Secrets of a perfect paint job

ASK JUST ABOUT ANY PAINTING pro, and he’ll tell you that his trade has a real image problem. After all, everyone thinks they can paint—just watch how fast the color goes up on those done-in-a-day home-makeover shows. Grab a brush, a roller, and a couple gallons of latex, and you’re all set, right? Not quite. “The truth is, it is easy to do things poorly,” says Rich O’Neill, who chairs a craftsmanship committee within the Painting and Decorating Contractors Association of America. There’s no substitute for learning the proper steps, taking time to do the job right, and improving your technique as you go.

But there are also a few tricks of the trade that homeowners can learn to ease the way. We’ve assembled a couple dozen of them on the following pages, gleaned from decades’ worth of accumulated wisdom from pros working from Seattle to Boston. Put their pointers to work, and you’ll notice a difference in your paint job years after the tape and tarps are put away.

By James Glave Photographs by Kenneth Chen

PRO TIPS to ensure your walls and trim get a flawless finish

Never dip your paintbrush directly into the can—too unwieldy, too sloppy, too dangerous if the container slips or drips. For optimum control, pour paint into a small metal “cut bucket” with a lever and fill it only a third of the way. Bonus: Any paint left in the can stays pristine this way.
A bigger, better switch
Don’t expect a thumbnail-size color chip from the paint store to give you an accurate idea of what something will look on the walls. Colors are relative to one another and the objects around them—like, say, that new leather sofa. Instead, make your own megaswatch. Get a sample quantity of paint, brush two coats on a slab of foam core (its white surface acts like primer) at least three times, then put it up against the wall. You’ll get a much better sense of how your first paints off your furniture and flooring. Eyeball the color at various times of the day and move it around the room to see how it looks in different light conditions.

How many cans?
Before you set out for the paint store, take a tape measure and figure out how much surface you need to cover—and don’t forget the ceiling. Measure the longest wall, and square that number for the ceiling. For the walls, multiply the length of the longest wall by its height, then multiply that number by four. Double your numbers if you’re doing two coats. Or use an online calculator, like the one at thisoldhouse.com, as a rule of thumb: one gallon covers about 400 square feet.

For the good stuff
Invest in a premium paint. Why? Because cheap paints cover very well when it’s wet—the first, and paint covers very well when it’s wet—the first, and only room for a gallon’s worth of stuff in the can, “ says Seattle-based painter Doug Wold, owner of Queen Anne Painting.”If you add more cheap pigment, you take out more expensive resin—and water-based paint makes them swell and lose their shape.” Unfinished hardwood handles are easier to grip with sweaty hands, and copper or stainless-steel ferrules won’t rust after you’ve washed the brush. You’ll want at least a 2½-inch angled sash brush for cutting in trim, and one 3-inch brush for cutting in walls and ceilings. Buy the best ones that you can find—around $20 each, and a good brush will generally run you $12 to $15. “People think nothing of spending $30 to go to a movie,” says John Hone, owner of Orange Painting and Reconstruction in Caldwell, New Jersey. “But they put themselves through torture trying to paint with cheap equipment.”

No muss, no dust
Painting prep usually involves scraping, sanding—and dust making. You might be shocked at how far dust travels, and what scribes the card, then it is “let down” in- toed, “sign” or “paint” that it is “good.” As you can roll while the paint remains wet.

A clean sweep
Many of us are so anxious to get the paint up that we don’t take the reality of first days of thorough, cleaning the walls—especially in the kitchen, where they may be irreversibly decorated with grease, oil and food residue. “If you don’t clean that off, you could be painting a greased cookie sheet,” says Doug Wold. “It can’t (2 to 3) millimetres can be used to gap a lot of area quickly—mainly if you have a high-ceilinged great room to get color on. “Manufacturers make larger rollers, and think people in them,” says O’Cahan’s Marie Guerin, president of Painting in Partnership. “But only the educated ones.”

Size matters
Your local home center or hardware store offers lots of standard-9-inch roller cages and covers for painting walls, but they’re not the only size to consider. Small foam rollers are good for door edges and window sills, and even 3½-inch rollers hold enough paint to allow you to cover a lot of area faster—and if you have a high-ceilinged great room to get color on. “Manufacturers make larger rollers, and think people in them,” says O’Cahan’s Marie Guerin, president of Painting in Partnership. “But only the educated ones.”

