

GOOD DESIGN is in the DETAILS

beginner
metal clay

Give your pieces the unique finishing touches they deserve by making your own findings.

by Carol A. Babineau



Carol Babineau shares her design ideas for custom-making findings to complement your handcrafted jewelry.



Why fine silver?

When you'd like to embed wire, jump rings, or other findings in your metal-clay, remember that they should be fine silver. Sterling silver may melt or crumble in the kiln and possibly distort or discolor your piece.

You've just poured your heart and soul into a handmade piece of jewelry and, in your eyes, it's ideal. All that's left is to add a clasp or other finding and your jewelry's finished. You rifle through your stash of commercial findings, trying to select one that matches your stellar piece. Nothing quite fits your design perfectly, but you choose a finding anyway and attach it. Your jewelry is now complete and ready to wear, but something still gnaws at you.

The dilemma? No matter how nice a commercial finding appears on the shelf, unless you've matched your design to that particular finding, there will be subtle style differences that will mark your piece. And in the jewelry world, a truly polished, professional piece includes custom-made findings. Raising the bar a little on your end can bring you a renewed sense of creative self-satisfaction, not to mention make a big difference on the sales floor.

Metal clay is an ideal medium for making personalized findings: It's an easy material for beginners to work with, but offers enough flexibility for even the most advanced jewelry maker to create embellishments of elaborate detail. Once you master these techniques for making a slide finding, end caps, and a loop-and-toggle clasp, you'll have the know-how you need to begin designing your own unique findings.

SLIDE FINDING

A simple slide finding should act in concert with matching end caps to create a sense of unity for a piece of jewelry. You can also create a complex slide finding as a centerpiece for simple strung jewelry, in which case it may be surrounded by beads or drilled stones.

Design. Decide whether your slide finding will match other elements in your jewelry or whether it will be a one-of-a-kind piece. Plan the design. If you'd like to add texture to the slide, choose the stencils,

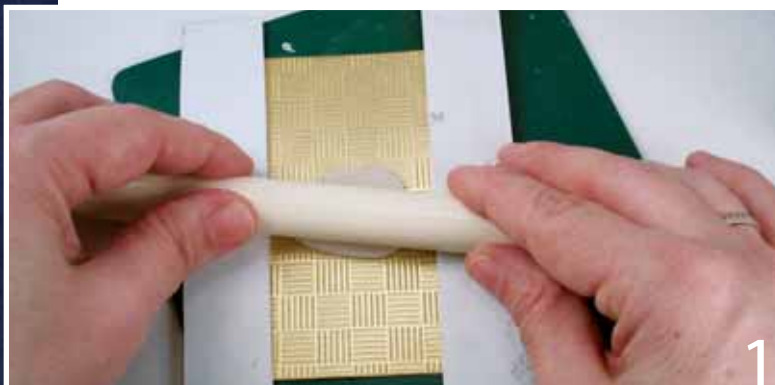
texture sheets, or stamps you will use.

Prepare a dowel. Wrap a 3- to 4-inch (7.62–10.16cm) length of a $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch-diameter (1.11cm) dowel with a piece of Teflon® and tape it in place. Lightly oil the Teflon.

Roll the clay. Place 16–25g of metal clay on a lightly oiled, heavy plastic surface between two stacks of 4 playing cards. Using an acrylic roller, roll the clay out to a 4-card thickness. Use a tissue blade to cut a $1\frac{3}{4}$ ×2-inch (4.45×5.08cm)

slab. Store the excess clay in an airtight container for subsequent steps.

