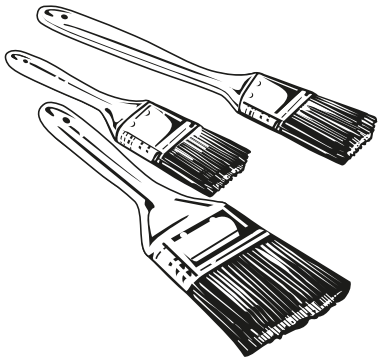

Painting and decorating tips

Gary Russell has many years experience in the building trade and has contributed to a number of trade magazines. He shares building tips, techniques and trade secrets with us.

BY GARY RUSSELL

Painting? Some people love it, others despise it, but it can be fun. If the job's done right, the visual rewards and sense of achievement are pleasing. When I ran a company building lots of houses, many clients were happy to do their own. This was probably wise because there is a lot of work in painting, so it was a way of saving a significant amount of money in labour costs. To give you some concept of the time involved, on average a new house could be framed in at least half the time it would take to paint it.

Ironically, to produce a quality painting job, many skills and lots of care are needed – more so, I think, than any other category of building trade. I have seen many a mess made over the years, even by so called professional painters. The following mentions some of these skills, but most of it focuses on saving time and money. In a future issue I hope to do an article exclusively on skills.

I often use the term 'cutting in.' This means to paint a straight line between any colour change in surfaces, like architraves and wall lining. It can also mean painting a straight line on windows so excess paint doesn't get on the glass. To successfully do this takes some practice, and special, narrow 'cutting in' brushes with angled and high quality bristles are available to make it easier. Professionals often don't need these brushes. I've seen some good tradies cut in very quickly with a standard 150mm wide brush. It makes me envious.

Below left: Specialised brushes make cutting in much easier, but it still takes...
...a steady hand and practice! (below right)

Washing brushes and rollers

It's generally considered standard practice to wash brushes and rollers at the end of each day's painting. There is a way though, where it's only necessary to clean them when you finish the job or change colours, regardless of the days taken. Apart from saving paint, on larger jobs an enormous amount of time will be saved, and when using oil based paints, the use of expensive turpentine is significantly reduced.

All you need to do is tightly wrap each brush or roller cover in a plastic supermarket shopping bag, twist the top closed and leave overnight (tuck the top underneath). They'll still be wet and ready for immediate use the next morning. The secret is to keep the air out, so in warmer weather I generally use two bags in case there's a small hole

Typical general brush sizes: 25–50mm for trim, touch ups, screens, furniture; 50–75mm for doors, beams, shelving, fences; 75–100mm for walls and panelling. Natural bristle brushes are soft and porous, and intended for use with oil based paints. Avoid natural bristle with water based paints.

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in one. It also helps to fully load the brush or roller with paint before placing in the bags. An alternative to bags is kitchen cling wrap.

Note – some thinners-based paint (typically automotive) may melt the plastic bags.

Economical drop sheets

Professional painters use drop sheets made from a canvas type material to protect floors and furniture from spatters and drips. Although superior, they're quite expensive. This is okay for full time tradies, but for us occasional painters it's not an economical option. You can buy plastic sheets from paint suppliers, which are extremely cheap, but the slightest breeze will move them and they puncture easily when ladders are placed on top.

A practical alternative to both is second-hand or worn bed sheets. If you can't get hold of enough sheets, thin, cheap plastic ones are still fine for covering furniture and bench tops etc.

Quick painting methods

Painting rough surfaces like brickwork with recessed mortar joints can be time consuming. Rollers are much faster than brushes, but even the thickest pile roller often won't cover the deeper parts of the surface, or at best will only leave a thin coat.

The secret is to use a combination of the two. I found this out many years ago while building several houses with V joint timber lining boards, at 1200mm above floor level (commonly called dado boards) with plasterboard above. I chose to do the painting myself, which included clear varnishing all the boards. Brushing was frustratingly slow, so I tried rolling the surface first and then finishing off with a large brush – I halved the time.

Apply the varnish (or paint) as thick as possible with the roller in about three to four metre sections and then use the brush to finish off. Run the brush lengthways in the grooves (or recessed joints in brickwork) to get good cover and then 'lay off' the paint film. This means to smooth and even out the film by lightly stroking with the tip of the brush, preferably from one end to the other without lifting the brush – this is a standard painting technique. Essentially, it means you can slap the paint on quickly, and then perfect the finish.

