



Honing Guides Aren't Just for Wimps

This tool guarantees consistent results when sharpening chisels and plane blades

BY MARIO RODRIGUEZ

When I apprenticed as a carpenter, I was taught to hone my chisels and plane blades without the benefit of a mechanical guide. At first, all I had to show for my intense efforts while hunkered over whetstones were a sore wrist, hollowed stones and uneven convex bevels on my cutting edges. With practice, my honing technique improved. But developing this skill required a great investment of time and discipline.

You may not want to make that kind of commitment when you'd rather spend your time building furniture. So how can a woodworker consistently obtain a razor-sharp edge without the investment of time an apprenticeship demands? Use a honing guide.

I teach a beginner's course in woodworking, and I encourage the use of honing guides. A successful sharpening routine—for intermediate woodworkers as well as novices—is a great way to build confidence.

I have taken a look at four of the most popular honing guides on the market. Whether you use Arkansas, ceramic, diamond or waterstones, these guides will work with all.

How honing guides work

Honing guides are available in a variety of designs, but they all make it easy to hold a tool at a steady angle to the stone. A clamping screw (or screws) secures the cutting tool to the guide, which has a wheel or roller that allows you to move the tool back and forth across a stone.

The trick to getting a uniform bevel on a chisel or plane iron is

maintaining the tool at a consistent angle to the stone. When honing by hand, beginners have difficulty maintaining a tool's angle, which results in a rounded bevel. Or they don't hold the tool square to the stone. A honing guide prevents these mistakes.

The bevel angle can be adjusted on most guides by either advancing or retracting the blade within the holder or by raising or lowering the vertical post supporting the holder.

What to look for in a guide

There are several models available, and each one is very different. Some are better suited to a particular type of tool or sharpening system. Using a honing guide should not involve convoluted motions. It should be easy to adjust and hold blades securely.

Use a firm grip when using a guide

The best grip for honing is a two-handed, six-finger grip (see the photo above). My thumbs rest on the back of the guide, and my fingers press down on the back of the tool. For narrow chisels, I use only my thumbs and one finger of each hand. Your fingers are very sensitive, and will tell you whether the tool slips in the jig and whether you're maintaining firm contact with the stone. Don't place your fingers too close to the cutting edge in case of a slip.

When using a guide, press down with your fingers, and maintain firm, even pressure as you move the guide forward and backward across the stone, which results in cutting action on both strokes.



A good grip is important. A six-fingered grip provides stability and good feedback so that you can tell immediately whether a tool has slipped in the guide.

Be sure to use whatever lubricant the stone calls for. Don't worry, it won't harm the guide. And try to use the entire stone so that it wears evenly.

Some people liken the use of honing guides to training wheels on a bike. But honing guides shouldn't be considered an embarrassing secret. Think of them as tools that make it easier to get good, flat cutting edges with less risk of nicked fingertips, stiff wrists or damaged stones. □

Mario Rodriguez is a contributing editor to *Fine Woodworking* magazine.

SOURCES OF SUPPLY

Honing guides and stone holders are available from many suppliers, including the following:

Garrett Wade
(800) 221-2942

Lee Valley/Veritas
(800) 871-8158

Woodcraft
(800) 225-1153

General No. 809 sharpening guide



the middle; a large, easy-to-turn knob allows you to adjust the bevel angle. The guide accepts blades up to 2⁵/₈ in. wide and holds them firmly with a spring-loaded bar. In use, the hinged half of the guide, which holds the tool, rests on the stone, and the heel of the guide, which contains a too-small plastic roller, rides off the stone (see the bottom photo at right).

The guide is designed to produce a 30° bevel, but that depends on how much the blade protrudes from the guide, the thickness of the stone and the height of the stone from the benchtop (determined by the stone holder). It's a good idea to use a protractor to check the bevel angle. Because the guide rides so high off the stone and the roller wheels are small, it's not the most stable guide. But the tool's large body does give you a lot to hold on to.

