

Pipe Stems - Vulcanite vs. Acrylic

Generally there are several types of materials used for pipe stems, Vulcanite (a.k.a. Ebonite or Rubber), Acrylic (a.k.a. Lucite), Bakelite, Cumberland and Brindle. Vulcanite and Acrylic seem to be the most popular. Each has its advantages and disadvantages.

Vulcanite/Ebonite: Vulcanite is a sulfur-hardened rubber. It is fairly soft on the teeth and is more flexible than Acrylic. It will yellow and oxidize with time. Vulcanite is more prone to breakage. If you need to make minor adjustments to the stem, Vulcanite is very forgiving.

Acrylic/Lucite: Acrylic is Polymethyl methacrylate, also known as Plexiglas, Perspex, Plazcryl, Acrylite, Acrylplast, Altuglas, R-Cast, Polycast. It's harder than Vulcanite stems and will not oxidize. It comes in many colors and swirls. Acrylic is more durable and stays clean and shiny with less effort. It's can be harder on the teeth, so many smokers prefer Vulcanite, even though it will oxidize.

Bakelite: Here's the chemical name: Polyoxybenzylmethylenglycolanhydride. Bakelite is fairly hard compared to the hardened rubbers, but softer than Acrylic. It doesn't oxidize like Vulcanite, though the color can deepen over time. It comes in many different colors, though for the purposes of pipe making only a few shades of white, amber and yellow seem to be available to pipe makers. The popular 60's pipe called "The Pipe" was made entirely of Bakelite.

Cumberland: Cumberland is a sulfur-hardened rubber. It's fairly soft on the teeth and is more flexible than Acrylic. It will yellow and oxidize over time. It won't oxidize as fast as Vulcanite because it has less sulfur. Cumberland also has the added benefit of being a lighter color than black and so does not show yellowing as quickly. Dunhill was the first to put Cumberland on the market.

Brindle: Brindle is also a sulfur-hardened rubber. It is fairly soft on the teeth and is more flexible than Acrylic. It will yellow and oxidize over time. Brindle is just another name for Cumberland.