



Distinctive

6 ways to take your next box to the next level

BY DOUGLAS STOWE

PULLS

Don't ignore a box's calling card. Use it as an invitation to open the box and as a set of instructions that tells people where to put their hand and how to open the lid.



FEET

Standing on a distinctive set of feet, a box takes on a life of its own as a piece of furniture. Without them, it tends to blend in and look like an accessory.



Box Details



Online Extra

Learn how to build beautiful boxes in a video workshop with Doug Stowe. Go to FineWoodworking.com/extras.

DIVIDERS

Open interiors quickly become a jumbled mess, but a few dividers keep jewelry sorted and organized. Arrange them to suit the contents.

As a professional box maker, I've thought a lot about what it takes to turn a humdrum wooden container into a unique and desirable piece of furniture. I've learned that the appeal of a box is due in large part to the details, like the shape and size of the pull. That's why I approach every new box as a design opportunity, a chance to create new and distinctive details that allow my boxes to stand out. But there's more to it than design. You also need to be able to make these parts, which can be a challenge because they tend to be very small. That's forced me to develop accurate and

safe techniques for machining them. I'll share some of my designs for feet, pulls, and dividers and demonstrate the techniques I use to make them. Even if you don't want to make the exact designs I do, you can use my techniques to make your own safely and accurately.

Douglas Stowe makes boxes and furniture in Eureka Springs, Ark.

Feet can raise your box above the crowd

A box that sits directly on a table or dresser tends to blend in and get lost. But one raised by feet or legs makes a clean break from the surface beneath it.

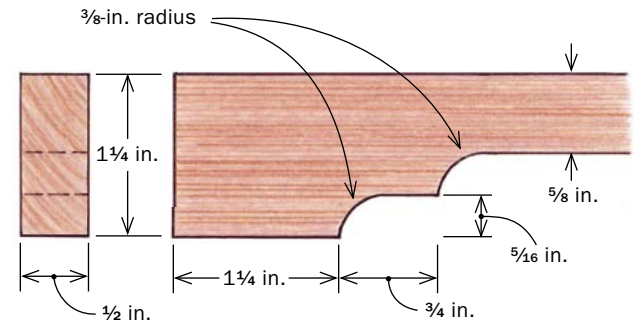
BRACKET FEET ARE ELEGANT AND STABLE

The curves and symmetry of a bracket foot add a graceful and formal base for a stately jewelry box like this one. The feet aren't very tall, so I make two at a time on a single blank (making use of both long-grain edges) to keep my hands well away from the router bit. On feet this small, any lack of symmetry would immediately be seen, so I use a stop block on the infeed side of the router table to start the cut for each foot.



Use a stop for symmetrical feet. After routing the lower arch on the foot, move the stop and fence to rout the higher one.

PERFECT PROPORTIONS



Route halfway, then flip. There is no stop on the outfeed side, so don't risk getting too close to the foot on the trailing end.

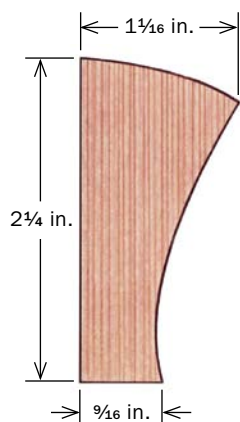


Cut the foot free, then miter the ends. Set the fence and rip all four feet at once so that they are the same height (left). Because the feet already are at final length, use a stop block so the miter is accurate and doesn't shorten the foot (above).

STILT LEGS ARE PLAYFUL

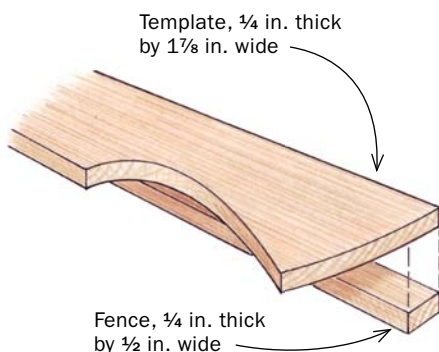
Because they are so akin to the body part they're named for, legs present an opportunity for levity. The mitered legs on this box give it an almost animated quality, and I like that playfulness. I use a template to rout the shape, making it extra long so that it can be clamped to a long blank (and then to my bench). The fence on the template ensures that the shape is routed square to the miter joint, which is cut prior to shaping.

A LEG WITH FLAIR



Cut the miter first. Miter the edge of a blank long enough for all eight halves needed to make the four legs.

