Ten Tips

Improve the speed and quality of your next trim job with better layout, assembly, and installation

BY JOE MILICIA

Perhaps nowhere does the old saying that time is money ring truer than in carpentry. To stay in business, I need to work quickly, and I need to do so while maintaining a high standard of quality. For instance, if I only have a couple of days to complete a crown-molding installation and I end up spending 40% of my time making extra trips up and down ladders or hunting for materials, I'm not only cutting into my earnings, but I'm spending far less time cutting and fitting joints precisely.

That's why any professional who installs trim will benefit from a production approach that eliminates wasted time while bolstering accuracy. While whole books have been published about the production approach, I've boiled down my method to 10 essential tips that every trim-installation job can benefit from. Even if you don't make your living as a carpenter, these select strategies will help you to create a better-looking job that allows you to move on to other projects faster.

Admittedly, no two trim jobs are the same, and no two carpenters are either. What saves time for one person may make another person develop a sore back, and different materials sometimes demand an adjusted workflow. The tips here are an organizational starting point

1 Increase efficiency with a dedicated production area

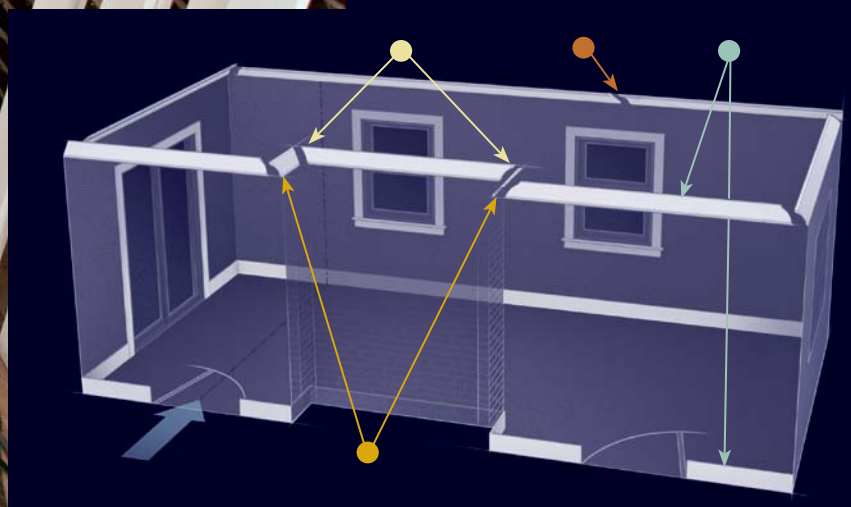
In a production area such as this, you can mill and assemble window trim while at the same time organizing rough cuts of base moldings that will eventually be coped and cut to final length. Despite its small space, this cut room and assembly setup creates a workflow where neither work areas nor carpenters create a bottleneck.

Drawing: Christopher Mills

for Fast Trim

Visualize a plan of attack

2 To make your cutlists, always begin with a visual layout of each room. Walk each room and take an accurate count of trim lengths to minimize the splices in crown and base trim and to make sure that the splices are put in the least conspicuous spots and on the flattest surfaces of the room. Move around each room from left to right, numbering each board on the cutlist and marking it if it is a left or right cope. Being consistent in measuring each room is important, as it ensures that you don't miss any sections. Use this cutlist to rough-cut the trim. If some of the boards have knots in the middle, use them for the shorter pieces. This ensures that the best long boards remain intact for the longest runs.

