

Ten Ideas for Better Finishing

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1. **Experiment with the finish *before* you build your project.** That way once the project is done, the finishing step is easier. Glue up several 12" x 12" pieces of wood from your project stock. Sand the sample to the same grit as your finished project. Then experiment with different finish combinations to see which ones you like the best. Write each step of the finishing process on the back of the board including the date and time of each step. Also, write your finish schedule on your project somewhere to help the next guy repair your finish (or to help you duplicate your finish again.)
2. **Try a different finish.** Would you build a piece of mission style furniture from pine because that is the only wood you use? Different woods are used in different styles of furniture. The same holds true for finishes. For a formal look pore filled walnut and mahogany are appropriate. Maple or cherry Shaker furniture can get by with a thin oil finish. Mission oak furniture looks good with the pores semi filled. Experiment with different finishes just like you would experiment cutting dovetail joints. You might come up with a finish sample and say, "I have to make something that looks good with this finish."
3. **Apply a yellow stain or dye under a dark stain.** Factories do it. You can too. Here's how. After sanding, apply *Minwax Golden Oak* (a yellow/green oil based dye stain) or *Minwax Puritan Pine* (a yellow/red dye stain) and let it dry. Then apply a darker stain such as a walnut or cherry stain directly over the yellow dye. The yellow will be in the background and it will give your furniture a certain glow.
4. **Use an aerosol can of lacquer.** Aerosol spray lacquer is easy to apply and it gives you different sheens and great results. Just make sure you read the directions and apply the finish with 50% of your spray overlapping with the previous coat. And remember, a warm can sprays better than a cold can so heat up your cans in or a crock pot. Spraying a large area? Use two cans.
5. **Use Shellac.** There are many reasons to use shellac. While derided as a "delicate" finish that is "tricky" to apply by the magazines, shellac is a useful part of the finishing process. Here are some shellac applications to consider:
 - a. Use shellac as a sanding sealer. Shellac sticks to everything and everything sticks to shellac. Shellac is iridescent and can provide sparkle to a finish when applied underneath waterbased finishes.
 - b. A one pound cut of shellac is easy to apply with a 1" golden taklon artist's brush using the proper technique.
 - c. Use shellac for its strengths. It has good abrasion resistance, it is UV and water vapor resistant, it rubs out to a brilliant shine, it is hypoallergenic, can be made in a water based form and it is more easily repairable than varnishes.

6. **Match the finish to the project.** Let's say you are building a wall clock. You want to apply polyurethane because it is durable. But how durable does the finish on a wall clock need to be? Finish durability is over sold and most finishes are durable enough for most applications. *Repairability* is more important than durability in most cases.
7. **Don't sand more than you need to.** Sand up to 220 grit for closed pore woods like maple and cherry and sand up to 180 for everything else. For oak, don't sand higher than 150. There are three reasons why you should not sand higher than 220.
 - a. You can burnish the wood so that stain will not absorb deeply and your color will look thin.
 - b. You can burnish the wood and possibly affect the adhesion of your topcoat.
 - c. The first coat of finish you apply will roughen up the wood anyway and you will have to sand that first coat of finish. If you like to sand, then sand between finish coats of varnish, shellac or lacquer using 320 or 400 grit sandpaper for a smooth finish.
8. **Try a black glaze to add richness to a finish.** Most darker oak, mahogany and cherry factory furniture has a dark glaze applied as the last color coat. A glaze is nothing but thick stain applied over a finish. To apply a glaze, allow your finish to dry and scuff with 320 grit sandpaper or maroon Scotchbrite. Then brush on the dark stain (dark walnut, Jacobean or ebony) let it set for a few minutes and then gently rag off the excess and then dry brush the surface to make the glaze look uniform. Allow the glaze coat to dry then apply your final finish coats. Or you could use the refinishers technique to add age to furniture by mixing two tablespoons of roofing tar to a cup of low odor mineral spirits. Apply the glaze liberally to the surface with chip brush. Gently rag off the excess and when the mineral spirits flashes off, spray a lacquer or shellac top coat to lock in the color.
9. **Buy an expensive brush and learn how to clean it.** Many finishing problems can be traced to using the wrong brush. If you are using polyurethane, buy the most expensive brush recommended for applying poly. If you brush shellac, buy a 1" artist's golden taklon brush. A real badger hair brush is great for oil based varnishes. If you brush shellac, have a dedicated shellac brush and just "rinse" the brush with denatured alcohol and let it dry hard. When you are ready to use it again, just soak the brush in alcohol for about 10 minutes and you are ready to brush again. To clean natural bristle brushes used with oil based varnishes, clean brushes with lacquer thinner instead of mineral spirits and use a brush/roller spinner and a brush comb.
10. **Finish your finish.** A good finish can use a finishing touch. Try rubbing out a gloss finish to a satin sheen with steel wool and paste wax. You get a smooth satin finish that feels good and looks great! Also try using automotive rubbing compounds to rub out cured (30 day old) finishes.