

**F**or a lot of people, painting is dreadful. They complain that it's messy and fussy, and that they don't always get the results they hoped for. The truth is that most people end up with less-than-desirable results because they ignore the importance of proper preparation.

In the 20 years that I've been painting houses, I've learned how to size up quickly the results of poor prep work. The signs include paint peeling in sheets off doors and trim, mildew seeping through layers of paint, and bleeding spots on walls and ceilings—paint failures that easily could have been avoided.

At each job, I follow a basic routine that ensures a long-lasting, attractive paint job. I start by removing items from the room. Large items, such as couches, can be moved to the center of the space and covered with drop cloths. With a fresh canvas, I can begin the real prep work.

Jim Lacey is a professional painter in Bethel, Conn. Photos by Rob Yagid.

# Prep Before You Paint

When the paint dries, these **10 steps** will go unnoticed, but skipping one can blow a perfect finish

BY JIM LACEY

## STEP 1



**Drop the entire room.** After the furniture is covered or removed, cover the floor with heavy-duty canvas drop cloths. Use 9-ft. by 12-ft. drop cloths near walls, 4-ft. by 5-ft. cloths under tools and paint, and a 12-ft. by 15-ft. cloth to cover a large area of flooring or furniture. Don't skimp on the drop cloths. Cheap products can allow paint to seep through, and plastic drop cloths can be slippery, especially on hardwood floors.

