

Honing Guides

The best guides help get a keen edge on a variety of blades

BY CHRIS GOCHNOUR



A real-world test

To see how the guides handled a variety of tools, Gochmour tried them on 3/4-in. to 3/4-in. bench chisels, a 1/4-in. mortise chisel, a spokeshave blade, straight and slightly cambered plane blades, and a skew plane blade. The more commonly used blades were weighted more heavily in the tests than others.

Guide styles

Honing guides can be divided based on how they clamp the blade and what surface they roll on.

To be successful, a sharpening routine for woodworkers must be easy, quick, and versatile, and it must produce accurate and consistent results.

While some may prefer to sharpen freehand, I'm a big proponent of honing guides, and I recommend one for anyone looking to get sharp edges. Intended to hold blades at a consistent angle while you sharpen, these guides are essential to getting keen, repeatable results.

With all the guides on the market, it's hard to know which one to pick. Should it clamp from the sides or the top? It depends. Should it ride on the stone or off? I prefer on.

To determine the best models, I tested each with a variety of different blades and focused on four areas: ease of setup, accuracy of setup, versatility, and consistency. No single guide did everything perfectly, but two were easily my top picks: the Lie-Nielsen honing guide and the Veritas Mk.II Deluxe Honing Guide Set. Used mindfully, either will be a great addition to your sharpening arsenal, getting you back to your bench with razor-sharp blades in little time.

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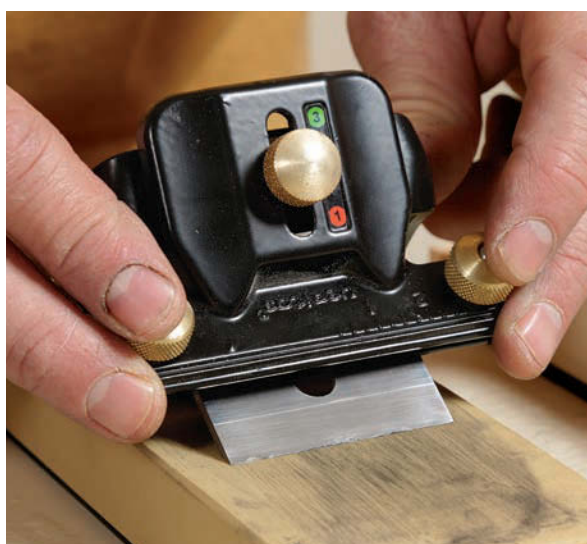
SIDE OR TOP CLAMPING

Side clamping is straightforward. These guides are great at holding blades square, because their jaws secure blades between a pair of rigid side walls. But this side-pinching action also limits what the guides can hold.



Top clamping is more versatile. Guides that hold blades from the top and bottom can secure them at a variety of angles in addition to holding them square—although positively and consistently registering these angles can be tricky. Gochmour has found that there's also a greater chance blades will slip out of their setting with these guides.

ON OR OFF THE STONE



On the stone is Gochmour's go-to. While guides that ride on the stone typically restrict the amount of usable stone, they keep the honing angle constant from stone to stone regardless of differences in the stones' heights.



Off the stone is less than stellar. While they prevent the sharpening medium's grit from contaminating the wheels and let you use more of the stone, these guides have a catch: All stones must be the same height for the honing angle to remain constant. For that reason, Gochmour does not recommend this style of guide.

Online Extra

To see test results for off-the-stone guides, go to FineWoodworking.com/274.



LIE-NIELSEN HONING GUIDE

\$125; accessory jaws, \$25–\$35 per pair

Rating: Excellent



Projection of blade determines honing angle. Like other side-clamping guides, the Lie-Nielsen works best when paired with a shopmade projection guide for repeatable results.



Accessory jaws expand capability.

These include jaws for short blades, like spokeshaves, chisels down to $\frac{1}{8}$ in. wide, mortise chisels, and skew blades of 18° and 30°.



Although it may look like many a generic side-clamping guide, the Lie-Nielsen guide is head and shoulders above them while still being straightforward and easy to use. Machined to tight tolerances, the tool performed solidly and simply. Pair it with a projection jig (see p. 48 to learn how to make and use one), and it's hard to imagine a more efficient setup.

The guide did an excellent job on just about every blade I tried, holding them tight and square. Narrow chisels did pose some problems with squareness, but thanks to the guide's narrow wheel, it was nothing a little deliberate, concentrated pressure couldn't fix.

The standard jaws work with most plane blades and bench chisels. Accessory jaws, priced at \$25 to \$35 per pair, help overcome the common drawback of side-clamping guides: the limited range of blades the tool can hold. The jaws for skew blades work only for 18° and 30°, the angles Lie-Nielsen uses on its skews.



