Woodworking Tips

Experienced woodworkers rely on workshop routines to help them consistently achieve top results. Adopt these simple habits to help you get the most out of your workshop time.

Plot your course

Before you cut the first board for a project, review the plans, line up all the materials and supplies, and determine what tools and equipment you'll need. Think about the steps involved and how you'll accomplish them. Then jot down a brief list outlining the order for accomplishing the steps, which you can then use as a checklist. You may alter your work plan as the project progresses, but working from a list of everything you need to accomplish ensures that you don't miss something crucial.

Make notes, not memories

When a project spreads across several workshop sessions, break the work at a logical point whenever you stop. Complete the step you're working on, for instance, instead of stopping in the middle of an operation. Then, write notes on the plans and mark parts so you can easily determine where you left off. You may think you'll remember where you stopped and what you need to do next when you return to the project, but human nature says you won't, especially if the break lasts longer than you plan.

Banish distractions

Some researchers maintain that the human brain can concentrate on only one task at a time. This means that when we think we're multitasking, we're really forcing the brain to jump back and forth between competing thought processes, giving each only brief snips of attention. The brain's ability to hop from one thought to another, most researchers say, declines with age.

This suggests that you can't focus fully on your woodworking project while debating with talk radio or watching the game on TV. Background music may not be dangerously distracting, but beware if you find yourself singing along.

Clear the clutter

Few things waste as much workshop time or raise irritation levels as high as misplacing the tool you need, (or the one you just laid down) in the clutter on your bench. And stumbling over scraps on the floor as you search, just makes matters worse.

Everything you need to know about keeping your work area efficient stems from lessons your mom taught.

- Clear scraps, chips, and sawdust off your workbench and tool tables often.
- Toss trash into a can, not on the floor.
- Put away tools you're finished using.

Set machined parts aside so you won't mistake them for raw stock or scraps.

Round up your safety gear

Safety equipment only protects you if you use it, and you're more likely to use it if it's easy to find. So keep your personal protective equipment in a designated, visible, and easy-to-access place, perhaps near the entrance to your shop. Keep a selection of push sticks, push blocks, and feather boards near each machine where they're needed.

Make safety a part of your setup routine. Before you start a machine, position feather boards, locate push sticks, put in earplugs, don your safety glasses, and if necessary, find a snug-fitting dust mask or respirator. Then check everything one last time before making the cut.

Make your mark

As you make project parts, put identifying marks on them. If you're working from plans, label the parts with the part letters or numbers from the plan; otherwise use a descriptive name. Mark out oversize blanks to show which parts they'll yield. Label blanks to indicate part position and orientation, too. Simple alignment marks can prevent gluing a piece in backward or in the wrong place. Labels like "top edge" or "back" eliminate confusion and simplify assembly.

Measure, measure, cut

The oldest saw in woodworking (yeah, we just had to say that) still holds true: Measure twice, cut once. To maximize accuracy in those measurements, get into habits like these:

- Use the same tape or rule throughout a project for consistency.
- Measure from the same edge or other reference surface on matching parts.

Make precise marks with a sharp pencil or, better yet, a marking knife.

Measure, cut, cut, cut ...

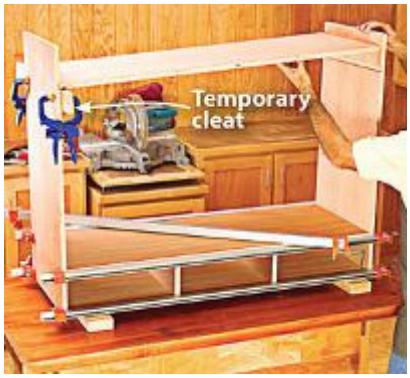
Carry out repetitive operations--cutting parts to the same dimension, drilling equally-spaced holes, or routing rabbets, for instance—more consistently, quickly, and easily with stop blocks and jigs. You can buy commercial jigs that simplify many operations, but some of the most valuable ones in your shop will be the ones you create yourself for a specific job. Make it a habit to look for situations where a quickly-made jig-something as simple as a scrap of wood clamped to a miter gauge—will save you from repeated measuring and marking. Make permanent jigs for jobs you do often, such as miter-cutting sides for identical frames.

Get the most from a setup

Set up tools, jigs, and equipment for every operation carefully and precisely, lock the adjustments, and test every setup on scrap wood before machining project parts. To avoid repeating setups, rip all same-width parts at once, for instance, instead of resetting the rip fence several times.

When you interrupt a project and leave a setup to use later, write "Don't Change Setup" on a sheet of paper and stick it on the tool. Also jot down the setup specifications and which part you're making with it.

Take a digital photo of a setup you might reuse, print it, and add notes.



Dry-assemble everything

Before gluing, assemble the parts without glue to ensure correct fit. Give each part a final inspection as you work, and take note of the order of assembly to avoid glue-up goof-ups. Finally, clamp the dry assembly together.

This assembly rehearsal helps you determine which clamps to use and the best order to apply them. It also can help you identify situations where you might need a helper or temporary support. And after undoing the dry-clamped assembly, the clamps are preset for the real job, further minimizing any glue-up panic and confusion.

Don't settle for dull

The importance of sharp tools almost goes without saying. To make clean, accurate cuts, you need sharp tools.

Carbide-tip saw blades and bits stay sharp longer than steel ones, but except for touching up router bits, you can't sharpen them yourself. When they need sharpening, let a professional do it.

You can sharpen most hand tools, such as chisels and planes, yourself. Hardened teeth on today's handsaws and pull saws require grinding, another job for a pro sharpener. Some pull saws and Japanese handsaws feature replaceable blades; it's often cheaper to replace the blade than to have it sharpened. Keep sharp, stay sharp.


Touch-up router bits between sharpenings by honing the flat back of each cutter blade with a diamond file.

Chill, dude

Remember, this is your hobby. You're doing it for fun. These habits will help you enjoy your workshop time more:

- Avoid setting project deadlines or creating unrealistic expectations that lead to stress or safety compromises.
- Work at a comfortable pace regardless of the scope of the project. Don't try to hurry through a seemingly simple project, for instance.

Take the time to learn and understand new or unfamiliar techniques, rather than rushing blindly through the steps just to get done.