TEMPLATE AND FENCE



Clamp on the template. Place the workpiece against the fence of the template and clamp both so that they overhang the workbench.



Rout the shape. Use a flush-trimming bit so that the leg is an exact copy of the template. After routing the first half, flip the blank end for end and rout the second one.



Cut to length. A stop block guarantees that all eight leg halves are the same length, creating a box that won't rock after assembly. A pencil eraser is the perfect hold-down for small pieces.



Glue up the leg. Use a glue block to reinforce the miter joint and support the box from below. Packing tape and rubber bands add clamping pressure.

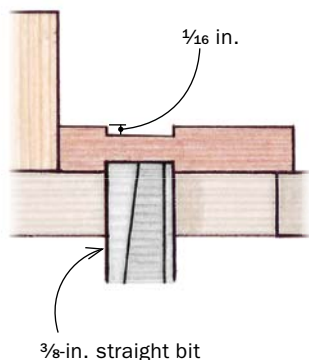
Pulls invite people to open the box

The size, shape, and location of a pull tell the user how a box opens.

LITTLE PULL DOES BIG WORK

There are times when a pull shouldn't call too much attention to itself, like on this understated jewelry box. This one is just big enough to get a finger under and lift. Its diminutive size might be a design plus, but it's a woodworking challenge. I overcome that problem by making several at once. I start working on a large blank to improve safety, I use a crosscut sled at the tablesaw, and then I gang the parts after they've been cut from the blank.

MAKE THE TENON



Rout the tenon on a long blank. This is safer than trying to do it on a short blank cut to the final length of the pull.

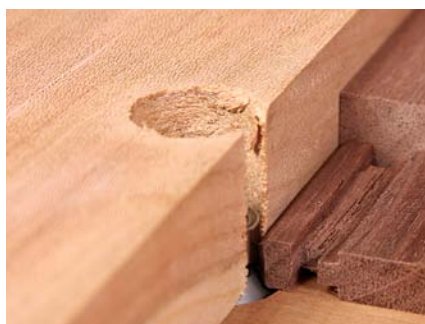
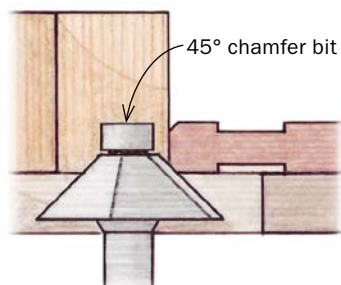


Then cut shorter blanks for the pull. Switch over to the tablesaw, using a pencil eraser to hold the cutoff piece on your crosscut sled.



Cut the tenon to final width. Use a clamp to hold the blank on the sled. The edge is too narrow to hold effectively with the pencil.

CHAMFER THE EDGES

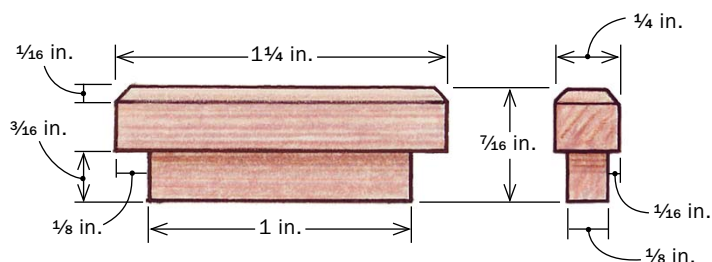


Chamfer on the router table. For safety, Stowe buries the bit in a hardwood fence and uses a push block to steady the blank.



For the end grain, chamfer several pulls at once. Whether you do just one or a small stack as shown, use a push block to support the small piece(s) and prevent tearout.

BY THE NUMBERS



Finally, free the pull. Put a stop block on your tablesaw sled, and use a pencil to hold down the part. Push the sled until both pieces are clear of the blade and turn off the saw before moving the pull. If you pull the sled back, the blade can throw the pull.

