

Resawing by hand

WITH A GOOD, SHARP SAW, IT'S FASTER AND EASIER THAN YOU MAY THINK

BY BILL PAVLAK

Pick the right saw for the job

When selecting a saw for resawing, think large and aggressive. The teeth need to be filed for ripping and have some set, but not too much. Saws from modern makers should come sharp. If you buy an antique one, but aren't comfortable sharpening it yourself, send it out and let the sharpener know you'll be using it for resawing. Don't stress too much about the tool, though. The saw needs to be good and sharp, not great and perfectly sharpened.

A handsaw with a 26-in.-long blade works well for boards up to 12 in. wide. For wider stock, I grab a helper and a 4-ft.-long, two-person frame saw. Fortunately, that isn't often. I use a 5½-ppi (points per inch) saw. For really aggressive jobs, like cutting up backboards, I might use something coarser. I go finer for veneer. If your budget allows only one saw, go for 7 ppi.



Different teeth for different jobs. In the photo above, Pavlak is using a 5½-ppi saw, good for general-purpose work. When cutting veneer (left), Pavlak uses a 10-ppi saw. The higher tooth count affords more finesse and leaves a finer surface.

“I can’t imagine having to do all of that by hand.” Woodworkers often say this to me as I demonstrate 18th-century cabinetmaking at Colonial Williamsburg.

I try not only to get them to imagine it, but also to see that hand-tool techniques still have an important place in today’s shops. There is, however, one method where the conversation often stops: resawing by hand.

For starters, it looks exhausting. There’s also fear around following the line. But resawing by hand isn’t that hard or arduous; it just takes trying it a few times to realize that. And once you become proficient, your resawing will never be limited by your bandsaw—or lack thereof—again.

For the best results, there are a few things to keep in mind. Foremost, when sawing, advance the saw only down a line you can see. This means starting at the near corner, taking great care to advance the blade simultaneously across the end and the edge facing you. When you reach the far corner, flip the board and repeat. This process of cutting triangles (see pp. 24, 26) means you are sawing only the lines you can see.

Starting is the hardest and most crucial part. The wide blade will feel unwieldy until it’s buried in the board, so use the thumb of your off hand to position and steady it on the waste side of the cut. Generally, I saw off my line to leave a



GET READY

Begin with a reference surface. Because you’ll scribe the thickness off this face, make sure it’s flat and without wind.



Scribe the resaw thickness. Using a marking gauge, wrap the scribe line around the entire board. Make sure it’s clearly visible.



Clamp the board so it’s angled slightly away from you. A lot of force is generated while resawing by hand, so Pavlak recommends having a stout bench and a strong vise to handle the task.

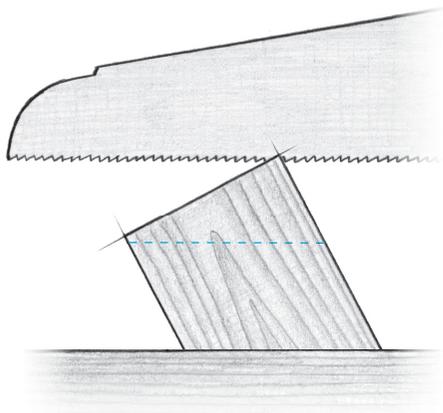
Online Extra

To watch a video of Bill Pavlak and a partner working together to resaw wide stock, go to FineWoodworking.com/275.

START THE CUT

SAW INTO THE NEAR CORNER

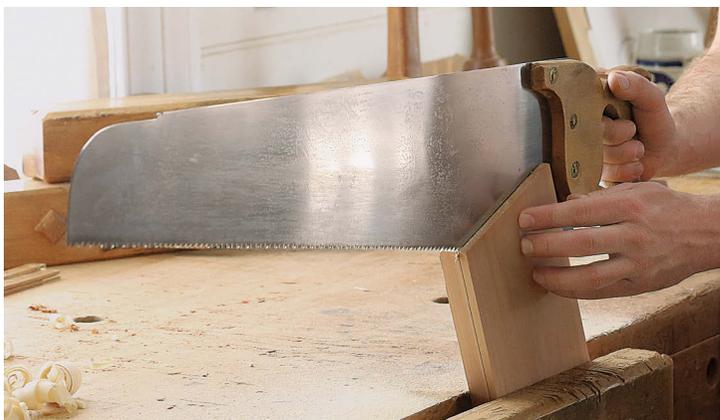
Begin by cutting a triangular kerf across the top end and partially down the edge facing you. When resawing, saw only down a line you can see.



Start just off your line. Pavlak is right-handed, so he keeps the waste to his right to better see his line. (Lefties should do the opposite.) He positions and steadies the saw with his thumb.



Course correct if necessary. Apply a little lateral pressure with a finger to allow the set in the teeth to push the tool back on track.

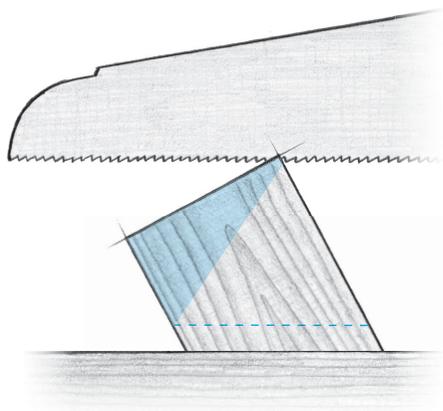


Take full-length strokes. From beginning to end, slip into a rhythm, using the entire length of the saw as soon as it feels stable in the cut.