Another method I use to speed application when using only a brush is to fully load the bristles up with paint – that is, don't wipe the excess off on the side of the paint pot and immerse most of the bristles in the paint rather than the recommended two thirds. I then slowly twirl the brush when moving it between the pot and the surface so the excess paint doesn't drip off.

To prevent paint from running down the surface or dripping off, quickly wipe each side of the brush along the surface at an angle near parallel with it. You can now spread the paint with normal

Below left and below: To save time on cleaning each day, brushes can be tightly wrapped in a plastic bag or cling wrap.
Above right: Oil based paints require cleaning in turpentine, which can also be reused.
Right: Old sheets and thin plastic sheeting make good drop sheets.

Avoid bubbles in varnish

Rollers are not recommended for varnishing as they will cause tiny air bubbles to form in the finish – and they won't smooth away, even with a brush. Vigorously stirring varnish or shaking the container will also create air bubbles that will be picked up by the brush and transferred to the surface, again causing a permanent problem. If you do see bubbles in the container, leave it sit for about two or three hours to allow them to rise and disperse.

Don't pre-paint tongue & groove lining boards

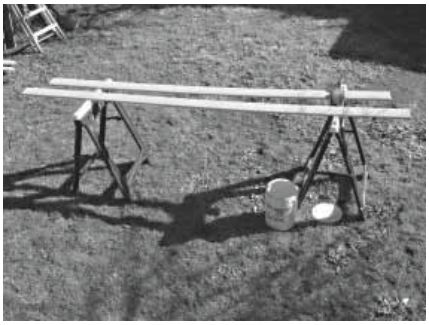
In most cases, pre-painting can save time, however, one situation comes to mind that could end up a disaster. Don't pre-paint tongue and grove lining boards unless they've been milled to form a loose fit (rare). Paint or varnish will swell both the tongue and the groove, thus slotting them together could be near impossible. Even raw boards are often difficult to fit together. You could pre-paint/varnish them and avoid the tongues and grooves, but this would be excessively time consuming. If the boards are used inside the house (the majority of cases), then sealing the rear to prevent distortion or cupping is not a major issue.

Beware pre-primed timber products

Beware of timber products that are supplied 'pre-primed' – typically weatherboards and fascia boards – as they still need another primer applied. In most cases the primer used is low quality and only meant as a temporary measure to prevent distortion in the time between manufacture and supply to the trade, especially if they are imported on ships where moist, salt laden air can deteriorate them.

Paint linings before internal fixing is done

A big time saver when building new houses or extensions is to paint the wall and ceiling linings before any internal fixing is done such as doors, architraves, skirting boards, cupboards, floor coverings and shelving. This saves a lot of masking or cutting in, using drop sheets and working around obstacles. This method will require some final touch up work but considering the time saved it's insignificant.



Above: Various methods can be improvised to support boards while pre-painting.

brush strokes. I've found this method particularly useful when painting windows, door jambs, architraves, rough sawn timber and pre-painting lengths of timber on saw horses. It helps to keep a damp rag handy if you're painting overhead because paint will dribble onto the handle.

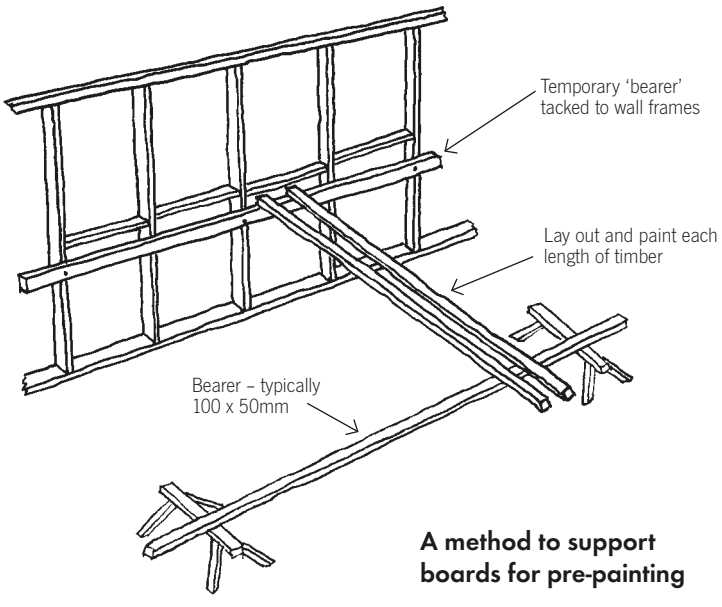
When painting or varnishing horizontal surfaces like benches or table tops, rather than load the brush or roller from the pot or tray, pour the varnish/paint directly onto the surface and then spread it out. You'll do the job in half the time and end up with a much smoother and thicker film. Make sure you use this technique in an area free from floating particles or dust, because anything settling on the thicker, wet surface will cause more prominent blemishes. Remember too, that the thicker film will take longer to dry.

