

Trim Carpentry Secrets



A veteran finish carpenter shares some tricks for cutting precise miters, fixing sagging doors, and a host of other tips for your next home improvement project.

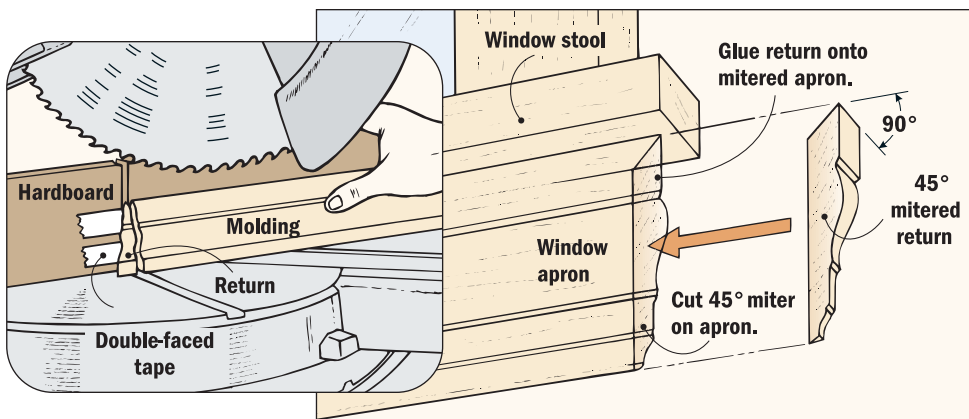
1 USE MITERED RETURNS AS CLEVER COVER-UPS

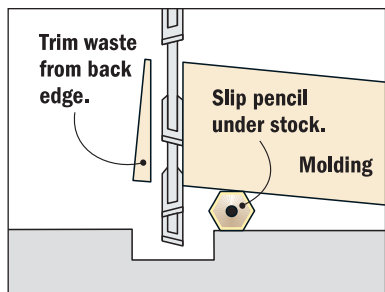
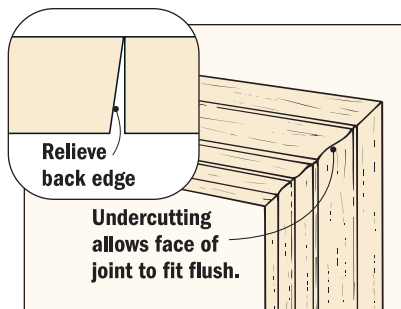
Staining or painting end grain can create problems because it almost always looks different than the rest of the wood. And when you're working with trim, exposed end grain really stands out in a room.

When you can't plan your installation to hide the exposed ends of molding, a clever solution to this problem is to cut mitered returns. A small return is formed by making mating 45° miters on a piece of trim and on another short length of molding as shown below. When you fit the two pieces together, you end up with a perfect 90° angle. Anywhere molding doesn't end in a corner is a good place to use a mitered return.

You can cut returns using a power miter saw, just be sure to secure a short length of molding to a piece of hardboard with double-faced tape (see far left). This keeps returns from flying across the room and getting lost. Also, let the saw blade come to a complete stop before raising it.

When attaching mitered returns, reach for the glue bottle. Because of their small size, the pieces are difficult to nail and have a tendency to split easily if you aren't careful.





2 UNDERCUT MITERS FOR BETTER-FITTING JOINTS

Whether you're casing a door or a window, it's important to get the faces of the mitered joints tight. One secret to tight casing joints is to put a slight back bevel on one of the two miters. This technique is referred to as either undercutting or sometimes backcutting.

What you're doing with undercutting is relieving the back edge of the miter joint by trimming a small amount of material from one of the pieces. This allows the two pieces to fit tighter along the face of the miter joint where a gap is more noticeable. Undercutting is especially important when the jamb protrudes beyond the drywall and you don't have the option of planing it.

An easy way to make undercuts is to slip a piece of casing stock or a pencil under the piece of molding on the table as you're cutting it (see above). This raises the stock just enough to form a slight back bevel.

