

Cane Theory by byrd Tetzlaff

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I often tell my students that they only need to be able to do three things with clay. They need to be able to make:

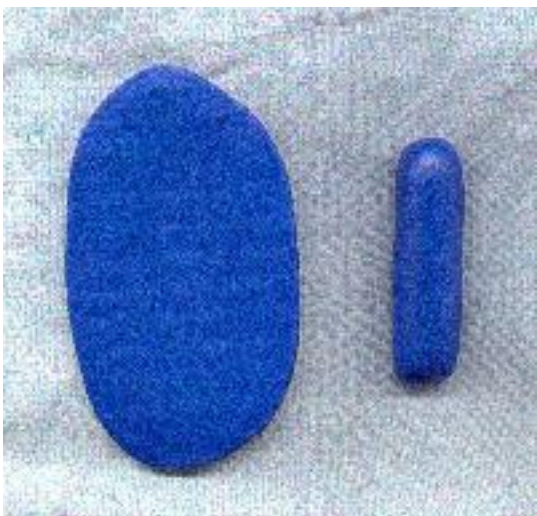
- a ball of clay
- a log of clay
- a sheet of clay

If you can do those three things, you can do anything with clay, from sculpting to caning.

So what, my students ask, is caning?

Cane: A log of clay with a pattern running all the way through it, so that if you cut off a slice of the cane, it (supposedly) will look like all the other slices.

For most newcomers to polymer clay, one of the most intimidating and at the same time intriguing techniques is making canes. It looks so complex and difficult. How do they get those designs so perfect and so tiny? (Reduction, my dear, reduction.)



Well, there is hope. Caning is not nearly as difficult as it may seem at first.

All canes are made up of only two things:

- sheets
- logs

As for cane work itself, it boils down to three type of canes:

- basic canes
- complex canes (made from the basic canes: flower canes, leaf canes)
- picture canes (face canes, landscape canes, etc.)

The good news is-- you don't have to do all three types! In fact, some of our best folks use only one or two types of canes. Donna Kato (my hero!) uses almost exclusively the basic canes with occasional forays into the complex canes. She uses simple, direct patterns; she's just very good at it!

Now, I'm not going to give you directions on actually making the canes (although I will give you links to lessons). Instead, I will just talk about the theory of caning.

Theory of Caning

The single most important secret to making good canes is **contrast**. Always make a cane of very dark and very light colors. Subtle shades get lost if you reduce a cane to any degree.

When it comes to basic canes, there are really only three:



The jelly roll or spiral cane

[Instructions](#)



The bull's-eye cane

[Instructions](#)



The striped or stacked cane

[Instructions](#)

See? I'll bet you've seen these a hundred times when you look at canes. Only three basic canes, honest.

Complex Canes

When you put these three canes together, they form complex canes. And while there are only three basic canes, there are hundreds of different types of complex canes.

To make different complex canes, you can manipulate the clay.

For instance, you can change the shape of the cane. Any basic cane can be made into a square, a diamond, a circle, or a triangle. I also often use the teardrop shape, which is merely the triangle with a round bottom.

One note of caution: it is usually rather difficult to shape a single slice into the shape you want. I always cut off part of the cane and form that segment into whatever shape I need. Then I cut off the slices to get the shape I want.

With very little practice, you can spot the basic canes inside the more complex canes.



In this cane, you can see the middle is just a simple jelly roll cane. The outside is a striped cane formed into a triangle.

I have put a single triangle of the striped cane to one side so you can see it more clearly.



Another technique often used is cutting the cane lengthwise. You can then use all or part of it in another cane.

Here the lengthwise cut on a jelly roll cane is used to decorate the outside of a bull's eye cane .



Another example of cutting the cane is the ever-popular [Chevron cane](#).

Complex canes might also include the [Skinner Blend](#). The Skinner Blend (SB) (named after Judith Skinner) comes as a sheet of clay.

In order to use it as a cane, you need to change it into one of the basic cane types.



For instance:

- jelly roll or spiral SB
- bull's eye SB
- striped or stacked SB

I personally know of well over sixty variations on the Skinner Blend Canes. I'm sure there are more out there that I haven't heard of.



Look what happens when you use the Skinner Blend to make basic and complex canes.

You need to add only two more elements to this arsenal and you can make any cane ever made.

Those two elements are:

- a log of solid colored clay (logs need not be round; they can be any shape)
- your basic sheet (or ribbon) of clay

Yes, these are the **same** two elements you used to make the canes in the first place.

Logs are often used to fill in a background or to keep other canes the correct distance from each other. The sheet or ribbon of clay is often used to outline. You can wrap anything at any point. You can also cut into a cane and add a sheet of clay any place you want to, in order to get lines or definition.

That's it. That's all there is to caning.

I suggest practicing by looking at canes and identifying different parts. Once you know what you are looking at, figuring out how to make canes becomes easier. After a while, caning won't be intimidating at all!



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