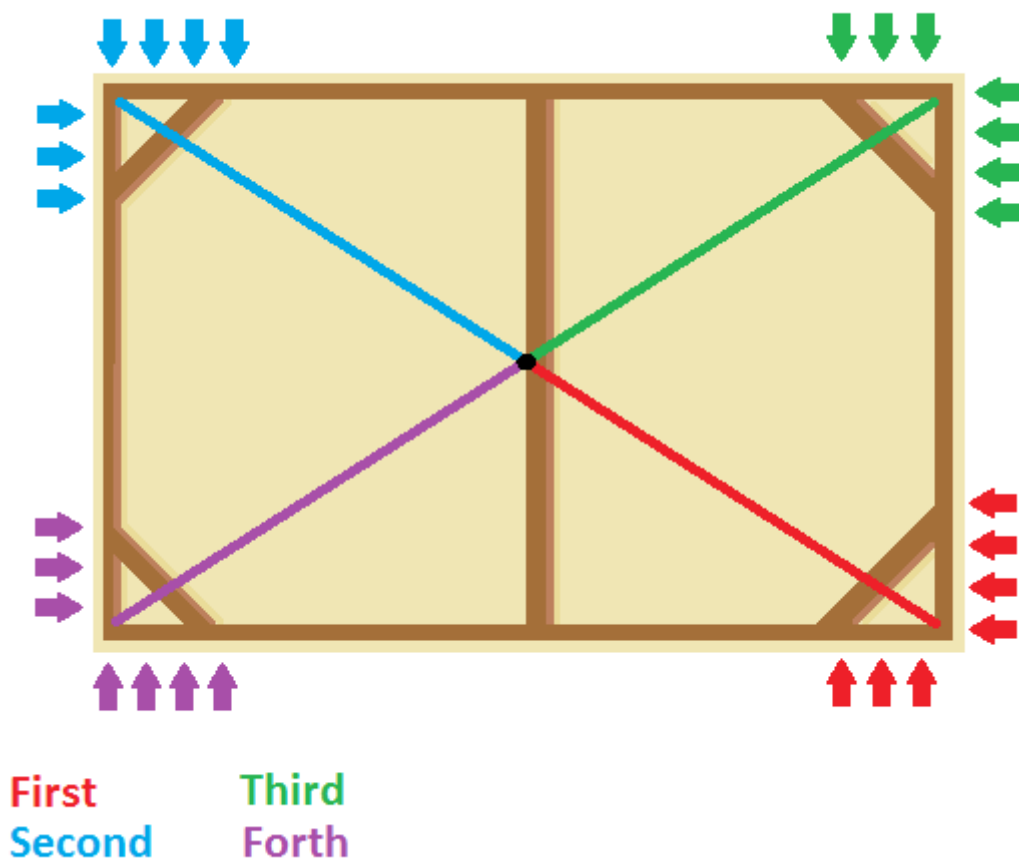
If you don't care about framing your piece, then a hospital fold should work well too. Once you have the canvas folded over the frame, staple it in place with 3 staples in each direction. Now that one corner of the canvas is attached to the frame, a common mistake is to work out from there, but then the canvas wont be tightly pulled.

Staple one fold at each other the other 3 corners. This is to ensure that the canvas stays roughly where you want it while it is being pulled. Remove the staple from the diagonally opposite corner that is securely fastened, and pull the canvas as far as possible before folding it onto the back of the frame. This may wrinkle the canvas, but don't worry, that will be fixed momentarily.

Staple the corner into place with 3 staples in each direction like the other corner. Now there are two corners that are stapled in place, with a large wrinkle in the canvas across the middle. Move to one of the corners that has only the one staple and remove said staple. Stretch the canvas diagonally from the opposite corner, fold, and staple just like the last 2 corners. Do the same to the last corner.

As you've seen, the canvas has been stretched in an X pattern, which has removed most of the wrinkle that was in the middle of the canvas.

First — Second (red, blue)
Third — Forth (green, purple)

Continue adding to the corners in the same X pattern. Go to a corner, and to one side of the 3 staples that are there, pull on the canvas and fold it over before stapling 3 more times. One arm of that corner has 3 more staples, so now go to the other arm of the same corner and do the same, then do the same to the opposite corner, and continue in the X pattern until the rest of the canvas has been stretched and stapled into place.

Now that everything is stapled in place, and stretched tightly, you should be able to lightly hit the canvas and make it play like a drum. Take a minute to play the drums on your canvas in celebration of your victory!

The back side of the canvas is still going to be unclean because of all the extra canvas

hanging over. You could leave it, but it's best if it's removed. Take any kind of utility knife to it, cutting off the excess along the inner edge of the canvas. Try not to over extend and cut the face of the canvas. Any cuts or tears in the front of your canvas will reduce the tension, not to mention leave a hole in your painting, which isn't good, unless that is what you wanted of course.

Once the back is all cleaned up, you have a big decision to make. To gesso, or not to gesso, that is the question. In order for you to know what the answer is, you need to think about your painting, and what you want to do with it, not to mention understand what gesso does to the canvas and your paint.

Painting on ungessoed canvas has several effects. The canvas absorbs more of the paint, meaning that you use more paint, but its visual affects are different than gessoed canvas. Without gesso, because canvas absorbs the paint and makes the color more dull. Colors can still be vibrant, but the paint won't be as reflective without gesso underneath to keep the canvas from absorbing the paint.

Gessoing the canvas, letting it dry, then painting is a standard method of painting, and it allows the paint to reflect slightly, making it look like new, wet paint. The glossy look brings out light colors, but doesn't detract from dark colors. It makes for creating marvelous contrasts on the canvas.

Obviously you could gesso only part of the canvas for one effect on one part, but not another. However, there is a third option, and let me explain my experience with that. You could blend paint with gesso while they are wet to have hardly noticeable grainy texture to the paint. It may also make the paint not as reflective, but like I mentioned, it is so minute, it's hardly noticeable.

If there is a way for me to make my instructions clearer, please email a comment.

Learn more about the processes of artwork! Read more of my "how to" articles, or if you want personal lessons, that is an option as well! Thank you for reading! Enjoy making art!