Handling Big Sheets of Drywall

Longer sheets mean fewer seams and simpler taping and finishing

by Myron R. Ferguson



A boom truck makes loading drywall easier. A second-floor window, or in some cases part of an exterior wall, can be removed to provide access for long sheets of drywall.

A short time ago, I had to install some drywall on the second floor of an 18th-century farmhouse. I was hoping to use 16ft. sheets because the upstairs walls and ceilings were crooked and uneven. However, the only access to the upstairs was a steep, winding stairway. I could have squeezed 8ft. sheets up the stairs. But the 8-footers wouldn't have spanned the imperfections in the walls, and I'd have been left with a lot of difficult seams to finish. The only way to get the longer panels to the second floor was through a large window in the finished master bedroom.

The clients were a bit skeptical of our dragging all that drywall through their bedroom and feared broken windows and dusty footprints all over the hardwood floors. But I carefully removed the window sash and covered the floor and furniture with plastic. Working with a crew of five, I had the truck unloaded in just over two hours. We carried the panels from the bedroom window through to the work area without a casualty. It probably sounds like a lot of trouble, but our efforts paid off. Using long sheets of drywall left me with a minimum number of seams, and the customer got the best possible job.

Most types of drywall are available in longer lengths—When most people think of drywall, they think of standard 4x8 panels that have been in use since drywall first became popular in the 1940s and 50s. But panels are available in lengths up to 16 ft. and in 54-in. widths for houses with 9-ft. ceilings. Also, drywall comes in a variety of special-use panels, including moisture-resistant, fire-resistant and abuse-resistant panels; ¼-in. thick flexible panels for curved applications; ½-in. high-strength ceiling panels; and foil-backed panels. Each type is available in longer lengths.

Planning a drywall job involves more than selecting the right type of drywall and figuring out square footage. You also need to visualize how drywall will be applied in each area to estimate the panel lengths and how many of each length sheet the job requires. Then you have to make sure those materials are available when needed. Drywall suppliers don't always stock longerlength panels, so order them ahead of time.

As you calculate the size and the number of sheets you'll need, always try to eliminate unnecessary butt seams by using the longest panels possible. A butt seam is a joint created when two panel ends are joined together. Eight-ft. lengths may be lighter and easier to handle (and are often cheaper), but resist the temptation to use them only. Using all &ft. panels creates more difficult-to-hide butt seams, which means more taping, not a favorite drywall task.

If a wall or ceiling is too long for even the longest drywall panels, plan to stagger the seams



Carrying drywall is a two-person job. With one hand on the bottom of the sheet and the other holding the sheet against the shoulders, two crew members can safely handle the drywall.



Raise one end of a ceiling panel at a time. A ceiling panel is installed by lifting one end of the panel and then holding it in place while the other end is raised.



A window might be the easiest way to get drywall into a house—You also need to consider the best way to get sheets of drywall into the building. (Ideally, the contractor should start thinking about this as he frames.) To find the best access, look over the job site and take mea-



Using your head. Once the ceiling panel is in position, it can be held in place briefly with the top of the head while the first fasteners secure the panel to the ceiling.

surements during the rough-framing stage. For a normal single-story building, access is usually not a concern, but for buildings over one story tall, there may be some special considerations.

If necessary, ask the builder to leave out a window, a door or, in some cases, a section of plywood on an exterior wall to allow access for long panels that would be difficult to carry by hand through the inside of the house (photo facing page). If you plan to use a boom truck to unload the drywall, keep an eye out for overhead wires that could interfere with delivery. Freshly covered ditches or septic tanks also might spell trouble for heavy trucks.

Special arrangements such as leaving out a window or a section of exterior plywood for dry-





wall access may mean limited time for access. Again, I try to order longer lengths or unusual types of drywall as soon as possible to prevent holdups that might delay the project.

The boom truck grabs about 20 sheets at a time and slips one end of them through the access hole. Crew members working in pairs carry drywall to various storage areas (top photo, p. 87). Drywall is heavy, but it's also fragile. It can be broken easily if care is not taken while the panels are lifted and moved around.

Carrying drywall panels of any length should always be a two-person job. Both carriers should be on the same side of the panel with the same hand under the bottom edge and the other hand steadying the top. They should hold the panel a foot or more in from each end and let the panel lean against their shoulders.

When drywall arrives, I try to have areas ready to store the panels until they're used. Sheets can be lain flat on the floor or stored on edge against a wall. If long panels are left on edge, they need to be well-supported so that they don't develop bows or, even worse, fall over. I like to distribute



A drywall lift can be operated by one person. Hanging long sheets of drywall does not have to be a two-person job. With a drywall lift, long ceiling panels are raised and held in place, leaving the operator free to fasten the panels to the ceiling.

Site-built T-supports hold ceiling panels during fastening. Ceiling panels are held in place temporarily by a T-support fashioned out of 2x4s or furring strips. The support is cut to fit each ceiling and is propped up after the panel is lifted into position.

the panels in neat piles throughout the building to spread out the weight and to make hanging them more convenient.

Ceiling panels are hung first—One inescapable truth about drywalling is that all drywall panels have to be lifted into place before they are attached. Some may have to be raised only ½ in. off the floor, others need to be hoisted to the top of a cathedral ceiling.

Ceiling drywall should always be installed first. Wall panels then fit up against the ceiling and help to support the edges of the ceiling panels.