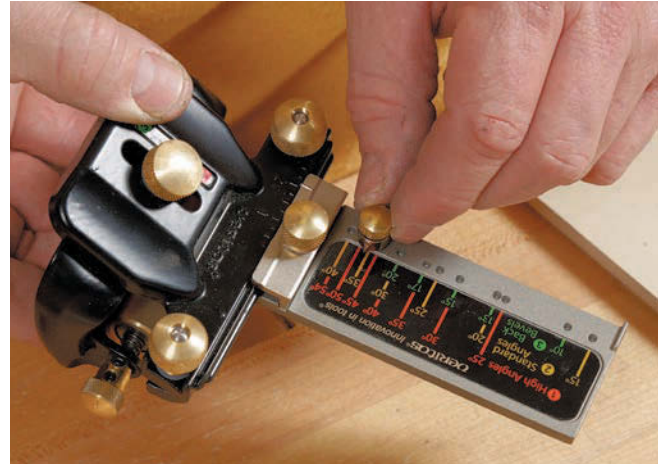
Narrower chisels cant slightly. Even in the jaws meant for chisels, narrower chisels would cock slightly out of square. As long as you're aware of it, however, this is easily compensated for because the guide's narrow wheel helps direct pressure.

VERITAS MK.II DELUXE HONING GUIDE SET

\$125; skew registration jig, \$34

Rating: Excellent

EASY ANGLE SETTING



Guide for square blades included. The guide comes with a gauge for setting bevel angles from 15° to 54° and back bevels from 10° to 20°. Using it also helps set blades square.



Optional registration jig for skews. This one has radiating lines to guide the skew angle, and a stop that lets you set the honing angle from 10° to 45° in 5° increments.



The Veritas Mk.II Deluxe Honing Guide Set is a versatile jig that, thanks to its accessories, was the only model that did an excellent job sharpening every type of blade. The kit is truly the Swiss Army Knife of honing guides. Plus, it was comfortable to use and easy to set up regardless of the accessories.

The Mk.II comes with a top-clamping head, a side-clamping head, a long cylindrical roller, a barrel-shaped roller for cambers, and a gauge for setting bevel angles on square blades. While you can get the Mk.II base model—the straight roller and registration jig with either the top- or side-clamping jaws—for just under \$70, the deluxe kit's extraordinary versatility paired with its price makes it the clear choice for me. Buying the skew registration jig only adds to its appeal.

The guide's roller is on a spring-loaded adjustable cam, which can be rotated to change the angle of the blade by 1° or 2°—a convenient way to add a microbevel without taking the tool out of the jig.

One caveat about this guide: Clamping blades square takes some care. You have to be very careful when tightening the two knobs on the clamping bar or it will press on one side of the blade, causing the blade to skew. Also, blades sometimes shifted in use with the top-clamping jaws. Additionally, when using the side-clamping attachment, it took some effort to get the blades held square.



Do a barrel roll. The barrel-shaped roller lets you easily hone a camber, a slightly radiused edge, which is helpful for avoiding plane tracks.

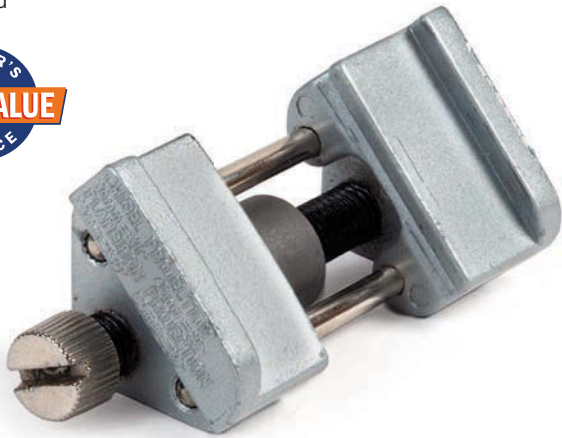


Switch to the side-clamping jaws for narrow blades and chisels. These jaws hold blades $\frac{1}{8}$ in. to $1\frac{1}{2}$ in. wide and work with the square projection jig.