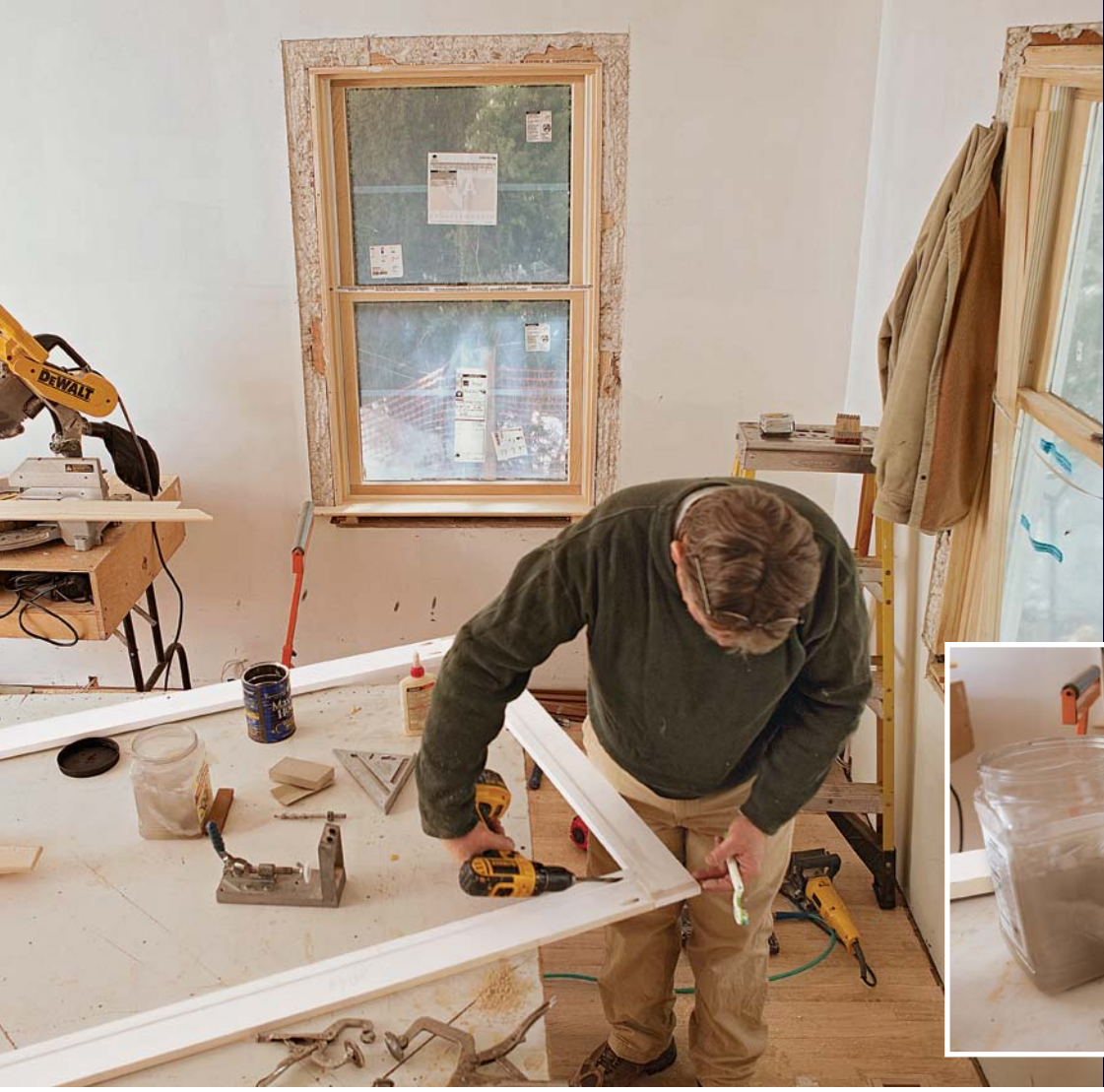


Avoid coping short lengths of trim, as these are difficult to fit.

Start at the hardest spot—here, the outside miters with the short legs to the wall.

Locate crown splices out of sightlines and away from low spots in the ceiling, which are the most difficult places to get an even splice.

Measure rough cuts for crown and base at once. One carpenter can make short work of developing a rough-cut list by measuring the wall lengths and adding 3 in. for waste.



Windows require a large assembly table

3 Make your worktable large enough to fully support casing during assembly and glue-ups. A table that's too small won't provide enough support or an adequate clamping surface. By keeping a glue-brush jar full of water nearby (below), cleaning joints during casing assembly becomes second nature instead of a step that can be forgotten.

Don't be fussy when you don't have to be

4 Carefully cutting drywall for an outlet isn't necessary when the drywall will be covered by baseboard trim. Be sure, however, to locate the outlet so that when the shoe molding is added later, the outlet will appear centered on the baseboard.

and should be optimized to suit the way you work and to fit the work at hand.

Job preparation

The key to efficiency is creating good cutlists, a process that begins with a series of site assessments. At my company, we typically create a rough-cut list and a final list. Before the job starts, we take an inventory of the types and sizes of the windows and doors we have. We order trim specifically for each window and door size. This minimizes wasted time and ensures that we don't have splices on trim around windows and doors. Also to cut down on splices, we order the longest lengths of crown, baseboard, and shoe molding available.

If by a stroke of luck we are awarded a job at the framing stage, we stop by after the rough mechanicals are installed and take a few photos. These photos help to identify the location of nailing hazards such as wiring and pipes before they are hidden behind the insulation and drywall. We organize the photos by floor and eventually attach them to the cutlist as a reminder of potential trouble areas. When the drywall is installed, we can quickly make reference marks for these obstacles to prevent complications or delays in our trim installation.

