

Avoid shortcuts and do your finest work

BY ASA CHRISTIANA

We're all busier these days, feeling the pressure for quick results in every area of life, even in the last place we woodworkers should tolerate it—the shop.

So we take shortcuts—at least, I do. I trick myself into believing I can skip vital steps that prevent mistakes but slow me down. I ignore the quiet voice in my head that tells me I am gambling.

Temptation arises at every stage of a project, from choosing what to build to buying lumber and milling it, from cutting joints to assembly and finishing. And a mistake at any stage can show in the final product.

On the other hand, if you go the extra mile, you'll appreciate the gorgeous surfaces, tight joints, and flawless finish for years to come. I've never regretted taking my time on a piece.

The payoff

If you are a hobbyist like me, don't put yourself on a deadline. Leave those for your day job. Take a breath, clear your mind, and let that quiet voice guide you. It will warn you about every shortcut, and you'll be surprised at what you can accomplish.

—Asa Christiana is the editor.



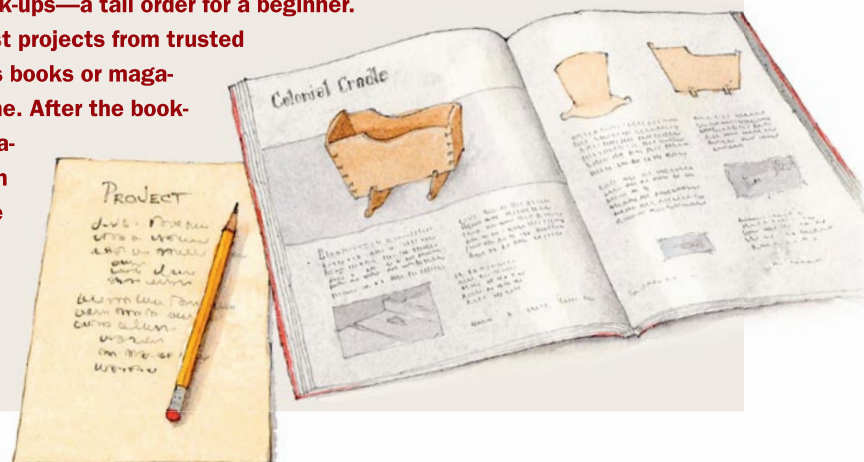
No shortcuts here. By carefully selecting materials and paying close attention to milling and joinery, Christiana built very square cases and doors for his built-in home office, featured in FWW #166. That made it much easier for contributor Tony O'Malley to install the entire unit, attach the face frame and moldings, and hang the doors.

Spend time on design

When I was starting out, I couldn't wait to begin cutting and building, so I designed pieces without much forethought. As a result, my work wound up with proportions, moldings, and other elements that I didn't like. I keep my first bookcase well hidden in a basement playroom.

If you're creating a design from scratch or even from a photograph, you'll need to iron out the details before you buy lumber. The best approach is to make scale models and mock-ups—a tall order for a beginner.

So build your first projects from trusted sources, such as books or magazines like this one. After the bookcase, I built a cradle from a plan in a book. That one came out great, and sits proudly in my daughter's bedroom.



Don't skimp on wood

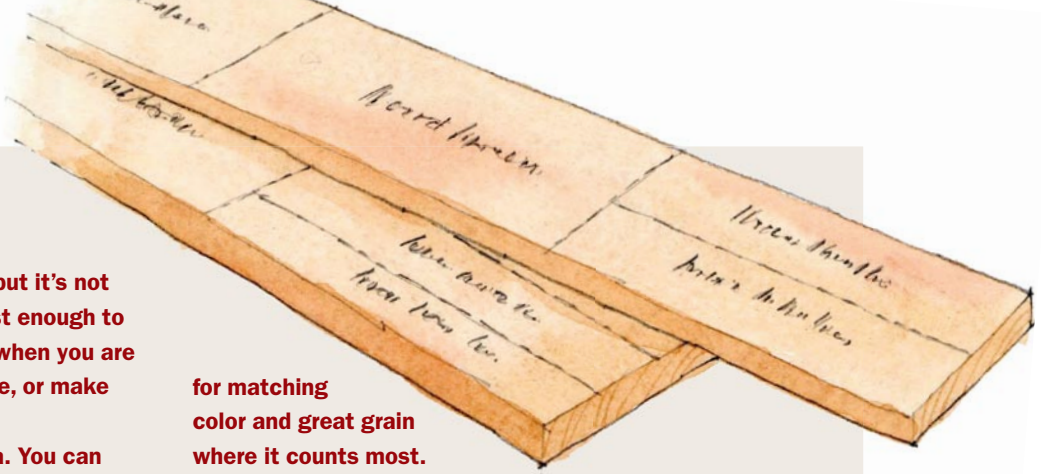
We all get sticker shock at the lumberyard, but it's not worth the savings to buy subpar wood, or just enough to cover your cutlist. The ugly trade-off comes when you are forced to accept defects in the finished piece, or make the long drive to get more wood later.

