

TOOL TEST

Honing Guides

A good sharpening jig makes it easy to get a fine edge on chisels and irons

BY CLIFF COLLEY

One of the first woodworking skills I learned from my father was the art of sharpening plane blades and chisels by hand. I became convinced that freehand sharpening was the only way to put a keen edge on a tool. It wasn't until I started my first job in a cabinet shop at 15 that I learned otherwise. One day, my boss saw me honing a 1/2-in. chisel by hand. He tossed me a honing guide and said, "Use this. It's consistent and faster."

He was right. In minutes, I was back at the workbench, putting a perfectly honed tool to wood.

Unlike sharpening by hand, a honing guide guarantees a consistent angle as you work your way up through the various grits, which makes sharpening faster and more efficient. A typical honing guide consists of a body, a clamping mechanism to hold a blade, and a roller or set of rollers that rides on the stone or on a surface adjacent to the stone.

Using one of these tools is straightforward. After lapping the back of the chisel or plane iron flat and grinding a bevel on a bench grinder, mount the blade in the honing guide, set the bevel angle, clamp down the blade, and roll it across whatever sharpening medium you prefer (waterstones, oilstones, diamond plates, or sandpaper on glass).

For this review, I tested eight honing guides, ranging in price from \$9 to \$70 (for the rundown on each tool, see pp. 40-41). In general, most of the guides I looked at are easy to use, and



all can hold typical blade sizes, from 1/8 in. wide to 27/8 in. wide.

From the tests, I found that guides with convenient features made a lasting impression. For instance, a few of the honing guides have adjustment mechanisms that allow you to put a secondary bevel (also called a microbevel) on a blade. Without this feature, you'd have to unclamp and slide the blade back about 1/8 in. A secondary bevel is steeper than the primary bevel and makes for a beefier edge that is easier to touch up later.

Some of the guides also come with angle-setting gauges either built in or as separate components. Finally, honing creates a burr on the back of the blade, which should be removed before you put the blade to use. A few guides allow you to remove this burr while the blade is mounted in them.

Of the guides I tested, my choice for best overall is the Veritas Mk.II. It's well engineered, has a hefty feel, handles a wide range of sharpening angles, and comes with a revolutionary angle-setting jig. What's more, you can adjust for a secondary bevel with the turn of a knob.

A close runner-up to the Veritas is the extra-wide honing guide from Kell.

For best value, I chose the Stanley guide. For \$20 you get a versatile guide that rolls smoothly, is comfortable to hold, and fits a range of blade sizes. □

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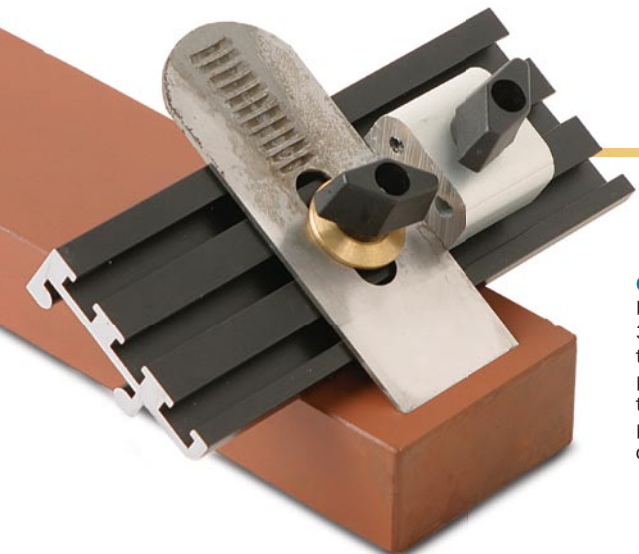
TWO WAYS TO HOLD A BLADE

Blades are held in the honing guides with clamping mechanisms that are horizontal or vertical. In general, clamping mechanisms that grip the blade horizontally between two jaws (left) hold tools more securely than most vertical mechanisms (above) and ensure that the cutting edge is always set perpendicular to the stone.



TWO WAYS TO ROLL

Most honing guides roll on top of the stone (above), allowing you to sharpen on stones of varying thicknesses without having to reset the blade. Guides designed to roll off the stone (left) must ride on a surface that's smooth and free of debris.



FasTrak

Price: \$55 (includes carriage, 30° roller, clamp, and depth gauge); \$13 for the 27° roller

Source: www.prairieriverwoodworking.com

Comments: With the FasTrak, you can achieve a 3° secondary bevel by honing first with the 27° roller, then switching to the 30° roller. The guide holds blades securely and perpendicular to the stone, and rolls smoothly. Unfortunately, the wide carriage has sharp edges and protruding attachments that make the FasTrak cumbersome to use. Also, the guide is a bit tippy, especially when honing chisels. I would purchase the FasTrak honing guide only if I planned to use the complete FasTrak system (see FWW #174, p. 73), which allows you to go directly from grinding on a wheel to honing on a stone with one setup.



