master class

Better way to add stringing and banding

BY CRAIG THIBODEAU

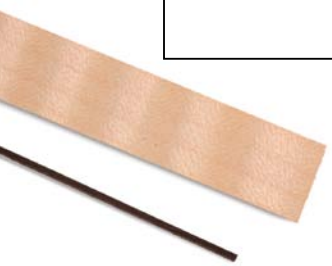
Veneer is the secret. *If the central panel is veneered, you can just add the inlay pieces to the edges of the sheet before laying up the panel, with no wood-movement worries.*

Whether your tastes run traditional or contemporary, learning to do a veneered tabletop opens up all sorts of design possibilities. For one, you now have access to scores of new wood species and grain patterns, all widely available and affordable. Secondly, you can cut and arrange the veneers into beautiful patterns not possible with solid wood. That's just the beginning. My focus here is bandings and borders. Veneer makes those easier, too.

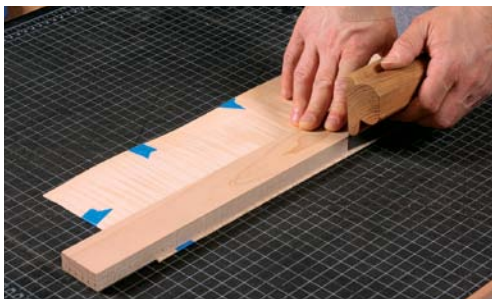
The traditional way to make bandings is to start with a bricklike lamination and slice off layers. Then you inlay them, excavating a channel in solid wood, with issues when you go across the grain. But since my tabletops are fully veneered on a stable substrate using a big vacuum bag, adding beautiful bandings and borders is as easy as cutting out pieces of veneer and taping them to a center field of veneer. After laying up the panel, I add solid-wood edging to protect the veneer and complete the look. Last, I rout a groove along the glueline and inlay the final piece of stringing the traditional way, hiding the glueline and any inconsistencies there. It is a foolproof system.

I also sometimes veneer all the way to the edge of the table, by simply making the bandings wider. I often

Cutting bandings



INLAY: MAKE IT OR BUY IT
Thibodeau buys his stringing, which is the same thickness as veneer. But he makes his own banding pieces.

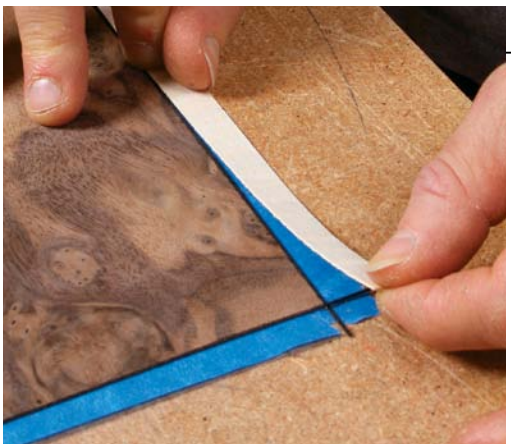


Start with a straight edge. *After taping a couple of pieces of veneer in a stack, use a veneer saw and an MDF straightedge, with sandpaper stuck to the bottom, to cut one edge straight. Start with a light pass, and then bear down a bit more as you go.*

Simple jig. *Make a cutting board as shown, plus a hardwood cutting guide the width of your desired bandings. Hold the guide and the veneer firmly against the stop on the cutting board. Cut enough banding to go around your panel, plus a few extra pieces.*

Photos, except where noted: Asa Christiana; this page (top): courtesy of the author

Installation is easy



Stick it down. *With a strip of overhanging blue tape on the show face, you flip the sheet over and simply stick on the stringing and banding, pulling it tight against the central field, and overlapping it at the corners.*

Scarf the banding. *Stringing can have butt joints, but where the 2-ft.-long bandings come up short, use an angled cut to hide the joint. Just overlap the pieces, line up the grain, and use a scalpel and steel ruler to cut through both.*

Another angle at the corners. *Use a similar technique to make perfect miter joints at the corners, cutting both stringing and banding at once. Line up the straightedge carefully with the corners of the overlap.*

Tape across the joints. *Pull blue tape across the miter joints, and across the all the edges. Stretch and pull the tape as you apply it.*

Always burnish. *After running long pieces down the joints, burnish down all the tape with a brass-bristled brush for a strong bond.*

Veneer tape next. *Remove the blue tape from the show face, and replace it with ¾-in. veneer tape. Then throw the sheet under a piece of MDF to stay flat. When it's dry, flip the sheet and remove the blue tape on the glue face.*

use crossbanding this way, banding the side of the tabletop with the same veneer for a waterfall effect.