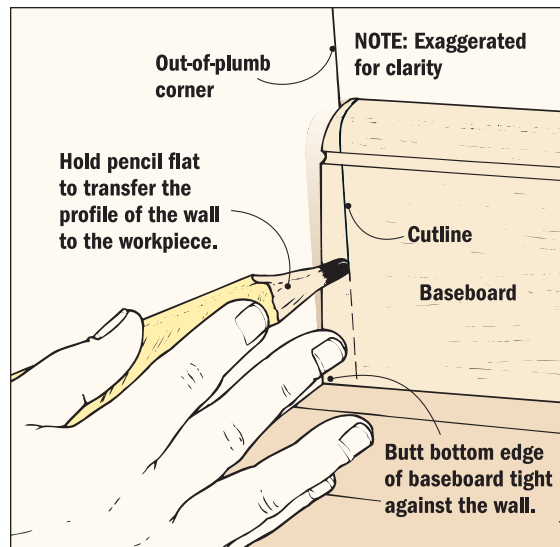
Another method is to use a block plane with the workpiece secured in a vise so the miter is positioned roughly parallel to the work surface. Hold the plane at an angle to the back edge of the miter and make a series of light cuts. With either method, keep cutting and checking the joint until it fits tight.

3 USE A CARPENTER'S PENCIL TO TRANSFER IRREGULAR PROFILES

If you've done any amount of finish carpentry, you know you end up spending a lot of time figuring out how to deal with minor imperfections. That's because nobody's house is perfect.

For example, at times you may have to fit a square end of a piece of trim against a wall that isn't vertical. When this happens, put your carpenter's pencil to the rescue as seen at right.

Simply hold the pencil flat against the wall as you transfer the wall's irregular profile onto the workpiece. By cutting along this line, you'll end up with a piece that fits in place tight against the wall.



faces. This is most evident when hanging doors. I'm sure you've seen doors that have a tapered gap at the bottom and wondered why. It's usually caused by a level door bottom over a sloping floor.

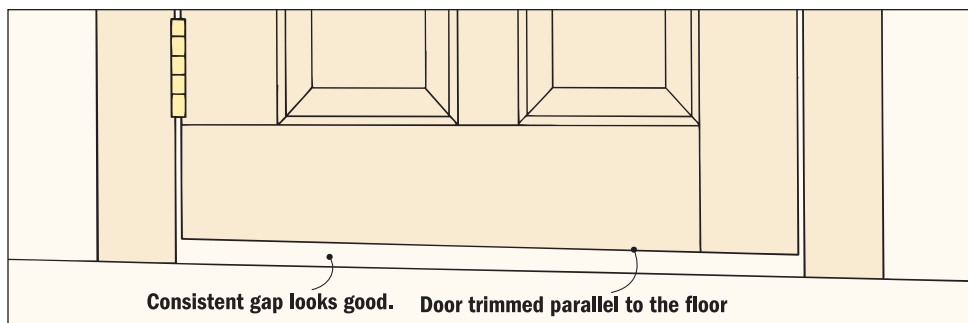
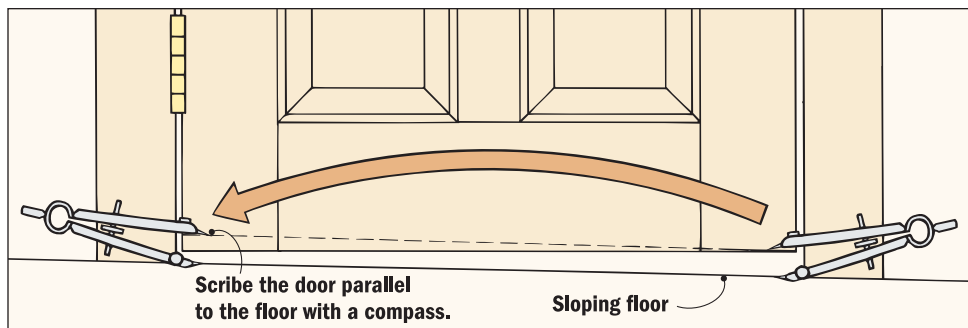
One way to fix this problem without redoing the floor is to trim the door. Using a compass as shown below, scribe the door bottom so that it's parallel to the floor.

