



<http://www.howloweenqueen.com/>

Tombstones How-To

A little history on how my tombstones have changed over the years....



My very first foam tombstones were made from that crumbly white floral foam that they make flower arrangements for weddings and funerals with - those 1'X 2' X 2" flaky sections that are a huge pain to work with. I used a Sharpie to "push" in the lettering while giving black color and spray painted them (man that stuff hates spray paint!). Hey, I was a newbie, and I didn't know any better. The kids loved them, and that's all that mattered. I finally gave them away to a friend of mine's son a few years ago.

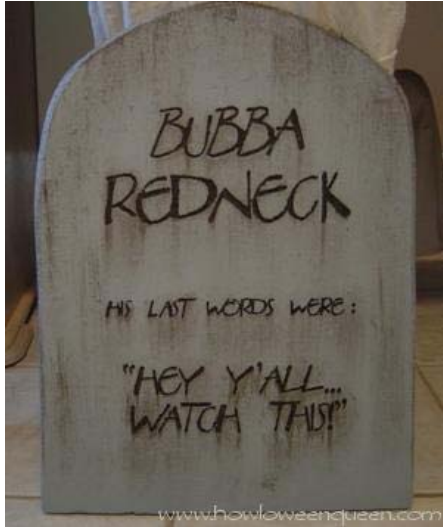


For the first batch of tombstones that I made using insulating foam board, I bought some 4' X 8' sheets of pink insulating foam from Home Depot. They only had the 3/4 inch thickness here in North Eastern Florida, so I glued two sections together with Liquid Nails for Foam.

The LN for Foam Board takes a while to dry, and I got very annoyed with it and ended up not making the tombstones that year (2003) since they still hadn't dried after 24 hours with only DAYS before Halloween. I did manage to get them done in 2004 after a year's curing time for the LN for foam.

*Now, if you're not up north.. good luck finding this foam in anything thicker than 3/4". How it was explained to me by someone else is basically this - The Owens Corning pink and Dow blue Extruded Polystyrene (EPS) foams are made for the areas that actually HAVE winter and is designed to hold in warmth. The white beaded stuff is for keeping in cold (which is why it's prevalent in the southern states) - think "Ice Chest".

For the second and third rounds of tombstones that I made, I used the beaded Styrofoam that comes in 4'X8'X2" sheets from Home Depot, but it's softer and a little less favorable for carving than the pink. It was not TOO difficult to work with, although there were some problems with the Dremel catching the beads and tearing the lettering when I tried to do small detail work.



The painting on the first coat was somewhat tedious, but mainly because it took so much paint to cover them and get into the small nooks and crannies that come with Styrofoam. They look ALMOST as good as 2004's, but cost half as much to make. 2005 pictured left, 2006 right. In 2006, I started adding sand to the paint to give texture. They turned out VERY well and are much heavier than the rest of the previous years.



Currently, (in 2008) I started out making just white styro tombstones, but a fellow Florida Haunter, Coda180, brought a couple of his that he made with the white styro AND the pink foam together. The front is the pink and is the carved side; the white gives the tombstone the thickness without having to use more pink. Genius! So now all my future tombstones will be that method. We used Liquid Nails for Projects (pictured above) on those. It dries MUCH quicker than the LN for foam board (pictured here).



Gorilla Glue and Elmer's less expensive version are both also GREAT for using with foam projects. A little bit goes a long way with these two. One thing I noticed when cutting through the LN for projects and cutting through the Gorilla glue is that the LN didn't "catch" the foam cutter like the Gorilla did. They both seemed to sand equally well.

Basically, I just cut the basic size that I wanted for my tombstones out of the white and the pink foam. I used a box cutter to score and snap the foam into rectangles. Then I glued them together with the Liquid Nails and stacked them up, put stuff on top to weigh them down and help cause a good seal while the glue dried. You could also wait to glue them together until after you carve your epitaph; I'm just a creature of habit, so I do it this way.



I used Microsoft Office Publisher to create a poster sized template with the font and size I wanted. You could use a number of other programs to create epitaphs like Corel, and even Microsoft Word, or Word Pad. (If you don't know how to go about doing this or don't have the programs, and want to use WordPad which comes with Windows-based systems, check out this page: [Creating a template with WordPad](#)) I printed them, laid them out, and taped them together, then set them aside for later.



Now, perhaps the most important thing that I learned from Keeba, the Queen of Tombstones, to do before you start getting all artistic, is to drill your holes for your support.

The worst thing to happen is to do all that hard work carving, and then poke a hole right through the front of it. I use 1/2" and 3/4" rebar that is 2 feet long for my supports on my tombstones - it's cheap and works great. The first set of insulating foam tombstones that I made, I used PVC encased in the middle of the two glued sections of pink foam. Now, this actually was more of a pain to me to do, and I honestly haven't noticed a difference in having the PVC in them and not having it, so I just skip it altogether. I just take a 1/2" drill bit that's about 12 inches or so long and drill a hole or two depending on the width of the tombstone into the bottom of the foam. I do this by hand now; it's a hard thing to try to accomplish with a powered drill without poking through the front or back of the tombstone. It can be done, I just prefer to work by hand.



