

Painting Trim the Right Way

A pro shares **8 steps**
from prep to final coat

BY TIM LEAHY

Most people who are new to painting see the job in terms of applying the finish coat, but that's just the icing on the cake. The real work that makes or breaks a paint job is how you prepare the surface. If you're painting interior trim and you don't do a good job of sanding, cleaning, and priming, the final coats of paint won't look pristine. At the very worst, a poor prep job can make the finish coats fail. I work in high-end restoration, where the end result is paramount. Over the years, I have developed the following procedures for a great paint job.



Master Craftsman

Born and raised in Newport, R.I., Tim Leahy grew up in a Navy family. Trained as a chef, he married his college sweetheart, started a family, and eventually gave up cooking to work as a painter for Kirby Perkins, a local building and restoration company. He worked his way to a painting foreman's job 15 years ago. He and his crew tackle everything from faux finishes to marine-grade varnish and recently completed a 30-ft. by 50-ft. room that's a replica of a yacht's interior.

Tim specializes in matching old finishes. With his three kids all grown, he spends his off-hours employing his cooking skills (he's placed first three times in the last seven years of neighborhood grilling cook-offs) and playing golf, an activity at which he admits he's not as accomplished. Like all good craftsmen, he has a hard time putting down the tools, and he relaxes by refinishing antiques. With all that, he claims his greatest achievement is "being a good parent."

STEP 1 Clear the air

Whether it's your spouse, the construction manager, the homeowner, or any combination of the three, everyone needs to know when the painting stage of a job is set to begin. Other trades need to be out of the area, and the air needs to be right, especially for the last finish coats. The inside temperature should be between 55°F and 80°F, and the humidity level should be less than 50%. Humidity between 50% and 80% is less than ideal. When the humidity shoots over 85%, the paint won't dry properly, which may cause blushing, sags, wrinkling, or film failure.

Air quality is very important, especially during the finish-coat stage, so we try to eliminate all airborne dust by using fans fitted with filters to draw in clean air and exhaust dusty air from the work area.



First things first. Before starting the prep, thoroughly vacuum the floor and all horizontal edges to eliminate dirt and dust. An aftermarket HEPA filter (inset) improves the performance of a typical job-site vac.

STEP 2 Clean and protect the room

A dirty floor and fresh paint don't mix. The dirt gets airborne when kicked or when cords, hoses, or ladders are moved. Once everyone has left the area, the first thing we do is vacuum. Sawdust, dirt, and other debris on the floors and walls need to be cleaned off with a powerful vacuum that has nonmarring attachments. Vacuums

equipped with high-efficiency particulate absorption (HEPA) filters are the best, although they can be expensive.

Any hardware should be removed or protected. We remove hardware, tag it with tape, label it with a marker, and place it into plastic bags or clean cups. If there is a lot of hardware, I use a camera or a sketch pad to document the layout before taking everything apart.

If the area has finished floors, we use one of three levels of protection. If we happen to be priming in a room where the flooring hasn't been finished, we tape down rosin paper, which helps keep the dust and dirt to a minimum. If the finish is in place, then we switch to a thicker, more protective paper product such as Ram Board, and sometimes even add a plastic layer to block moisture. The ultimate protection is paper first, followed by a layer of plastic and a layer of luan plywood.



Cover the floor. It's a good idea to cover the floor with builder's paper to contain any embedded dirt. The author uses this quick method of footwork to apply tape to the paper.

STEP 3 Fill the holes

On many of our jobs, paint-grade trim comes to the site already primed. Once it has been installed (and if not primed, see step 5), the next step is to fill the fastener holes. For typical finish-nail holes, I use lightweight spackle. I like UGL brand, which dries quickly and expands out of the hole when dry, which makes it easy to sand flush with the surface. For large screw holes, I use a two-part wood filler. Lots of folks use auto-body filler, but I use a two-part filler from Minwax that is made for wood.

For dents and shallow imperfections, I use Elmer's interior Wood Filler. This product has better adhesion than spackle, so it works on fine dents and scratches. It tends to shrink, though, so I have to compensate with a slight overfill or a second application.



Fill nail holes. Use a lightweight filler such as UGL spackling

to fill small holes. Press the filler into the holes, and allow it to expand to prevent shrinkage.



