

SNAKE SKIN BLANKS FOR DUMMIES

BY SKYE MALONEY

Well, probably same as you, I was in awe first time I saw a snakeskin pen and knew I'd have to make my own. Through sage advice from many, mostly Don Ward, I've started making my own. Here's what's involved.

Supplies needed:

- Razor blades
- Clean cutting surface (I used an old cutting board)
- Thin CA
- Black spray paint
- Pen kit (of course)
- Straight edge for cutting (I used a hacksaw blade)
- Some Ziplock disposable containers (4 cup ones)
- Some spare wood (I use paint stirrer sticks *free*)
- Rubber gloves (non powdered are best)
- Disposable cup (or one the wife wont notice go 'missing')
- Rubber stoppers that fit your particular tube (2 per tube)
- Measuring cup in ounces
- Clear casting resin
- Snake skin

Two important supplies are your Clear Casting Resin and the skins. For the resin, I use the SM41 from www.mrfiberglass.com bought at a gallon at a time. Good price, comes with the hardener. The skins I get from www.sdsnake.com/SnDen.htm Real good guy to work with and more importantly, the way he prepares his skins works well with resin. Some people cure the hides with a chemical that will react with the resin, leaking black clouds into the resin while it hardens, making all your work totally useless. So, those are my suggested retailers. I get no kickbacks from them, I just know what works for me.

Ok, so, because I don't have a lot of progress pictures (yet, a version 2 may be in order), here's a look at the finished product:



So, now that you see what we're going to do, let's walk through the steps of doing it.

First, take your brass tubes and spray paint them black. You may want to scuff them to see if they hold the paint a little better than mine because if you don't act fast enough the CA will start to melt the paint from the tube. Move quickly and everything will be fine. I highly suggest painting your tubes though because you can see the brass between the scales and I don't really dig that look.

In the mean time, cut a little bit of one of the paint stirrers off. Just about 2" long. You'll see later.

When the painted tubes are dry, take one and lay it on a skin. Wrap the skin around the tube and see what part of the skin you need to use. The skins are wider in the center of the snake and narrower towards the head and tail. The idea is to use as much as possible of the snake while not using any belly scales. The back and side scales look the best and will help in hiding the seam. Find a good section and cut it from the rest of the skin, leaving a quarter inch on both top and bottom sides to be sure it's long enough.

Now, trim off one side of the belly scales from underneath making sure not to take off more than necessary. You're going to have to trim on both sides, so be sure not to take off much. Now, put some glue in a thin strip to the underside of the skin, right where you just cut. Lay that down the center of the painted brass tube. Let it dry just long enough to start to get tacky and then roll the tube so that it presses the skin between it and the cutting board. Roll it on the seam to really smash it down. Next roll the snake skin around the tube, allow for a slight overlap and mark the underside of the skin where it'll be cut next. Unroll the skin leaving the glued edge still on the tube. With the hacksaw blade's smooth side as a cutting guide, cut the skin from the underside. Wrap it back up and double check the length, hopefully you are left with enough to overlap a little. If so drip a few drops of your CA on the underside of the skin and use the small piece of paint stirrer to act like a squeegee to spread CA over the entire underside. Now, like wrapping a goat meat burrito, roll the tube up in the skin, again stopping and pressing on the new seam to be sure to seal it as tightly as possible. Be sure not to let the scales stick to the cutting board.

Take the razor and trim the edges of the tube up. This takes a little practice but take your time. This is also a good time to look for scales who may be 'shedding' a little. It seems like each scale has a protective clear coating on them and sometimes they want to lift off. If it is doing so, pluck it off. Don't go around pulling them all off though, only the ones who have separated from the skin. You'll be glad you did this later.

Ok, so now you have nice, creepy lookin tubes. Sit back and have a drink, the worst part is over, and it wasn't even that bad!

Next up is prepping your setup. You'll need to take your paint sticks and cut two lengths so that they're long enough to reach both sides of the bottom of your 4 cup Ziplock container. See the pic for a lot of this step. Now that you have 2 strips, drill 4 holes the same size as the drill bit you would use for the particular pen tube you're working with. Be careful though, these sticks are like glass. You can use anything from wood to cardboard for this, just use what works for you. Next, cut the strips into 8 pieces, each with a hole. Now pull the stoppers through the holes, almost all the way into the strip. You'll want a lot of stopper pulled through. Now take your tubes and twist them onto the stoppers. Keep in mind, you'll have some shorter ones if you're working with cigars, just try to keep everything centered up. Do this to both sides. Twist till the boards are lined up and flat. If at all possible, glue this into one long strand of 4 blanks. You can glue the wood back together, even leave one side intact like I did in the picture to help. You'll see why soon. If you want, you can put some small bolts inside the tubes to make them heavier for later, you'll understand in a minute.

Now, cut your ziplock container about 2 or 3 inches from the bottom, all the way around. Place the blanks in the bottom and make sure it's going to fit and be below the surface of the top of the container.

The rest of this should be done in your shop in a **clean** area.

Mark the outside of your container a comfortable distance above the level of the blanks, but not too far as to not waste a lot of resin. Remove the blanks. Fill the container to the new line with water. Empty that into a measuring cup that reads ounces. It should be

about 8 ounces of water or so. Remember the number of ounces. Pour this again into a disposable plastic cup. Now mark this cup at the water line. Pour out water and dry cup.

You now know how many ounces of resin it will take to fill the cup to the line, which will also be enough to submerge the blanks. Keep in mind, you're going to have extra because the blanks and wood will displace some resin.

Now, the messy part. Slap on your gloves like a ham-fisted proctologist and pour the resin into your dried cup to the marked line. Drop in your hardener and mix for one minute. The stuff I use is a ratio of 10 drops per ounce of resin, but match it to your supplier's specs. Grab your blanks and dip a few fingers into the resin and rub your fingers all over the skins. Make sure to cover every little bit of it, all around it, even where the stopper is. Cover every single square millimeter of skin with resin. Now, put the blanks into the container and fill to above the level of the wooden pieces with the stoppers through it. The trick here is to keep the tubes from floating. I use another piece of wood laid across the blanks (see pic) then put something heavy on that to force them all to the bottom of the container. I used a huge socket as you can see from the pic. I also glued my wooden pieces together so that they would all sink if the centers were sunk.

From here, just wait. It'll take a few hours, but eventually it'll harden and you can pop it out of the container. The top surface will remain tacky for a while, but the inside will be hard as well as all the surfaces that were touching the container.

Cut through the stoppers close to the tubes, then take a screw and pop the corks from the tubes like popping a bottle of wine. Take your time cutting the blanks apart and you're in business! Just make sure when making the pens to plan ahead which way the scales will point and use the right bushings on the right ends.

Here's a few more pics just for reference:



