A new set of makeup brushes can leave you confused. Why does the set include similarly shaped brushes in different sizes? Why are there identical brushes made with different materials? To ease that confusion, we lay out the most common cosmetics tools and explain how to use makeup brushes in your collection.

A Word on Brush Materials

The bristles on makeup brushes come in one of three forms: natural, synthetic, or hybrid. You may find sets that include brushes made of one type of bristle, or a mix of each.

Natural Bristles

Made from real animal hair, natural bristles have a porous structure that makes them perfect for picking up color from powder cosmetics, but they’re not as ideal for cream and liquid products.

Synthetic Bristles

Because synthetic bristles aren’t as absorbent as their natural counterparts, cream blushes and liquid foundation won’t get trapped their bristles, and they blend eyeshadow and other cosmetics to a natural finish without removing much color. They’re still no match for natural bristles when it comes to applying powders.
Hybrid Bristles

You can often spot hybrid brushes by their telltale two-tone design, as each individual bristle is made of both natural animal hair and synthetic material. Combining these two materials creates a versatile tool that lends itself to applying and blending virtually any type of makeup.

Types of Brushes

Below, we explain how to identify and use 20 of the most common makeup brushes to help you get the most from your brand new brush set.

Eyes

Angled Liner Brush

Also known as: angled eyeliner brush, small angle brush, slanted eyeliner brush

Use it for: lining the eyes with eyeshadow or gel eyeliner

Despite its name, an angled liner brush can be used for anything that needs a straight edge, such as bordering colored lips with concealer or filling out the brows. These brushes are usually synthetic, since that material works best for gel products.

Eyeliner Brush

Also known as: liner brush
Use it for: precise eyeliner application

This brush’s precision tip makes it perfect for creating a thin, smooth stroke along the lash line. Use it with liquid or gel eyeliner, or dip it in brightly colored eyeshadow for a bolder look. On variations of this brush, the ferrule, or metal part, sits at an angle to encourage a more precise application.

Smudge Brush

Also known as: smudger brush

Use it for: applying shadow to the lash line or smudging out eyeliner

The dense bristle arrangement of the smudge brush makes it perfect for applying and blending bold bursts of color. It’s especially good at smudging out pencil or gel eyeliner to create a smoky eye.

Blending Brush

Also known as: blender brush, eye blender brush, eyeshadow blender brush

Use it for: softening and blending eyeshadow

This soft bristled brush is designed not to apply color, but to blend it. Blending might be the most important step of any eyeshadow application, as it smooths out rough lines and softens stark borders for a more professional look.

Eyeshadow Brush
Also known as: shadow brush, eye shader brush

Use it for: bold application of eyeshadow

Whether you want an office-friendly pop of eyeshadow or a head-turning evening look, this brush is what you’ll use for shadow application. It doubles as a blending brush, as long as you remove any previously used color from its bristles.

Eyeshadow Sponge

Also known as: sponge applicator, sponge-tip applicator

Use it for: applying pressed or lightly pigmented eyeshadow

Though this tool might puzzle some—don’t people use makeup brushes so they don’t have to use the little sponge that comes with every eyeshadow palette?—it has its uses. For one, its absorbent qualities make it perfect for applying shadow that’s prone to fallout, so you won’t get speckles of shadow on your freshly blushed cheeks. It’s also great for applying dry, chalky cosmetics that brushes can’t pick up. And when you want to amp up the drama with a dense, heavy layer of shadow, the sponge applicator is your best bet.

Brows and Lips

Spoolie
Also known as: eyebrow brush, lash brush, spoolie wand

Use it for: grooming and shaping eyebrows

Your eyes deceive you: this is no mascara wand. It’s designed specifically for the eyebrows, where it makes quick work of brushing brow hairs into place and applying brow gel. When used after lining and filling, it can soften the color so it looks more like your natural eyebrows. It also works just as well for removing mascara clumps from the lashes.

Brow and Lash Comb

Also known as: lash/brow groomer, lash comb and brow brush

Use it for: shaping and grooming brows and separating lashes after mascara application

Use the bristle side to shape and groom the eyebrows or to blend brow color for a more natural appearance. The comb side can also be used to groom brows, though it’s especially good at separating mascara-darkened lashes, removing any clumps in the process.