Level dents. Use a medium-body product

such as Elmer's Wood Filler to fill any shallow depressions in the trim. Overfill slightly so that sanding will create a flush surface.



Think body shop. For wide holes deeper

than 1/4 in., use a two-part acrylic product that is similar to auto-body fillers, such as Minwax's Wood Filler.



STEP 4 Sand surfaces and soften edges

When the fillers have dried, it's time to sand everything smooth. This prep stage creates a uniform profile over the trim surface. Hand-sanding and checking your work by feel is critical; your fingertips can detect imperfections that your eyes would miss. I always use a disposable mask with a N100 rating when sanding.

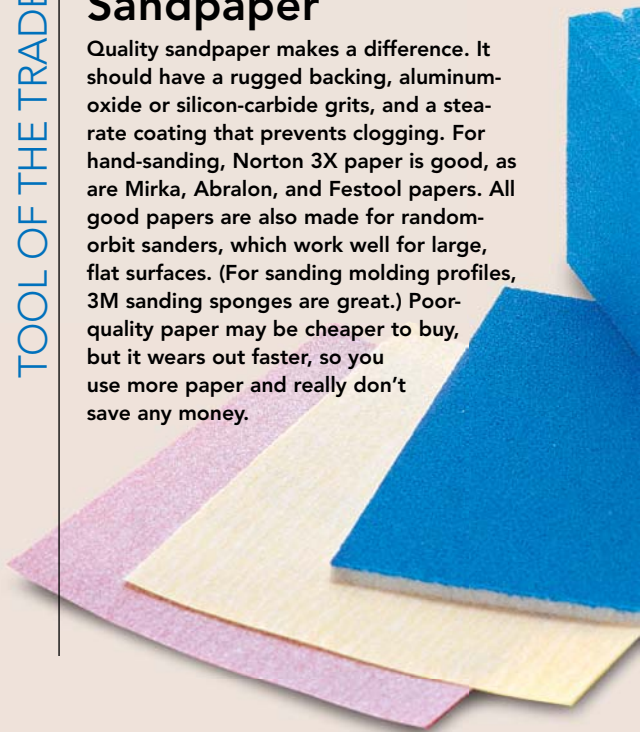
I begin with 180-grit sandpaper to smooth the entire surface and to level all fills. Since fillers are often softer than the wood around them, I make sure to keep the paper flat so as not to dig out any filler. Working from the bottom up means not sanding over dust from above. I feel every inch as I go to ensure the surface is buttery smooth. At this point, it's OK to burn through the primer on some edges and profiles and to remove heavier raised grain. The primer used in the factory is typically applied heavily, which results in a poor texture that has to be sanded down quite a bit to create a truly flat surface.

Sharp edges are easily worn and chipped, so it's best to soften them with 150-grit paper. Remember, it's all about the feel. After everything has been sanded, I use a vacuum to thoroughly clean the surfaces, and then a raking light to inspect for defects. It's better to fill a spot now than it is to interrupt your workflow in the middle of painting to spackle a divot.

TOOL OF THE TRADE

Sandpaper

Quality sandpaper makes a difference. It should have a rugged backing, aluminum-oxide or silicon-carbide grits, and a stearate coating that prevents clogging. For hand-sanding, Norton 3X paper is good, as are Mirka, Abralon, and Festool papers. All good papers are also made for random-orbit sanders, which work well for large, flat surfaces. (For sanding molding profiles, 3M sanding sponges are great.) Poor-quality paper may be cheaper to buy, but it wears out faster, so you use more paper and really don't save any money.



STEP 5 Apply the primer

We always make sure the trim has a total of two coats of primer. If you begin with unprimed trim, apply an oil-based primer to the entire surface. I like to use Zinsser's Cover-Stain Primer because it seals off the grain and tannins better than water-based products, it sands smooth, and it can be topcoated with oil or latex. I have used water-based primers, but they tend to raise the grain, which means I have to prime and sand two or three times until the grain texture is tamed.

The second coat builds the surface, giving it an even color and texture that's a good substrate for any type of finish paint. Be sure to brush the primer onto the adjacent walls to create a better seal for the caulk. This foundation coat has to have straight brush strokes, minimal build, and no fat edges or overlaps. Brushing needs to be done in proper sequence: first the edges, then the flats.



Proper technique. It's easier to control the work if you sand by hand. Fold the sheet into thirds, and hold it between your pinky and ring finger to keep it from sliding around.