You won't regret buying 10% or 20% extra. You can cut around defects, reject a board that warps severely or looks worse than you thought it would, or replace one if you make mistakes (you will).

Before you open your wallet, though, take care at the lumberyard to find the right board for each part. Look

for matching color and great grain where it counts most. Then use a lumber crayon to mark each board for the parts it will yield.

Also, if you buy your wood already surfaced, take extra care to make sure that each board is straight, flat, and smooth before putting it in the take-home pile.



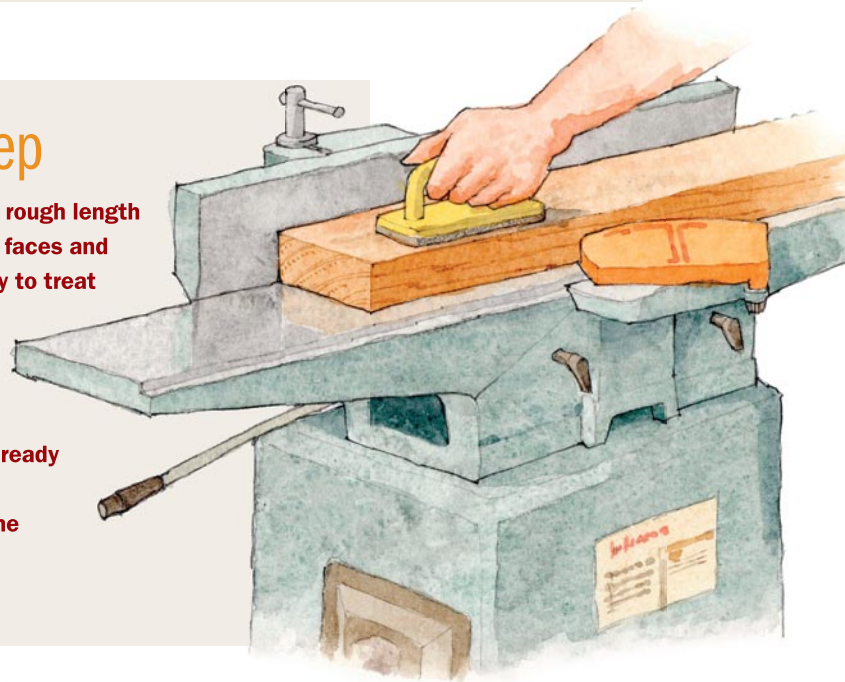
Milling is the most important step

You need patience and attention to detail when cutting pieces to rough length and width, then jointing and planing them to achieve flat, parallel faces and square corners. These tasks are crucial, but dull, and it's too easy to treat them like a speed bump on the road to building your project.

You might decide, for instance, to skip the step of milling your stock slightly oversize and letting it acclimate (and move) for a few days before bringing it to final dimension.

You might choose not to bother marking which faces you've already milled, and end up with lumber that is not straight or square.

Attention to these details will make you much happier when the work is done. It's also worth remembering to mill extra pieces as replacements or test parts.



Pause for a sharpening session

If I don't sharpen my hand tools at the beginning of a project, I tend to avoid it when I'm in the thick of things later. So I try to make do with dull tools, swearing when they dive too deep or tear at the wood. I end up with torn-up surfaces and joints that don't fit well.

I've learned to commit to a sharpening session early on. At a minimum, I hit my block plane, smoothing plane, and scraper. If there are any mortises and tenons, I also sharpen my shoulder plane and chisels.

If you don't know how to sharpen blades well, stop now, read a few articles, buy the gear you need, and learn to use it. I recommend a high-quality honing guide and waterstones, getting the final polish on an 8,000-grit stone. Once you use a truly sharp tool, you'll know what all those hand-tool nuts have been crowing about.

Check the bits and blades on your power tools, too. They should be free of gunk and sharp to the touch.

