



Rotary Club of Goleta Noontime
P.O. Box 164, Goleta, Ca 93116, U.S.A.

Basics of Graffiti Removal

Thank you for your willingness to assist in keeping our community free of graffiti. The key to our success is citizens like yourself, keeping a part of our city, no matter how small, clean. Without you the mess would overwhelm even the best organized and funded government program. First and foremost when removing graffiti, **do no additional damage**. Exercise care not to damage surfaces and **never** paint out graffiti with poorly matching paint. Being careless will make the property look sloppy, anger other property owners and the nearby community. Graffiti removal is often incorrectly referred to as “painting out” graffiti. Yes, large tags on walls are often painted out with matching paint, or if is a not very visible wall on the back of a property, gray paint may be acceptable, but this is not the method of choice for removing most graffiti.

The first decisions you face are, should I attempt to remove or over paint this graffiti? What permissions do I need? Removing graffiti is always preferable. If that can't be done, then over painting with color matched paint is the method of choice. Never over-paint vehicles or baked enamel paint (news boxes, painted mail boxes, trash containers, signal control boxes, cable and phone splice boxes), no matter how perfect your paint. These can be cleaned with solvent. Over-painting will make it impossible to clean these boxes with solvent in the future. In general, you can remove any graffiti on anything, so long as you do no damage, without permission. You can also over paint most graffiti if your paint matches well enough that only you can tell where you painted. Permission is not needed to over-paint graffiti on bridges or in flood control channels. Never over paint graffiti on freeways, very busy roads or high bridges. This is work for professionals. Permission is not usually needed to over-paint back walls on private property if your paint looks good. Permission should always be obtained before painting out graffiti on the exposed parts of homes or businesses. Color matched paint will, of course, be required. I have been removing and over-painting graffiti for many years and have occasionally been “caught” by a property owner or local officials. They have all been delighted!

If you encounter a problem removing or over painting a tag, call me, Ed Graper, 964-7117. It's much better to delay a day and do a good job rather than to make a mess. Following are some specific suggestions from my experience for removing graffiti:

1) Tags on newspaper boxes, metal signs, metal boxes, transformers, signal boxes, plastic trash cans, truck bodies, metal posts and glass.

These tags can usually be quickly wiped off with **Laquer Thinner**, available at you local paint store, on a paper towel. Wear plastic gloves to protect your hands. Before wiping off a tag test the finish in an out-of-the-way place. Most boxes are OK but some signs (black type on white street signs and some STOP signs) are attacked by laquer thinner. If a sign is attacked by Laquer Thinner then clean it with **Denatured Alcohol**. This is slower but less damaging. Laquer Thinner will usually damage hard plastic surfaces but is excellent for trash cans. Do not use Laquer Thinner on the plastic parts of phone booths or the windows on newspaper boxes. Alcohol will usually work on these surfaces. Acetone (nail polish remover) is too aggressive a solvent for most graffiti removal and damages many surfaces. **NEVER** over paint any of these surfaces, even with exactly matching paint, unless the graffiti absolutely cannot be removed.

2) Tags on painted wood surfaces and wood signs.

Laquer Thinner will remove tags from most glossy painted wood. Painted wood signs are very expensive and are more likely to be damaged, so be very careful. Test the finish in an out-of-the-way place. Nothing will remove tags from flat painted surfaces without some damage but careful removal with laquer thinner often works very well. Combining removing graffiti where it will come off and over painting where it will not can be very successful.

3) Tags on exposed walls.

These are the tags most often thought of as graffiti. They may be a 5 foot high gang tag or a colorful gothic representation of a tagger's name. **NEVER** over paint exposed walls or surfaces with generic gray paint. Wall tags are over painted **with matching paint** if the wall is visible. This may require custom mixed paint. Surprisingly, a common cream or pink shade, selected from available paint, will often give an excellent color match. If you're responsible for a large, frequently tagged, wall you can save a lot of time by never cleaning your paint roller or tray. Rollers, on the roll frame, will keep for several weeks between uses without drying out in a thick wall plastic bag closed with a twist tie. Paint trays, lined with a disposable plastic liner, never need to be cleaned. Just let the paint dry on them. It takes dozens of uses to build up enough paint to make the liner unusable. **NEVER** over paint graffiti on unpainted brick, block, wood or stone walls. Small tags can often be very successfully be removed from these walls with Laquer Thinner and wire brushing. Small tags on brick or block can be very successfully over painted using *faux* finish techniques. Large tags must be sandblasted or pressure washed clean.

4) Tags on exposed unpainted wood walls and fences.

Power sanding with extremely course grit (20 or courser) is very effective for removing even very large tags from unpainted wood fences. Laquer thinner also often works well for small tags. **NEVER** over paint unpainted wood walls or fences.

5) Tags on bridge abutments, culverts and back walls.

Tags on back walls, hidden concrete surfaces, bridge abutments and culverts can be painted out with generic gray paint. Very exposed tags on these surfaces must be removed by sandblasting, pressure washing or painted with color matched concrete gray paint so as not to create an eyesore. **NEVER** use random color left over paint, greens, bright colors, white or blacks to paint out any graffiti.

6) Paper tags

Self stick stickers (HELLO stickers) can be peeled off slowly. Saturating the sticker with Laquer Thinner will loosen old stickers. Glued on paper political tracts can be removed by saturating the paper with window cleaner, letting it soak 5-10 minutes and gently pulling or scraping it off. **NEVER** over paint paper tags.

Beyond removing graffiti there is much one can do to minimize future graffiti. The most effective method of protecting a frequently tagged wall is to cover it with vines. Cal Tans and many cities have used vines very successfully along major roads. Though they take some maintenance, plants also look much better than any bare wall. Improved lighting helps, particularly motion activated lights. You can also do small things to discourage the vandals, like flood where they stand to paint. Taggers don't like to stand in a mud puddle. Having a dog can help too, beyond just barking. When you clean up after your dog, put the droppings where the vandals stand!

Do not attempt to remove or over paint graffiti on vehicles, or etched into windows. Get help with these. Special techniques are needed to clean them up and glass etching cannot be removed. If you have questions, need help or face a problem graffiti please feel free to call me, Ed Graper at 964-7117