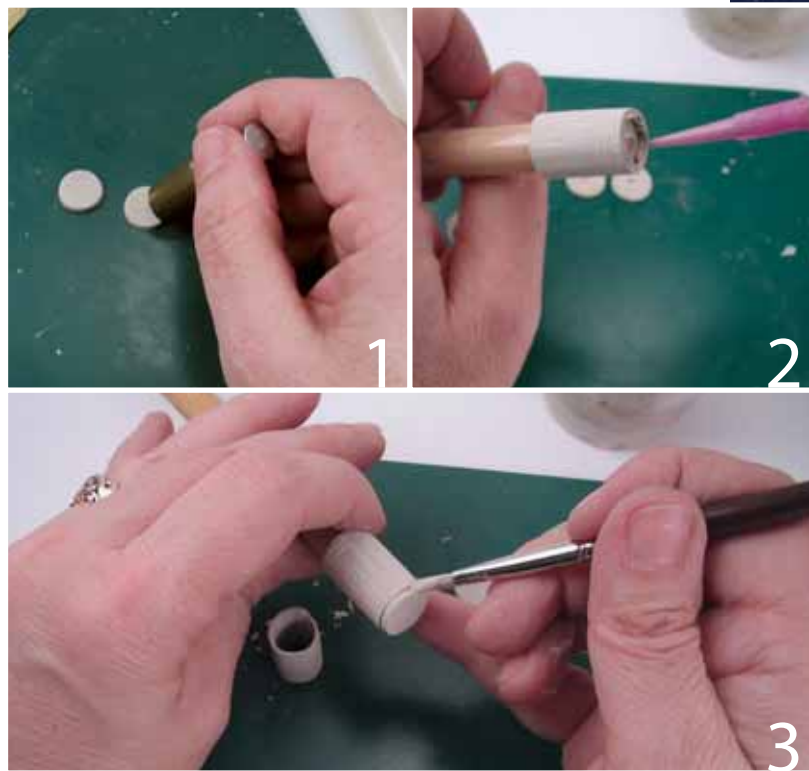
[1–2] Texture the clay (optional). Place your oiled texturing pattern either on top of the clay or underneath it [1]. Gently but firmly roll over the clay and pattern with an acrylic roller. Pick up both the pattern and the clay; gently peel the pattern away from the clay. Trim the clay evenly to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches (3.81cm) wide [2]. The length will be trimmed in the next step.



[3] Wrap the clay. Carefully wrap the clay around the Teflon-covered dowel (it will resemble a barrel). When you wrap it completely around, allow the clay to overlap, and cut evenly through both layers with a craft knife or tissue blade. This will ensure a clean seam. Use a small paintbrush to apply metal-clay slip or paste to the seam and blend it smooth with your finger. Reapply your textured pattern to the seam, if necessary.

Let the piece dry to the leather-hard state. Carefully remove the slide finding from the dowel, and apply more slip or paste to the interior of the seal.

Dry and refine. Let the piece dry to the bone-dry state and sand any rough areas with a fine-grit sanding material. If you are not making any more findings at this time, proceed to Finishing.



END CAPS

Snazzy, handcrafted end caps signify a professionally made necklace or bracelet. The initial steps for creating the end caps are the same as for the slide finding, except that you will use a slightly smaller dowel.

Begin by making two slide findings using a $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-diameter (.95cm) dowel instead of a $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch (1.11cm) dowel. Dry the slide findings to the leather-hard state (they are now end-cap barrels.)

[1] Cut out two circles. Roll out a slab of clay approximately 1 inch (2.54cm) square and 4 cards thick. Cut two $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-diameter (.95cm) circles from the slab. Let them dry to the leather-hard state.

[2–3] Attach a circle to each end-cap barrel. Slide the leather-hard end-cap barrels to the end of each dowel, leaving 3–5mm hanging over the edge. Squirt a line of metal-clay syringe around each of the

openings to create a “shelf” [2]; the dowels inside each barrel will help support the shelf. Place a leather-hard circle on the end of each barrel, resting the circle on the line of syringe clay; use slip for extra adhesion, if necessary [3].