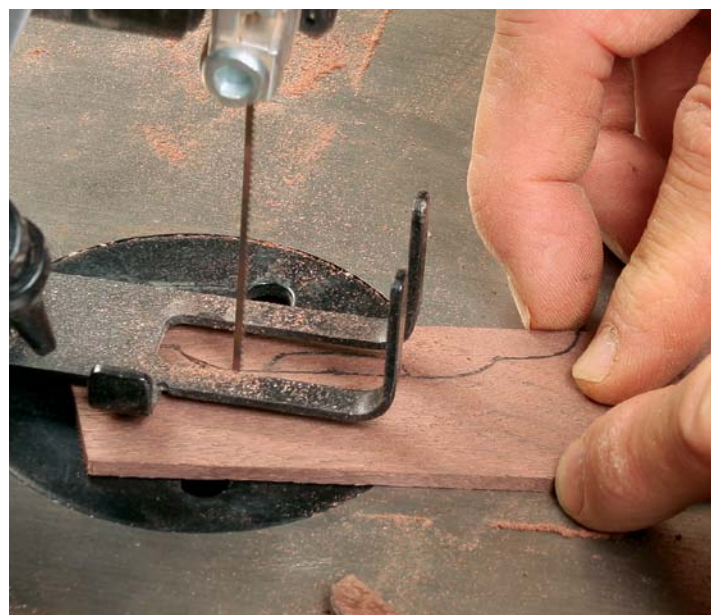
TWO-PART LIFT DOES DOUBLE DUTY

I use a pair of these lifts on opposite sides of boxes that need to be mobile, such as those for stationery. One part of each lift is mortised into the box and the other into the lid. When you pinch the two parts between your fingers, the lid is held in place and the box can be picked up. But the cutout in the lower part lets you get a finger under the upper part and take off the lid. Making the lift isn't particularly difficult, but it won't work if the shape isn't just right. So take your time with the design, tracing it onto the blanks and then refining the shape.



Draw the basic shape. Stowe uses a half-template cut from a manila folder so that the two halves of the pull are symmetrical.

Every other pull gets a cutout. Simply modify the existing template and trace the cutout onto two of the pulls already drawn.

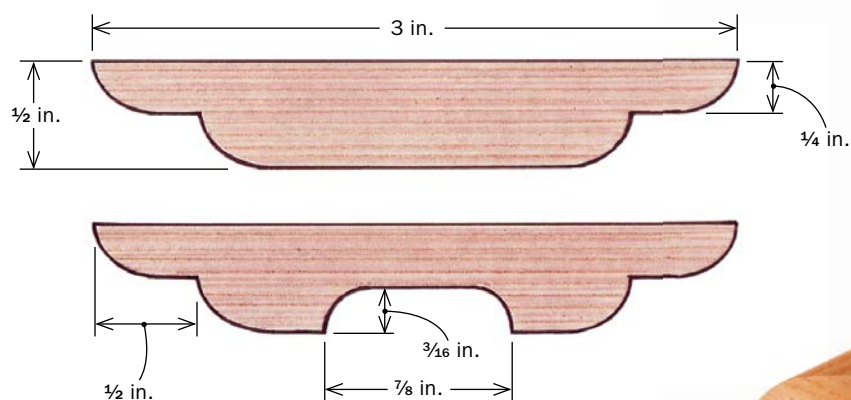


Rough out the parts. A scrollsaw is best because its blade is narrow enough to follow the tight curves.



Refine the shape with sandpaper. Stowe groups the pulls to make it easier to keep the edges square to the faces. He uses 1-in.-wide sandpaper glued to a pencil to get into the tight curves.

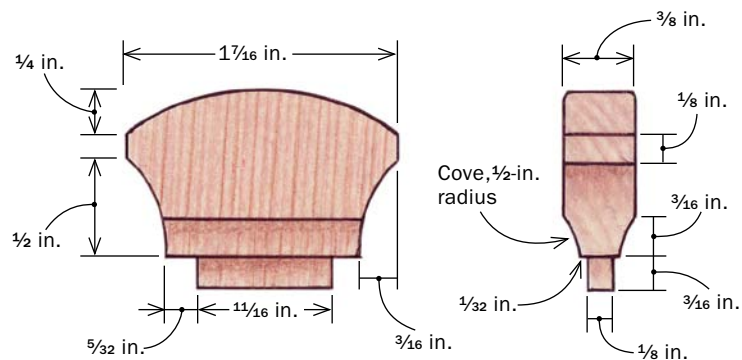
A PERFECT PAIR



Pulls (continued)

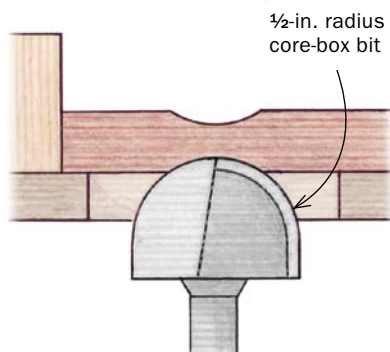
FAN-SHAPED PULL IS READY FOR LIFTOFF

This pull's size and location act like a set of instructions: To open the box, take hold and lift. The shape aids your grip, important when a thick solid-wood top hangs from it. For improved safety, I machine it at the end of a long blank, clamping it to a template to rout the shape. The long blank also makes it easier to round over the edges, because it's easier to control than a small one.