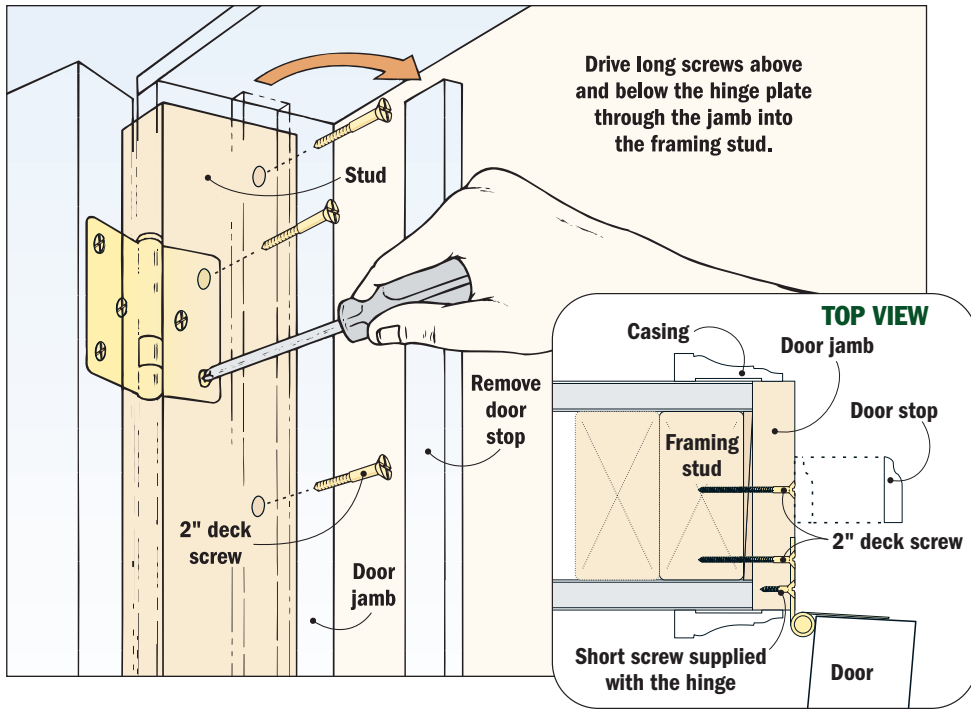
When you get done, your door may not be perfectly level along the bottom. But with a consistent gap all the way across, it'll look good.

4 TRIM DOORS PARALLEL TO A SLOPING FLOOR

Dealing with imperfections also means sometimes having to forget about level and square. Instead, you'll need to concentrate on keeping materials parallel to the walls and floors.

Why? Because your eyes will pick up diverging lines more readily than they see plumb and level sur-



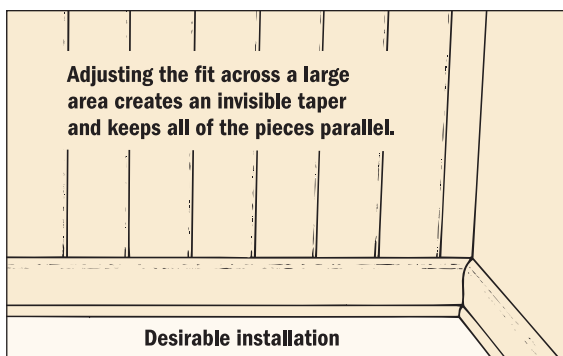
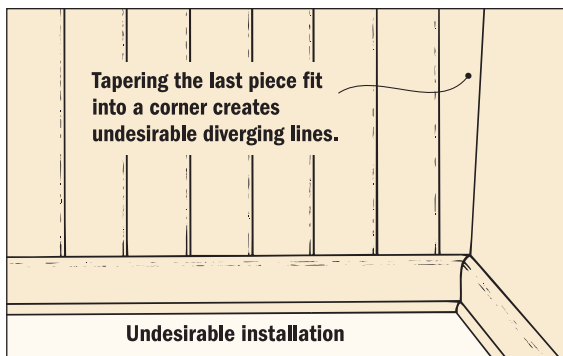


5 FIX SAGGING DOORS WITH DECK SCREWS

Heavy doors can sag after they've been hanging for awhile. Their weight can also cause the door jamb to twist. Take a look above to see how you can compensate for these problems.

