



Before I made furniture for a living, I made music. As a player in orchestras and brass ensembles, I stayed sharp in the way that most performers do, with hours and hours of practice.

So when I came into the woodshop, it seemed natural to practice my new skills with the same sort of discipline. Imagine my surprise when I found that practice is shunned by most woodworkers as much as it is embraced by musicians. But it's just as important.

Practice turns the tool into an extension of yourself. It builds and reinforces your muscle memory, letting you perform the physical tasks routinely and making them second nature. And that's key, because there's always more than just the physical task. You don't just saw or chisel—you need to do that to a line. Practicing lets you build

Skill-building hand-tool exercises

PRACTICE, AND YOU'LL GAIN BETTER CONTROL OVER YOUR TOOLS

BY JEFF MILLER

up mastery of the underlying skills by isolating them—reducing them to basic elements of technique.

The exercises shown here will help. Work on them for 15 minutes a couple of times a week and your mastery and confidence will grow. Will it make you perfect? Nope. But it certainly will make you a better craftsman.

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SAWS



With proper technique, using any handsaw—western or Japanese—is a joy. The saw cuts easily, without binding, and follows a line without being steered. These exercises will help. Start with the right stance, with your forearm perfectly aligned with the back of the saw. To do this, stand slightly off to the side, with your hips at about 45° to the work. Your feet should be at least shoulder-width apart.



SAW WITHOUT SEEING

Clamp a 1/2-in.- to 3/4-in.-thick board upright in a vise, with 5 in. or so above the jaws. Practice sawing into the end grain with your eyes closed. This lets you concentrate on your mechanics, instead of watching the kerf. Make your grip light, as if you're holding a baby bird, and point your index finger forward along the blade. Try to generate all of the saw's movement from your shoulder.

With the cut underway, close your eyes and notice how the saw's action feels. How much pressure is needed in each direction for a smooth cut? Also listen to the sound of the saw as you cut. Strive for a very even sound throughout the stroke. A little of this practice goes a long way.



Eyes wide shut. Practicing with your eyes closed helps you focus on the sound and physical sensation of a smooth cut (right). Curl your fingertips under and let the saw brush the back of your index finger to help monitor the straightness of each stroke (left).

SAW TO A LINE

This exercise helps develop your ability to cut accurately right next to a layout line.



Set a practice piece in the vise. Use a knife to make several clean lines about 3/4 in. down the board and across the top. Now trace over these lines with a slightly dull pencil to create two pencil lines; one on each side of the incised line (left). The goal is to cut away one of the lines without disturbing the other one. Miller suggests beginning the cut with almost no pressure on the back of the saw. It may feel like you're actually lifting the saw off the work (center). A neatly sawn line leaves its twin undisturbed (right).

HANDPLANES

These exercises will help you practice the right stance and teach you how to control and balance downward pressure on the plane. For tips on sharpening and setting up a plane, see “Get Sharp Fast,” *FWW* #213, and “Handplaning 101,” *FWW* #204.



SLOW DOWN

Pick a 3/4-in.-thick board, at least 4 in. wide and 3 or 4 ft. long, and set it up to plane on edge. With a smoother or jack plane, start at one end and move the plane extremely slowly (right). This makes it harder to plane incorrectly. Feel the push originating with your feet (far right). Align your pushing arm in the direction of the cut and keep your wrist straight.



START, STOP, START, STOP

Plane the entire edge again, but stop and start every 6 in. or so. Remember to maintain pressure with your hands (right) as you push all the way from your feet. With proper downward pressure, the cut will begin as soon as you restart. The goal is a continuous, unbroken shaving (far right).



PLANING A CONVEX CURVE

You should always plane “downhill” on a curve to follow the grain. But just for the exercise, try planing uphill, too. As you move the plane over the curve, balance downward pressure on the front and back to keep the iron in the cut.



CHISELS

These exercises are aimed at developing greater control over the chisel and understanding how the chisel interacts with wood grain.



PARE TO A LINE

Cut a rabbet on the end of a board. Then, with a marking gauge (or knife), scribe a line about $\frac{1}{32}$ in. away from the rabbet. Use a $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. or $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. chisel to pare to the scribed line. The goal is to leave the scribed line perfectly straight without going over it (right). This will teach you chisel control, and how much you can pare away in a single cut without forcing the chisel backward.



Chase the line across.

Once you're within $\frac{1}{32}$ in. or so of the line (closer is better for harder woods), start at one end with the chisel in the scribed line and pare down. Then move the chisel along the line, holding it so that about 80% is tight to the just-pared surface, with the rest in the line a little farther along. Pare and repeat all along the line.

SQUARE UP A HOLE

Start with a scrap board at least $1\frac{1}{4}$ in. thick. Use a Forstner or spade bit to drill a hole about $\frac{3}{4}$ in. deep and 1 in. to $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. dia. Now scribe a square tangent to the circle. The task is to pare the hole square. This will help you feel how the chisel interacts with wood grain. For control, hold the end of the tool like a pencil, with your hand resting on the work. Power the work with your weight and shoulder muscles.



SLICE OFF A DOWEL

Drill a $\frac{3}{8}$ -in. hole in a board. Next, pound in a dowel and trim it so that it sticks up about $\frac{1}{16}$ in. above the surface. Now use your chisel to pare the dowel flush. A slicing motion will help with this, and is a useful technique to master. Push the chisel's edge sideways across the dowel with your guiding hand, while you push forward with the other hand on the handle.



Two directions at once. Move the cutting edge sideways as you push the chisel forward. This helps to trim the dowel flush without cutting into the board's surface.