

# A No-brainer Varnish Technique



Applying thinned varnish  
with a paper towel



BY JEFF JEWITT

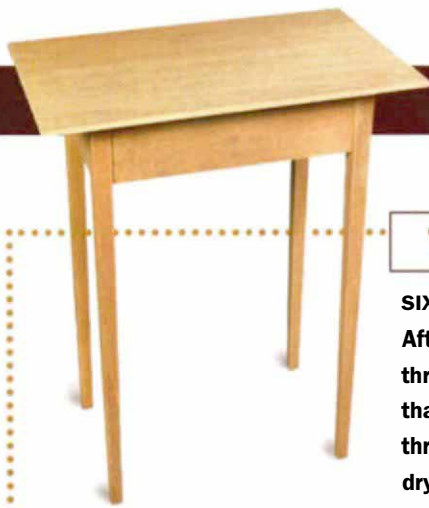
About a year ago, I moved my refinishing business. This time around, I was determined to install the most up-to-date spray booth right from the start. Though assured by the designer that it would be up and running within a month after moving into the new shop, inevitable delays stretched that timetable into several months. Somehow I had to keep a furniture-restoration business running that had a reputation of providing a quick turnaround on jobs.

Until the new booth was in order, spraying was out of the question, so I had to come up with a quick-dry finishing system. After some trial and error, I developed a method of wiping on a fast-dry varnish with a paper towel. The varnish provided protective qualities similar to those of a standard nitrocellulose lacquer. It was easy to apply, and it dried fast enough that all the dust kicked up by workmen wasn't a problem. I was so impressed with the results that this technique is now a staple in my teaching repertoire, and students love the results.

## What to use

Fast-dry varnishes are similar to typical alkyd varnishes, but the drying time is sped up by adding vinyl toluene to the alkyd resin. These varnishes dry tack-free

*Unorthodox, but it works.* This simple method, which uses fast-drying varnish and smooth-textured paper towels, solved the author's need to apply a quick-drying, long-lasting finish.



**The Piece**

**SIX COATS IN TWO DAYS**  
After sanding this small table through 180 grit, it took less than a day to apply the first three coats of diluted, fast-dry varnish.



**Step 1**

**FOLD IT UP AND SQUIRT**  
Glue bottles make great dispensers for the thinned finish. Replenish the supply of finish as necessary to keep it flowing smoothly onto the surface of the wood.

**Materials**



**FAST-DRY VARNISHES WORK BEST**  
These three brands dry so fast that you can apply a second or third coat within hours of the first one.

**USE A SMOOTH-TEXTURED PAPER TOWEL**  
The author prefers Viva brand towels (left). Heavily textured paper towels (right) can leave streaks in the finish.

in as little as 15 minutes. This means that the conventional problem associated with varnish—dust drying in the finish—is eliminated. The three brands I've used—Zinsser's Quick-15, Sherwin Williams' Wood Classics Fast-Dry Oil Varnish and Benjamin Moore's One Hour Clear Finish (see *FWW*#133, p. 142)—are available in gloss and satin versions. I use gloss for this technique because satin versions tend to dry a bit streaky when applied in thin coats. Gloss can also be rubbed down to satin, as I'll explain later.

When brushing on varnish, bubbles sometimes form in the finish. But by thinning the varnish and wiping it on with a paper towel, bubbles are eliminated. Any nontextured paper towel will work, but my favorite brand is Viva. Avoid textured paper towels.

I use naphtha to thin varnish because it dries the fastest; I can easily apply three coats in a day. Mineral spirits will extend the drying time, so you'll probably be able to apply only two coats a day.

**How to do it**

Sand the wood through 180 grit. I use a random-orbit sander and then hand-sand with the grain, using the same grit. Remove all

sawdust and other debris, and then apply any stain you want. Allow the stain to dry. Dismantle the project as much as you can so that you have flat surfaces to finish. Thin the varnish with equal parts naphtha or mineral spirits and put the thinned solution into a plastic squeeze bottle with a dispensing nozzle—the type you find on a glue bottle.

Fold a single piece of paper towel once perpendicular to the perforated seam. Fold it again perpendicular to the previous fold, then fold it again. You should end up with a rectangular piece of folded towel approximately 2¾ in. by 5 in.

Hold the paper towel so that the tip extends just beyond your fingers and apply a squirt of varnish (about ¼ oz.) to the tip of the towel. Bring the towel down onto the surface of the workpiece and wipe a thin, even coat from one edge to the other. Don't bear down too hard at the beginning or you'll get a pool of finish. Replenish the towel again and make another swipe, overlapping the first one by about ½ in. or so. Repeat this process until you've covered the whole surface. Do the edges last. The thin varnish sets up quickly, allowing you to fix a drip immediately. But your goal

**Step 2**

LAY IT ON IN LONG STROKES WITH A LITTLE OVERLAP

Wipe on the finish in long strokes in the direction of the grain. Each successive stroke overlaps the previous one by about 1/2 in. Work from one side of a piece to the other, always rubbing in the same direction. Take care to dispose of used paper towels properly.



**Step 3**

STRIVE FOR A LIGHT TOUCH  
Scuff-sand the dried finish very lightly. A sufficiently dried finish will turn to powder (right); one that's too wet will form gumballs on the sandpaper.



**Step 4**

REDUCE THE SHEEN WITH STEEL WOOL  
Using very fine (0000) steel wool, you can turn a gloss finish into a satin sheen by rubbing the final coat of varnish with the direction of the grain.



should be to get the varnish on as evenly and as quickly as you can and then leave it alone.

The first coat should be dry enough to sand in about an hour. Use 400-grit silicon-carbide sandpaper and scuff the surface just enough to remove any nibs. If the varnish film turns to powder easily when you sand it, then it is dry enough to re-coat. Remove the dust with a tack rag and apply the second coat just like the first. After a few hours, scuff-sand and apply a third coat.

After overnight drying, sand the finish again with 400-grit paper. Wipe all of the residue with a tack rag and build at least two more coats, and as many more as you like. When the finish depth is to your liking, stop. I typically apply six coats to maximize durability.

After a week's drying time you can rub out the finish if that's the look you want. Wet-sand the finish lightly with 600-grit wet-or-dry paper, by hand. Then, using 0000 steel wool and wax thinned with mineral spirits, rub the finish with the grain in long strokes. This

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