



Rock Tumbling for Beginners – Part 2 of 2

Four Stage Process

Now that you have your tumbler and all the supplies you'll need, let's go into more detail about each of the four stages of rock tumbling.

Stage 1 - Shaping

As I've mentioned a few times already, the first step of the process is shaping with coarse grit. This will remove the rough edges from your rocks and give them a round shape. To start, fill your barrel about half to two-thirds of the way full. For best results, you should try to use various size rocks. If you don't have enough rocks to fill the barrel, be sure to add your plastic pellets after adding the rocks. You should also add pellets at this stage if your rocks are fragile or have a flat shape.

The next step is to add your coarse grit (about two tbsp per pound of rock) followed by water to nearly the top edge of your rocks. Close the barrel firmly and clean up any water or debris. Not everyone will do this next step, but I like to weigh my barrel before starting the machine. Every tumbler has a maximum weight. It's important to stay under this weight, so you don't wear out the motor.

Put the barrel on the tumbler, plug her in, and get going! I should mention here that tumblers can be noisy so you should probably set up in either your garage or basement – or even a shed if it has electricity.

After a few days, you'll want to check the progress to make sure the edges are being knocked down. Then after your rocks have been tumbling for about a full week, and they are the shape you want them to be, remove your rocks from the barrel and rinse in a clean bucket of water. Note that your time may vary depending on the type of rocks you're tumbling. Harder rocks and rocks with strong angles will take longer to shape than softer, smoother rocks. If your rocks aren't the desired shape after the first week, just put them back in for as long as it takes. Just be sure to check on them every day or so.

At this stage, you'll also want to clean out the barrel with soap and water as you prepare the rocks for stage two of the process. You'll want to make sure all of the coarse grit is cleaned out of the barrel. You want to be 100% sure all of the grit is out of the barrel, so you're not mixing coarse grit with the fine. Some people will even go so far as to use separate sponges for each type of grit when cleaning their barrel.

At all stages of cleaning, don't ever dump your waste products (slurry) down the drain – unless you happen to be a plumber and like repairing pipes. Once clean, it's time to move onto the finer grit.

Stage 2 - Medium/Fine Grit

Follow the same process as before, again adding pellets if needed. Be sure to clean the pellets good because grit will stick to them. Sometimes it's easier just to use a new batch of pellets.

Stage two (the finer grit) should take about the same amount of time as stage one. What you're

looking for here is to remove any visible scratches/cracks/pits and to create a dull glow on the rocks when they're dry. Since time here will vary, you should check on your rocks every day or so to see how they're progressing.

After another full cleaning, stage three is the pre-polish stage.

Stage 3 - Pre-Polish

The purpose here is to make your rocks silky smooth and start to bring out a bit of luster. This stage should also take about a week, but mileage may vary. One last full cleaning and we're onto the final stage – polish!

Stage 4 - Polish

This stage is going to use a grit that looks like a fine powder. After another week in this stage, your rocks should come out with a bright shine and look absolutely stunning.

During the polish stage, you should consider using some plastic pellets to protect your rocks from hitting each other. There's nothing worse than ruining a batch of rocks after a month of processing!

Finally, there's a bonus stage that's not necessary but can boost the brightness of your rocks – especially with agates and jaspers. It's called burnishing and is considered an additional stage of polish.

Burnishing

Burnishing is a fifth stage of tumbling, but instead of using grit, you're using some form of soap or powdered laundry detergent. This will put even more shine on your rocks, brighten them up, and remove any haze and residue from the slurry. If you're not sure whether the burnish stage will add more brightness to your rocks, a simple test can be done. Take one of your rocks and buff one side with a very soft cloth for 10-20 seconds. If the side you buffed is shinier than the other sides, it will benefit from a burnish stage.

Most people will either use borax or shaved layers of ivory bar soap. Whatever you use, make sure there are no additives in the soap that will harm your rocks. Also be sure to add your plastic pellets for protection. The ratios here are the same as in the grit stages. About two tbsp per pound of rock is recommended. All you need is 24 hours in a rotary tumbling during this stage. But the longer, the better!

Tip: during both the polish and burnish stage, you may want to batch your rock types. Since you'll mostly be tumbling types of quartz as a beginner, group them all together for these last two stages. Remove all other families of rock.

So there you have it. The complete process for tumbling rocks in your rotary tumbler. Expect to wait 3-6 weeks on average to complete the entire process.

Remember, patience is a virtue!

Excerpt from *Ultimate Beginners Guide to Rock Tumbling* by Mark Orwig

Source: <https://www.smarterhobby.com/rock-tumbling/>

Permission granted by Mark Orwig, Managing Editor, SmarterHobby.com