Price: \$21.50



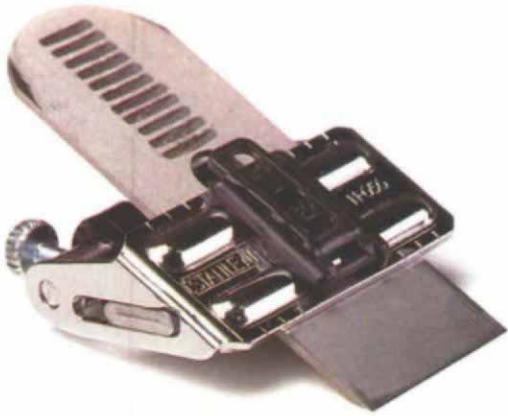
The General is the only guide that rests on and off the stone. The tool is hinged so it can be adjusted for stones of different heights.



You have to be careful not to tip this unit during use.

The General honing guide (see the top photo at right) is the only one whose roller wheel does not ride on the stone. Instead, it rides on your workbench and assumes you have a smooth spot somewhere on that beat-up, pockmarked surface. The guide is hinged in

Stanley No. 14-050 guide

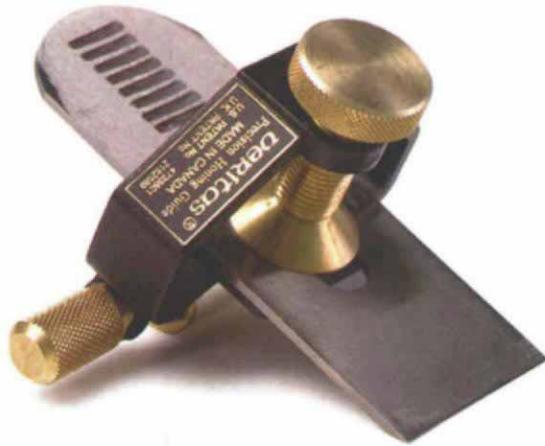


The Stanley has a narrow space between the stamped metal upper body and roller below, which makes it difficult to slip a chisel into position. The roller half of the guide is adjusted by two puny screws (similar to those on a Stanley spokeshave), which must be advanced and retracted equally to keep the works from jamming. You also need to tighten the screws evenly; otherwise, the tool won't be held securely. The guide is small and low, which makes it easy to keep flat on the stone. The best thing about this guide is the built-in bevel gauge (25°, 30° and 35°). The guide accepts tools up to 2½ in. wide. Price: \$15.95



A built-in angle guide makes it easy to position a tool to this guide.

Veritas honing guide



The Veritas has a D-shaped cast-iron frame that accepts blades up to 2¾ in. wide. A large brass screw, topped with a wide, easy-to-turn knob, holds blades securely. The tool glides on an eccentrically set roller wheel. The roller design allows you to dial in secondary bevels of 1° or 2°. The sensible design, good construction and reasonable price make this my favorite.

In addition to the honing guide, Veritas sells an angle-setting jig that has the most common bevel angles arranged around a pentagon wheel. The underside of each segment is ground to one of the five popular grinding angles (15°, 20°, 25°, 30° and 35°). Price: \$24.95 (guide); \$12.95 (angle setter)



A large, easy-to-tighten hold-down knob and a wide roller make a secure, stable honing guide. An angle-setting gauge with five presets can be purchased separately.

Side-clamp or vise-style honing guide



This model has a compact no-nonsense design. It's imported from Taiwan and available from several U.S. companies. The guide splits in the center for loading and can accommodate tools up to 2¾ in. wide. The jaws, because they're parallel, automatically register a tool perpendicular to the stone. A slotted screw on the guide's side opens and closes the jaws, which do a good job of keeping tools from slipping. Because of the narrow roller wheel, the guide is a bit unsteady. The bevel angle is set by the tool's placement in the guide; the more the tool projects forward, the shallower the angle. You should use a protractor to get an accurate setting. Price: \$11.95



Each half of the guide has a pair of jaws: one for wide tools and another for narrow ones.