

Removing Non-Soakable Self-Stick USPS Stamps from Paper

By Michael Clynne

(Editor: The following article is a follow-up to the October Post Boy article by James Steckley "Self-Adhesive Stamp Removal Made Easy.")

I believe that in the future the modern U.S. (and probably many other countries like some of the most recent Danish and Swedish issues) self-adhesive stamps will be difficult to obtain in good condition. This is because the self-adhesive gum (PVA) migrates into the paper over time and becomes discolored and brittle when it devolatilizes. The only way to prevent this migration is to completely remove the self-adhesive. Removal from paper and application of talcum powder or some other substance does not mitigate the long-term problem. The removal process must be done with stamps on envelope paper within a few years because the gum migrates that quickly into the paper and bonds with it resulting in thinned stamps upon any attempt at removal. I have found that the sooner they are removed, the better and easier it is.

Below I describe my process for completely removing the self-adhesive gum from modern US stamps. My process is somewhat similar to the that described on the APS website but with several critical improvements.

Introduction

The process described removes used U.S. and foreign non-soakable or difficult to soak self-adhesive stamps from paper. The result is a perfectly flat stamp that is mountable in your album with a hinge or mount and will never stick, become brittle or change color. The process actually works better than water soaking because the stamp paper does not swell or curl differentially and stamp inks do not crack, chip off or become dulled. It is, however, more work and I typically only remove one of each stamp for my collection or high denomination stamps. The process is similar to that described by Peter Butler (American Philatelist, October 2010, p. 910–913). The major difference is that I use isopropyl alcohol instead of Bestine and I completely remove the PVA which eliminates the need to apply talcum powder to mitigate the sticky PVA.

Materials

1. Isopropyl alcohol, 99–100%, available from any scientific supply house and many pharmacies and grocery stores. Do not use normal rubbing alcohol as it generally contains 30% or more water.
2. Lintless paper wipes. I use Kimtech brand made by Kimberley Clark, but a variety of other companies make a similar product and any absorbent, thin, lintless paper wipe will do. These are much stouter than Kleenex or other facial wipes. I cut the wipes into 1–1½ x ¾ inch strips.
3. Self-adhesive backing paper. I prefer to use a one-inch strip from the backing that covers the adhesive on small USPS priority mailing boxes because it is thick, and I have many of them.
4. Standard printer paper. I used the back side of recycled old draft manuscripts.

Process

Cut envelope corner so there is a narrow margin around the stamp. Place the stamp corner face down on clean sheet of printer paper folded in half. Fold a Kimwipe strip into quarters so it is about ¾ x 1 inch. Wet with alcohol and wipe the back of the envelope corner for a few seconds. When it is thoroughly wet peel off the paper from the stamp so that the stamp does not bend. The PVA glue on the stamp will be extremely sticky. Place the stamp on a sheet of clean printer paper face down and cover 1/3 or so of it with a piece of self-adhesive backing paper. Hold the stamp down on the printer paper with a finger on the backing paper. Gently wipe the stamp with the alcohol wetted Kimwipe, always from the middle toward the edge. Move the stamp to a new spot on the printer paper, rewet a

fresh surface on the Kimwipe and keep wiping until all the PVA is removed. The stamp will dry in a few minutes and no longer be sticky to the touch (blowing on it evaporates the alcohol more quickly). Turn the stamp around and repeat with a new Kimwipe surface to remove the remaining PVA.

Hints

Wipe your fingers with alcohol regularly to avoid transferring PVA to the front of stamps. If you find that fingerprints are appearing on the front (printed side of the stamp) shift to a thicker backing paper and/or reduce the amount of alcohol that you are using.

When it looks like all the PVA is gone, let the stamp dry (blowing on it speeds drying) and hold it so light reflects off the back. If any PVA is left, you will be able to see shiny areas. Alternatively, lay it face down and place a piece of dry Kimwipe on it, which will stick to any remaining PVA.

Practice on duplicates or unwanted stamps until you get the hang of the process. The Kimwipe gets saturated with PVA fairly quickly, especially early in the process so change the wiping surface often. Some glue is transferred to the printer paper, so move the stamp often and systematically across the paper.

Alcohol partially smudges most canceling inks, so avoid letting the front of the stamp get wet. Ditto for some printing inks, so work quickly, but carefully. Stamps with large areas of black ink and the new priority and express mail stamps are particularly susceptible to dissolution so work carefully with them. Do not get them too wet and blow on them to evaporate excess alcohol regularly. The process works for most, but not all, foreign self-adhesive stamps. If in doubt, test first!

Additional Comments

There are other solvents that also work, including 100% methyl and ethyl alcohol, acetone, and Bestine (which contains heptane), as well as many advertised products for example Unglue or citrus oil products. Any product with heptane as a major ingredient will work. I prefer isopropyl alcohol because it is easy to obtain, cheap, pure, non-toxic (but do not drink and use with adequate ventilation), evaporates quickly, leaves no residue, and is effective for most stamps.

By the way, isopropyl alcohol can also be used to inspect watermarks and even to dry stamps, because it is completely miscible with water. Take a wet stamp (blot it first with a Kimwipe) and dip it in the alcohol in a small watermark tray. Blot and then wave it in the air for 10-20 seconds with tongs. As the alcohol evaporates it takes some of the water with it. Repeat several times until you have a dry stamp. The only caveat is that you need to be careful with the few stamps that have fugitive inks (especially aniline and purple).

Some additional comments and correspondence from the author.

I will be happy to answer any questions that may arise. What this process really needs is a U-Tube video that shows exactly how to do it. I have been adding self-adhesive stamps to my collection for over 15 years, basically since the non-soakers came out. I also have a process for removing any stamp that curls so much in water that the ink cracks, for example the 1996 Olympic stamp. This is caused by the coating on the paper that does not expand like the rest of the paper when the stamp is wetted. They must be soaked in such a way that they remain flat during the entire process. Finally, I have a process for drying soaked stamps so that they come out completely flat with no wrinkles- it even works for souvenir sheets or flattening previously wrinkled stamps.

I have found that the time necessary for stamps to be no longer easily removal is variable. I have successfully removed some that are nearly 20 years old but had difficulty with some on a few years old. My interpretation is that it has to do with the porosity of the paper that the stamp is on. As I said

before the sooner you remove them the better. I have bought stamps from APS circuits with powder and the SA is normally easily removed from them. We don't know yet what the modern SA stamps will look like when they age, but they will age. Even if they don't discolor badly, the paper will become brittle. Just look at the labels on your old computer disks (if you still have any).

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