Angled Eyebrow Brush
Also known as: slanted eyebrow brush

Use it for: defining and filling in brows

This brush looks nearly identical to the angled eyeliner brush (which you technically could use for the same purpose) with one difference: brow brushes are made with stiff, densely packed natural bristles. This stiffness makes it easier to apply heavier color underneath the brows. Use the slant to your advantage: holding the brush at a 45-degree angle works well for shading, while a 90-degree angle is great for creating precise lines.

Lip Brush

Also known as: lipstick brush, precision lip brush

Use it for: controlled application of lipstick and lip liner

This pointed brush plays a number of roles. If you use lip liner, the brush’s precise, tapered bristles can blend the line inward and create a more natural-looking base for lipstick or gloss. You can also use the brush to apply lip color itself: after coating the bristles in color, apply it to the lips in thin layers. Start from the center and work your way out, so as not to overpower the corners with too much color.

Face

Concealer Brush
Also known as: concealer blending brush

Use it for: applying and blending concealer

This densely packed synthetic brush is made to evenly distribute opaque liquid and cream formulas. Use it to apply concealer to any blemishes, under-eye circles, or discoloration, and then blend to camouflage it with your skin.

Contour Brush

Also known as: angled contour brush, contouring brush

Use it for: precise application of blush, contour, or bronzer

With firm bristles and an angled tip, this brush is designed to create a more defined line than its softer, rounder brush counterparts. That makes it perfect for creating the illusion of shadow under the cheekbones or jawline, or even adding a bold streak of blush to the cheeks.

Highlighter Brush
Also known as: highlight brush, tapered brush

**Use it for:** light application of highlight or shimmer powder

With sparse, soft bristles, this brush is designed to apply products that need to go on sparingly, such as brightly colored blush and intense shimmer. Try stippling a shimmery highlighter on the high points of your face, such as the cheeks, nose, chin, and center of the forehead.

**Powder Brush**

Also known as: large powder brush

**Use it for:** applying a light dusting of face powder

This big, fluffy brush full of loosely packed bristles will pick up just the right amount of pressed or loose powder. Just tap off any excess before you sweep it on.

**Stippling Brush**
**Also known as:** stipple brush, foundation stippling brush

**Use it for:** applying a light application of cream blush or highlighter

Usually a hybrid brush with finer fibers near the tip of each bristle, the stippling brush has a knack for creating an airbrush-style finish with liquid or cream foundation. Start by pouring a small amount of foundation on the back of your hand and gently tapping the brush into the liquid. Use that same tapping motion to distribute the foundation evenly all over your face, then gently swirl the bristles around over the applied foundation for an even finish.

**Foundation Brush**

**Also known as:** flat foundation brush

**Use it for:** applying liquid foundation

Like the stippling brush, the foundation brush is primarily designed to apply foundation. Its bristles are tightly packed into a wide, pointed tip like a paintbrush, making it perfect for getting foundation into nooks and crannies around the eyes, nose, and mouth. For the best of both worlds, try using both brushes: apply foundation with the foundation brush, and then blend and finish with the stippling brush.

**Blush Brush**
**Also known as:** tapered blush brush

**Use it for:** a natural application of blush or bronzer

Designed for applying blush to the apples of the cheeks, this soft, fluffy brush creates a more subdued finish than the contouring brush. This brush comes in a variety of shapes, each designed for a particular application style. Try a few out to find the one that works for you.

**Finishing Brush**

**Also known as:** blending brush, face blending brush

**Use it for:** naturally blending makeup on the full face

Despite its name, this brush can be used to apply foundation, blend makeup, or both. It’s usually made with hybrid bristles, since it’s designed to be used with powder, liquid, or cream foundations. Like eyeshadow, face makeup should always be blended for the most natural appearance possible.

**Fan Brush**
**Use it for:** applying a light dusting of powder, highlighter, or shimmer

Made with sparse, soft bristles, this gentle brush works well for sheer applications. Use it to apply a light touch of blush, shimmer, or bronzer on the cheeks, or even brush it under the eyes to remove any leftover flecks of shadow.

**Kabuki Brush**

**Also known as:** buffer brush

**Use it for:** applying an even application of face powder, bronzer, or blush, or for blending

This brush is soft and fluffy and usually compact, the brush may be used to apply finishing powder or blush with a feathery finish. It is also good for blending—simply swirl the brush in circles to soften any harsh lines in your foundation, blush, or contour.