

Tips & Tricks for Working with Plywood

Plywood typically comes in standard 4 x 8 panels. However, for ease of handling, transportation and storage, as well as less wasted material after smaller projects are complete, plywood can also be purchased in smaller Project Panel sizes such as 4x4, 2x4 and 2x2.

Additionally, plywood comes in a variety of thicknesses. The noted nominal thickness may not be the *exact* actual dimension – as is common with dimensional lumber too – but it will be close, and certainly close enough to help you ensure that you’re choosing the proper thickness for your project. However, “eyeballing” the thickness you’re looking for is the quickest and surest way to make your first mistake.

As they say, measure twice, cut once.

Understanding Plywood Grades

Veneer Grades:

Veneer grades are just like school grades. A-grade has the best, most attractive appearance and D-grade has the least favorable.

A-grade – Sanded, smooth, paintable surface without knots. Any defects were small enough to be neatly repaired by the manufacturer using a synthetic filler. This product is ideal for furniture, cabinets, doors or any projects where beauty is of the utmost importance.

B-grade – Sanded, smooth, paintable surface. Veneers may have only a few small knots or slight discoloration.

C-grade – Unsanded with observable minor defects that would need to be repaired if a more attractive appearance is desired. Knotholes may be up to 1½ inches across.

D-grade – Unsanded and potentially discolored with more significant defects and knotholes up to 2½ inches across. This grade is often used for structural purposes or sheathing that will be covered with other products such as flooring, siding, roofing, etc.

Cutting Plywood

Don’t own a saw? Ask a sales associate if complementary cutting is available. Some stores will cut as many pieces as you’d like to any dimensions you need. Feel free to bring your project instructions along so you’re ready to take advantage of this service when and where it’s offered. The professionals are there to help!

Getting a Clean Edge

All the cuts you need to make on plywood can be made with a circular saw. A miter saw and table saw work too – and can save time on large jobs – but the circular saw is your Swiss army knife of saws. Whichever saw you choose, make sure you’re using one with sharp carbide teeth. A high number of sharp teeth will ensure clean cuts, while dull blades are more likely to chew up the edges of your panels.

Terms that describe cuts:

Rip cut: A cut going *with* the grain of the wood. Rip cuts are less likely to splinter.

Crosscut: A cut that is made across/perpendicular to the grain. This is where you'll encounter problems with splintering, chipping and other symptoms if your saw blade doesn't have an adequate number of sharp teeth.

For the cleanest possible cuts every time, use masking tape or painter's tape. After measuring your cut line, place a piece of tape over the line. Measure and mark your line again on top of your tape. The tape will prevent the wood from splintering and chipping.

NOTE: When using a CIRCULAR saw, remember that the blade cuts UPWARD, so you'll want your preferred side to face DOWN in order to minimize defects. Conversely, TABLE saws cut DOWNWARD, so you'll want your preferred side to face UP in order to minimize defects.

Drilling Tips

We recommend predrilling whenever it's necessary to screw into the sides/edges of plywood. Drilling screws directly into plywood without predrilling first may cause plies to separate.

When drilling *through* plywood, if you do not predrill, the backside is likely to splinter. Always drill from the front face to make sure the visually important side of your project is as clean as possible.

If you're looking to achieve a splinter-free look on both sides, try applying tape to the backside. In the same way that tape helps during sawing, it will help keep your wood from splintering when drilling. Don't have tape? Clamp another piece of wood to the backside and drill down into it for the same improved results.

Sanding Tips

When sanding plywood, you'll want the proper tools for the job. These may include an orbital sander, sanding block or sandpaper in a variety of different grits, as well as clean rags or cloths for wiping away sawdust.

When looking for a smooth finish, start with a low-grade sandpaper (80 grit) and work up to higher, finer grits (180-220 grit). The lower the grade, the grittier the sandpaper. Grittier sandpaper is best for removing larger imperfections. Finer grits produce smoother and more uniform results.

Due to the nature of plywood's face veneers, it's important to be careful when sanding, as it can be easy to inadvertently sand through the veneer. This produces what's referred to as a "burn," where the second, darker layer shows through. When you're looking to achieve an even finish, it's always a good idea to make a few light pencil marks on the surface of your veneer and use their disappearance as you sand as a benchmark for how deep you're going.

On the other hand, some people intentionally create the “burn” effect, as it can be used to achieve a number of creative looks. It’s even possible to sand/“burn” through multiple plies, expose alternating tones and a truly unique effects, so never be afraid to experiment either.

Finishing Tips

Edge banding: Edge banding is an iron-on strip that covers the plies at the edges of the plywood. It’s commonly used on plywood furniture projects or any time you wish to achieve a finished appearance.

Wood edging: Simply gluing, nailing or using a pocket hole jig or biscuit cutter to attach real wood to the edges of a plywood panel can instantly give any piece a high-end look.

Spackle or joint compound: Use spackle or joint compound to fill any gaps along plywood edges. Allow to dry, sand smooth, then prime and paint or stain.