For similar reasons, we check all the rooms for discrepancies, such as drywall that sticks proud of the window-jamb extensions, or low spots in the ceiling that will interfere with splices in the crown.

We make our assessments in the order in which we work, from the top of the house down and from the crown down in each room. This lets us begin the work without any finished flooring and allows other contractors to come in behind us as we complete each room.

Make cuts in two stages

We begin with a rough-cut phase in which we measure each trim piece, write its dimension on the drywall behind its intended location for future reference, then cut it about 3 in. long. We bundle rough-cut trim packages for each room together.

Rough-cutting adds an extra step to the job, but there are four very good reasons to do this with all of the trim. First, it allows us to prepare the trim in such a way that we can later cut out any knots or imperfections that would lead to callbacks. Second, it helps us to confirm that we ordered the right quantity of trim, as we can reference our cutlist while moving through the stack of material. Third, it gives us greater control over our use of the stock. For example, when we're installing door and window casing, we like to cut the miters at the middle of the trimboards rather than at the ends, which are more prone to snipe marks from milling and to checks. Finally, rough-cutting means that one carpenter can cut copes on one end of the crown, base, and shoe molding while another carpenter continues taking door and window measurements around the house. Cutting copes ahead of time, leaving the opposite end long, saves a lot of time when it comes to final cutting and installation.

Once the rough-cutting is done, we create a final cutlist to guide dimensioning the trim all the way through installation. A cutlist can be developed in many forms. Ours are not so much lists as they are attack plans (see p. 69). You can make a cutlist look like a checklist, a floor plan, or a combination of both.

Whatever its appearance, the final cutlist should include all the information you need for production. For large projects, we like to put the floor number first, followed by a number for each window and door. We start with the room to the left of the stairs and then

Create strong joints quickly

5 Biscuit miters for strength. But instead of marking the center of a biscuit to align the tool, register the biscuit joiner's edge to the tip of the miter to speed the process. Have enough miter clamps on hand (right) to reinforce each joint as the glue sets. Enough clamps for three windows keeps the production line moving without having to wait for glue to dry before assembling the next window.

Custom-fit stools to maintain quality

6 To maximize efficiency, remove the wallboard where necessary, and fit all the stools at once. Hold a section of casing in place to establish where the stool's mitered return intersects the casing's edge.

Reference marks help you stay organized

7 When fitting a trim component such as a window stool around the jamb, make a small tick to reference its ideal position. This saves time when fitting the dimensioned pieces later and ensures that the stool doesn't get installed in the wrong opening.

Use screws when needed

8 While finish nails satisfy most fastening tasks, certain components need to be pulled into place and demand the increased holding power that screws provide. On paint-grade trim, use trim-head screws, then fill the holes with putty and sand them flush.

work left to right. For example, door 301 would be the first door on the left of the third floor.

On most of our jobs, we create a cut room in a large, centrally located space to create some semblance of an assembly line. Ideally, the room can stay intact throughout the project. If large enough, the room also houses our glue-up worktable, where we assemble the door and window casings, and in some instances, even the built-up trim elements if the design calls for them.

With the cut room organized, begin the assembly

Whenever we can, we place the stock pile to the left of the cutting station, with the saw situated along one wall, and the opposite wall reserved for pieces that have been cut to length. This allows the cut man simply to turn around rather than being forced to walk around the length of the miter-saw stand. We set up another workstation to do all of our left and right copes. On the job pictured here, space was a little tight, so we used both the table and the wall to stage material.

After installing the crown, we move on to window and door trim before attacking the base and shoe. While we tackle nearly every job with this approach, we're careful never to pigeonhole ourselves into any given process. For example, on this job, we installed the flat casing on the windows and doors first and then went back and completed another cutlist for the backband. Sometimes trying to do everything ahead of time simply isn't as efficient as breaking up the process into more manageable chunks. Our crew has been working together for a while and falls into a natural rhythm, but we like to approach jobs with flexibility and always stay on the lookout for new efficiencies. □

Joe Milicia is the owner of Hobart Builders in Fairfield, Conn.
Photos by John Ross.

Clamp when you can

9 Look for opportunities to use clamps to hold trim in place. Here, double-hung sashes allow clamp placement where the carpenter would have a difficult time pushing the trim into place. Once the entire assembly is secured, the clamps are removed and the trim stays put, with a consistent reveal.

Don't cut corners for speed

10 Door casings require two trips to the saw. First, scribe and cut the side leg to the floor (inset below). Then mark the leg's length to maintain the proper reveal across the head casing (inset bottom). Finally, use two fastener sizes to secure the casing. For trim-to-trim connections, 18-ga. fasteners work well; 16-ga. fasteners secure the trim to the framing (below right).