A better sandpaper
Look for black sandpaper coated with silicon carbide—it won’t gum up as quickly as the standard issue brown kind, so it’ll last longer. Foam sanding sponges covered with the same stuff allow you to sneak into corners and evenly wrap around rounded trim—plus, they’re reusable. Just wring them out in water to clean them, then use them damp to trap more of the dust. Which grit to pick? Use a medium grit

6 The mark of a good brush
Brushes should “flag” on tap, split, and arranged in multiples lengths to form a slim tip. Synthetic ones—especially a mix of nylon and polyester, like DuPont’s Chinex—hold and release latex paints exceptionally well. “It’s best to see how it looks in different light conditions. Eyeball the color at various times of the day and move it around the room to see how your tint plays off your existing color. Colors are relative to one another and the objects around them—like, say, that new leather sofa. Instead, make your own megaswatch. Get a sample quantity of paint, brush two coats on a slab of foam core (its white surface acts like primer) at least three times, then put it up against the wall. You’ll get a much better sense of how your first paints off your furniture and flooring. Eyeball the color at various times of the day and move it around the room to see how it looks in different light conditions.

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Tape Tips
9 Let it be your guide
Paint a small, black-blue painter’s tape—mainly to protect surfaces, but also as a guide for cutting in walls.” With older finishes, flat surfaces can be so seamless you can’t be sure you are getting a crisp line if you paint over tape,” says Hone. “So just use your eye.” Cut in up to the edge of the tape, but don’t cross over it. Bring your fully loaded brush in about ⅛ inches of the tape, but go very light on that last ⅛ inch closed to the tape.” When you do that, you have a fighting chance that the paint won’t wick under the tape’s edge,” says Hone.

10 The perfect stripe
Like the set of painted stripes? To put on a crisp band of color without any bleed, first lay down a line of blue painter’s tape, then run a small bead of latex caulk over the edge where the boards meet. “When the caulk is set, you can create a great trim line,” says Hone. “Sometimes latex wall finishes can be rubbery until they cure completely, and if your touching your tape you can pull away a piece of the paint from this wall when you go to remove it,” says Siegner. Score the edge of the tape between the top of the baseboard and the wall with a putty knife held at a 45-degree angle.

11 Score it
If you’re masking off baseboards with painter’s tape, pull it off the same day as you apply the paint— but run a blade along it first, says Siegner. “Sometimes latex wall finishes are rubbery until they cure completely, and if you’re touching your tape you can pull away a piece of the paint from the wall when you go to remove it.”

12 Halfway measures
If your budget is tight—and your painting skills are decent—ask a painting contractor if he would willing to talk about splitting the job with you. Brandt Domas, owner of Domas Fine Painting in Denver, Colorado, occasionally enters into such partnerships with homeowners. “We may go in and strip the trim, then people do the painting themselves,” he says. “Or we may go in and do the prep repairs, or the high areas. We don’t always have to say ‘It’s all or nothing.’”

13 A little help, here?
Pros always work with “wet edges.” Meaning they roll walls before the areas where they’ve in-or painted with a brush along the wall’s perimeter edges—have dried. “It’s best to have one person cutting in and another rolling walls right behind—avoid ‘banding’ around the edges of a room,” says painter contractor Jim Clark, who’s worked on many This Old House TV projects. If you can’t help on a buddy to help and you’re working alone, try to cut in only as much as you can roll while the paint remains wet.
Bust the fuzz

There’s nothing more frustrating than seeing little squiggles of lint embedded in your freshly painted walls. To keep them at bay, wrap your hand in painter’s tape—sticky side out—and pat down new roller covers to catch any stray fibers.

15 Glob patrol

Never dip the roller so far into the paint that the roller arm gets wet—this is a recipe for drips. And at the start of each overhead stroke, strain your paint into a clean bucket, even if you’ve sealed the lid tightly overnight. “If you skip this step, you end up with coagulated pieces of paint—we call them boogers or snots,” says Mark Casale of Hingham Painting and Decorating in Massachusetts. And nobody wants that.