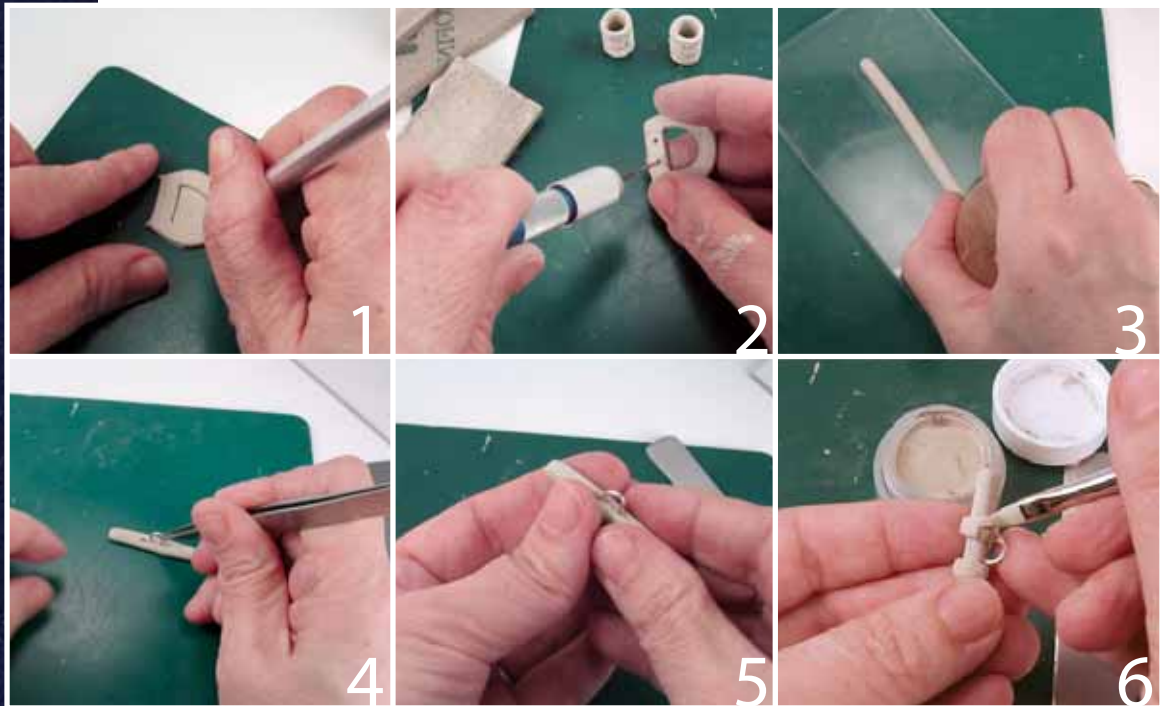
Let the syringe clay dry thoroughly before removing the end caps from the dowels. Apply more syringe clay to the interior seams of the end caps and smooth the seams with a damp paintbrush. Again, let them dry thoroughly.

Drill and refine. Carefully hand-drill a small hole in the top of each end cap with a drill bit. (*Editor’s Note:* The drill bit can be inserted into a pin vise for more leverage.) Tailor the size of the holes to your preference and remember to account for shrinkage during firing. Sand any rough areas smooth with a fine-grit sanding material. If you are not making any more findings at this time, proceed to Finishing.

texture to match

If you’d like to fashion a matching set of findings for a piece of jewelry, texture the slide finding, end caps, and loop-and-toggle clasp to create a unifying theme. Use the same texturing tool for all pieces, or use two texturing tools that have complementary patterns.





an optional toggle

You can embed a fine-silver jump ring halfway into your clay toggle, rather than a U-shaped staple. Secure the jump ring by making a clay toggle strip, brushing slip or paste on the underside of it, and looping the strip through the jump ring. Press the strip down over the ring and smooth the seam to secure it.

LOOP-AND-TOGGLE CLASP

A classic connecting device for either a necklace or a bracelet, loop-and-toggle clasps can be as simple or as complex as you desire. The clasp shown in the process photos is D-shaped, but nearly any shape with a hollow center will work.

LOOP

Roll the clay. Roll out a slab of clay 1½ inches (3.81cm) square and 4 playing cards thick.

Texture the clay

(optional). Impress the clay with a lightly oiled texturing pattern, as explained in steps 1–2 for the slide finding.

[1] Cut out the loop. Cut the slab to a basic D-shape, making sure the straight side of the D is wide enough to securely drill one or two holes in it. For a clasp that is equivalent in size to the one shown on the first page, the interior straight side of the D should be 1 inch (2.54cm)

long, and the interior width from the straight edge to the curved edge should be ⅝ inch (1.59cm). These measurements take into account that the clay will shrink slightly when fired. Allow this piece to dry until it is leather hard.

