

Sanding Strategies

Give raw wood and base-coated pieces the royal treatment by sanding their surfaces. Our short course shows you how to sand with success.

Tools and Supplies

In the instructions for projects featured in Better Homes and Gardens crafts magazines, we tell you to sand all wood surfaces before and after you seal the wood. We also often include a step for sanding the base-coated surfaces with a paper grocery sack. And when you finish a project, we recommend that you sand paint or varnish from surfaces you'll join with glue or 5-minute epoxy.

All of these steps -- no matter how tedious -- are necessary for creating smooth, long-wearing surfaces and tight joints. Ignoring them can compromise the overall appearance and longevity of your painted project. Here are some strategies for making the sanding process simple and stress-free.

1. Stock Up for Starters

If you cut your own wood, choose stock from your local lumber supplier that's free of defects such as excessive planer marks. If you plane your own stock, adjust your machine properly, and use sharp knives for best results. Likewise, keep your saws tuned up and use high-quality, well-sharpened blades.

2. Get the Right Grit

Whether you sand with a power tool, for instance a belt sander, or a hand tool such as a sanding block, it's best to use the grit that's specified in the project instructions. The grit number (or mesh number) refers to the particle size of the abrasive mineral, from 36 grit (the most abrasive) to 600 grit (a very fine sandpaper). The sanding products you're most likely to use fall within the 100- to 220-grit range. These grits will work fine as long as you start with good-quality stock.

3. Choose Your Tools

Consider using a variety of tools to make the sanding process smoother:

Hand sanders: Custom-make your own sanding blocks by wrapping the abrasive around a block of hardwood. Foam sanding blocks work great on rounded surfaces because they're easy to grip. For hard-to-reach areas, attach abrasives to small wooden shapes, such as dowels, pieces, and curved or rounded blocks.

Power sanders: You'll find a wide variety of tools on the market, including belt sanders, finishing sanders, random-orbit sanders, and detail sanders. Each sanding tool has unique features; choose the one that works best for your project.

Basic Techniques

1. Go with the Grain

This is one of the easiest rules to remember when sanding. Going against the grain can create visible scratch marks. Pay close attention to a project that has four joined sides. Where the end of one piece meets the edge of another piece, you'll want to sand right up to the joint without crossing it. Sand the edge last, being careful to sand with the grain.

2. Progress from Coarse- to Fine-Grit Sandpaper

Begin by sanding with the grain with 100-grit sandpaper to remove the deepest scratches from the wood. Then sand with 150-grit sandpaper for a smooth, uniform surface that will evenly absorb the paint. For base-coated surfaces, we recommend sanding with paper cut from a plain paper grocery sack before continuing to paint details or applying varnish. This is by far the finest-grit sandpaper around, and it will remove any fuzz raised by acrylic paint without leaving scratches. Be sure to use the plain side of

the sack; the ink on the printed side could rub off onto the project surface. You may crumple the bag before using it to make the paper more pliable. If you do, crumple it and then flatten the piece so there are no hard folds or edges.

3. Search for Scratches

Once you complete all sanding, remove the dust with a light sweep of a tack cloth. (Do not rub the surface with the cloth; you'll leave a sticky residue.) Then hold a light at an angle over the piece (or place the piece near a window) to inspect it for scratches. Sand again as before until the surface is smooth and scratch-free.

4. Make It Stick

All adhesives bond best to clean, dry, bare wood. Sand painted or varnished parts to expose bare wood in the gluing areas. Then remove dust from the surface, but don't rub the surface with a tack cloth -- the wax residue will prevent an effective bond.