

Every woodworker needs a tape measure

HOW TO GET THE MOST FROM THIS TRUSTY TOOL

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

The tape measure is largely a contractor's tool, but every woodworker needs at least one. Mine travels with me to the lumberyard and stays in my pocket for a host of tasks around the shop, from rough layout to setting up machines for milling lumber. It has endless possible uses—and there are a few tips and tricks that will help you make the most of it.

I can't count all the ways I use my tape, but the first is at the lumberyard when checking stock against my cutlist. At home, I use it to lay out parts, marking rough lengths and widths with a lumber crayon. I use it at the chopsaw, when I cut those boards to rough length, and at the bandsaw when ripping them to rough width.

Later, as a piece develops (and I need to build doors and drawers to fit, for example), I use my tape to grab measurements and lay out rough stock. But rough work isn't the only reason I



Roughing out parts

Fast layout. When using a tape to lay out parts for a project, you can quickly see which parts can come from which board.



And fast machine setup. When you rough those parts out of a large board, a tape is great for setting your bandsaw fence, for example.



TIP CHOP QUICKER



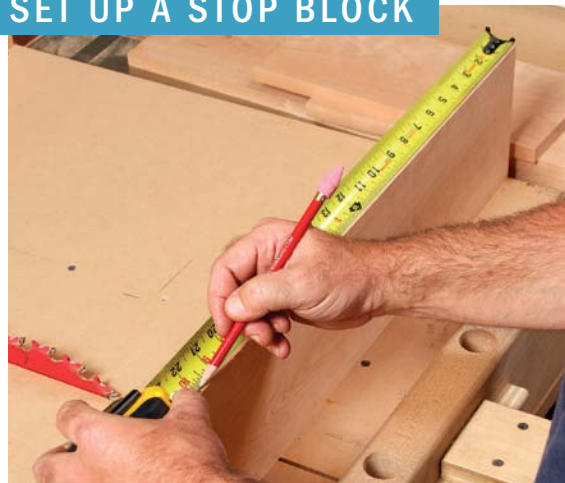
No mark needed on the miter saw. With the tape hooked on the end of the workpiece, just align the blade with your desired measurement. (without turning the saw on). Hold the workpiece tight against the fence.



Hold and cut. Keep the workpiece firmly in place as you retract the tape, and then bring down the blade to make the cut.

Precise work, too

SET UP A STOP BLOCK



Precise, matching parts. A tape measure can do more than rough work. To cut two case sides the same length, for example, square one end of the workpiece, then hook your tape on that end and make a tick mark (left). Then use that tick mark to set up a stop (above)—in this case, a hook-shaped stop—and cut both parts precisely with one setup.

reach for my spring-loaded buddy. Since I know my tape is accurate (see p. 27), I use it to lay out joinery on big pieces, like dados in bookcase sides. I trust it for machine setups, too—especially for measurements that are too big for a combo square, like when I'm working with plywood, or setting up a stop block in my crosscut sled. Even an accurate tape can't replace stop blocks or a story stick when they're called for, but you want a tape you trust, so you can use it to set up those stop blocks in the first place.

Tricks of the trade

I'm not the first to use these, but I have a few favorite tape tricks. They may not be amazing, but they're handy.

Here's a no-brainer: When you need to be precise, pivot the tape so that one side is lying down flat on the work. There are times you need to measure from one mark to another and the hook becomes a liability; it's much more accurate to measure from a line somewhere along the tape. I used to start at the 1-in. mark, but after forgetting to add that inch back in a couple of times—with disastrous results—I now start from the 10-in. mark. It's an adjustment that's too big to forget.

Then there is the trick at the chopsaw (or miter saw), where I bring the blade down onto the tape and board at the same time to line up a measurement. Then I just slide the tape away and keep the board in place for an accurate cut—without stopping to make a mark. Finally, there are all the ways you can use your tape during assembly to measure diagonals to check for square. The tape is perfect for this task—you can slip it under clamps, hook it over outside corners, and nestle it into inside corners.

Asa Christiana is FWW's editor.

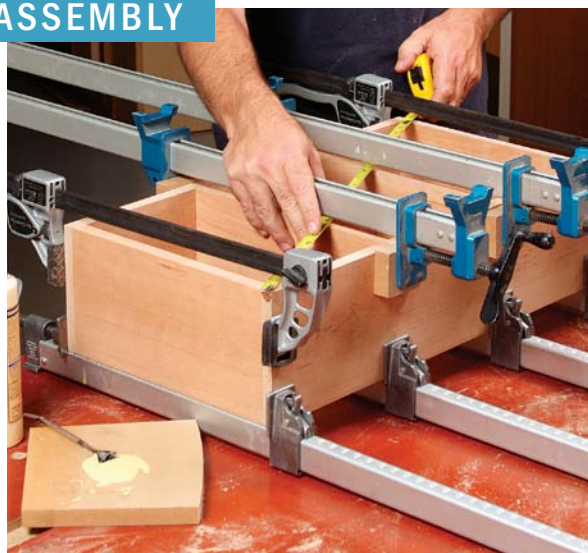
TIP

10-IN. TRICK



Measuring from mark to mark. If you start at the 1- or 2-in. mark when measuring from one pencil mark to another, you might forget to subtract that amount from your measurement. Start at 10 in. instead. That amount is hard to forget.