Drill bit and rebar - I just twist the drill bit by hand until only a little is left sticking out, being careful of the angle it's going in:

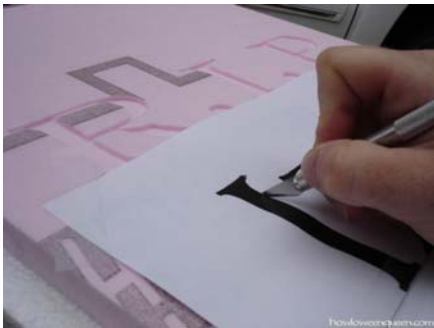




When you go to use the rebar with your tombstones for set-up, you simply use a hammer to pound the rebar into the ground far enough for the tombstone to accommodate the rebar, then slide the tombstone over it. You should have a snug fit depending on the size of drill bit and rebar you use.



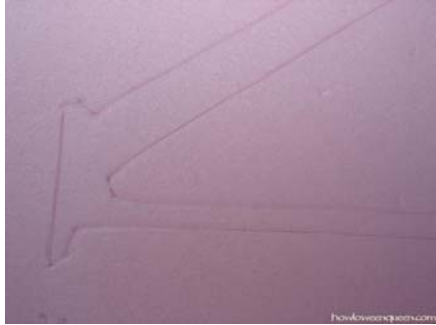
Now that my foam is glued and drilled, let's move on to carving epitaphs. I have my template that I made earlier and I've taped it (or pinned with thumbtacks) to my foam on the pink side, centered to allow for shaping the tombstone.



I'm going to use a Xacto knife with a nice sharp fresh blade to cut through the edges of the letters to score the foam under it. I make sure to get the blade deep enough so that I'll have a good line to follow later. If you have letters (pictured right) that have center sections like A, O, P, R, etc... make sure to do the inside cuts first so you don't lose them when you do the outside cuts.



Obtained from Omarshahidtrail.com



If you've scored it well, you'll end up with visible letters (above right). Scoring it also helps you keep nice crisp lines when you go to carve with a Dremel, as it pulls the foam away from the edges of your cuts, but not past them. You can skip the scoring altogether and use the Dremel right through the paper, but I haven't had good luck myself doing that, so I stick to my little extra step. I get picked on for being a perfectionist like that. :)

The first batch of tombstones that I made with the pink foam back in 2004 were carved completely with the Xacto knife by hand. I beveled them and everything. It was very time consuming and rough on my carpal tunnel, but man they look good. If you don't have a Dremel, the Xacto is good as long as you have sharp blades and time. Some people use wood burning tools as well. If you decide to try the wood burning - **MAKE SURE TO HAVE PROPER VENTILATION!!!** Melting foam releases fumes, and it isn't good for you! Do this outside.



Some people also use spray paint to do their lettering. You can create a template and cut the letters out, but leave the main template on the foam and spray over the letters so that the spray paint eats the foam some. Or you can do it the opposite way and make individual letters to put on the tombstones and spray paint over that so that the paint eats away around the letters, but leaves the foam intact where the letters are. Then remove your letters and you have nice raised letters. There are a ton of methods to try, I suggest trying a few and see what works best for you.



I use several different tips for my carving with the Dremel, depending on the look I'm going for or the size of the text or image I'm trying to carve. Since I'm using a plunge router with my Dremel, I am using the corded Dremel that has the plastic end that screws off. This is so the Dremel can then be screwed into the router attachment for stability.





The plunge router can be found at Home Depot, Lowes and other places that carry Dremel products.



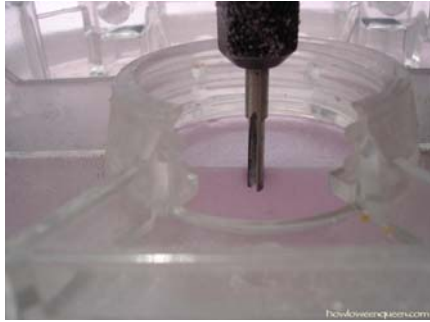
This one costs about 30 dollars. You can also try to find the smaller and easier to use 230 router attachment from Dremel, but it's been retired from their line-up, so Ebay and other resell areas would be your best bet for finding it. It's much easier to see around and since it is smaller and lighter, it's easier to use for people with smaller hands or with arthritis or carpal tunnel.



