

# Cyanotype as Observation and Experiment

## A High School Curriculum for Material Exploration and Everyday Nature

**Age Group:** High school students

**Recommended Group Size:** 10–30 students

**Duration:** 90–120 minutes

**Setting:** Art classroom with access to sunlight and water

**Theme:** *Rediscover ordinary materials through cyanotype*

## About This Curriculum

This workshop introduces cyanotype not only as a photographic process, but as a way to experiment with composition, transparency, shape, and everyday materials.

Students begin with familiar plants collected around campus, then gradually expand their material choices to objects found around the classroom. The goal is to move from learning a new technique toward asking a broader question: **What around us can become an art-making material?**

## Materials

### Cyanotype Materials

- pre-treated cyanotype paper
- transparent acrylic sheets or clear frames
- clips or clothespins
- trays for rinsing
- clean water
- paper towels
- gloves
- access to direct sunlight

### Natural Materials

Students may collect safe, ordinary plants from around campus, such as:

- leaves
- grasses
- small flowers
- other locally available plant materials

### Experimental Materials

Invite students to explore safe objects already available in the classroom, such as:

- paintbrushes
- plastic bags
- transparent or translucent materials
- jewelry
- classroom tools

# Lesson Plan

## Part 1 — Introduction to Cyanotype

**10–15 minutes**

Introduce the basic history and principles of cyanotype.

May Cover:

- where cyanotype comes from
- how light-sensitive paper reacts to UV light
- why rinsing reveals the final blue-and-white image
- examples of historical and contemporary cyanotype works

For detailed content, images, and diagrams, refer to the downloadable **Cyanotype History & Process Visual Presentation**.

Keep this section short. The goal is to give students enough understanding to begin experimenting rather than turning the workshop into a lecture.

## Part 2 — Campus Observation

**15–20 minutes**

Invite students to look around the campus and collect a small number of safe natural materials.

Encourage them to choose ordinary plants rather than searching only for the most visually impressive examples.

Ask students to bring several different forms back to the classroom so they can compare how each one behaves on cyanotype paper.

## Part 3 — Composition Trials

**15–20 minutes**

Before exposing the paper, allow students to test several arrangements.

Students may sketch or photograph different arrangements before choosing one.

## Part 4 — First Cyanotype: Natural Materials

**20–30 minutes**

Students create their first cyanotype using the plants they collected.

Have students:

1. arrange the materials on cyanotype paper
2. secure the composition under a clear sheet
3. expose the paper to sunlight
4. rinse the print in clean water
5. place it flat to dry

Exposure time will depend on sunlight and the specific paper used. Refer to the **Cyanotype Basics Guide** for technical instructions.

After rinsing, give students a few minutes to examine what worked differently from what they expected.

## Part 5 — Expanding the Material

**20–30 minutes**

After students understand the basic process, open the activity beyond plants.

Invite them to look around the art room and choose safe everyday objects to experiment with.

Students can create a second cyanotype using natural materials, found objects, or a combination of both.

## Part 6 — Looking and Sharing

**10–15 minutes**

Place the finished works together and invite students to walk around and observe one another's experiments.

Possible discussion prompts:

- Which material created the most unexpected result?
- What changed between your plan and the final image?
- Which ordinary object became more interesting after being printed?

Keep the discussion informal and focused on observation rather than judging which work is most successful.

## Facilitator Guidelines

**Do not over-direct composition.**

High school students usually already have experience making visual decisions. Give them space to test rather than demonstrating one “ideal” result.

### **Encourage experimentation after the first print.**

The first cyanotype can focus on understanding the process. The second should allow more risk-taking and unusual materials.

### **Treat unexpected results as part of the process.**

Overexposure, movement, transparency, and imperfect silhouettes can become useful starting points for discussion rather than simply being labeled mistakes.

### **Start with nature, but do not end there.**

Campus plants provide an accessible entry point, but the workshop becomes more interesting when students begin questioning what else around them can participate in image-making.

### **Focus on looking differently.**

The goal is not only to produce a finished cyanotype. It is to help students reconsider the visual potential of materials they already encounter every day.

## **Safety Notes**

- Use pre-treated cyanotype paper whenever possible.
- Students should not mix cyanotype chemicals unless the instructor has appropriate training and safety procedures.
- Confirm that collected plants are safe to handle.
- Wear gloves during rinsing if required by the materials being used.
- Wash hands after handling natural materials.