

Making Your Own Art Journal Using Coptic Stitch

by Kaaren Poole

There are several reasons to make your own art journal. First of all, it's fun, easy, and inexpensive. But beyond that, you can create a journal to your own specifications: size, type of paper, number of pages. And making your own journal makes the whole piece—the journal and the art within it—completely your own.



You will need:

Eight pieces of paper of your choice. You can use mixed media paper, watercolor paper, drawing paper, or anything else you like to work on. For most of my journals, I've used 12" x 16" Canson watercolor paper, but for my first one and for this one I'm using 9" x 12" Strathmore Mixed Media Paper.

Two pieces of heavy cardboard cut to half the size of your paper. The easiest way to get this cardboard is to use the back of the tablet your paper came in. Cut it in half crosswise with a utility knife, and you'll have your covers.

A large, curved needle, scissors, a strip of lightweight cardboard like from a cereal box, a ruler, pencil, a 1" chip brush for the glue, two pieces of waxed paper a few inches longer than the long edge of your papers.

Optional: ribbon for a bookmark, about 6" longer than the narrow edge of your page papers.

A book or something else flat and heavy that's larger than your cover pieces.

Bookbinding supplies or their alternatives: a bone folder or a spoon; an awl or a push pin for punching holes; waxed linen thread or embroidery thread strengthened with bees' wax. (Pull 4 strands of 6-strand embroidery thread over a piece of beeswax to coat the thread.)

PVA glue (the advantage of this glue is that it grabs fast and doesn't buckle the paper).

NOTE: the PVA glue, bone folder, awl, waxed linen thread, and curved needle are all available from Lineco, a manufacturer of bookbinding supplies. Their products are sold on Amazon.com as well as many other sites.

Let's Get Started

Fold each of the eight pieces of paper in half crosswise. Sharpen the fold by running your bone folder (or back of spoon) along the fold while applying pressure. These are your pages.

Make a template for placing the holes you will use to sew the pages together. Cut a strip of cardboard about 1" wide. The length should be equal to the height of your pages (or the length of the short side of your original pieces of paper). I'm using 9" x 12" paper, so my strip is 9" long. Mark the position of your holes along one long edge of your cardboard strip. My marks are at ½", 1 ½", 3", 4 ½", 6", 7 ½", 8 ½". (If your pages are a different size, make a mark at the halfway point, marks ½" from each end, then space the remaining holes as evenly as you can between the center and end marks. You can have either an odd or even number of holes.)

Mark a "T" (top) on one end of the template.

Make holes in each of your folded papers as follows. Open the paper flat and lay it on a piece of corrugated cardboard (to protect your work surface). Align the long, marked side of the template along the fold in your paper, being sure that the ends of the template are even with the edges of the paper. With your pencil, mark a "T" on your paper corresponding to the end next to the "T" on the template. Now put pencil marks along the fold in the paper next to each of the marks on your template. With either a push pin or your awl, press a hole over each of the marks on the fold of your paper.

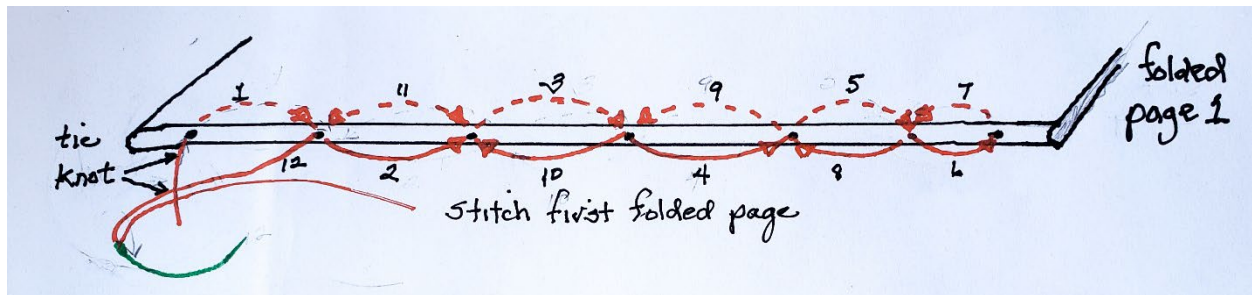
Refold your papers and stack them with all the “T” s at one end. By the way, the “T” s are insurance that your holes will match on all your pages. The marks on your template may not be perfectly placed to have one end exactly match the other. By ensuring that the same ends on all the papers are aligned the same as when you punched the holes, all the pages will have holes which are punched the same way.

Now Sew the Pages Together

Cut a piece of thread ten times the length of the folds in the pages and thread the curved needle.

I’m using Coptic stitch to make my journal. The advantage of this stitch is that the journal will open flat. With Coptic stitch, the procedures for the first and second rows are different from the rest. Here we go.