GENERIC SIDE-CLAMPING GUIDE

\$10–\$15

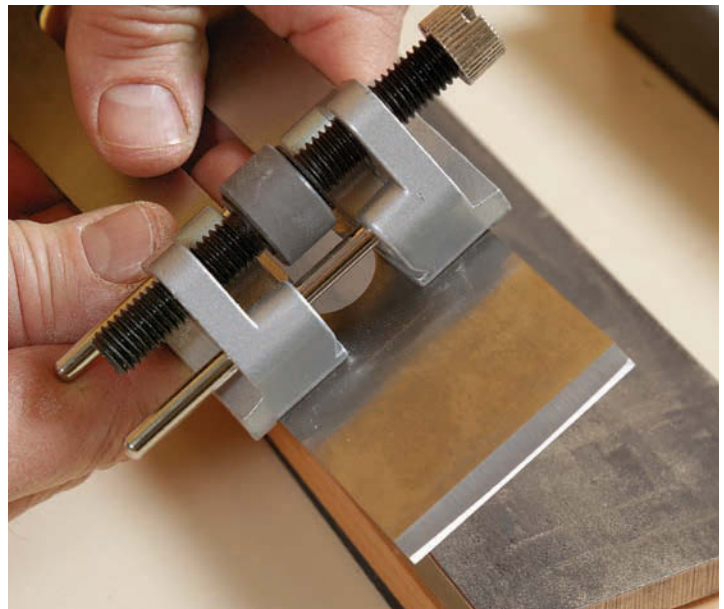
Rating: Good



You can find this guide from a number of manufacturers. Mine happened to come from WoodRiver, but they all function the same: a pair of jaws clamp a blade's sides to hold it in place. Wider blades, like plane blades, fit up top, and there's a lower recess to secure narrower blades, like chisels.

The guide is comfortable to hold, easy to set up, and performed basic tasks well. It did a nice job honing straight and cambered plane irons. It also handled a spokeshave blade just fine. However, the guide cannot hold a skew blade or a mortise chisel.

The big drawback is that its lower jaws struggled holding chisels.



Narrow wheel allows for camber. Steady, alternating pressure at the corners of the iron produce a slightly radiused edge.

Some woodworkers square and shape these guides' jaws with a file to help the tool better hold chisels and even other blades. Being mindful about where you apply pressure can help, too.

Despite these concerns, I used one for years, and many of my students gravitate toward these while the school's more expensive top-clamping guides collect sawdust.

Make a projection jig

Having a way to quickly and consistently repeat certain angles is crucial to getting the most out of a honing guide. Luckily, for guides that ride on the stone, where your honing angle is determined by how much a blade projects from the guide, this just means making a series of fixed stops set to your most common sharpening angles.



Find the angle. A digital angle finder is a simple way to find honing angles. Once the blade is at the angle, lock down the jaws.



Set your stops. With the blade set at the desired angle, push the front of the guide flush with the edge of the jig base. Set the stop so it just touches the blade's edge, then nail it down.



Repeatable results. With the stops clearly labeled with the angles, you'll remove any guesswork when setting up your honing guide.



KELL NO. 2

\$85
Rating: Fair

The Kell functions much like other side-clamping guides, except that its wheels run alongside the blade instead of under it. As a result, it can hold blades up to 2½ in. wide; there is no minimum. It worked well on wider chisels, but I found it a little challenging to register narrower blades accurately so the bevel could be honed square. It was hard to set the bevel angle, and I did not like its ergonomics. It can't hone a skew or mortise chisel, and it can't camber. Plus, when honing wide irons, the guide's wheels may extend too far to roll on the stone.



Hard to hold. Whether he put his fingers between the wheels or beyond them, Gochmour found the Kell guide awkward to hold and often struggled to find a stable, comfortable grip.

NANO HONE SHARP SKATE 4

\$300
Rating: Very good

This guide has a row of small wheels and is used side-to-side. Once set, it was quick and easy to use. The clamp is positive and kept almost every blade I tested from moving. It struggled with the ¼-in. chisel, but did a better job on the wider ones, holding its setting and honing them squarely. I could not hone a camber with it. Setting the guide to hone skews—a matter of twisting the internal base of the guide—was tricky. The pivoting action of the top clamp is well-suited to hand-forged Japanese blades that might have irregularities.



Use the whole stone. Unlike other guides, the Sharp Skate runs side to side, letting you use 100% of the stone, facilitating uniform wear.

TREND HONING GUIDE

\$55
Rating: Very good



Projection guide included. The base lets you set honing angles of 25°, 30°, 35°, and 40° and ensures blades are clamped square.

The Trend guide is similar to the generic side-clamping guide, but its tolerances are tighter. The Trend did a great job sharpening a straight plane blade, chisel, mortise chisel, and spokeshave. It comes with a jig for setting blade projection and sharpening angle, but it was fussy to use. The side-clamping jaws prevent sharpening skew blades, and the wide roller makes cambering difficult.

VERITAS SHARPENING SYSTEM

\$50
Rating: Very good



This Veritas guide is well made and sturdy. It clamps blades securely from above, allowing it to handle straight and skew blades easily. The jaws also open wide enough to hold mortise chisels. The guide itself performed well on both plane irons and chisels. Honing a slight camber was not a problem with this guide.



Angle guidance. The system includes an angle jig for setting bevel angles from 15° to 35°. It also has a cam for conveniently adjusting a microbevel.