

Sailor Ink: DIY Temporary Tattoos

National Museum of the American Sailor Activity

Tattoos have been part of U.S. Navy culture since the Navy was first established in 1775. American sailors picked up the practice of tattooing from British sailors. In the early years of the Navy, sailors were often at sea for long periods of time and had few outlets for their boredom. Practicing their amateur tattoo skills on their own arms and that of their shipmates gave sailors something fun to do.

Before the electric tattoo machine was invented in 1891 by a former sailor, tattoo artists used a simple poke and stick technique. This slow and painful technique consisted of the artist dipping a bundle of needles into ink and moving their hand rhythmically up and down to puncture the skin and insert the ink. Aboard ship, sailors often used the materials they had on hand, such as large needles for sewing sails, India ink, laundry bluing, and even gunpowder!



From the Revolutionary War to today, sailors have permanently inked themselves with nautical tattoo designs. Popular designs have always included ships, anchors, American flags, and eagles. But not all popular sailor tattoos are nautical in theme. A pig and chicken on each foot is a common sailor tattoo. This unusual design is supposed to bring good luck to sailors and protect them from drowning. Before refrigeration, ships carried pigs and chickens aboard ship in wooden crates. During a shipwreck, these farm animals were sometimes the only survivors, floating to shore in their wooden crates. For this reason, sailors came to view pigs and chickens as good luck.

No matter the design, sailors choose tattoos to show their pride in being an American sailor and as a symbol of their Navy service. Are you ready to get your own temporary sailor tattoo? Read on for instructions on how to create your own tattoo at home, without the painful poke and stick technique.



Supplies

- Paper
- Pen/pencil
- Wax paper
- Permanent marker
- Scissors
- Waterproof eyeliner
- Damp washcloth
- Hairspray
- Translucent makeup powder or baby powder



Instructions

1. Pick a location for your temporary tattoo. Will you put it on your arm, leg? Sailors are not allowed to have tattoos on their face!
2. Create your tattoo design using paper and a pen or pencil.
 - a. Think about the meaning of your tattoo. Does it symbolize something like a job or hobby? Popular Navy designs include ships, flags, and anchors.
 - b. Keep the design simple. Designs with fewer lines transfer to skin better than ones with intricate details.
 - c. Check the size of your design. Will it fit in your chosen location?
3. Cover your design with wax paper. It may help to tape both your paper and wax paper to the table. Trace the design with a permanent marker.
4. Trim your wax paper design to a more manageable size. Check the size of your design one last time by holding the wax paper against your desired tattoo location. You should be able to see through the paper to get an idea of how your new tattoo will look.
 - a. Are there words in your design? Avoid adding them until step 7. Otherwise, your letters will appear backwards!
5. Apply eyeliner to the outline. If using a liquid eyeliner, do this quickly! Be sure to apply a heavy layer of eyeliner.
 - a. Liquid eyeliner gives the boldest lines and a more realistic appearance.
 - b. Eyeliner pencils also work, but look more like a crayon drawing.
 - c. A waterproof eyeliner lasts longer and results in less smudging.
6. Transfer the design to your skin. Make sure the eyeliner is still wet when you press it on your desired body part. Depending on where you place your design, you might want the help of an adult or friend.
 - a. Press the tattoo design to your skin.
 - b. Use a washcloth dampened with warm water and press it firmly against the back of the wax paper for at least 10 seconds.



- c. Remove the wax paper and allow your design to air dry.
7. Optional: To make your tattoo appear bolder, apply a second coat of eyeliner to your design. Be careful! You don't want to make a mistake.
8. Apply a translucent makeup powder or baby powder to the design. Spray with hairspray. This step ensures your design lasts longer. This DIY tattoo usually only lasts 24 hours.
9. To remove your tattoo: Use makeup remover and a cotton ball. Some eyeliner tattoos may be removable with soap and water.