HONING GUIDES

Honing guides are simple tools designed to make sharpening easier and more precise. Of the eight guides tested, the Veritas Mk.II is the best overall. It offers versatility, precision, stability, and comfort at a moderate price. On top of all that, the guide features a revolutionary blade-setting jig that's accurate and easy to use.

The Stanley guide is the author's choice for best value.

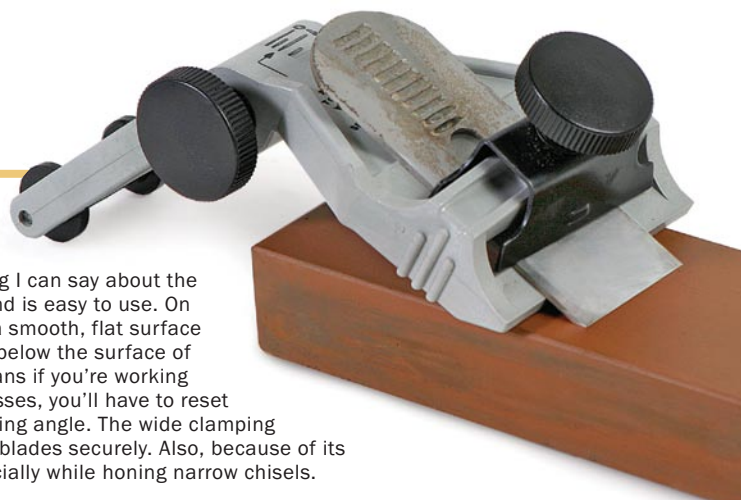


General 809

Price: \$27

Source: www.woodcraft.com

Comments: Perhaps the best thing I can say about the General is that it rolls smoothly and is easy to use. On the downside, the rollers require a smooth, flat surface that's free of debris, level with or below the surface of the sharpening medium. That means if you're working through stones of varying thicknesses, you'll have to reset the blade to ensure the same honing angle. The wide clamping mechanism does not hold narrow blades securely. Also, because of its height, the tool tends to tip, especially while honing narrow chisels.

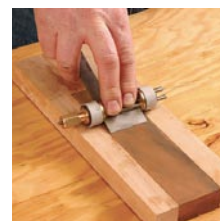


Kell guide

Price: \$65, extrawide; \$57, standard

Source: www.hartvilletool.com

Comments: The Kell honing guide is an exquisite tool made from brass and stainless steel, with smooth-gliding rollers. The horizontal clamping mechanism automatically registers a blade perpendicular to the stone, and the knob is easy to grasp. The guide is very stable, even with narrow chisels, and allows you to lap the back of a blade while it's clamped in place. The extrawide guide accepts blades up to 2 $\frac{3}{8}$ in. wide; the standard guide accepts blades up to 1 $\frac{5}{16}$ in. wide. For wide blades or narrow stones, a supplemental support surface may be necessary (right).



Sharpening Sled SS1

Price: \$70 **Source:** www.alisam.com

Comments: With its four-wheeled design, the SS1 is the most stable of the guides I looked at. The adjustable alignment pin makes it easy to keep a blade square to the stone during clamping. The SS1 works only with stones up to 1 in. thick, but you can purchase accessory side supports (\$33) to increase this capacity (according to the manufacturer, shorter side supports will be available soon for use with sandpaper on glass). On the downside, if you're working through stones of varying thicknesses, you'll have to reset the blade to ensure the same angle. Also, the guide does not fit over stones wider than 3 in.