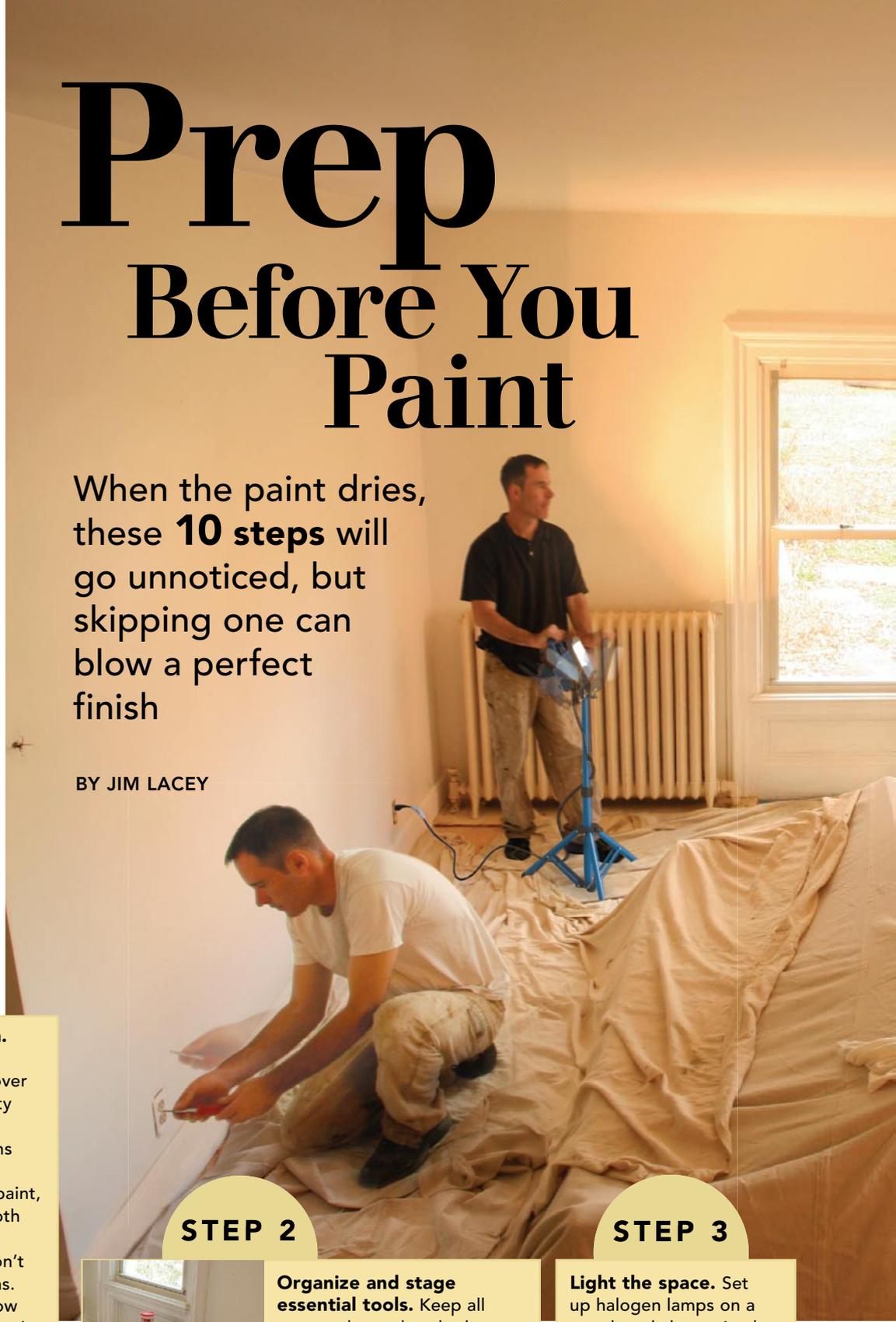
## STEP 2



**Organize and stage essential tools.** Keep all commonly used tools close at hand. This helps the work to go smoothly. Place these tools on their own drop cloth in an easily accessible but out-of-the-way area. Large items, such as step ladders and vacuums, also should be kept close by.

## STEP 3

**Light the space.** Set up halogen lamps on a stand, and clamp circular incandescent lamps wherever possible. Set the lights in a position that eliminates shadows and works best with the natural light coming into the room. Adjust the lights as conditions change.





**STEP 4**

**STEP 5**

## Must-have materials

- Step ladder
- Canvas drop cloths
- 5-in-1 tool
- Multibit screwdriver
- 2½-in. angled brush
- Acrylic caulk
- Cut bucket
- Extension cords
- Taping knives
- Paint trays
- Roller handle
- ¾-in. roller sleeves
- Roller extension pole
- Bleach or TSP
- Rubber gloves
- Sponges
- Tinted primer
- Joint compound
- Tack cloths
- Sandpaper and sponges
- Rags
- Shop vacuum
- Auxiliary lighting



**Remove wall and ceiling obstructions.** Don't try to paint around easily removable elements such as window treatments, sconces, outlet covers, switch covers, thermostats, and recessed-light trim rings. Large fixtures, such as chandeliers, can be covered with plastic instead of being removed. The escutcheons can be unscrewed and lowered.



**Wash down everything.** One-quarter cup of trisodium phosphate (TSP) per 2 gallons of water will remove dirt, smudges, smoke residue, and most surface grime. Pay particular attention to high-touch areas such as door jambs and areas around light switches. Bleach and TSP work best on mildew stains. Use a light hand when washing; you don't want to soak the wall. Also, wear heavy-duty rubber gloves. Allow the walls and ceiling to dry completely before moving on.

## TACKLE THE BULK OF THE SURFACE PREP IN THE FINAL FIVE STEPS

### STEP 6



#### Assess the existing paint.

Glossy finishes need to be sanded with 120-grit sandpaper, while moderate-gloss paint can be sanded with 120- to 150-grit sandpaper. Very hard surfaces may need to be prepped with a palm sander, but most often, you can get away with using a sanding sponge or sandpaper. Remove dust from the wall with a brush and a tack cloth.

### STEP 7



#### Repair any damage, and fill any gaps.

Joint compound is ideal for repairing cracks, holes, or dents in both drywall and plaster walls. (Visit [FineHomebuilding.com](http://FineHomebuilding.com) for more on wall repair.) Use a high-quality wood filler for repairs on wood trim and doors. Sand the repairs, and remove dust from the wall with a tack cloth, a brush, and a vacuum. Any gaps that have developed between the trim and the wall or ceiling should be caulked. Acrylic caulk performs well in most applications. However, in damp areas such as bathrooms or kitchens, consider a vinyl adhesive-based caulk, such as Phenoseal ([www.phenoseal.com](http://www.phenoseal.com)), for greater longevity.

### STEP 8



#### Mask conservatively.

Mask only those horizontal areas that are most vulnerable to paint splatter, like the tops of chair rails and the tops of baseboards if they're not going to be repainted. If baseboards are going to be repainted, mask the area where the wood flooring meets the baseboard.



## STEP 9

## STEP 10



**Always prime walls, but not ceilings.** Roll primer on walls to give paint a flat, uniform base to adhere to. Ceilings don't always have to be primed because they're often in good shape and are typically painted with flat paint. Recoating flat paint is less demanding than recoating glossy paint. You should, however, spot-prime areas with repairs, such as places that had water leaks or drywall cracks. Tinting the primer to the finish color helps to improve coverage and gives a better sense of how the room will look when it's done—much better than small paint swatches, which can bleed through subsequent coats of paint and ruin the final finish. Universal acrylic primers perform better than ever and have little odor.



**Give the wall a final sanding and cleaning.** Sand all wall and ceiling surfaces with a medium-grit sanding sponge, and inspect the surface for any irregularities, such as hardened paint or primer drips. This is an ideal time to make any final touch-ups or repairs prior to painting. If you make a repair, remove the dust, and be sure to spot-prime the area before starting to paint.