

# Sample boards: No surprises

TEST YOUR FINISH  
BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE

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Spend weeks making a beautiful piece of furniture, and the last thing you want is the finish to be a nasty surprise: a look that magnifies your poor sanding; one that display's the wood's blotchiness; or a stain that's simply the wrong color. That's why you should always test the finish on a sample board rather than on the project. By making all of the potential mistakes on the scrap instead of the project, life can

## A clear finish

Even a clear finish needs testing. The sample board below shows how a straight shellac finish will look with one, two, three, four, and five coats.



**A test sample shows the way.** Without this step-by-step sample board, the complex finish on the bird's-eye maple table would have been a hit-or-miss proposition, at best.

still go on without the huge task of reworking a finishing nightmare. The only disaster is the test piece!

### How to make a sample board

For the best results, use a cutoff from each of the woods used to make the project. This includes plywood, veneered panels, and solid lumber. Use a piece that's big enough to give you a good read: at least 7 in. square for each step of the finishing process.

It's important to prepare the sample board's surface exactly as you will the actual workpiece. Sand or scrape it too

much or not enough, and you'll get a misread on the stain and the sheen. There's a light-year's difference between a stained finish on pine at P150-grit and at P400-grit.

**Testing just a clear coat**—The basic sample board (below left) shows what the wood will look like with just a clear finish. Apply one coat to the whole board. Let it dry, mark off one-fifth of the board at one end, and apply a second coat to the rest of the board. Repeat the process until the last section receives a fifth coat.

This "step sample" is a graphic way to show how many coats

### TEST AN OIL FINISH FOR BLOTCHING



**Try different methods.** The Danish oil-finished sample board (far right) shows how blotches can be overcome in either of two ways: by presanding to a higher grit (left), or by applying a washcoat before the stain (right.)

SANDED TO  
P150 GRIT

SHELLAC  
WASHCOAT

SANDED TO  
P400 GRIT

## Adding a stain



**Top stain samples with a clear coat.** You need to apply several coats of clear finish to see how a stain will look.

must be applied. On certain woods, even a clear coat can blotch, especially if it is oil-based. The sample alerts the finisher to change course by pre-conditioning, sanding to a higher grit, or changing the coating material altogether.

**Adding a stain**—One up from the basic sample board is one showing a stain first and then a clear coat. But continue with the clear coats up to the desired sheen, as this will give a complete indication of what the stain will be like with the finished or “wet” look.

### A slightly more sophisticated sample

When the finishing plan calls for multicolor layering, it becomes imperative to use a step sample.

Like the example showing five coats of shellac on p. 106, each step is isolated on the board. On the walnut sample below, lemon-yellow dye is applied to the whole board but left uncoated in the first section. A seal coat of shellac is applied as the second step. The third

panel shows the application of a glaze, and so on.

This process is necessary to visually document the raw appearance for historical reference. It's important to make notes on every detail of the process including the date; it's vital information when working with cherry and other woods that age dramatically in a short period of time.

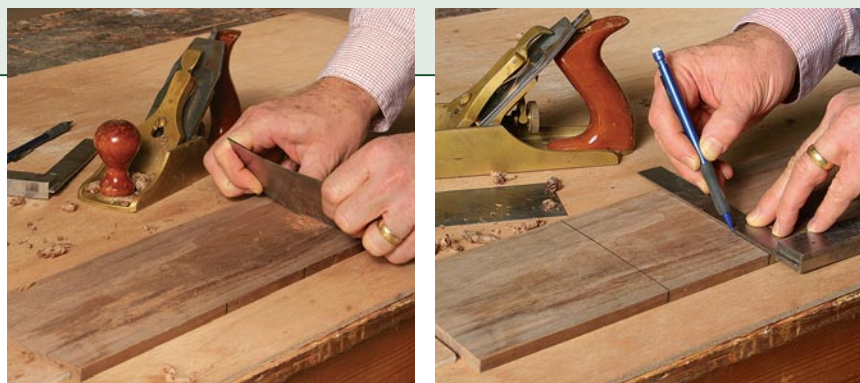
Years from now, you'll be able to go to the sample board and make sure that any new or repair work is progressing to match the original piece perfectly.

In short, the test sample helps you achieve two key goals of finishing: predictability and repeatability. The sample predicts the wisdom (or folly) of the finishing plan, and it allows you to repeat or duplicate the chosen plan in the future.

With a test sample, finishing your project can turn a nightmare into a dream. □

## Making a multicolor sample

**A step sample can document a complex coloring process. Start by prepping the sample board and then apply each layer of finish.**



**From prep to finish.** Start by scraping, planing, or sanding the sample board as you will the actual workpiece (left). Then mark the lines separating each step in the coloring process (center). Then apply the finish, coat by coat, until the desired color and gloss are achieved (right). A piece of blue tape offers a way to isolate a section.