Pre-painting

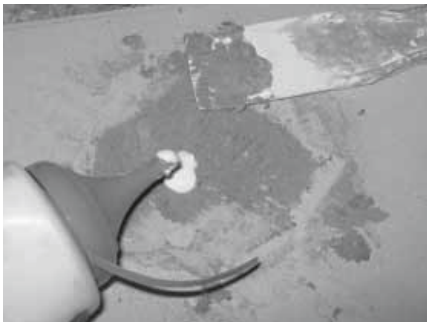
A lot of building materials can be pre-painted before installation to save time. In fact, building regulations usually stipulate that timber weatherboards, fascias and barge boards should be at least sealed on the rear (where they can't be reached later) before fixing to prevent moisture in the air from penetrating the bare timber causing twisting and cupping. I generally fully paint all the above and sometimes the architraves and skirting boards and at least the rear of window frames, door frames and internal door jambs.

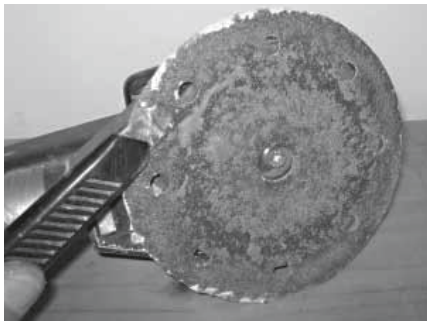
You'll use a little extra paint because of the off cuts when timber needs to be cut to exact length, and some touch up work will be required after installation, but the extra cost is negligible compared to the amount of labour saved by not having to mask or 'cut in,' set up scaffolding and work above ground or floor level.

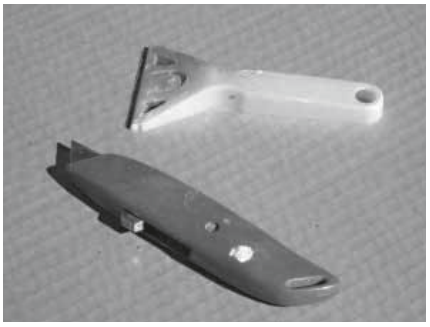
One important consideration when pre-painting lots of boards, is that you'll



A method to support boards for pre-painting







Above L–R: Mix sander dust with wood glue to make a putty to fill holes; a utility knife is handy to remove dried glue when sanding later; handy tools for removing paint from glass after painting sashes.

need plenty of space, and if the weather is cold and damp, that space may have to be under cover inside the house.

Large numbers of boards can be laid out for painting on a pair of bearers supported by a saw horse at each end and smaller quantities simply supported on a pair of horses. If you're pre-painting the boards inside a new house before the wall lining goes on, the wall noggins can be used as supports, or lengths of timber bearers temporarily fixed to the wall frames. These methods can also be used in combination with saw horses.

To prevent marks or blemishes in the paint film, let the first side of the boards dry before flipping to paint the other. One problem I've encountered is that blobs of paint can form close to the edges on the underside of the boards (where you can't see them). You can run a brush along to smooth them out before they dry, but a better and faster way I've found is to just use my hand. If an excessive amount of paint gets on my fingers, I'll periodically wipe it off with a rag before continuing.

Disguising filled holes

Finding the correct colour filler to match the timber on varnished surfaces can be difficult. It may look fine on the bare timber, but when the varnish is applied colours can change, leaving a noticeable difference between the filled holes and surrounding timber.

There is a technique to get a near-perfect match, taught to me many years ago by a furniture restorer. For smaller holes, say any up to about 3mm, simply squirt some common white wood glue into the holes, leaving it to get half-dry or tacky (usually about twenty minutes) and then sand over the holes with an electric sander. The dust from the surrounding timber impregnates the glue, colouring it to match the timber when the glue is fully dry (white wood glue dries clear). You should have enough glue in each hole to rise a few millimetres above the surface.

With larger holes, the method is slightly different. Sand the bare timber to collect some dust in the sander's dust collection bag, and then either push some of the wood dust into the glue while still wet, or make up a putty with the glue to push into the holes. In both instances, leave the mix until it's half dry, and then sand over the top.

One little problem with these methods is that the sandpaper clogs up with dried glue. If sanding becomes difficult, periodically flick the larger pieces off with a utility knife. Sometimes a wire brush helps. You will however, use more sandpaper than normal.