I usually use adjustable step-up benches as scaffolding to hang drywall on ceilings 9 ft. high or less (photo bottom left, p. 87). A crew member on one bench lifts one end of the panel into position, and another crew member keeps the other end low. The low end is then pushed into position while the higher end is held in place. Once both ends are in place, the panel can be held against the framing gently with the top of your head, which frees your hands to drive nails or screws to attach the panel to the joists (photo bottom right, p. 87). With a longer panel, make sure you drive enough nails—10 or 12—to keep it in place before you remove the support.

Another option is using a T-support to hold the panel in place while driving the fasteners (photo left). I usually make a T-support for each job to fit the height of each ceiling. T-supports can be made out of two lengths of furning or 2x4s. A 4ft. crosspiece is screwed to the top of a longer length to make the T-support ½ in. higher than the finished ceiling.

Although hanging drywall is normally a job for two or more people, a mechanical drywall lift makes it possible for one person to hang drywall alone (photo right). The lift adjusts for different-height walls and ceilings, sloped as well as flat, and easily accommodates longer panels. After cranking the lift up and positioning the panel where you want it, leave the lift in place until the edges of the panels are securely fastened. The lift can then be dropped, and the rest of the panel can be fastened. (For more on drywall lifts, see FHB #50, pp. 50-52.) Working with a regular crew, I usually don't need a drywall lift. However, on those rare occasions when I'm working alone, I rent a lift. Most rental stores carry them; where I live, drywall lifts typically rent for around \$25 per day.

Walls are hung from the top down–Hanging drywall on walls is usually a lot easier than on ceilings. There are more cutouts for openings on walls, but at least you're not hoisting all that weight overyour head. Before hanging the walls, it's a good idea to mark the location of the wall studs on the ceiling and on the floor to make fastening easier once studs are covered with drywall. I also mark the location of any electrical boxes or other openings that need to be cut out on the floor directly below the box.

I measure and cut the top wall panel first, making cuts for window or door openings. If the doors and windows have not been installed or if a window is in place but the jamb extensions haven't been put in, openings can be cut after the drywall is installed (photo bottom left, facing page). Just follow each side of the window's rough opening with a drywall saw, then score along the top with a utility knife for a snap cut. If the jamb extensions have been installed around the windows, you need to measure and cut the openings before hanging the drywall. Mark the opening on the face side of the panel, and cut the sides with a drywall saw, again using a knife to complete the cut at the top.

When I'm ready to install the first wall panel, I place it on the floor exactly below where it will be attached, leaning it against the studs. Before raising the panel in place, I start nails about 1 in. down from the top edge and in line with each stud. With the help of another crew mem-

ber, I lift the panel until it is tight against the ceiling and drive the nails home (top photo).

After the top panel is tacked in place, I finish cutting out any small openings, and then fasten the rest of the panel. Now the bottom panel can be cut to fit up against the top panel. I make the bottom panel about $\frac{1}{2}$ in. short so that it has plenty of clearance above the floor (photo bottom right). This extra space means that I don't have to force the panel into place. Cutting it a little short also leaves room for a foot lift or a pry bar to be slid under the panel.

Most electrical-outlet boxes are near the floor. So before hanging the panel, I measure to find the center of the box and transfer the location of the box onto the face of the panel. Then I tack the panel in position along its top edge. I start a drywall router or a drywall utility saw at the center mark and work to the edge of the box. Then I hop the router or saw to the outside of the box and make the cutout, letting the tool ride on the outside edge of the box. If you're using a router, proceed counterclockwise around the box until the cut is finished.

Using longer sheets of drywall, you should have few butt seams. If butt seams are unavoidable, they don't necessarily have to fall directly on studs (sidebar right). Butt seams can also be placed above doors and above or below windows so that part of the seam falls in the opening. When I make a butt seam fall within a door or window opening, I try to keep the seam at least 8 in. in from the edge of the opening, where the wall is more stable and where the slight bulge from taping the seam won't affect miter joints in the window or door trim.

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Start nails before raising the panel. Nails started at each stud location while the panel is on the floor can be quickly nailed home once the panel is lifted into position.



Window openings can be cut later. After running a wall panel over a door or window opening, cut the sides with a drywall saw, then score and snap the top edge.



Bottom wall panels are lifted into position with a pry bar. Bottom wall panels are cut ½ in. short so that they can be snugged into position with a foot lift or a pry bar.

Making invisible butt seams



A butt seam doesn't have to fall on ajoist. A plywood backer makes it possible to land a drywall seam between framing members.

The most common way to butt the untapered ends of drywall panels is to land the butt seam on a framing member. But because the end of the panel isn't tapered, taping and finishing the seam leaves a slight bulge that can be unsightly in certain lighting conditions. One way to make butt seams almost invisible is by backblocking the seam with plywood (photo above).

Back-blocking begins with hanging a drywall panel so that the butt end falls between two framing members. Next I cut a strip of ½-in. plywood about 10 in. wide and 48 in. long and staple narrow ½-in. thick strips of wood or cardboard along each edge of the plywood. I then insert the plywood assembly behind the panel end and screw the drywall to the plywood. I try to keep the plywood roughly centered on the panel end. Then I hang the abutting sheet of drywall, screwing it to the plywood and to the adjacent framing member.

The plywood-backed butt seam turns the joined drywall panels into one continuous panel. The narrow strips on the edges of the plywood cause the joint to bow in slightly, creating a shallow indentation along the seam. When the seam is taped and the indentation is filled in with compound, the joint is hidden.—*M. R. F.*