

Confidence in the Bath

ABSTRACT

“I don’t know, I’ve just always done it this way,” is often the explanation of why water is prepared a certain way for aqueous treatment of paper. Water is the paper conservator’s most ubiquitous solvent; so why do we not know more about the specific quality of our solutions? Even conditioned with calcium, traditional wash water for paper conservation has low ionic strength (conductivity) and does not allow for accurate measurement of pH. This paper presents the practical considerations for preparing aqueous solutions for washing, including accurate measurement of pH, the relationship of pH and ionic strength, and the implications of ionic strength within solutions. Practical tutorials will show the use of affordable and accurate hand-held digital meters for measuring solution pH and conductivity. Finally, there will be a discussion of how the use of these meters can improve and refine wash water preparation. A mini-survey of wash water measurements collected before and after treatment by practicing conservators indicates the direction of future research and demonstrates the potential of these meters to improve our understanding and control of washing practices.

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