Stringing and banding separate the center field from the edges of the tabletop, and add a dash of both complementary and contrasting color. While you can buy banding in varied patterns, it's just as easy to create your own using small pieces of figured veneer that are too nice to throw away.

A few shopmade helpers

To make all of the bandings in this article, you'll need a freshly sharpened veneer saw (see FineWoodworking.com/extras to learn how I sharpen my saw) and a few simple shopmade devices. First, make a 2- or 3-in.-wide straightedge from MDF to joint edges. Then you'll need a banding-cutting board with a fixed stop that sticks up about ¼ in. to ½ in. The board works in conjunction with a simple cutting guide that matches the width of your desired banding. Both the cutting guide and straightedge need 60- to

Sheet becomes a panel

In the bag. *After laying up the panel (left), you'll need to trim it. To get a first reference edge straight and flush with your banding, you can shim the panel on a crosscut sled (above). Then line up a framing square with that edge, using it to set up a straightedge and router on an adjacent edge. The tablesaw can take over from there.*

Different deal for the last piece of stringing

It is next to impossible to install the last piece of stringing beforehand and then trim the panel precisely flush to it, so Thibodeau installs it after attaching the solid-wood edging to the tabletop, routing a groove right over the glue joint.

Rout carefully. *After the solid edging is sanded flush, rout a 1/16-in.-wide groove that straddles the glue joint. Attach a fence and set the depth at 1/8 in., pivot the router down into the cut, and go slowly so you don't break the tiny bit.*

Square the corners by hand. *Be careful not to rout too far, then finish up the corners with a narrow chisel and scalpel.*

Shopmade stringing this time. *To make slightly taller stringing, which is easier to inlay, Thibodeau rips a strip of ebony on the tablesaw, sizing it to fit the groove, and then rips that strip to height on the bandsaw as shown.*

Need to fine-tune it? *Make a little planing jig like this one, with a low stop, and add pieces of double-stick tape to keep the stringing from bowing as you plane it.*

Pre-fit the pieces. *Mark these at the corner joints (above), using a sanding block or disk sander to make the tiny miters. Thibodeau uses a kids' glue bottle with a narrow tip to inject the glue into the groove, presses in the stringing, and then seats it fully using a small hammer and a wood block (right).*

120-grit sandpaper stuck to the bottom to stop them from slipping. You'll also need veneer tape. I recommend "water gum" tape from schurchwoodwork.com.

Let's start by making ½-in.-wide straight banding of curly sycamore. Cutting any curly veneer along the grain creates interesting stripes across the width. We'll need a ½-in.-wide cutting guide.

For bandings, I stack (and tape) two pieces of veneer and cut them at the same time for greater efficiency. But I don't try to cut bandings any longer than 24 in.; it is hard to cut them straight. If I need longer pieces, I join them with a simple scarf cut that hides the seam.

Adding the stringing and banding is easy

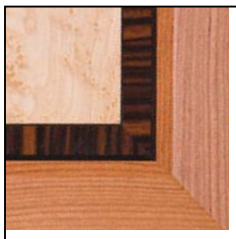
After you have cut and assembled the veneer for the center of the tabletop, usually some sort of bookmatch, be sure all edges are straight, square, and clean.

The inner line of stringing and the shopmade banding go on now, simply stuck down on tape, overlapped at the corners, and mitered with a single cut. For this first line, I tend to use commercial stringing (from originalmarquetry.co.uk). It comes in many widths and colors, and is relatively inexpensive. In this case it is roughly 1/16 in. wide (sold as 1.5 mm), and the same thickness as the commercial veneers I use. The best colors for these thin outlines are black and white. The black is usually dyed, not true ebony. For pure white, holly is best, though maple makes a great off-white stand-in.

