Faceting Your First Ten Gemstones: Practice, Practice and Practice

by Mark Oros

How does a new faceter best learn the craft and art of faceting gemstones? There are great books, manuals and videos that tell you how to facet your first gemstone. I give four-day lessons where the student facets two gemstones in my studio as well as Zoom lessons where the student cuts one gemstone. These work well for understanding the process of gemstone faceting, but where does one go from there? How does one develop great gemstone faceting skills? This listicle is meant to help beginning faceters progress during the first ten weeks of faceting, solving common problems and providing tips that I apply to my daily gemstone faceting.

Every gemstone needs to be better than the last

After learning how to cut your first stone with a teacher and attempting to cut a stone alone, things may not go as well as in the lesson. Understand that gem cutting is a trade and like many trades, there is a learning curve. Gemstone cutting is still considered a guild in many parts of the world and has a progression from apprentice, journeyman to master. In a guild or studio, the apprentice gradually learns the craft by taking small steps and repeating the skills. It is by measured advancement and practice that the skills develop, and one achieves their gemstone faceting goals. Here are my recommendations for my students when they get home, set up and are ready to start their faceting journey.

1. Monitor your progress, each gemstone that you facet should be better than the previous one. Your skills will develop over time and, as long as you are progressing by making better gemstones with each effort, you are moving in the right direction. Even today, my personal motto is, “Every gemstone needs to be better than the last.” This keeps me actively developing and refining my faceting skills.

2. Practice, practice and practice. Gemstone faceting is a skill that needs time to develop. It is not unlike learning creating a stain glass window, throwing a clay pot, or painting a picture, one must develop their skill set through practice and refinement. Louis Comfort Tiffany, Peter Voulkos, or Georgia O’Keeffe did not turn out masterpieces on their first tries and neither will you. It takes a minimum of seven to twelve gemstones to start to understand and work through the issues of basic gemstone faceting.

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3. Start with 10 mm rough gemstones. This size allows for you to see what you are doing. It's not so large that it takes a long time and not so small that the gem the will disappear if you make a mistake. I recommend using light smokey quartz because it is easier seen than clear quartz and is inexpensive. If you want to see where you have faceted during the process, cover your gemstone with pencil between cutting laps.

Take care of your faceting machine, laps and workspace
and they will take care of you

4. Advice and recommendations will come from many sources. Like any opinion that someone gives you, including mine, what you read, see and hear from other faceters can be either right or wrong for you. Beware of the individual that is adamant about their way being the only way. Your faceting journey is about finding your own way. What works for others may not work for you. Also, do not spend too much time reading books, stalking user groups, and watching videos. Balance your time wisely making sure that you spend most of your time cutting. The only way to learn to facet is to facet. Today's information generation tends to over-study and analyze rather than practice and perform. Of course, if you are waiting for your equipment to show up, go ahead and read Tom Herbst's book a couple times through.

5. Many new faceters find it helpful to keep a journal for tracking failures and successes.

6. Start with simple round brilliant designs and progress to harder designs as you improve. Don't overstep your progress by taking leaps. Baby steps are fine for your first ten gemstones. I highly recommend this book for your first five gemstones. It is the book that I did my first five gemstones: "Learn to Facet the Right Way" by Jeff Graham.

7. You need to trust your faceting machine. Many times I talk to a beginner and owner of a new ULTRA TEC faceting machine and I will hear them blaming the faceting machine or laps for their problems. These folks have only cut one to three gemstones. The machine is most likely not the problem. The problem is that they are a neophyte. It is a simple matter of them not having put in the time to learn the craft yet. ULTRA TEC is my faceting machine of choice. I not only highly recommend them, I also sell them and help new faceters put together their equipment, supplies, and rough gemstones to get started faceting. When you buy a good faceting machine, trust it to do its job while you learn yours.

8. In a sense, all faceting is doing is taking out larger scratches with smaller scratches up to the polished state. It is very important to look at your gemstone facets and make sure that previous lap scratches are being removed while you meet and align your facets. My students tell me they hear about faceters skipping laps/grits and taking shortcuts. I have never seen the advantage to this method. I believe that each lap/grit takes you on a gradual path to facet alignment and polish. To skip a lap/grit is to deny yourself of the benefit that lap has in the faceting process. Skipping laps/grits can wear out laps and limit you precision and make polishing a chore. Here again, there are different opinions, but I suggest that you don't skip laps until you are confident with your faceting and satisfied with your finished gemstones. Shortcuts are best taken by those that know the terrain.

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Trust your faceting machine

9. Watch what each lap is doing to your facets. Make sure that the laps are clean and not contaminated and are taking out scratches and not putting larger ones in to your gemstone. It is very common for a new faceter to think that the scratches were left from the previous lap when the lap they are using need to be cleaned.

10. Your girdle, pavilion girdle facets and crown girdle facets are the foundation for your gemstone. It is from these initial tiers that the rest of the gemstone is aligned in meet-point faceting. I find it useful to go around these tiers two or three time on each lap (excluding pre-polishes and polish) in order to set the foundation for all other facets. It takes a little longer to go around the tiers again, but it saves me time putting in the following facets.

11. Take care of your faceting machine, laps and workspace and they will take care of you.

12. If you have a problem that keeps repeating itself, stop and ask for help in identifying the source of the problem. There is a wonderful set of faceters in our community that would be happy to help. The only question unanswered is the one not asked. When in doubt, ask about.

13. Don't hurry the dopping process. Make sure the dop and gemstone have significant surface area contact. Make sure the surfaces are clean and oil-free. Let the glue set overnight.

14. When buying rough, I recommend that you start slowly and cautiously, and learn about purchasing rough to prevent costly mistakes. Ask your colleagues for rough dealer recommendations. Make sure the rough dealer has a return policy. Inspect your rough upon receipt and acknowledge your satisfaction or disappointment with the rough dealer the same day as receipt. If a deal seems too good to be true from an unknown seller, be wary.

15. Set realistic expectations and goals for your learning period. Try to facet as much as possible right away so you can get some momentum going and start feeling proud of your faceting. There may be times that you have to step away from the faceting machine because of frustration. Come back with a clear head and relaxed state to put you back into the groove. Remember, your first ten gemstones are practice. They don't need to be perfect and you don't have to spend a lot of time on each one. Keep the queue moving while you learn your craft. Wait until you create a gemstone that you are proud of before showing it off. Above all, enjoy your faceting journey.

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Materials referred to in this article

Book - "Learn to Facet the Right Way" by Jeff Graham - www.rockpeddler.com/product/learn-to-facet-the-right-way-by-jeff-graham/

Book - "Amateur Gemstone Faceting" by Tom Herbst – www.facetingbook.com

Online Videos – A good starting point is ULTRA TEC's Video Showcase www.ultratec-facet.com/category/video-showcase/

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