If you use stain before varnishing there may be a more noticeable difference in shade between the filled hole and the surrounding timber. This is not considered a defect because it can be almost impossible to get a perfect match with conventional fillers anyway.

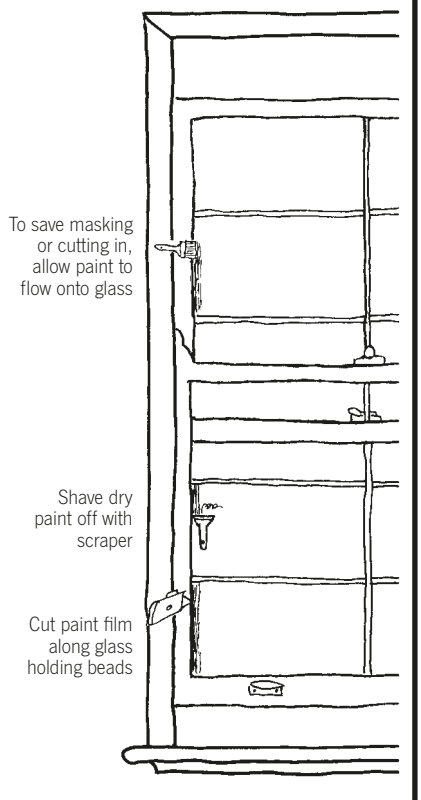
Painting windows

Painting windows can often be very time consuming, especially if they're double hung or colonial style (lots of small panes of glass).

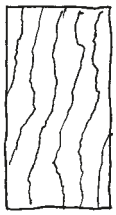
The usual options for a neat, clean job is to either use masking tape, or if you've got a steady hand and some experience, use a cutting brush to keep paint off the glass. Both are slow methods, even with experience.

Over the years, I've found a much faster way. Don't mask or cut in, just let the paint get on the glass and use a razor blade scraper to remove it after it's dry.

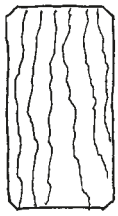
The method I use to remove the paint after it has dried is first to cut the film with the point of a utility knife next to the timber bead or putty holding the glass in place. Then I use the razor blade scraper to remove the paint from the glass. I've found it's better to use the scraper parallel to the beads/putty rather than at right angles. It's important that both the utility knife and razor are sharp and the paint is fully dry and hard; leaving for a week is good. You'll soon find the whole process is fast, much more than masking or cutting in.



Painting double hung, colonial windows

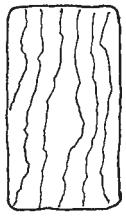


Paint film deteriorates quickly on thinly painted sharp edges



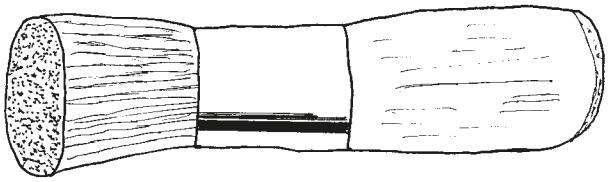
Chamfered edges enable a thicker paint film to be applied.

Chamfer typically 5mm on large section timber, less on smaller section.



Rounded (bullnose) edges are best

Prevent paint flaking at edges



Short stiff bristles

Short stubby handle

Stencil brush – For painting deep relief patterns on ornate plaster products such as cornices.

Make a paint job last

A paint film usually starts to flake away at a sharp edge first – e.g., the bottom of the vertical surface of weatherboards. Once this happens, deterioration accelerates rapidly, particularly with external applications. The reason flaking starts at sharp edges is that the thickness of the paint film finishes much thinner than on the flat surfaces.

The solution is to chamfer (bevel) the sharp corner of boards to soften the angle, therefore enabling a thicker film of paint to be applied. Even better would be to round off (bullnose) the corners with a router, but in most cases this would be too time consuming. Chamfering or rounding off also prevents bristles on paint brushes catching and sticking on the sharp edges when the paint is applied. Note that some timber is supplied with rounded edges. Fascia boards and internal door jambs are typical examples. By chamfering the sharp edges of timber in external applications or damp areas like bathrooms, my estimate is that you could get an extra two to three years out of a paint job, and it doesn't take that long to do.

The best way I've found to chamfer is with an electric planer. Most of these have a V groove in the base, forward of the blades, specifically for this purpose. The groove acts as a guide, fitting over the sharp corner allowing you to move the planer rapidly and accurately. Alternately, hand planers or sanders (both electric and hand) can be used. I'll often find it easier to use a hand plane or sander on small section timber instead of the typically bulky and heavy electric planer, because clamping the timber may be required.