First remove two of the three short screws in the hinge and replace them with 2" deck screws. These longer screws will reach into the stud and help secure the door.

Another simple trick is to remove the door stop and drive 2" deck screws through the door jamb above and below the hinge plate. This will help keep the jamb from twisting as the casing and framing swell and shrink. The stop will hide the screw heads after it's reattached.



6 ADJUST FIT OF TONGUE-AND-GROOVE PANELING FOR INVISIBLE TAPER

If you're installing any type of tongue-and-groove paneling such as wainscoting, the best place to start and end is in a corner. There's a good chance, however, you'll end up with a wall that isn't quite plumb. Whenever you run into this problem, think parallel just like you did when scribing the door bottom (see Tip #4 on page 2).

Simply adjust the fit of the tongue and groove at the top or bottom of several pieces of paneling. This lets you spread out an invisible taper across a large area, but still keep all the pieces parallel to

each other. This type of installation is desirable because you don't see any diverging lines in the corners.

Take a look at the two drawings at the bottom lefthand of the page. Notice how the irregular corner really stands out in the top drawing. But the irregular corner goes unnoticed in the bottom drawing. This is what you're after by creating an invisible taper.

7 PAINT OR STAIN TRIM BEFORE ATTACHING IT

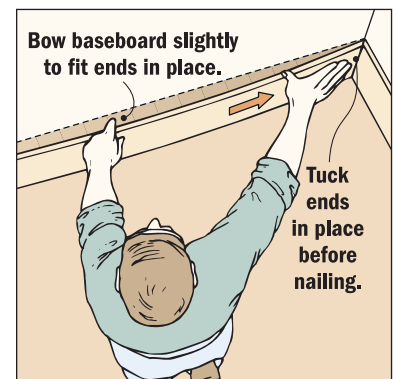
Finishing trim before installing it is much easier than trying to apply paint or stain after it's already in place. After the paint or stain dries, you can cut the pieces to size and attach them permanently. Then simply set the nail heads, fill the holes, and touch up around them.

For trim that's going to be painted, automotive body putty makes an excellent filler for nail holes. It dries quickly and sands easily. For stained trim, fill nail holes with a soft color putty that matches the color of your stain.

8 CUT BASEBOARDS TAD LONG FOR A SNUG FIT

Long baseboards will fit snug if you cut them a hair longer than needed. Since the baseboard will be a tad long, you'll have to bow it away from the wall slightly to fit it into place. It should bow about a finger's width away from the wall as shown below.

Then nail the center of the baseboard first. That should force the ends tight into the corners. Finally, nail both ends.



QUICK JIG

KEEP REVEALS CONSISTENT USING A SIMPLE SQUARE JIG

9 STEP CASING BACK TO CREATE SHADOW-LINES AND PLANES

When attaching casing around doors and windows, it's practically impossible to get flush edges to stay that way over time. A casing installed flush to the inside of a jamb may look out of place after a few years. This is because wood moves — as it dries out, as you cut it, while you're nailing it in place, and as a house settles. And the eye will pick up even a slight $\frac{1}{8}$ " variation from top to bottom.

