

F-A-Q: Wheat Paste

1. What is wheat paste?

Common wheat has been easily processed into a sticky starch with good adhesive properties for thousands of years. Ours is archival which means – no additives. Our wheat paste ships in bags with a plastic liner. Shelf life is forever, for all practical purposes - assuming there is no moisture in the storage area.

2. How is it used?

Wheat paste is stirred into water little by little, using a wire whisk (kitchen equipment). It can also be whipped up using a butterfly wheel on a drill. It should be strained before use because of lumps. The strainer can be a double-wire kitchen type, or a reusable nylon bag found in paint stores. Wheat paste is intended for simple paper products, not vinyls.

3. Why is wheat paste important?

The simplicity of it, the convenience of carrying around a dry powder instead of a 5-gallon pail, and the ease of cleaning it from wallpaper surfaces. Wheat paste works with naturally porous paper to create good slip and grab. Many liners and wallpapers are highly porous (absorbent), and nothing quenches their thirst like wheat paste.

4. How does it differ from other pastes?

Wheat is starchy and much more tacky than methyl cellulose. Both of these are high-moisture pastes, defined as consisting of over 90% water. Next in line are premixed clears, with about 60% water, and premixed clays, with about 40% water. Both clay and clear have a lot more solids than wheat. Premix solids are better at adhering flexible wallcoverings to a wall, especially if the wallcoverings are nonporous. Wheat paste works differently. It creates a mechanical bond with porous paper by holding the paper to the wall until the moisture evaporates. The starch left behind anchors the paper to the wall.

5. Why can't I use an all-purpose premix paste for paper?

You can. But, it might be more than you need. Many installation problems are caused by overkill – either too much paste, or too much of the wrong type of paste. The problems may include: messy tables; bloated seams; too much seam-rolling, resulting in shiny seams; too much clean-up, resulting in loss of color; ridges or pockets under the finished product; and occasional strike-through or staining. If any of these things happen on a regular basis, you may want to consider using more wheat and less premix. If you're in doubt about whether a product is porous or not – the front of a porous wallpaper usually changes color after pasting.

6. I mixed wheat paste once, and it clumped up. Why?

The archival wheat paste we sell has no additives for shelf life or ease of mixing. It's actually cooked and then processed back to a dry state, but without any additives. On the work site the powder in the bag is reconstituted by adding it to water, more or less like mixing up pancake batter. We think that straining is a small price to pay for the consistency, strength and purity of the product.

7. Can wheat be mixed with other pastes?

Definitely. Traditionally, wheat has been used for hanging and sizing lining papers, and also for double-pasting a pulp paper. The first coat sinks into the back of the paper, and after five minutes another coat evens out the paste. However, one of the drawbacks of wheat is that it's not going to work well in a pasting machine. Mixing wheat paste with methyl cellulose or a little clear helps it travel nicely whether you're using a brush, roller, or machine. Many paperhangers claim that a superior paste results from a few extra steps: mixing clay and wheat with high-speed drills and then straining with nylon bags.

8. Is there a premixed wheat paste?

Not to our knowledge. There used to be, on the West Coast; we believe that pre-mixed wheat was a Shur-Stik product that went away. The clear and clay premixes may sometimes use wheat as a base, but they are just as likely to use corn or a synthetic polymer, and in any case, premixed adhesives are far too heavy to qualify as "wheat paste".