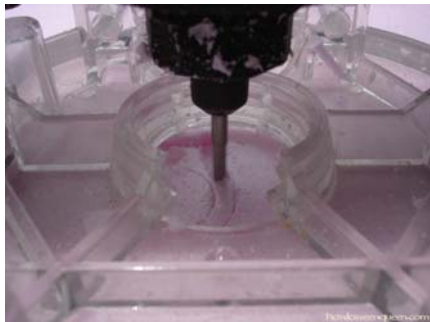
Special thanks again to Coda180 for bringing his and letting us try it out! I bought one on Ebay for 10 bucks, and it's worth every penny.



Then I put the Dremel in place over a letter and turn it on, letting the tip sink into the foam and I follow the score lines I made earlier. I try NOT to touch the lines, but to stay just a tiny bit away and let the Dremel pull the foam away from the cut lines.



It helps to make sure you know what letter you are working on at all times. I've made "P" into "R" too many times....



Also, don't turn your Dremel on when it's sitting on the foam with the bit touching it unless it's where you want to carve! Again, painful lessons learned from experience. This is a messy job too, so it's something you'll want to wear a mask and goggles for as tiny bits of foam will be flying all over the place. One thing I noticed with the pink foam is that it tends to melt and stick to the Dremel bit if you go too fast or hold it in one place too long. I've not had that problem with the white styrofoam yet.



Obtained from
Omarshaunted.com



Moving on to shaping... I found the easiest way for me to make the basic shapes for my tombstones is to use the old "fold and trace" method I learned in elementary school.

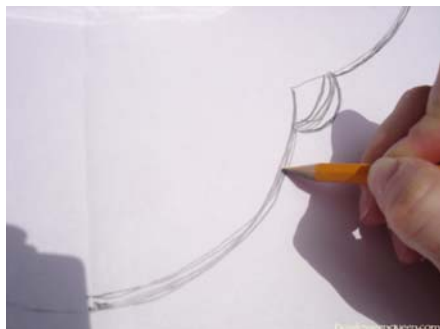


I sketched out the shape I liked, trying to stay within the size confines of my rough cuts of each tombstone I have ready for shaping. I then fold over that sketch, so that the fold is right down what will be the middle of the tombstone.



Then I trace the line through the paper so that it transfers onto the other side of the template. Now I have a symmetrical shape for the top of my tombstone. I place the paper over the rough tombstone, trying to make sure I have it centered over the epitaph. There's other ways to make a template, or you can just wing it and do it by hand.

Once I have it placed where I want it, I use a pencil and trace the drawing I made and make sure to put enough pressure that it goes all the way through to the foam to create lines.



There are a number of ways you can carve the shape of your tombstones. You can use a really sharp knife, a drywall or hack saw or even a jigsaw. Or you can use a hot wire foam cutter.





You can buy a battery operated one called a WonderCutter from Michael's Craft Stores for about 8 bucks.



You can buy plug in types from other places like the Hot Wire Foam Factory... or you can make one yourself. I recently made one myself using Wolfstone's instructions and I LOVE it. Before, I was just using the battery operated one. The wire gets heated by the power source and glides through the foam like a knife through butter.



Typically, nichrome wire, guitar or music wire are used for these. Steel fishing wire is GREAT for it too... and is easy to find, they sell it at WalMart. Nichrome is expensive.

There are many different styles of cutters that you can make too, so if you're going to be doing a lot of foam cutting, I suggest taking a look at this page:

http://wolfstone.halloweenhost.com/HalloweenTech/fotmak_MakingFoamTools.html



So, now that you've got your foam cutting method, just follow your lines and cut away.



I use a box cutter to score and snap off the bigger pieces like corners so that I have less work to do with the foam cutter.



I don't spend much time trying to be perfect when I am cutting the shape because the next step takes care of all that for me. I sand the edges of my tombstones, rounding them, bevelling them, making them smooth. I used to do this by hand, but now I just use my orbital palm sander.



I also sand the backs of the tombstones on the white styrofoam, but that's just an added step that you don't really need. I just like to. :) If you tilt the sander 45°, you will get a nice beveled edge.



Because I'm a psychotic OCD perfectionist type, I like to fill in all the gaps where the two foams are glued together. I just use joint compound and a plastic putty knife to do this. It's not a necessary step, but I like to do it anyway. I sand it smooth when it's dry.



You can also add other things to your tombstones for some extra pizzazz and character. Skulls, bones, crosses, even Xmas ornaments can be glued to the foam and painted over to look like it is part of the tombstone. I'll be experimenting with this in the 2008 preseason this year. Most plastic things can be cut in half to glue on to the foam, plaster of paris can be ground with a bench grinder. I found some fun things at the thrift store to add on:



These little angels on the left will go nicely on a tombstone. They're already flat and ready to be added. The little cherub to the right will go on top of a monument of some sort I think.



I also found this neat little box thing that I'll be taking apart to use the acorn and leaf pieces for tombstones.