ASSEMBLY



Best tool for checking diagonals. When you assemble and glue up a case piece, it's important to measure the diagonals to check that it's square. A tape threads around clamps and cauls so you can make those measurements quickly and easily.

Choosing a tape: My favorites are small and accurate

With all the bells and whistles that are available on measuring tapes these days, the most important feature for woodworkers is still accuracy. Good news: After testing every tape measure I could get my hands on, I found that the most accurate, most convenient tapes tend to be among the least expensive.

Manufacturers are always looking to build a better mousetrap. But most of the innovations that have come along—winged hooks, and extrawide tapes that can span long distances without drooping, for example—benefit contractors more than woodworkers. Likewise, the big, fat 24-ft. tapes and beyond are overkill for the woodshop. For me, the perfect tape is 16 ft., longer than the longest boards I find at the lumberyard but small enough to carry easily. You might get away with a 12-footer, but I avoid pulling my tape measure out to its limit, since it puts stress on the reel inside and can shorten a tape's life.

A great woodworking tape does just a few things very well. For one, it's accurate on the inside and outside of the hook, especially when tipped on its side to get the markings close to the work. (The big, winged hooks on contractor tapes often prevent the tape from lying on edge.) The hook should be easy to snag on the

end of a board, the lock should move smoothly and hold fast, and the marks and numbers should be easy to read. Tapes that read from right to left are much easier for righties than the traditional left-to-right tapes, as the easiest marking position is with the tape in your left hand, hooked on the right end of the work. I tried every tape I could find, and my favorites are among the least expensive. That means you can afford to keep a few lying around the shop.

I like a standard locking mechanism that locks only when you flick the switch, and stays locked until you flick it back. I avoid the ones that slide freely only when you actively hold the release button, because that lever gets in my way when I quickly hook and pull.

There are new tapes that lie flat and are made for woodworkers, but since I frequently use my tape to measure things that are out of reach, like the end of a 12-ft. board or the opposite corner of case piece, I prefer the traditional type that has the ability to support itself in midair.

All these features are useless, though, if the tape is not accurate. Fortunately, you can check its accuracy before you buy (see opposite page). —A.C.

STANLEY 16 FT.

No. 30-495; \$8.50, amazon.com

This tape was accurate, inside and outside, and the price is unbeatable. The first 12 in. of graduations are $\frac{1}{32}$ in., and $\frac{1}{16}$ in. after that. The angled hook makes it easy to turn on its side for inside measurements.

STANLEY POWERLOCK 16 FT.

No. 33-116; \$9, amazon.com

This metal-cased Stanley has a smoother lock than its yellow plastic cousin, and it has a protective coating added to the tape itself, but otherwise, they're the same. I own two, and they're both dead-on accurate.

STANLEY FATMAX 16 FT.

No. 33-716; \$20, homedepot.com

This extrawide tape is my favorite among the Stanleys. It's chunky, but the $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. markings are easy to read, even upside down. The hook is solid, offering more support when you angle the tape sideways.

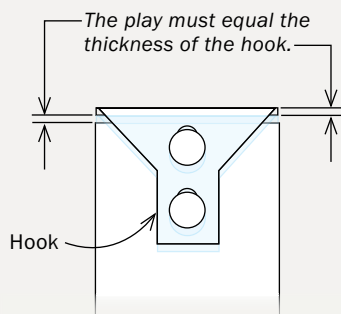


Does your tape measure up?

A tape measure should give accurate readings for both inside and outside measurements. Since quality can vary from one tape to the next, use a steel rule to check it for accuracy before you buy it.

PRECISION SLOP

The hook on the end of a tape measure wiggles for a reason, allowing precise measurements whether the hook is pushed or pulled.



Check the outside reading. When you're in the store, grab a good steel ruler off the shelf, hook the tape on the end, and verify that the lines match.



And the inside. Push the ruler and the tape against a stationary object to check whether the inch lines match when taking an inside measurement.

LEE VALLEY 12 FT.

Blindman's Tape; \$8, leevalley.com

This is the only right-to-left reading tape on my list—a great feature (L-R is available too). The giant numbers are easy to read, and each mark comes to a sharp point, so accuracy is not sacrificed for readability.

STARRETT EXACT 16-FT.

No. TX34-16; \$9, mansontool.com

This is a great tape for woodworking, with dead-on accurate readings in any position, a matte finish that reads well in any light, and $\frac{1}{16}$ -in. marks all the way to the hook. The first foot has $\frac{1}{32}$ -in. marks, too.