[2] Drill holes. Hand drill one or two holes in the straight side of the D using a drill bit. Make sure the holes are large enough to accommodate your jump rings (account for shrinkage during firing).

Refine the loop. Sand the piece to smooth any rough areas.

TOGGLE

[3] Make a clay snake. Roll out a clay snake 3–4mm thick and long enough to cut evenly to 1¾ inches (4.45cm) long. *(Editor's Note:* Placing a rectangular piece of clear, hard plastic over the clay and moving it in a brisk back-and-forth motion will yield a smooth, even snake without

handprints.) Temporarily cover the snake with plastic to retain the clay's moisture.

[4] Form a wire staple. Use 10–15mm of fine-silver wire and roundnose pliers to create a U-shaped staple. At the opening of the U, bend a 3–4mm 90-degree angle at each end using chainnose pliers. The staple should resemble an ohm symbol.

[5] Embed the staple into the clay snake. Press the fine-silver staple into the center of the snake about 2mm deep. Let the snake dry to the leather-hard state.

[6] Attach toggle strips. Roll out a slab of clay ½ inch (1.27cm) square and 3 playing cards thick. Use a tissue blade to cut two 4mm-wide strips from the slab. Apply metal-clay slip or paste to the strips and wrap them around the toggle to the left and right of the staple. Trim the strips as necessary, add slip or paste to the seams, and blend smooth.






FINISHING

[1] Dry and refine. Let the clasp pieces dry completely and sand any rough areas smooth.

[2] Fire and polish all the findings. When you have finished making the quantity of findings you had planned, fire the pieces simultaneously. Place a small amount of fiber blanket into each slide finding and end cap. Nestle the pieces in a bed of vermiculite or alumina hydrate. Place the flat toggle piece directly on the kiln shelf. Fire the pieces according to the clay manufacturer's instructions. Let the pieces cool completely.

Brush the findings with a stainless-steel or brass brush to remove the white residue from firing. If desired, polish them to a high shine in a tumbler with steel shot and burnishing compound, or use a hand burnishing tool.

[3] Patinate (optional). Patinate selected pieces with liver of sulfur

according to the manufacturer's instructions. Rinse them in clean water, wash with soapy water, and then rinse again. 

RESOURCES

- PMC3® metal clay, syringe, and paste
- www.pmc3supply.com
- www.pmc123.com

materials

SLIDE FINDING

- Metal clay, about 5g
- Metal clay, about 10g
- Metal-clay slip or paste
- Metal-clay syringe

LOOP-AND-TOGGLE

- Metal clay, about 10g
- Fine-silver wire: 16-gauge, hard, 10–15mm
- Jump ring, fine-silver (optional)

tools & supplies

SLIDE FINDING

- Stencils, stamps, or textured sheets
- Olive oil
- Heavy plastic surface
- Playing cards
- Acrylic roller
- Tissue blade or craft knife
- Sanding material, fine-grit
- Dowel, $\frac{7}{16}$ -inch-diameter (1.11cm)
- Teflon® (to wrap around dowels)

END CAPS

- Stencils, stamps, or textured sheets
- Olive oil
- Heavy plastic surface
- Playing cards
- Acrylic roller
- Tissue blade or craft knife
- Sanding material, fine-grit
- Dowel, $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-diameter (.95cm)

- Teflon® (to wrap around dowels)
- Small paintbrush
- Circle template or cutter, $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch-diameter (.95cm)
- Small drill bit
- Pin vise (optional)

LOOP-AND-TOGGLE

- Stencils, stamps, or textured sheets
- Olive oil
- Heavy plastic surface
- Playing cards
- Acrylic roller
- Tissue blade or craft knife
- Sanding material, fine-grit
- Small drill bit
- Pin vise (optional)
- Clear hard plastic, 4×7 inches (10.16×17.78cm) (optional)
- Roundnose pliers
- Chainnose pliers

FINISHING

- Small amount of fiber blanket
- Vermiculite or alumina hydrate
- Kiln and ceramic-fiber kiln shelf
- Stainless-steel or brass brush
- Tumbler with steel shot and burnishing compound (optional)
- Hand burnisher (optional)
- Liver of sulfur (optional)



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