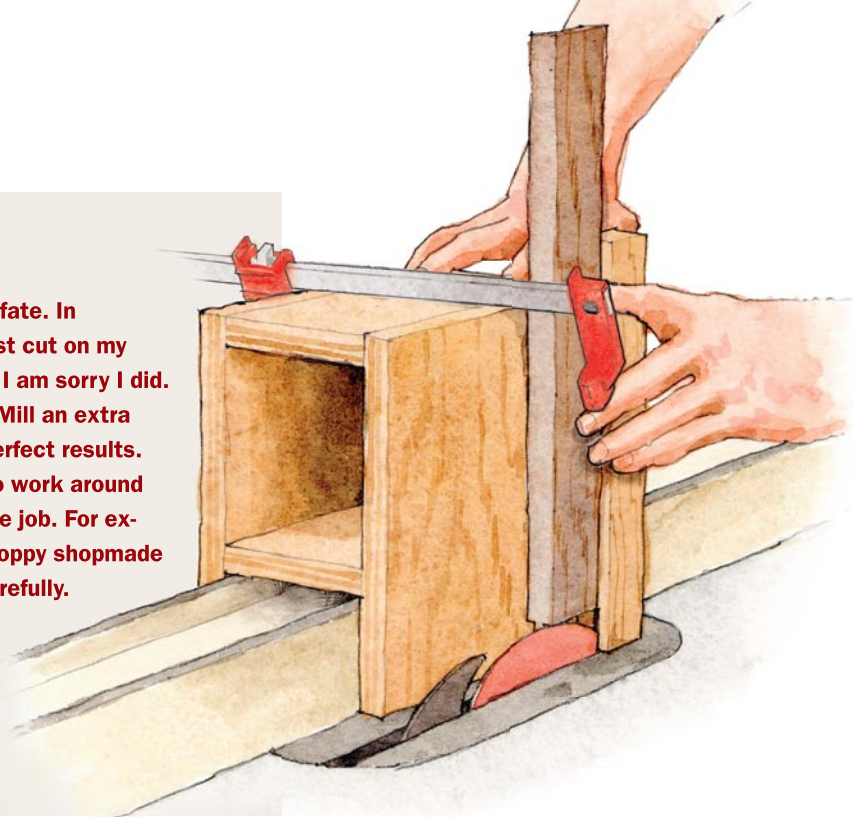


Joinery requires some prep, too

Cutting joinery is another place where I sometimes have tempted fate. In a rush and overconfident, I sometimes try to make the first cut on my actual workpieces. And about 50% of the time, I am sorry I did. That's where extra lumber can come in handy. Mill an extra part here and there to dial in your setups for perfect results.

Another trap I sometimes fall into is trying to work around the fact that I don't have the right tool or jig for the job. For example, I used to struggle to cut tenons with my sloppy shopmade tablesaw jig until I finally made a second one—carefully.

Sometimes you need a certain tool for best results. I use spiral upcutting bits for mortising. Until I got serious and bought a few of these pricey bits in different sizes, I struggled with straight bits that wouldn't clear chips, stopping every five seconds to blow them out.



Pause before gluing up, or else



Once all the joinery is cut, I can't wait to get the whole thing glued up so I can show my wife what I've been doing in the shop for weeks.

At that point, two huge temptations arise: avoiding a bunch of sanding and scraping, and not doing a dry-fit to test the clamping setup. Skip either, and you'll be sorry.

Some beginners try to skip surface prep—either in part or entirely—leaving behind jointer, planer, and table-saw marks that become painfully obvious once a finish is applied.

Once the surfaces are prepped, don't rush into a glue-up. Stop to do a real dry-fit, and you won't have any surprises once the glue is spread and the clock is ticking. You don't want to be caught scrambling around the shop for a missing clamp or caul, or be forced to pull apart a whole assembly that doesn't fit right.

Don't run out of gas at the finish

By now the surface should be mostly prepped, with just a bit of touch-up to do after the clamps come off and the squeeze-out is scraped away, but you still need to apply a nice finish. Once again, you'll be tempted to dive right in, slapping finish on the real piece. Don't.

Stop, take a breath, and make a test panel. A test panel is simply a piece or two of extra project wood, used to test the finish. Even if you are using a finish you've already mastered, you shouldn't skip this step, because each board can respond differently to a finish. You should try out most or all of any process, coat by coat, on some scrap. If you are unsure of your surface-prep method, try that out too.

