

Accurate joinery starts with a marking knife

One of the secrets to achieving fine, crisp work is to lay out the joints carefully. Whether you're cutting with machines or by hand, working to a single clean line is essential. Instead of a relying on a thick, blurry pencil line, I work to a reliable scribed line cut into the wood surface. Alongside smudged fingerprints, sweat stains and wood dust, it remains unmistakable.

A marking knife cuts a straight, accurate line, highlighting exactly where to stop your cut. Besides offering a clear visual reference, this fine groove also leaves a positive starting point for any wood removal.

On antique furniture the remnants of the craftsman's layout lines are often taken as visible proof that the piece was handmade.

Marking knife has many uses

A marking knife is so versatile that you need at least one in the shop. It can be used for hardware installation, for inlay work, for scoring cutlines to avoid blowout and for laying out dovetails.

When setting hinges, locks and other hardware, not only does the marking knife produce a clear outline for the shallow mortise, but it also provides a fine notch for your chisel tip when you're removing the last of the waste.



A more advanced use of the marking knife is setting inlay and marquetry into a wood surface. Just as when mortising hinges, accurate work becomes as easy as putting the item in place, cutting a fine line around it and removing the waste.

A marking knife can also be used to eliminate blowout on the back of veneered panels or plywood being cut on the tablesaw or bandsaw. For clean crosscuts, cut a layout line across the bottom exactly at the panel's final dimension.

For me, however, the most indispensable use of the marking knife is laying out hand-cut dovetails. One of the keys to a gap-free fit is crisp, careful layout. Once I mark out the joint, the single line left by the marking knife provides the perfect boundary. The waste

Marking knife vs. marking gauge



A marking gauge works well for tenon cheeks. The cut is clean because it is with the grain and not far from the fence of the tool.

Shortly after abandoning the pencil, many woodworkers take up the marking gauge. The traditional type of marking gauge scores a line into a board's surface with a stylus-like point that tends to tear wood fibers rather than cut them, often leaving a crude and ragged groove.

The marking gauge works best when used with the grain or on end grain, and when the desired line is close to a parallel edge. A good example is marking the cheeks of a tenon. However, the farther the cutter on a marking gauge is extended from its fence, the greater its tendency to wander. An example of this is marking out tenon shoulders. In this situation, the best tool is the marking knife. Used with a square, the marking knife easily cuts a clean, square shoulder line across the grain.



On the shoulders the marking gauge falls short. It tears fibers when used cross-grain and far from its reference edge.



A knife is a better tool for the job. The marking knife leaves a flawless line, regardless of grain direction.

Rules of Thumb^(continued)

USING A MARKING KNIFE



Well-fit dovetails start with accurate layout. A marking knife allows you to transfer the tail layout precisely onto the pins board. The thin incisions will guide the chisel later during final paring.

Scribe a line for clean cuts on plywood. Cut this line into the bottom of the panel, where the sawteeth will exit.



Marking out a hinge mortise. The marking knife adds precision to this operation, too. The line will serve as a starting place for final chisel cuts around the perimeter.

outside that line seems to flake away as I pare at it with a chisel, leaving only a clean dovetail recess or a precise pin.

There are several types of marking knives

The most obvious distinction between marking knives the way in which the blade is sharpened. The most common type used for marking has one side of the blade beveled, so the flat side of the blade can be placed vertically against a straightedge.

Knives also can be sharpened on both sides of the blade. When using a double-beveled knife, you should angle the knife so that the bevel rests flat against the straightedge. Another significant design difference is whether the blade has a single cutting edge or if the knife's tip is spear-shaped with two cutting edges. Generally, the two-edged knife has a sturdier tip and when rotated 180° it can be used to scribe a line down the left or right side of an edge.

In the catalogs you'll find a wide variety of knives for marking. Some feature stout, mirror-polished blades attached to rosewood handles and are made to last a few lifetimes. Others are plastic-handled carving or specialty knives. In the shop, I've used everything from utility knives to X-Acto blades. My favorite is a #1 chip-carving knife with a custom walnut handle shaped to fit my hand.

I use the fixed-blade, chip-carving blade for marking joinery and dovetails, and a #1 X-Acto knife for marquetry and veneer work. Although I could get by with one knife, each type seems to be well suited to a particular type of work.

Sharpen on a grinder or a stone

I typically sharpen my fixed-blade knives on the bench grinder. Grinding the blade every time might shorten its life somewhat, but it saves me significant time over honing.

Of course you can hone the blade using flat stones. This method might take a little longer, but it removes less material, leaves a finer edge and eliminates the possibility of damaging the hardness by overheating the metal.

Whether it's single- or double-bevel, handled or handleless, ground or honed, a sharp marking knife will add accuracy to your work. □

KNIFE TYPES

DOUBLE BEVEL

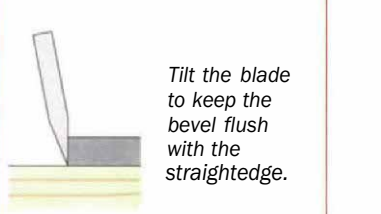
Most general-purpose knives have a bevel ground on both faces of the blade.



CHIP-CARVING KNIFE



DISPOSABLE BLADE



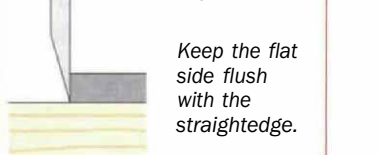
Tilt the blade to keep the bevel flush with the straightedge.

SINGLE BEVEL

A blade designed for marking is typically beveled on one face only.



SPEAR-POINT MARKING KNIFE



Keep the flat side flush with the straightedge.