



TIPS FOR SANDING SUCCESS

Sanding is something that most woodworkers take for granted. We don't think much about it, we just do it. It can be pretty dull, it's always dusty and it's usually a little tiring. But when you think about it, sanding is what creates the final surface of a project. To put it simply, the finish sanding that you do or don't do can make or break a project. After spending more hours sanding than I care to remember, I've managed to come up

with a few simple tips to help reduce the "chore" of sanding.

THE GOAL. Before you jump into any job, it's a good idea to have an end goal in sight. And sanding is no exception. Here the goal is simple but pretty important. You want to smooth and refine all the surfaces so that when the finish goes on, the project will look its best.

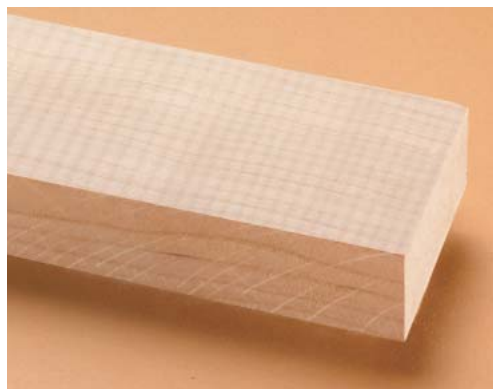
I'm likely to use 4 or 5 power tools during construction and each one can

leave its mark. But when I'm all done, I want the project itself to show-off, not what I used to make it. And good sanding is the key here.

I like tabletops and other large surfaces to be nice and flat with only the grain of the wood showing (no glue joints, planer marks, dips, or bumps). And any contours should be smooth and graceful. When I run my fingers over a flush joint, I don't want to feel a thing. Invisible to the eye *and* to the touch. That's what I always try to shoot for.

SIMPLE TOOLS. In the end, I like to make sanding a "hands-on" task. I use belt sanders, pad sanders, and drum sanders for the rough stuff, but when it comes to the final surface, nothing beats sandpaper and a little elbow grease. It's not rocket science, so just keep it simple.

When I'm working on any flat surface, from a door stile to a tabletop, the sandpaper is always wrapped around a padded sanding block. Using a block helps to create flat surfaces and keep them flat.



▲ This piece of cherry, straight from the mill with pretty serious saw and planer marks, needs some work before the joinery starts.



▲ The same piece of cherry shows a clean surface and crisp joinery, after just a little work with some 100 grit sandpaper.

A little bit of “hard” padding makes a big difference. What the padding does is form soft spots where the dust can accumulate and be released from under the block. Your paper won’t clog quite as fast and you won’t get streaks on your work from lumps of sanding dust. It’s an old trick, but it sure works.

FINGERS. The second important sanding tool isn’t very “high tech.” It’s just your fingers. Sometimes a quarter sheet of sandpaper, folded in thirds and wrapped around a finger or two is the only way to get into that small cove or smooth the router marks off that bead trim. It’s pretty simple, but there’s nothing better.

And I use my fingers in another way. They can sometimes be a better judge of flatness than your eyes. An auto body repairman once told me that “if you can’t feel it, you can’t see it.” And he was right. If you run your fingers over a joint and it feels smooth, you can trust that it will look good. So for me the final test is usually the finger test. If my work passes this test, I know it’s smooth.

GOOD LIGHT. It’s really just common sense, but good light can be a tool. It’s hard to do a good job when you can’t see what you’re working on.

And look at the work from more than one angle. Sometimes problems aren’t noticeable until you see them in a “different light.” If you’re not sure about your progress, a little mineral spirits wiped on the surface can help. Under good light the wet thinner will give you a preview of what you’ll get with a finish, but it won’t raise the grain.

START EARLY. I don’t wait until the project is assembled before I start sanding. Almost as soon as my pieces come off the table saw, I start sanding. It’s really just another step to work into the building process. And when you fit it into the flow you’ll get a better result in the end.

I don’t do a lot of sanding right off the bat, but enough to get a good head start. The bottom photos on page one show the difference that just a small amount of work with some coarse sandpaper can make.

Get started at removing the surfacing marks and saw marks and any major blemishes on your rough cut blanks before you get to the joinery. This way you’ll be working with pieces that are pretty close to final thickness so your joinery should be a little crisper and more accurate.

Next, I concentrate on removing tool marks and smoothing the flat surfaces and contours. This is rough work. Coarse sandpaper can be a pretty good shaping tool, and I take advantage of it. (One of the few times I sand below 100-grit is when I’m “refining” a curve.)

THE RIGHT SEQUENCE. When it comes to sanding it sometimes pays to be aggressive. Early on, I used to waste a lot of time and energy trying to sand away planer or jointer marks with 180 or 220-grit paper. But no longer. Now I usually start with 100 or 120-grit paper. You can get a lot farther, a lot faster this way.

This may be stating the obvious, but the key to this strategy is to start coarse and then work your way up through the finer grits. Start at 100-grit, and your next stop could be at 150-grit. And when you’ve got a consistent surface at 150, step up to 180.

THINK AHEAD. And think a bit ahead when you’re sanding. Sand the hard to reach spots before assembly. I’ve learned this lesson the hard way on a project or two. So I make sure the difficult spots get all the attention they need before glue-up.

STAY FOCUSED. It’s very easy to lose track of what you’re doing when sanding and I try really hard to avoid this. One of the goals of my wood-working is to have crisp, sharply defined surfaces and edges. I want my projects to look like I paid attention to the details.

You want joint lines to end up perfectly flush. On a door frame, for example, you don’t want to be able to see or feel where the stile ends and the rail begins. And you don’t want to accidentally “round over” the square edges. I work to keep all the edges crisp and sharp while working up through the sanding stages. This is



where a sanding block earns its keep.

And then as a final step, you can gently ease the sharp corners with some fine paper. Just enough to make them feel comfortable.

ALL THE SAME. Consistency is one of the keys to getting a smooth final surface and a good finish. Treat all the parts and surfaces the same. It’s as simple as that. Don’t be tempted to skip over one of the grits or maybe quit a little early. It might look fine at the time but you’ll regret it later on. The finish is likely to give away the “cut corners.”

This is especially important if you plan to stain. Rough areas will usually stain darker than smoother surfaces. A blotchy stain job can be the result of some hasty sanding. But if you sand everything the same, it will stain and finish the same.

And if you plan to stain, sand a little finer on the end grain. It tends to soak-up more stain and ends up looking darker than the face grain. But if it’s sanded to a finer grit, the color will be more consistent.

WHERE TO STOP. Where you stop usually depends on the type of finish you plan to use. If I’m going to paint a project, a 120 or 150-grit surface is great. For a clear built-up finish like varnish or shellac I don’t go past 180-grit. But if you’re applying a really thin, oil-type finish, it doesn’t hurt to sand to 220-grit.

When I’m giving a project the final once over with fine sandpaper, I work until everything looks good, and then I sand a little more. A little extra effort at this point beats regrets later on. If the project is consistently smooth, I know I’ll be pleased when the finish goes on. **TV**

▲ Whether it’s shop made or “store bought”, a padded sanding block will make the job easier with better results.