Don't forget the edges. Make all surfaces consistent by sanding the edges of trim pieces and the adjoining wall areas.



Shine a light. When a section is complete, use a strong light to make sure that all the imperfections are filled.



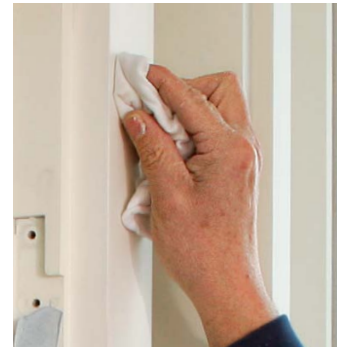
Clean up. After sanding, be sure to vacuum the dust from the trim and the surrounding surfaces. Use soft attachments that won't ding the trim surfaces.



Thin is better. Many modern oil primers must be diluted with turpentine or paint thinner (about 1 part thinner to 10 parts paint) so that they soak into the wood.



Start from the edge. To avoid buildup, brush first from the edges of the trim, making sure to hit the seam between the trim and the wall.



Get rid of the excess. It's difficult to brush away more paint than the brush can hold, so use a rag to wipe off the flats before proceeding.



Create a good foundation. Working in one direction, brush out the face of the trim in even, straight strokes, being sure to avoid laps and drips.

STEP 6 Sand both primer coats

I lightly sand the trim after both the first and the second coat of primer to remove dust nibs or unwanted texture. I also wipe down the adjacent walls and vacuum to remove dust before caulking.

It makes a difference. After each coat of primer has dried, I use 320- or 400-grit sandpaper or an extra-fine nylon abrasive pad to prepare the surface.



STEP 7 Caulk open seams

For the last step before the finish paint, I fill all cracks and seams with a high-quality acrylic adhesive caulk. The main trick with caulk is to make sure that a good bead of it gets forced behind the surface of the crack. Joinery with gaps of less than 1/16 in. don't need to be filled as deeply, but anything larger should be filled behind the crack, not just on top of it. If the bead is too thin, the caulk will crack at the slightest movement of the underlying material. Once I've applied the bead, I use my finger to push the bead into the crack and smooth it out at the same time. I don't use rags, as they tend to wipe away too much caulk. Larger fills are prone to shrink and may need a second application.

Control the output. When you're about to use a new tube of caulk, cut off the tip at an angle so that the caulk can be easily directed into cracks without too much waste.



Pull, don't push. With the angled tube facing the crack, pull the tube along the seam as you squeeze out a consistent amount of caulk.



Digital workflow. Use a fingertip to smooth out the bead of caulk and to push it into the seam. Use a rag only to wipe off your finger, not the seam.

STEP 8 Apply the topcoat

Vacuum as needed, then ensure that the air is as free of dust as possible and within the manufacturer's recommended temperature and humidity levels. Add heat to the room if it's too cold; if it's too hot and there's no air-conditioning, work at night. Allow for extra drying time if the humidity is high.

EPA regulations have adversely affected the performance of oil-based finish paints, especially in terms of their tendency to yellow over time. Fortunately, manufacturers have improved the performance of acrylic paints so that they level better and work easier than before. On this job, I used Benjamin Moore's Advance, which is a water-based paint with a small alkyd component to help it work and be tough like oil. Slight thinning according to the label directions is OK, but you shouldn't need any additives such as flowing agents.

Mind your strokes. When applying primer or finish coats, keep the brush strokes definitive along transitions such as miters and other joints.





Scuff and buff. After the first finish coat has dried overnight, rub all areas lightly with an extrafine nylon pad or 400-grit sandpaper to smooth any imperfections and to dull the surface for the final coat. After vacuuming, wipe everything down with a tack cloth.



Apply the second topcoat. The final coat of paint should provide a perfect sheen and an extra layer of protection. After it has dried, check for missed spots and then clean the area, remove any masking, and reinstall the hardware.



TOOL OF THE TRADE

Paintbrushes

For even brushwork, you need a decent brush. A high-quality China-bristle brush works best for oil-based paint, while a good nylon brush works well with water-based finishes. Look for evenly cut, feathered ends on the bristles, which help to smooth out the paint. Purdy and Wooster are reputable brands.



Online members can watch this *Master Carpenter* video at FineHomebuilding.com/extras.