Don't overlook liquid hide glue

BOTTLED VERSION IS STRONG AND EASY TO USE

BY STEVE LATTA

Like an Indiana Jones adventure, the recorded history of hide glue begins in an ancient tomb. Deep inside Egypt's Valley of the Kings burial complex, archaeologists early last century unearthed wall art depicting tradesmen cooking the glue and using it to apply veneer. This, along with furniture found inside the funeral chambers, confirms that hide glue has been in use for thousands of years.

Before Titebond. *This scene of craftsmen using hide glue was found in the tomb of Rekhmire, an Egyptian governor buried about 3,500 years ago.*

For most of that time, working with hide glue meant mixing it yourself and heating it all day to keep it liquified. But since the 1930s, we've had the option of using bottled hide glue that stays liquid at room temperature. Liquid hide glue offers several other advantages for beginner and veteran alike, helping to reduce the stress of assembly and finishing while matching more modern glues for strength. Liquid hide glue doesn't promise the adventure of an archaeological discovery, but—honestly—who wants assembly to be an adventure?

Strong, stress-free glue-ups

Before we go any further, a little myth-busting: Hide glue is plenty strong. A

READY TO GO AT ROOM TEMPERATURE

Liquid hide glue has been available since the 1930s. While not used as often as yellow or white woodworking glues, liquid hide glue offers a unique set of working properties that make it a smart choice in many situations. It sets slowly, cleans up easily, and forms a strong, rigid bond.

Some like it hot

I can't write about liquid hide glue without mentioning its much older brother, hot hide glue. Unlike bottled hide glue, the hot type has a very short open time, with a fast bond that makes it possible to apply veneer even on curved work without a veneer press or vacuum bag. This quick tack also lets you attach pieces like glue blocks or cleats with a simple "rub joint" that requires no clamps at all.

Cookware for the shop. *A glue pot holds its contents at about 140°. The dry glue granules are sold in varying strengths by most woodworking retailers.*

Veneer without clamps. *The glue quickly holds the veneer flat against its substrate with simple firm pressure from a veneering hammer.*

3 strengths

SETS SLOWLY

Tricky glue-up? Take your time. *Liquid hide glue's long open time makes it ideal for assemblies in which there are many glue surfaces or joints to bring together and square. It is also more slippery than other glues, making assembly easier.*

2007 *FWW* test (How Strong is Your Glue?, *FWW* #192) found liquid hide glue to be only slightly weaker than more commonly used yellow PVA glue, with both being much stronger than the wood itself. More recently, the folks at Franklin International (makers of Titebond) told me their liquid hide glue equals their yellow glue in strength and outperforms their white glue.

So, how is liquid hide glue different? For starters, it stays workable longer after you apply it. This extended "open time" can be a lifesaver, giving you 20 minutes or more to realign parts and fully seat joints before the glue locks everything in place. You can check that aprons are flush with the tops of table legs, that edge-glued boards are lined up, that drawers are square. And you can breathe normally while doing so. The flipside is that your assembly will be in clamps longer (I allow at least an hour), but that's a small price to pay for peace of mind.

CLEANS UP EASILY

Squeeze-out is no problem. *A warm, damp rag removes the glue easily (far right). If you miss any, the same technique will also remove dried glue.*

FORMS A RIGID BOND

Great for small veneering jobs. *Liquid hide glue forms a rigid bond that won't creep over time. This tendency in other glues can cause veneer joints to fail over time.*

For cleanup or repairs, add water

Using hide glue will also make it easier to get your project ready for a finish. You can remove squeeze-out—even after it has cured—with a warm, damp rag. Yellow glue is harder to remove when wet and, when cured, must be chiseled, scraped, or sanded away. Any that remains will be more visible under a finish than hide glue will. The glue's weak resistance to heat and moisture also makes it possible to loosen or reverse the adhesive bond, if you have to, for making repairs. Also, the glue will bond to itself,

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meaning the old glue doesn't need to be scraped away first. Instrument makers and furniture restorers take advantage of these traits, as veneer and some joints allow good access to the glueline. But mortise-and-tenon joints, for example, are not so easy to loosen, so repairs are still a last resort.

The bond won't creep away

Liquid hide glue is also a good choice for laminations and veneer work, in part because it forms a rigid bond. Yellow glue, even after it has cured, remains slightly elastic, allowing laminated parts to slowly slide out of alignment with one another. The damage from this "cold creep" can be dramatic: I've seen Queen Anne chairs on which the laminated back splats crept so much that they ripped the crest rail right off the legs. Modern plastic resins may be more practical for larger tasks, but for small jobs such as veneering doors or drawer fronts, or bent laminations with gentle curves, liquid hide glue works great and is easy to use. □

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VS. YELLOW GLUE

Hide glue weakens when exposed to moisture, and it spoils more quickly than yellow glue, with a shelf life of about one year. Keep it in a cool, dry place to maximize its life. Apart from those weaknesses, it performs as well as or better than its more modern counterpart.

	PVA GLUE	LIQUID HIDE GLUE
Strength	X	X
Open time		X
Moisture and heat resistance	X	
Cleanup		X
Reversibility		X
Laminations/veneering		X
Shelf life	X	