I like my tombstones to have a stony texture, so I tend to use DryLok (because I have a gallon of it sitting there) on them. It's not necessary for waterproofing purposes on tombstones. I've also used regular latex paint with play sand in it to paint tombstones with. If you buy your paint at Home Depot, they usually have a section where they mix the paint that has the "Oops!" paint. This is paint that wasn't tinted correctly or that the customer either refused or brought back. It's usually a buck for a quart or 5 bucks for a gallon. I ALWAYS check this section for gray paint every time I go in there. All my tombstones and most of my other props have all been painted with Oops paint.



You do not want to use enamel spray paint on your naked foam tombstones. The solvent in it will eat the foam. If you do use a spray paint, make sure to either use one that is latex based or that you coat your foam with latex paint before you use the spray paint. Again, you don't want to do all this work, then go to paint and it eats all that hard work right up!

If you are using DryLok or sand in your paint, you might want to give it a coat of that before you paint your lettering. I use a small foam roller to do my painting, that way it goes right over the letters without getting paint down into them. The larger fluffy rollers will tend to push paint down into the carving, and you can also see the texture DryLok gives - see below:

I use a small chip brush to fill in my lettering. It doesn't have to be pretty, just filled in completely.



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*note: Fellow Florida Haunter, Coda180, uses a squeeze ketchup bottle filled with paint to squeeze the paint into the letters, then he reclaims the excess. Great idea!

Then roll over the whole thing with whatever color you want them to be.



Again, I use a small foam roller for this. Slave labor is good for base coat painting too, as shown here:



I usually give 2 coats of color on my tombstones. Since I'm using sand in my paint, my tombstones are heavier and more durable than if I were just using the paint by itself. If you try the sand, just don't use TOO much sand in it, otherwise it likes to "pill" up while you're painting. The great thing is, that when you finish rolling your color on, you can go back with a really small artist's brush and touch up the black lettering pretty quickly.



Another even faster way to paint large groups of tombstones is to use a sprayer. We have a **touch-up sprayer** and a **Husky HVLP gravity feed sprayer**. I've only used the touch-up sprayer, but I can tell you that for the 12 bucks spent at **Harbor Freight** for it, that was money VERY well spent. I mixed my paint with an equal part water and painted several large props. This would work well for tombstones too, for base coats. Then you could just paint in your lettering later. If you have an airbrush, you could also do your aging and detail work with that.



The last step: aging. I used to just use plain old paint and dry-brush my age and mildew lines down the tombstones.

I just took a stiff paint brush, dipped it into the paint only a little, then used a piece of cardboard to brush off the excess.



I simply started at the top and moved the brush quickly down the stone, making several passes until it looked right to me.



On the top of the tombstones, I just dabbed the paint on, then streaked it by running the paint brush across it a few times.



I did the same at the letters, starting at the top of the letter and moving downward quickly and lightly to make it look as though water gets caught in the letters and the slow drip from that causes mildew or mold to form.



Now I use a spray bottle with water to help get that old dirty look. I spray the tombstone with a mist of water first.



Then I take a stiff paint brush and dip it in the black paint and wipe off the excess on a scrap piece of cardboard (just like above).

Obtained from
Omarshaintedtrail.com



This time however, I run the paint brush down the whole tombstone. I spray over that very lightly with the water, and let it run, drip and dry. Then I repeat that process with some pea-green paint mixed with black paint. I do this only in some spots just to give it that mossy green staining that I've seen on some tombstones and statuary.



Then I follow up with more black wherever I think it needs more or it ran too much before. This is where you just work with it until it looks good. It will need time to cure so that the paint doesn't wear off, so let them dry at least 24 hours before setting up in the yard.

You can also add stuff with hot glue to your tombstones, like moss, to give it that creepy look.

Anyway, there ya have it - the new and improved tombstones from The Dead End. As I learn new stuff, I'll add to the pages here.

For epitaphs, I like to use Goblinville.com 's list. They've got some good ones. Here's a list of more sites with epitaphs:

<http://www.howl2000.com/Epitaphs.html>

<http://www.famousquotes.me.uk/epitaphs/>

<http://www.insults.net/html/graves/index.html>

http://www.writing.com/main/handler/item_id/1099422

<http://home.wi.rr.com/epitaphs/>

<http://www.alsirat.com/epitaphs/>

<http://www.webpanda.com/ponder/epitaphs.htm>

<http://seniors-site.com/funstuff/epitaphs.html>

<http://www.innocentenglish.com/funny-dumb-quotes-questions-sayings/funny-epitaphs.html>

<http://www.digitaldreamdoor.com/pages/quotes/epitaphs.html>

http://www.mtworld.com/odds%20n%20ends/grave_epitaphs.html

Some funny cartoons with tombstones just for kicks:

<http://www.cartoonstock.com/directory/e/epitaph.asp>

Obtained from
Omarshantedtrail.com