

Scrollsaw Tips and Techniques

The scrollsaw is a key tool for most woodcrafters. Following the pointers below will help you master it.

Position Your Pattern

To concentrate on your scrollsaw technique, put a clear pattern on your wood piece to reduce any distractions. You can copy the outline onto the piece with transfer paper and apply the pattern with rubber cement, spray adhesive, or repositionable spray glue.

Joanne recommends removing the dust from your wood piece, then spraying the pattern -- not the wood -- with repositionable glue. (She uses Ridlen All-Purpose Glue.) Spray lightly; if your pattern becomes transparent, you've applied too much glue.

Once you've transferred your pattern, try cutting multiple shapes from 1/8" stock. Stack 4 to 6 wood pieces that are slightly larger than the shape you plan to cut. Wrap masking tape around the outside edges of the stack, overlapping the tape ends firmly. Then once you've cut the wood pieces, simply remove the tape.

Don't Take It Sitting Down

Unless you're an experienced woodcutter, always stand directly in front of your saw. Don't move off to the side of the saw as you work; it's easier to feed the work straight into the blade. Also, keep a fluorescent light at one side of your saw. The light will prevent shadows on your cutting area. And always wear a dust mask.

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Make Blades Your Business



After extensively testing all blade sizes on 1/8" wood, Joanne finds she prefers a #3 double-tooth blade. Blade sizes #4 to #6 work best for 1" stock. A double-tooth blade will produce less chip-out on your wood piece, and will last longer than other blades.

To install your blade, make sure the teeth face you and point downward. A blade installed backwards won't cut wood, and an upside-down blade will pick your wood up off the table bed and slap it back down again. You'll notice sawdust on the top surface of your wood piece, not on the bottom, if the blade is upside down. For proper blade tension, insert the blade and turn the tension knob three-quarters of a turn past the point of resistance. A blade that's too loose won't cut a straight pattern line, and a blade that's too tight will break and possibly damage your saw.

Hold On to Your Hands

If you're right-handed, you'll probably be more comfortable cutting your wood pieces with the largest portion of your piece to the right of your blade. Left-handers should work with the largest part of the wood piece on the left side of the blade.

Don't put your hands at the edge of your wood piece. Position them an inch away from either side of the blade to control the wood movement. Keep your fingers at least four inches away from the front of the scrollsaw blade.

Position Your Hands

Joanne considers hand position the most critical aspect of controlling your workpiece. If your hand position is correct and you're working on a good-quality saw, you will not tire quickly and you'll enjoy what you're doing. All you need is a light touch to hold the wood -- a white-knuckle hold only tires you out and makes the wood more difficult to turn. (Note: Thick wood needs to be held down much more firmly than thin wood.)

Imagine that you're driving a car. You know you're headed into a sharp turn, and you reposition your hands in preparation. The same thing applies to the scrollsaw. "Think ahead," says Joanne. "Unless I'm sawing in a straight line," she notes, "my hands are constantly moving around the wood to better position myself for the turns."

Watch your hand movements. If you find yourself turning your body to control the movements of the wood, stop and reposition yourself. If you notice when you turn that your entire arm is in front of the blade, stop! Always stand square in front of the machine for best control. Once you're aware of your hand movements, you can cut anything.

Keep the Blade Moving

It's imperative to keep the blade moving when attempting to turn your workpiece. "Ninety-nine percent of my students have a tendency to stop the motor (especially when working with a foot switch) when going into a tight turn," Joanne confirms. "This causes the wood to pick up and smash back down on the table." Keep your motor going! And listen to your machine. You should not hear any sawing noise when you make a 90-degree turn.

Make the turn by putting your finger fairly close to the blade to allow the wood piece to "pivot" around the blade. An inch away from the blade is close enough.

When you're trying to cut out a circle, keep the feeding speed constant. If you continually stop and start as you make the turn, the finished edge will be choppy.