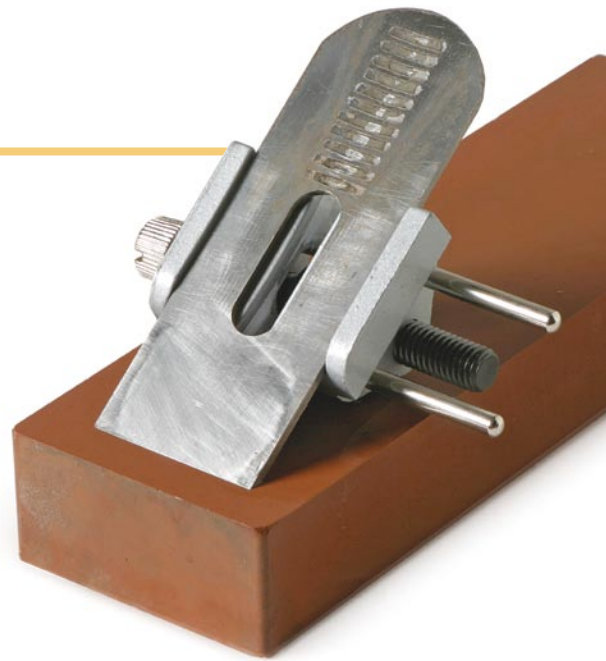
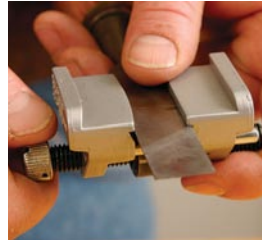


Single-roller guide

Price: \$9-\$15, depending on source

Sources: www.garrettwade.com, www.grizzly.com, www.leevalley.com, www.rockler.com, www.woodworker.com

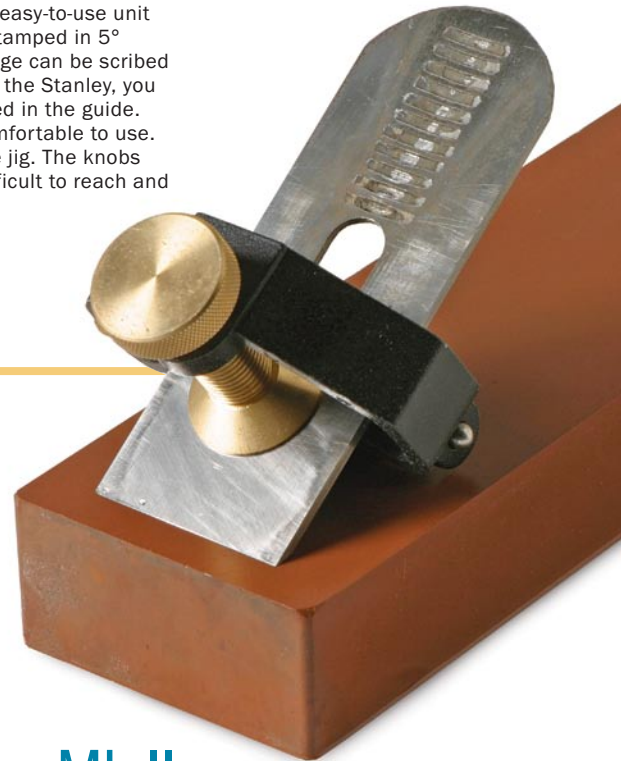
Comments: The low price is a big plus with this generic honing guide. Sold under different brand names and from a variety of sources, the guide is easy to use. It allows you to lap the back of a blade easily. The horizontal clamping mechanism sets most wide blades perpendicular to the stone. However, one jaw of the clamping mechanism is slightly convex, which caused my 1/4-in. stubby chisel to twist in the jaws and my 1/8-in. chisel to pop out repeatedly.



Stanley

Price: \$20 **Source:** www.garrettwade.com

Comments: The Stanley is a smooth-rolling, easy-to-use unit with a built-in bevel-setting gauge. Though stamped in 5° increments, from 25° to 35°, the plastic gauge can be scribed to mark at your preferred bevel setting. With the Stanley, you can lap the back of a blade while it's clamped in the guide. With plane irons, the guide is stable and comfortable to use. But chisels are more difficult to clamp in the jig. The knobs that adjust the clamping mechanism are difficult to reach and roughly milled.



Veritas

Price: \$36.50 **Source:** www.leevalley.com

Comments: The Veritas is a well-made, versatile tool at a reasonable price. The package includes a jig that helps set the blade for one of five common bevel angles: 15°, 20°, 25°, 30°, and 35°. You also can add a secondary bevel simply by turning a knob on the side of the guide. Unfortunately, I was unable to tighten the clamp enough to prevent chisel blades under 3/4 in. wide from pivoting during honing; the problem was solved simply by holding the tool with both hands.



Veritas Mk.II

Price: \$48.50 **Source:** www.leevalley.com

Comments: The Veritas Mk.II is an impressive tool. With its smooth, rounded edges and strategically placed indents for fingers, the jig is comfortable to use and is very stable because of its 2-in.-long single roller. You can achieve a secondary bevel with the turn of a knob on the side of the jig. The revolutionary color-coded blade-registration jig engages a slot on the front of the jig body and makes it easy to set a blade not only to the desired honing angle (from 10° to 54°) but also square to the stone. The instructions are well written and easy to comprehend.

