

7 habits of highly effective woodworkers

POWERFUL LESSONS FOR PART-TIME FURNITURE MAKING

BY MATT KENNEY

Making furniture isn't easy, especially if you do it in your spare time. When it comes to complicated tasks like dovetailing a carcass or sanding a big piece, it's challenging to get consistent results when working in short bursts.

I've long thought that if I could make wiser use of my limited shop time, I'd make fewer mistakes, get more done, and build better furniture. To that end, I recently asked our contributing editors for suggestions, tapping their combined

decades of experience. Surprisingly, none of them focused on technical skills; I guess these just come naturally over time. Instead, their advice dealt with things like project planning, tool maintenance, and basic milling operations. And there was a surprising amount of agreement among them.

In all, their tips boiled down to a set of good bedrock habits that will enhance anyone's work and enjoyment in the shop. With apologies to Dr. Stephen R. Covey (author of *The 7 Habits of Highly Effective People*), here they are.

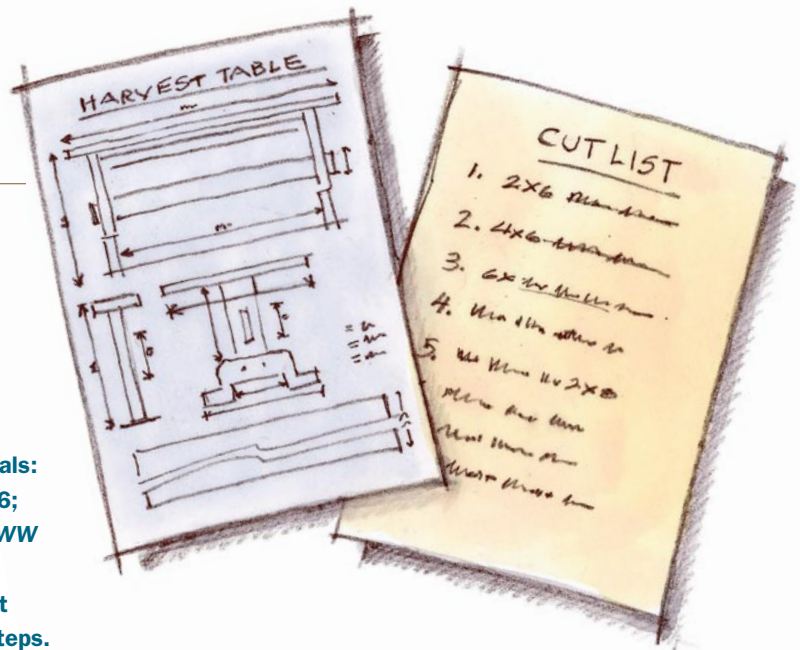
1 Plan your work

Begin each project by drafting an overall plan. This plan should start with a detailed drawing and cutlist, but just about everyone agreed it pays to think through the whole project in advance and map out a logical step-by-step sequence for every facet, from milling and shaping parts to joinery, glue-up, sanding, and finishing. (For more, see two earlier Fundamentals: "Making a cutlist" by Philip C. Lowe, *FWW* #176; and "Develop a game plan" by Stewart Crick, *FWW* #187.)

Planning ahead yields a number of benefits. It helps ensure that you won't forget any crucial steps. It also breaks up the project into a series of tasks, each of which can be made small enough to treat as a goal for an individual shop session.

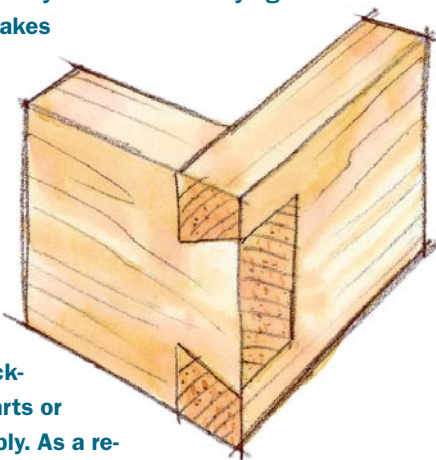
As you develop your plan, you'll learn to spot natural breaks in the action that afford their own very real woodworking advantages. For instance, if you

conclude a shop session with a final sanding of your project, you'll be ready to apply finish when the next session starts—after the sanding dust has completely settled. You'll also find that short shop sessions are ideal for applying a single coat of finish that can dry during the interval between them.