16 Give walls the once-over

To trap sanding dust on trim, you already know to run tack cloth—essentially, cheesecloth embedded with sticky resin—over it. But it’s also a good idea on walls. “I wrap tack cloth over the head of my pols sander and run it over the wall surfaces to pick up the dust,” says John Dow, a painting and decorating contractor based in Concord, Massachusetts. Most hardware and paint stores carry tack cloth, but if you don’t have one, use a Swiffer or a microfiber dusting cloth instead. It’s not a bad idea to vacuum walls with a soft brush attachment, as well. Just be sure the vacuum has a HEPA filter to keep the dust from recirculating back into the room—and back onto your walls.

The right sequence

Many homeowners paint the walls first, then move on to the trim while they wait for the first coat to dry. Homeowners should think more strategically, says Rich O’Neill of Masterworks Painting. “Paint all the woodwork first—the first and second coats—then move onto the walls,” says O’Neill. “If you haggle back and forth, your cut-in lines won’t be as sharp. When you do the woodwork first, you can do the trim paint into the walls a little, then cut in a little later on.”

19 Through thick and thin

When applying your coats, don’t just focus on coverage, think about a uniform thickness as well. “Homeowners think that pro painters put on more color, but they actually put on texture,” says Doug Wold of Queen Anne Painting. On woodwork, apply your strippers to follow the grain. “To avoid ‘fat edges’—the goopy, cornice of paint that can hang over the edges of a door—and mops marks left by overloaded rollers, if you don’t tickle the roller uniformly against the wall, it can leave a ridge—just like on a skirt, when groomers leave little ridges between their tracks.”

19 Lay off already

After you’ve rolled a section of the wall, make a series of long vertical strokes—moving in one direction, left to right—or up the full length of the wall. This last step, called “laying off,” distributes the wet paint across the surface in a nice even layer. Good strokes will pull paint up toward the top of the brush and the metal ferrule. To keep from overloading your brush, dip the bristles not more than halfway into the bucket. Then gently tap the bristle ends against both sides of the bucket to remove any excess. Or as do Mark Casale of Hingham Painting and Decorating does, “Dedicate half of the pot as your ‘wet’ side, using the handle as an imaginary dividing line: Tap one side of the brush on this side of the bucket, then turn the brush upside down.”

20 How to load a brush

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Get to the paint on the wall, Casale recommends setting the brush a few inches away from where you’re cutting in, then moving it in to the cut line and drawing it straight up until the brush starts to drop. Then draw it back down on a line to level it out. Finally, move the brush upwards with a light stroke to “tip off” smoothing out any brushstrokes.

21 Walk into the light

When rolling paint onto a ceiling with an extension pole, orient your strokes toward the natural light source; don’t stand at the window and look back into the room. This practice allows you to see your work much better and check for more even texture. “You get a better job when you can see more clearly in natural light,” says Mark Casale.

23 Clean Sweep

Don’t hang off your ladder like a “monkey”

Brush Schneider knows paint. He worked as a pro for 32 years before taking over for training for brush maker Purdy 27 years ago—and in his spare time heads up the apprenticeship program of the Finishing Trades Institute. Here are a few tricks he’s learned along the way.

To prevent paint spray on hard surfaces when rolling walls, wipe them down with a wet rag to keep spatter from sticking. After a finished rolling, run the dirty rag along hard surfaces once more to wipe away any droplets.

Before painting, lay out your cutting-in line on trim or where walls meet. “I’ll hold you a straight line,” says Casale, “I’m sure to stand super straight on your ladder instead of overreaching.”

When cutting in on textured walls or ceilings, allow your hand a little to get brush tips into surfaces uneven.

To avoid fatigue, switch hands when cutting in—the thick of the brush is an extension of your arm. And don’t push too hard when you’re rolling.

Finally, don’t run your brush or roller dry. “When you can see through the paint—what painters call ‘haloing’—you’ve gone too far.”

Cleaning your brush, scrubbing pad from the kitchen sink to loosen it. “You can clean bristles with the bristle end against both sides of the bucket to remove any excess. Or as do Mark Casale of Hingham Painting and Decorating does, ‘Dedicate half of the pot as your ‘wet’ side, using the handle as an imaginary dividing line: Tap one side of the brush on this side of the bucket, then turn the brush upside down.’

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23 Clean Sweep

22 Oops strategy

Should you accidentally drip water-based paint on your clothes, push them to the window and toss them out. “Dedicate half of the pot as your ‘wet’ side, using the handle as an imaginary dividing line: Tap one side of the brush on this side of the bucket, then turn the brush upside down.”

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