For the first row (you are working left to right):



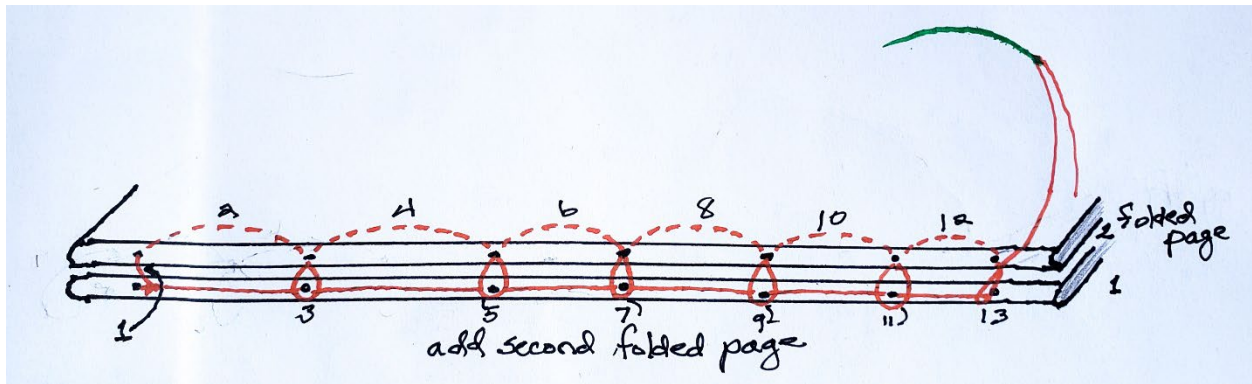
(Orange is the thread and green is the curved needle; black represents the folded page. The drawing shows the thread loose for clarity, but on your work, keep the thread taught—but not too tight. If you pull hard to tighten the thread it may cut the paper.)

Hold your page so the “T” end of the fold is to your left. Bring the thread in (from the outside of the fold) through the first hole. Pull it most of the way through but leave a 6” tail.

Push the needle out (from the inside of the fold) through the next hole, in through the next one, out through the next one, and so on until your thread is through the last hole.

Now work your way back along the fold. If you came in through the last hole, you’ll be going out through the previous hole, and vice versa. After you sew through the hole next to the hole at the “T” end, you’ll find that your thread is on the outside of the fold. Tie a knot with your thread and the tail. Position the knot as near the last hole as you can. It will be on the outside of the thread. The threaded needle should be on the outside of the fold.

For the second row (you are now working right to left):



(Orange is the thread and green is the curved needle; black represents the folded page. For clarity, the drawing shows the thread loose on the fold you're working on. But on your work, keep the thread taught—but not too tight. If you pull hard to tighten the thread it may cut the paper.)

Fold your first page. Take the second page, fold it, and lay it on top of the first folded page with the "T" s on both pages aligned.

Sew your thread in through the hole at the "T" end of the second page. Sew out through the next hole.

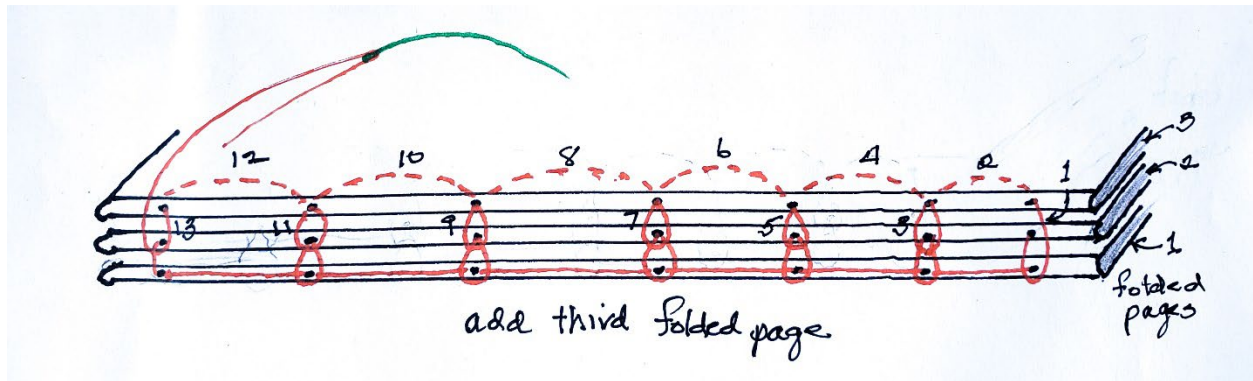
***With the two folded pages held together, there will be a hole in the first fold just below the hole you sewed out through. The hole in the first fold will have a stitch coming out to the left and another coming out to the right. Sew down through the stitch on the left of the hole and back up through the stitch to the right of the hole, effectively hooking your thread through the two stitches on each side of the hole in the first page fold.

Now sew back in through the same hole in the second page fold. Sew out through the next hole in the second page fold and repeat from the ***.

Continue through the second to the last hole in the second page fold. Sew out through the last hole in the second page fold. Sew down through the stitch along the first page fold to the left of the last hole.

Instead of sewing back through the last hole in the second page fold, lay the third folded page on top of the first two, aligning the "T" ends. Sew in through the hole at the non-"T" end of the third page fold.