2 Warm up and take your time

Gary Rogowski points out that great woodworkers work quickly, but they never rush. Hurrying leads to mental mistakes like chamfering the wrong edge of a stretcher or cutting an apron too short. Make a conscious effort to slow down and work carefully. You'll make fewer big mistakes and avoid major backtracking, like remaking parts or even a whole assembly. As a result, you'll finish your work more quickly. A routine hand-tool exercise like Rogowski's 5-minute dovetail (*Fundamentals*, FWW #196) is a great way to begin a shop session because it helps ease you into a focused, deliberate pace.



3 Prepare for mistakes

Careful planning can help you avoid many mistakes, but we're human, so something will go wrong eventually. Accept your fallibility. Mistakes are far less likely to ruin your fun if you're ready for them.

One way to prepare, Steve Latta suggests, is to mill extra parts—five legs instead of four, for example. That way, if you cut a mortise in the wrong place, you can grab a spare and keep going. It's also wise, as Chris Becksvoort points out, to mill stock for test cuts and test joints while milling the workpieces, cutting to exactly the same dimensions. A test piece that is even a few thousandths off will cause inaccurate setups. Lastly, avoid working while frustrated. Frustration has caused me to drill holes in the wrong place, cut tenons too narrow, and accept iffy results just so I could move on. It's better to stop, walk out of the shop, and stay away until your head clears. Ten minutes or ten days—it's worth the wait.

4 Keep tools where they belong

Organize your shop in a way that keeps tools close to where they will be used most often. And make a point of returning them to their places when you are done. We've all had work come to a screeching halt while we searched a jumbled and dusty shop for a tool that "was just here!"

A good shop apron is like a shop assistant. It can keep handy the tools you use most often: a square, a ruler, a marking knife, a pencil, a sliding bevel, and your safety glasses. If these tools are always at hand, you won't waste time hunting for them or making do with a substitute.



5 Tap the power of hand tools

The block plane is a great introduction to the utility of hand tools, according to power-tool lover Roland Johnson. Unlike a fussy router setup, it takes just a few quick passes to flush-trim a plug or the tails and pins of a dovetail joint. Leveling an apron with the top of a leg is also quicker and cleaner with a block plane than any power tool. And it's far quicker to break a sharp edge with a block plane than with a router. Hand tools are also great for smoothing convex curves and rough-shaping wood.



6 Document your progress

Sometimes, I leave the shop and don't get back until a week or more has passed. The lapse of time can make it hard to remember details. Suppose, after measuring a cabinet opening at the end of a previous shop session, I decided to widen the stiles for the door I'm about to build. Or did I? With no reminder, I might go merrily on my way at the start of the next session, milling the pieces to the width shown on the drawing, and end up having to remake them.

To avoid such gaffes, take detailed notes about what you are doing and thinking before you leave the shop. A quick note—"widen stiles $\frac{1}{4}$ in."—will put you right on track when you return. In addition, a note or two made on your original drawings will help you keep track of modifications to the design should you decide to build the piece again.



7 Sharpen and tune tools regularly

Sharpening tools isn't fun. Neither is checking the accuracy and setup of your machinery. But it's really an investment in the quality of your work and the quality of your experience in the shop. Nothing slows you down more than dull or out-of-tune tools, Rogowski says. Plan a shop session specifically to sharpen and maintain your machines. Perhaps the best time to do this is between projects, so you won't be interrupting other work. In this way, you'll have come full circle and be ready again for step one, which is planning your next project.