

# The 5-minute dovetail

JOINERY PRACTICE  
IS A WOODWORKER'S WARM-UP

BY GARY ROGOWSKI

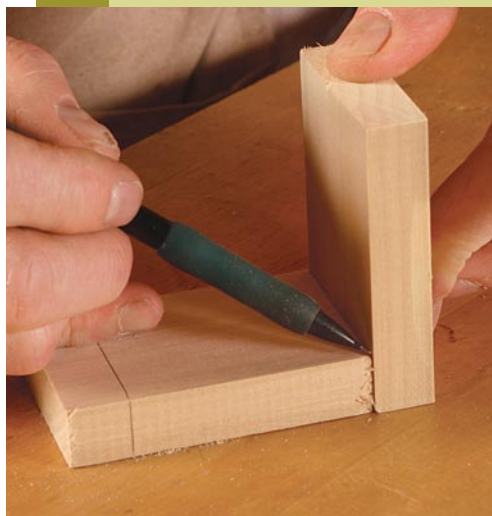
**W**hat is it about woodworkers? Baseball players loosen up their arms and take batting practice before a game. Violinists rosin their bows and tune their instruments before a concert. Artists draw big circles on their pads before drawing a portrait. Everyone seems to warm up before starting work except woodworkers.

What hubris tricks us into believing that we can begin sawing *right now* on that fiddleback maple, without getting ready? Some of us, hell-bent on “getting something done tonight,” only make



**Dovetails by the boxful.** Rogowski keeps several hours' worth of five-minute dovetails on hand to show students that the results don't have to be pretty.

## 1. Lay out and cut the tail



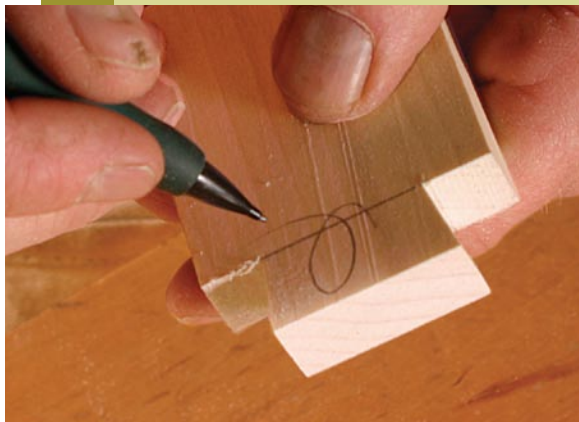
**The only layout tool is a pencil.** Start by marking the thickness of each piece on the end of its mate (above). Set the angle by eye and cut to the line (above right). Concentrate on keeping the line of sawteeth perpendicular to the board's face. Turn the workpiece in the vise and crosscut along your layout line to remove the waste (right).



**Clean up, but don't fuss.** Use a ½-in. paring chisel to square up the sawcuts.



## 2. Lay out and cut the half-pins



**Mark the outside face.** This helps ensure that you assemble the finished joint in the same orientation that you laid it out.

more work for ourselves in fixing mistakes. I do not have an answer. But I do have a strategy, at least for myself and for my students. It's called the five-minute dovetail.

This simple exercise consists of hand-cutting a single large dovetail to join a couple of pieces of scrap. It helps me practice hand skills while easing me into the focused mindset required for woodworking. For beginners, it's also a great introduction to hand-cutting a dovetail joint. The results don't have to be perfect. The point is to practice and get familiar with your body, the tools, and your bench.

The exercise uses wood like poplar or alder milled to about  $\frac{5}{8}$  in. thick by 2 in. wide by 3 in. long. You'll need a pencil, a backsaw, a coping saw, two chisels ( $\frac{3}{4}$  in. and  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.), a mallet, and a bench hook. Your tools should be sharp, your saws waxed for lubrication. Start by marking out the thickness of the stock on all four sides. There's no need for a marking gauge; just hold one board tight to the other and pencil in the line.

### Guiding a saw

The next step is all about controlling a backsaw. Work on your stance (arm and shoulder behind the cut) and your grip (firm enough to propel the saw, but not white-knuckled). Put one piece in the vise, end grain up, and start the tail cut. Drawing the saw across the thickness of the workpiece, make a slight kerf perpendicular to the two faces. Now tilt the blade sideways so the cut angles down toward the center of the board at  $7^\circ$  to  $10^\circ$ . Saw down to the marked line. Cut the other side at an equal angle. It doesn't matter if they don't match! After sawing, rotate the piece in the vise and crosscut the shoulders down to the first saw lines. Clean up these cuts with a chisel.

### Transferring the layout

Now it's time to work on transferring a layout accurately and sawing to a line. First, mark the outside face of each piece. Then hold the completed tail board against the pin board at a right angle and mark the tail shape onto the end grain of the mating piece. Make the pin cuts holding the saw straight up and down



**Transfer the tail outline.** Hold the pieces together tightly while making layout marks for the dovetail half-pins that will straddle the large tail.