For the third row (you are now working left to right again):



(Orange is the thread and green is the curved needle; black represents the folded page. For clarity, the drawing shows the thread loose on the fold you're working on. But on your work, keep the thread taught—but not too tight. If you pull hard to tighten the thread it may cut the paper.)

Sew out through the next hole in the third page fold.

###There will be a looping stitch connecting the first and second page folds below this hole. Loop your needle through this stitch then sew back into the same hole you just came out from.

Sew out through the next hole in the third page fold and repeat from the ### until you sew out from the last hole in the third page fold.

Loop through the stitch connecting the first hole in the first and second page folds.

For the next row:

Lay the next page on the stack, aligning the "T" ends. Sew in through the first hole in the next page fold. Continue as for the third row, but instead of looping through the stitch connecting the first and second page folds, sew through the stitches connecting the previous two page folds. Note that as you add new pages you'll be alternating between working left to right and working right to left.

Continue for the remaining rows. Once you've looped through the stitch below the last hole in the last page fold, sew in through that same hole and tie a knot around the thread coming out from that hole. Clip the end of the thread to a few inches.

I like having the ends of the thread dangling from the spine of the journal. If you don't like them, dab a bit of glue on the knots and when the glue is dry, clip the excess thread away. Be sure you've got a good glue bond though or your pieces can come apart.

Time to Add the Covers

Pour a few tablespoons of the PVA glue into a small container. Add about half the amount of water and stir thoroughly to thin the glue a bit.

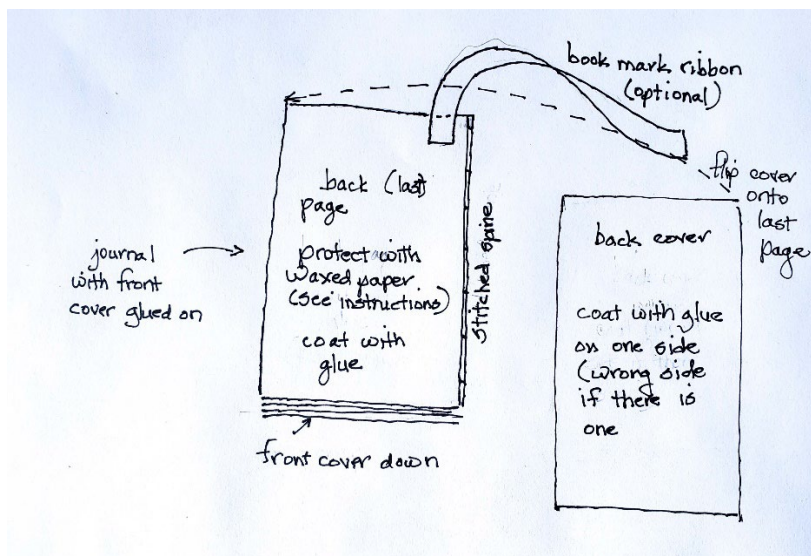
Have all the pages of your book closed. Fold one of the pieces of waxed paper in half lengthwise. Slip one end of the wax paper between the first and second pages. This will protect the rest of your book when you glue the cover to this first page. Use the chip brush to cover the first page with the thinned glue.

Coat one side of one of the cover pieces with glue. Lay the cover over the first page, glued sides together. Align all the edges and press in place. Use a damp paper towel to wipe away any glue which squeezed out.

Fold the other end of the wax paper over the cover. Be sure there's no glue on the upper edge of the waxed paper, then put your book or other weight over the whole thing. Let the glue dry for a few hours.

Remove the weight, turn the journal over, and add the remaining cover in the same way.

NOTE: If you want to add a ribbon bookmark to your journal, now is a good time to do it. You'll glue one end of the ribbon between the last page of your journal and the back cover. Mark where on the back page you'll glue the ribbon and carefully check it. As your journal sits on your work surface with the completed cover down, the last page up, and the spine of the journal on your right, the ribbon should extend beyond the page away from you in the upper right corner. There should be about an inch of the ribbon lapping over the page. Mark where the ribbon end should go then glue it in place with a bit of PVA glue.



Place one end of the second piece of waxed paper between the last page of your journal and the page just below it to protect the other pages in the journal from glue. Use the chip brush to cover the back page with glue.

Coat one side of the remaining cover piece with glue. Lay the cover piece over the back page, glued sides together.

Align all the edges and press in place. Use a damp paper towel to wipe away any glue which squeezed out.

Fold the other end of the wax paper over the cover. Be sure there's no glue on the upper edge of the waxed paper, then put your book or other weight over the whole thing. Let the glue dry for a few hours.

Leave the weight on the book overnight for the glue to dry. When you remove the weight in the morning, the covers may curl a little bit. This means there's still some dampness on the covers. Put a paper towel down on your work surface then lay your journal on top of it. Cover with another paper towel then replace the weight and let the paper towels absorb the remainder of the moisture.

Your new journal is pristine with all the pages beautifully aligned. Have a great time filling your journal with your marvelous work! I bet when you're done, it will have changed from pristine to chunky. That's the way I like them! How about you?



My new journal standing in the back on the left with my finished journals, volumes 1 through 5, keeping it company.