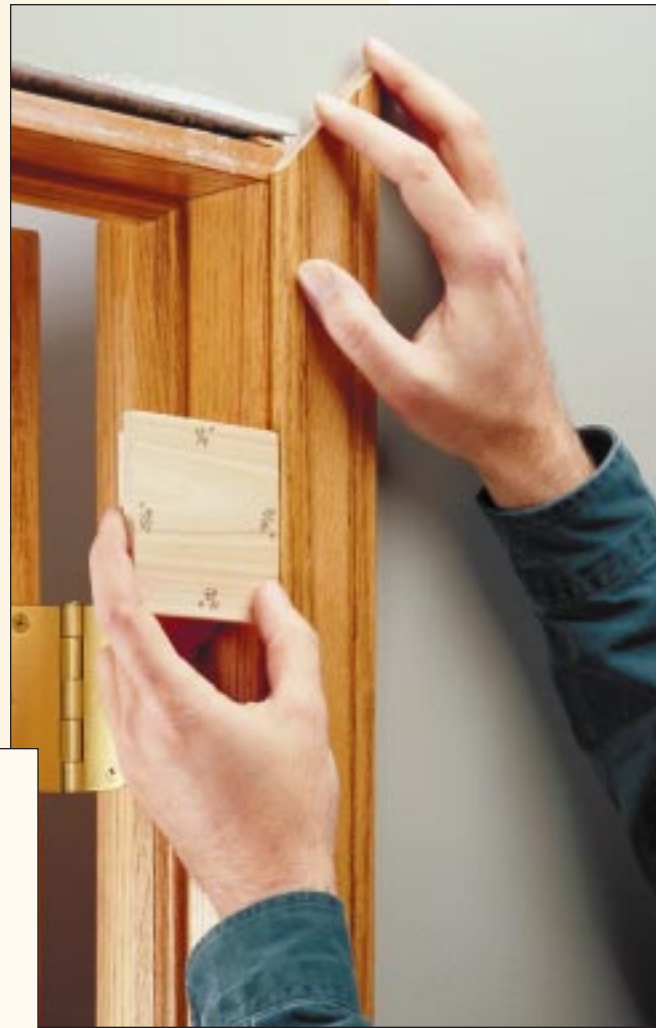
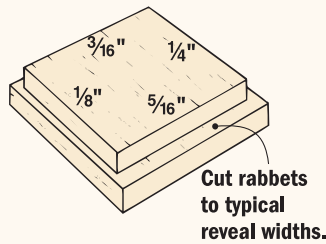
That's why many finish carpenters step casing back from the edges of door and window jambs, creating a narrow portion of the jamb that won't be covered with the casing. This exposed portion of the jambs — anywhere from $\frac{1}{8}$ " to $\frac{5}{16}$ " wide — is called the reveal. These reveals create shadowlines and form different planes that make it harder for the eye to

pick up discrepancies. That way the casing pieces can swell and shrink unnoticed.

Before attaching the casing, you'll want to be sure you have a consistent size reveal all the way along the edge of the jamb. The "Quick Jig" below makes it easy to keep the margins even.

To make this reveal gauge, cut a square piece of $\frac{3}{4}$ "-thick plywood or hardwood. Then cut a rabbet in each of the four edges to correspond with typical reveal widths (see below). For quick reference, write the widths on the gauge.

REVEAL GAUGE



10 HIDE NAILS IN THE GRAIN PATTERNS

One of the biggest problems you'll face when attaching molding or building furniture is how to hide the nails. There are different ways to approach this problem.

The easy solution is to drive in a brad, then simply fill the hole with putty. Although quick, getting an exact color match between the molding and putty may be difficult. And many woods change color as they age, but most plastic wood fillers don't. So what else can you do?

Another way you can hide nails when installing molding is to choose their placement carefully in the first place. Even small pieces of trim have noticeable grain patterns. Whenever possible, drive nails into

the darker grain where they won't be as noticeable. You can also hide nails in the profiles of some moldings where shadowlines are created.

And as a final suggestion, when using a power brad nailer, hold it perpendicular to the piece of mold-

ing you're attaching so the elongated hole follows the grain. 🛠️

Special thank you to Dave Fish, a veteran finish carpenter from Des Moines, Iowa, who shared his 15 years of professional experience for this article.