**This cut is straight up and down.** The saw is angled front to back this time.



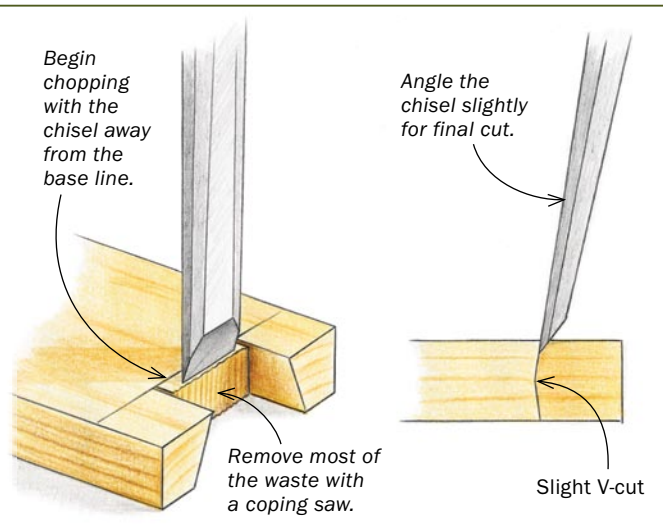
**Hog out the waste.** Use a coping saw to remove the bulk of material between the two half-pins.



## 3. Clean up and fit the joint



**Chop out the remaining material.** Support the workpiece against a simple stop and use a mallet and  $\frac{3}{4}$ -in. chisel to finish removing the waste.



and at the angle you have marked. Saw just on the waste side of the line down to the baseline. Now use a coping saw to make a pair of cuts, sawing away the waste as close to the line as you can. Then set the pin piece on the bench, supported by a bench hook or simple stop, to chop away the waste.

### Finish with some chisel practice

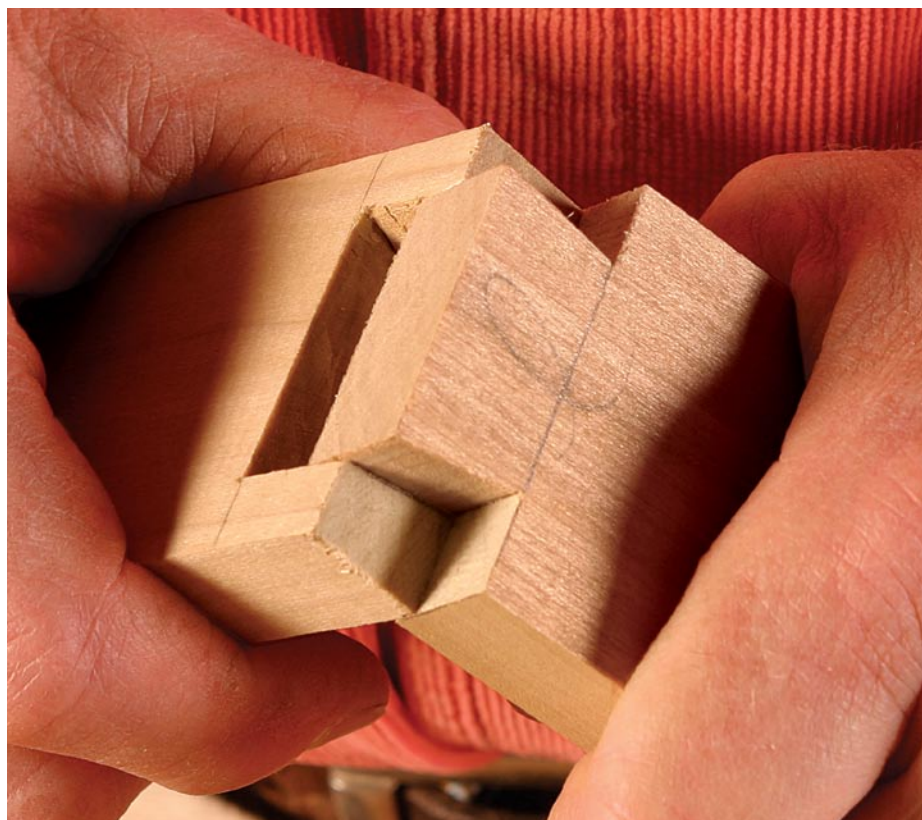
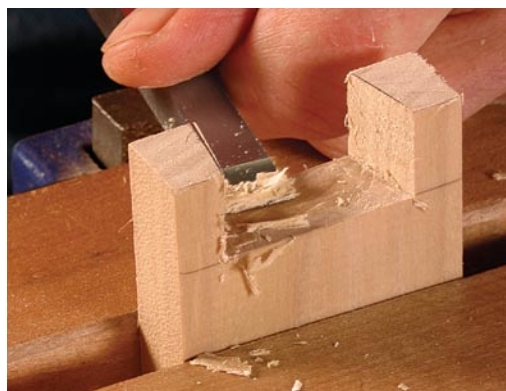
Remember, the chisel acts as a wedge. If you set it right on the line and strike it hard, it will move into the good wood. Instead, start well off the line and chop down from both faces toward the middle. Finish chopping from both faces by setting the chisel right on the line, angled inward to create a slight V-cut.

Check the fit; you may need to pare slightly across the pin's face. Just be careful to always keep your hands behind the business end of the chisel. And don't use a hammer to coax those pieces together. Too tight a fit may cause splitting.

Have fun with the dovetail exercise, learn to relax and get acclimated to the bench, and just do your best. □



**Clean up the surfaces.** Use the  $\frac{1}{2}$ -in. chisel to square the sawn and chopped surfaces.



**The moment of truth.** A good five-minute dovetail is a great way to warm up and get focused for each workshop session as well as reduce your fear of handcut joinery.