*Everything above the cove has a 1/8-in. roundover.

ROUT A RELIEF

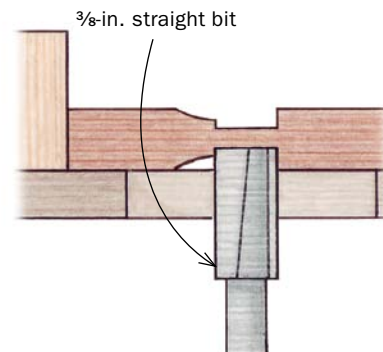


Smooth curve. A push block behind the blank prevents tearout and keeps it square to the fence, guaranteeing a straight cut.

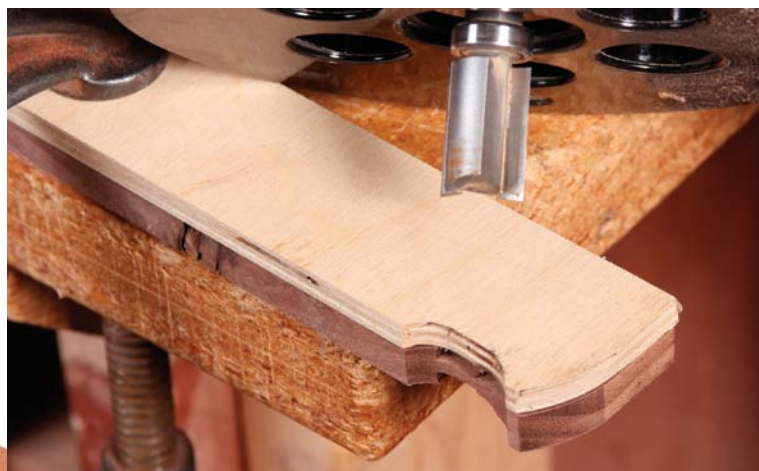


Precise tenon. Take several passes to sneak up on final thickness, using dial calipers to check against the mortise as you go.

THEN FORM THE TENON



Shape it with a router and template. Stowe uses a half-template, flipping it over to rout the second side and get a perfectly symmetrical pull.



Soften the edges. Be sure the bearing is against the end grain when starting the cut, so the bit doesn't grab the corner.



The tenon gets shoulders on all four sides. Use a stop block so that the shoulders cut at the tablesaw line up with those cut at the router table. Last, cut the pull free from the blank.

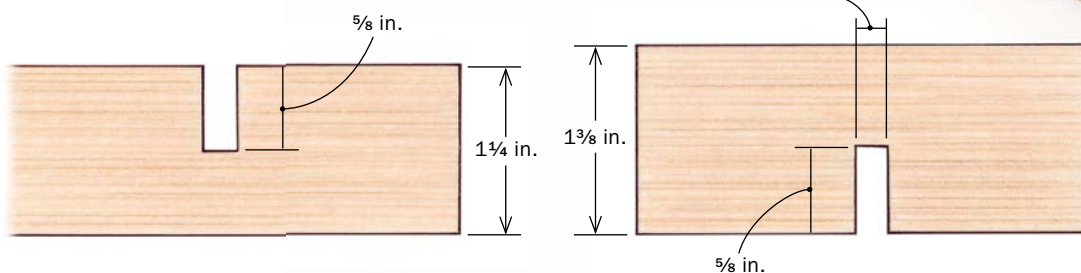
Dividers sort out the inside

Boxes with one large interior space become cluttered quickly. You can improve organization and utility with simple dividers, sized for the objects they'll hold, whether that is jewelry, minerals, tea, or keepsakes.

OFFSET DIVIDERS HIDE THEIR JOINTS

The bridge joint holding these dividers together isn't difficult to make, but it would be more visible from the top if the intersecting parts were the same height. That's why I make the shorter ones slightly taller than the long ones. The added height creates the illusion that the long dividers are mortised into the short ones.

Thickness of slot equals thickness of dividers.



Two stop blocks control slot width. Stowe makes the first cut with the divider pushed against the stop on the left. He makes the second cut with it pushed against the right-hand stop. Make test cuts to get the fit right.



Don't hold the divider with your hands. Use a clamp instead, so that your fingers are well away from the blade.



Hide the joint. The short dividers are taller than the long ones. That extra bit of material hides the slots.