SECOND CUT GUIDED BY FIRST

Within a couple of strokes from the new side, the saw will fall into the first cut's kerf, making it easier to guide.



Flip the board for the second cut. Once again, saw only what you can see while taking careful, deliberate strokes with the saw.

CONTINUE THE CUT

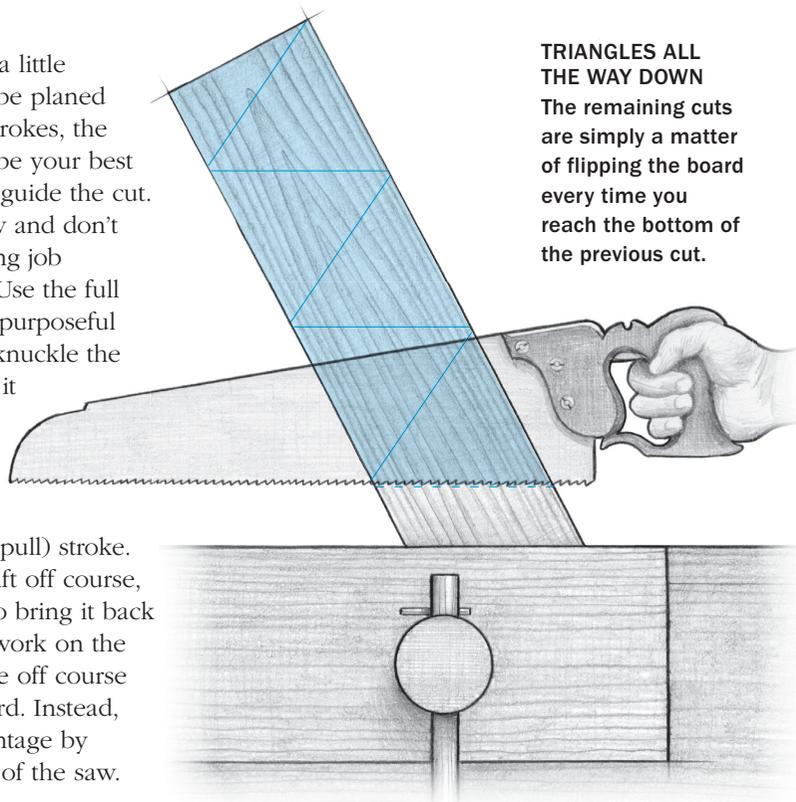
Keeping the board clamped at an angle maximizes the amount of blade in the board at any time, increasing stability.



little room for error and a little extra thickness that can be planed away later. After a few strokes, the once-wobbly blade will be your best friend as its width helps guide the cut.

Don't race with the saw and don't force it. A proper resawing job shouldn't wear you out. Use the full length of the blade with purposeful strokes, but don't white-knuckle the handle or bear down on it or the saw plate. Follow the old cliché: Let the saw do the work. Fall into a rhythm and let up a little on the return (pull) stroke.

If the saw begins to drift off course, don't twist it in the cut to bring it back on track. This will only work on the edge; the saw will still be off course in the middle of the board. Instead, use the set to your advantage by simply pressing the side of the saw.



TRIANGLES ALL THE WAY DOWN
The remaining cuts are simply a matter of flipping the board every time you reach the bottom of the previous cut.

TIP



Wedge the kerf open. Some boards may close up as you resaw them, pinching your saw. If this happens, put a wedge in the kerf to prevent it from closing.

FINISH UP



Extend the kerf to the bottom corner before flipping the board end for end. This helps you direct your saw to the already-sawn cut and makes it a little easier for the board to pop open at the end of the cut.

If your saw keeps wandering off course, it's probably not you. Blame the tool. It needs to be sharpened or reset.

If all goes well, the triangular cuts will meet beautifully. Sometime during the last stroke all the resistance below the blade disappears and “thwump,” you're through. That moment almost always comes as a sweet little surprise. For those other times, don't worry. If the kerfs don't meet but are past where they should have met, pull the boards apart and plane away the wood that remains. It doesn't feel good when that happens, but you'll still have a usable piece and it will be better the next time around.

Resawing by hand works just as well for veneer, and the technique's the same—albeit much more deliberate and cautious. I won't saw thinner than a heavy $\frac{1}{16}$ in. One of my coworkers has successfully gone down to $\frac{1}{32}$ in., but it wasn't really worth the trouble.

In all honesty, it's easier to resaw than to write or read about it. I'd dare you to try it for yourself if you don't believe me, but there's nothing daring about it. After a little, you'll turn yourself into the highest-capacity bandsaw in the neighborhood. □

Bill Pavlak is the supervisor at the Anthony Hay Cabinet Shop at Colonial Williamsburg in Virginia.



Flip for the final cut. Follow your scribe line and aim for the small kerf at the far corner.



Inspect the sawn surface. You'll likely see some roughness and sawmarks. For backboards, Pavlak leaves the stock right off the saw.



Plane if necessary. Boards resawn with good technique and the proper saw won't take much to plane smooth.