Last piece goes in after glue-up

I use a vacuum press for my veneering, which is wonderfully effective and convenient. The sandwich includes

Crossbanding isn't much harder



Thibodeau likes Macassar ebony for crossbanding, as its striped pattern is eye-catching and hides the seams between the short pieces.

Three good edges. *This time you need to cut the two long edges of the stack parallel before trimming one end square. These crosscuts want to tear out at the near end, so make a small reverse cut there before each pass.*

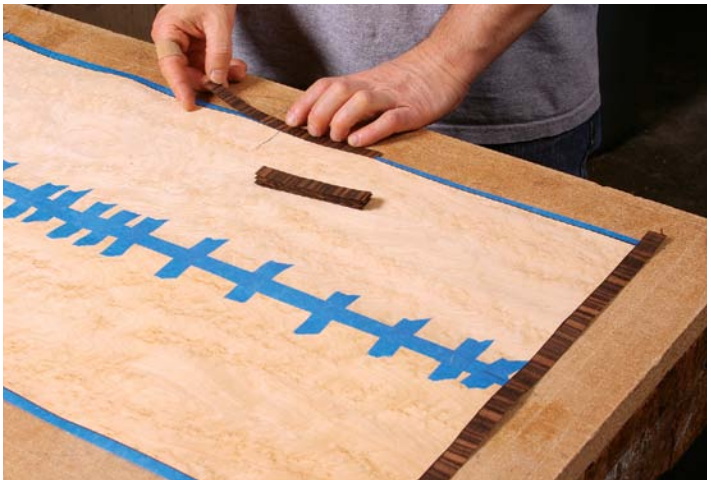
Back to the cutting board. *Starting at the square end, cut as many strips as you need. As before, make a series of light passes for each cut, with a short reverse cut before each pass.*

evacuation mesh on top, MDF cauls top and bottom, thin plastic sheeting to keep glue off the cauls, the front and back veneers, and of course, the MDF substrate. Yellow glue works fine.

When the panel is out of the bag, trim the edges right to the edges of the border, and add the wood edging. Now the final piece of stringing goes in, covering the glueline and any gaps.

You can use more commercial stringing here, but installation is much easier if the stringing is a bit thicker and easier to handle. I cut these strips from a solid piece of Gabon ebony, making them a fat 1/16 in. wide by about 1/8 in. tall. Now that I have a drum sander, I just bandsaw my shopmade stringing and sand it to size. But before I had one, I did it as shown in the photos. After routing the tiny 1/16-in.-wide groove and installing the stringing (I use bit No. 5152, stewmac.com), wait 24 hours for the glue to dry, and then sand the entire tabletop smooth. Apply a finish and watch the full beauty emerge. □

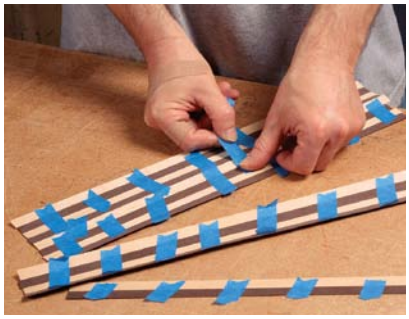
Craig Thibodeau is a professional furniture maker in San Diego.



Installation starts at the center. *Install a line of stringing first, as before. Then mark the center points of each edge, and start adding the crossbanding there, working toward the corners and flipping each opposite piece as you go for a balanced look.*

Checkered banding catches the eye

Any very dark and light colors work well for this type of banding, in this case maple and wenge.



Start with strips. *Cut six strips of each color, and join them in pairs first by pulling blue tape across the seams. Then assemble the pairs into a full sheet, before putting a strip of tape along every seam.*

Crosscut your bandings. *After squaring one end of the sheet, use the banding jig again. Cut tape-side-up, and make more than enough strips for the job.*

Start at the corners this time. *Overlap dark squares at the corners, then simply remove one of them. To get the rest of the banding to fit, trim a bit off a square or two near the center. No one will notice.*