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## How to Layer Your Skin-Care Products to Make Them as Effective as Possible

A best-practices playbook to making the most of your skincare.

By [Liz Ritter, Executive Editor](#) · Jul 29, 2020



**T**he Internet collectively lost its mind last year when the *Big Little Lies* skin-care meme made the rounds. As the suggested instruction of cleanser-toner-moisturizer-oil-sunscreen offered a solid, illustrated answer to the age-old question of what order we should apply our skin-care products in, not everyone was fully convinced.

Chaos ensued, revised recommendations circulated and numerous questions strongly challenging everything from the facial oil step to the non-mention of foundation quite literally swarmed social media for a couple of days.

Besides being a fan of moisturizer before oil, celebrity aesthetician Veronica Barton Schwartz says she sees her clients make mistakes with the order of their products all the time. “You could have the most amazing skin care, but if you’re applying them in the wrong order, you’re wasting time and money. The biggest problem is putting thin, water-based products on top of thicker creamy or oily ones. The thicker products form a barrier that prevents anything else from penetrating the skin properly, so you’ll never see the full benefits of everything you apply after that.”

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## 01. Thin-Skinned

Because thicker products pretty much play the part of Fort Knox on your face, it's smart to start with the thinnest, or the most-watery products, such as toners and serums, first. "Heavier, more moisturizing products, like lotions, creams and oils, come next," says Barton Schwartz.

And as for the great SPF debate, Barton Schwartz always recommends applying sunscreen as the last skin-care step, and then makeup can go on top of that. "If you layer serums, creams and oils on top of your SPF, you're essentially diluting it, leaving your skin susceptible," she says. Hannah Hatcher, makeup artist and global educator for jane iredale, is in agreement, and suggests applying SPF, then taking a minute before making any makeup moves. "I think many people don't like sunscreen because it 'mixes' with their other products. If you go too fast and don't wait for it to sink in, it can make it less effective and even get in your eyes, which doesn't look good," Hatcher says. "Let it sit, let it set. It will make everything look better."

## 02. Night Shift

So, do the basic steps change from morning-to-night routines? Most experts will say yes, but it really only comes down to a couple of simple steps. "At night, you're doing a deeper cleansing to wash off the day's pollution, makeup and sunscreen," Barton Schwartz says. "You still follow the same steps with your routine, going lightest to heaviest, but at the end of the cleansing routine, you can use either a chemical or physical exfoliant." Prospect, KY dermatologist [Q Tami Buss Cassis, MD](#) agrees and stresses that if you're using a retinoid or any other active, apply it to clean skin. "Using too many products and not using the active ingredient first are common mistakes. Sometimes, your dermatologist will cheat and ask you to moisturize first, but that is only because they are helping you out for a reason, like if you have sensitive skin."

## 03. Water Source

This one can get a bit confusing, but New York dermatologist Michelle Henry, MD recommends considering a facial mist like a toner or essence. "They are very light and water-based, so they should be layered under richer creams to get the most benefit. And, because they are light and often also very hydrating, they are great options for daytime." Regarding face mists and sprays, Dr. Cassis says applying them post-makeup gets a positive check in her book. "I love my Avène Thermal Spring Water— it is a must. I always use it after I apply my makeup." And is it bad to reapply over makeup throughout the day? "Nope, never!" she says. "Hydration is the key to good skin."

**Inside Tip:** If you go the layering route with serums, Rescue Spa's Kim Zimmerman says it's important to be aware of the ingredients so you aren't overdoing it with actives such as retinol, vitamin A or certain acids. "Depending on your routine, these ingredients may also show up in your cleanser and moisturizer, so it is important to be aware, especially if you are sensitive."

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## The Serum Step

As very opinionated social-media reviewers and New York dermatologist [Q Jody Levine, MD](#) call out: The popular meme skipped the serum step. In a nutshell, serum should be applied before moisturizer, and she recommends the face wash, toner, serum, moisturizer mix. “Many people massage serums into their skin, but you should let the formulas absorb on their own.” Her suggestion: Gently press them into skin and allow them to absorb for a few minutes before applying moisturizer.

Because serums absorb deep into the skin—rather than sitting on the surface like moisturizers—many skin-care savants also choose to layer them, adding a whole other level to the application game. “The thing I notice most in terms of incorrect skin-care application is that clients don’t know how to layer their serums properly—it’s probably the number-one question we get the most,” Zimmerman says.

When in doubt, she uses the same general rule of thumb: Layer your serums in order of thinnest to thickest in viscosity. “This way they can properly absorb deeper into the epidermis and you receive the benefits of your products.



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