

Tale of the tape

HOW PAINTER'S TAPE CAN HELP YOU CUT
PERFECT DOVETAILS

BY MICHAEL PEKOVICH



A while back, I was making a tea box out of wenge, which is almost as black as ebony. Chalk it up to old eyes, but for the life of me, I couldn't see my knife lines. I tried a brighter light and stronger reading glasses, but they didn't help. Finally, I laid a strip of blue tape across the end grain and re-scribed the joint. Peeling the tape away from the waste areas showed me exactly where I needed to cut. Problem solved.

Not long after that, I was building a dovetailed case in white oak. When it was time to scribe the dovetails,

I remembered the tape trick and used it again. The first joint I cut fit almost perfectly right off the saw. I attributed it to luck until it happened at the next corner, too. I began to wonder if the blue tape provided more than just a visual guide when sawing.

After a few more dovetails that fit straight from the saw, I had my answer: The tape is just thick enough to act as a shallow fence to register the saw for starting the cut. Sawing to a scribe line alone, the saw can skate across the end grain and away from the scribe line, especially on harder woods like

Improve your layout

Knifed layout lines can be hard to see and don't tell you where to cut. But Pekovich's tape trick leaves no doubt about where to cut, and where the waste is.



Tape the ends. After cutting the tails, and scribing shoulder lines on the pin board with a marking gauge, apply an over-size piece of blue painter's tape to each end of the board (left). Use an X-Acto knife to trim the tape flush (above).



Transfer the tails. Apply enough pressure to cut a scribe line through the tape and into the end grain (above). The scribe line acts as a visual reference in case the tape comes off and provides a precise line to pare to during fitting. Then remove the "waste" tape (right).



oak and wenge. The tape ledge puts an end to that, keeping the saw on track to cut a more accurate kerf. It also provides a visual guide when paring away the waste to the scribe line.

The tape trick worked well for me, but to confirm my findings, I wanted to see if it would help other woodworkers. So, I took it on the road.

Tested and confirmed in the classroom

When I first started teaching students to dovetail, I'd always preach sawing right to the scribe line. By

Cut and fit with confidence

The edge of the tape is a visual and physical reference for your saw and chisel.

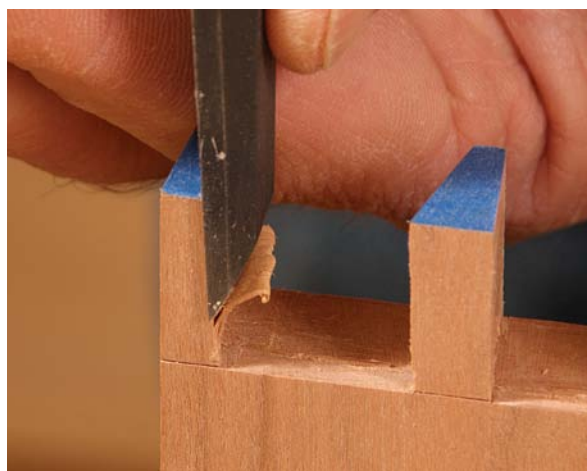
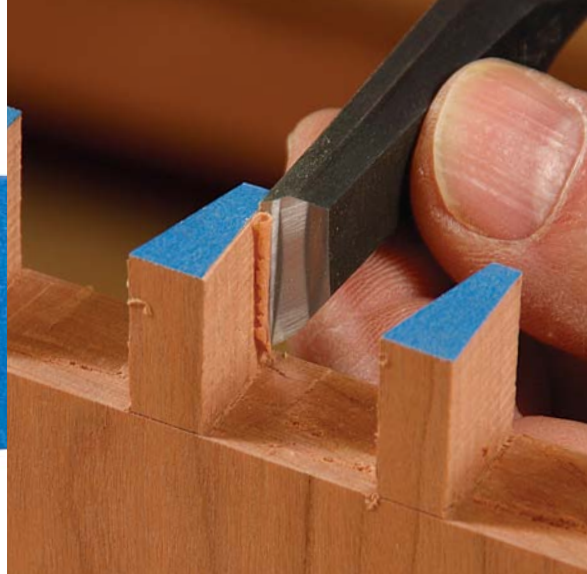


Use the tape as a saw guide. Align the saw along the edge of the tape and take light cuts until the kerf is established. As long as you don't cut into the tape, you shouldn't have gaps in your dovetails.

cutting closer to your mark, you'll do more accurate work with less fitting. While it's great in theory, it was not so great in practice. Students tended to shy away from the scribe line when cutting pins, resulting in more paring and fitting. It was also common for students to cut on the wrong side of the line, which guarantees gappy joints.

When I taught a class at the Marc Adams School of Woodworking that involved a dovetailed case, I decided to break out the blue tape to see if it would help any of the students. I was amazed at how quickly they blazed through the dovetailing process and I was equally stunned by the exceptional results they achieved. Not only did the tape guarantee that the students were cutting on the right side of the scribe line, but it also gave them the confidence to saw right up to it. I think that it must be easier to envision cutting next to a piece of tape than cutting exactly adjacent to a skinny little knife line. No matter the reason, I am convinced that the tape trick wasn't just an illusion. □

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It's a guide for paring, too. Find where the wood is proud of the tape, and then pare those areas back to the tape (top). Then check for plumb. Pin walls that aren't vertical won't let a joint fully seat and can cause the outside pin to crack if you try to drive the joint home. Let the tape guide those cuts, too (above).



Online Extra

To see how the tape trick works on through-mortises, go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

Check the fit. Chances are you'll get a pleasant surprise—no gaps and no banging the joint together—even if it's your first time cutting dovetails.