Save on extra coats

This is only applicable to internal painting – not external where additional coats help to reduce premature deterioration from the extremities of temperature and rain. Saving an extra coat is simply a matter of getting the undercoat, primer or sealer (or whatever your chosen paint requires), tinted to closely match the selected colour coats.

This trick is most useful when painting plasterboard walls and ceilings. If the primer is white, which most times it is, unless the top coats are also white or very light, two coats usually won't completely cover the white so a third is needed. If you're doing a whole house internally, you will really appreciate not having to do another coat.

Providing you do use the recommended sealer etc., two top coats rather than three generally won't compromise the quality of the job. Using the top coat as a sealer, as I've seen many do, definitely will. Note that on trim work, like architraves and skirting boards or doors and windows, three top coats would be better in at least the areas where hands or shoes are likely to regularly come into contact with the painted surface.

Decorative cornices

Old style, reproduction decorative cornices with relief patterns look great but can be a pain to paint, particularly the larger ones with deeper patterns. I've tried using small standard type brushes to get into the deeper crevices, but it's a slow process because the bristles are too soft and flexible.

Use a stencil brush instead (as illustrated). These have stiff bristles designed for dabbing rather than stroking. You'll find this method much faster although the paint film won't finish up as smooth, but this won't matter. It's barely noticeable on these types of cornices and I've found it actually enhances the finish.

The outside edges of decorative cornices are usually flat and smooth. A stencil brush would not be practical for these sections, especially if you have to cut in a different colour on the wall or ceiling. Use a conventional brush or purpose-made cutting brush instead. ■

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Some more of Gary's handy tips for painting

Saving water when washing brushes and rollers

Washing water based paint from roller covers can use lots of water, even after scraping the excess paint back into the paint pot. To save water as well as time soak the covers in a bucket of water for at least four hours before using the tap. You'll then clean them under the tap in a fraction of the time. This works because a lot of the paint disperses into the water and settles on the bottom of the bucket.

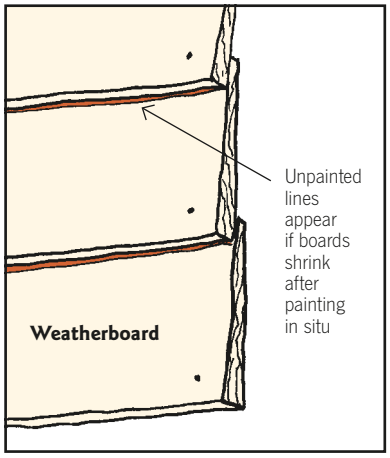
This method can also be used for brushes. I'll generally replace the water in the bucket after soaking about 10 to 15 covers or brushes.

After washing brushes and removing them from the water, it's important to let them fully dry before using again. Starting with even a partly wet brush or roller cover dilutes the paint and you'll find it won't cover sufficiently with the thin paint dripping and dribbling everywhere as well.

Paint spots on carpet

If you do happen to get paint spots or smears on carpet, snip it off the pile with small, sharp scissors. If the paint is still wet, you may be able to wash it out with water or turpentine. The bottom of door jambs in carpeted rooms is the most likely place to get paint on the carpet.

Painting weatherboards



It always pays to fully paint weatherboards on the external surface before installation – that is, not just the primer or undercoat etc, but also all the recommended amount of top colour coats (usually at least two). I've seen many occasions where the top coat has been painted in situ and the boards have eventually shrunk in width, leaving a thin and distinctively different-coloured line at the bottom of each board (the colour of the primer or bare timber), thus requiring a lot of extra touch-up work. Boards are more likely to shrink if installed in damp, cold weather, by as much as five or six millimetres.

Recycling turpentine

Turpentine is needed for washing equipment that has been used with oil based paints, and can be recycled. It is expensive, and to successfully clean brushes and rollers it is necessary to use at least three lots of turpentine before finally washing in soap and water.

Rather than throw the turpentine away, tip it back into a container. Most of the paint sediments eventually settle to the bottom, so if you're careful not to shake the bottle, the recycled turpentine can be used again. You should however, use fresh turpentine for the final wash.

Don't stack painted boards

Be wary of stacking boards together after they've been painted and are dry. They can stick together causing paint chips when separated from the pack. This once frustratingly happened to me when using dressed timber and water based paint. I had them stored this way for about two weeks. I'm not sure if the same would happen with oil based paints or rough sawn timber, or how long it would take for them to stick together.