


# The Challenges of Painting Kitchens and Baths

BY BRIAN DOHERTY



For paint to stand up to these hard-working rooms, the surfaces must be clean, and the finishes must be durable

**R**epainting can change the look and feel of a room. In kitchens and baths, this change can be dramatic. Bathrooms tend to be small, and even big kitchens can feel cramped for space. Both rooms take plenty of abuse.

Paint can't make a room bigger, but it can make a room feel more spacious. And it can add new life to dirty walls and tired old cabinets. Before you break out the brushes, remember this: Just as these rooms take the most abuse, they need the most care when being repainted. Everything needs to be cleaned, and you have to use the right products.

**“If you don't clean the walls thoroughly, the paint won't adhere.”**

### Special prep for special rooms

In kitchens and baths, good prep means good cleaning. If you don't clean the grease and soap scum from the walls, you'll be hard-pressed to produce a paint finish that lasts for any amount of time.

Before I do any work, I put drop cloths on the floors and plastic sheeting over furniture, countertops, fixtures, and appliances. I put tape on the baseboards and backsplashes. Then I scrape loose and flaking paint from any damaged areas.

In the kitchen, especially around the counters, stove, and refrigerator, grease and food splash on the walls. Bathroom walls may be coated with mildew, soap scum, and other residues. In each case, I wash every surface that is going to be painted before I continue with the prep work. If you don't clean the



### START WITH A GOOD SCRUBBING

In addition to filling holes, patching cracks, and sanding all glossy surfaces, cleaning and caulking are particularly important in kitchens and bathrooms. Wash, rinse, and dry every surface that will be painted to remove grease and mildew. Seal all trim, countertops, and fixtures with a mildew-resistant caulk to keep moisture out of the walls.

### REMOVING WALLPAPER: THE GLUE HAS TO GO

There are many theories on the best way to remove wallpaper. All I can say for sure is that it is a messy process. No matter how you go about it, the most important thing is to remove all the glue residue before you paint.

First, I soak the walls with hot water to loosen the glue. Soaking works best

if you score the wallpaper. A Paper Tiger ([www.zinsser.com](http://www.zinsser.com)) is an inexpensive scoring tool that you roll over wallpaper to create small holes.

Then I use a spray bottle or garden sprayer and a sponge to soak the walls

with hot water. When water isn't enough to do the job, use an enzyme-based product made to break

down glue. Diff ([www.zinsser.com](http://www.zinsser.com)) is a spray-on gel that works well. The trick with both water and specialty products is to give them time to work. After soaking the wallpaper, wait at least 45 minutes before trying to remove it.

Clean the walls after you remove the paper. If a lot of glue is left on the walls, use the Diff again, and some more warm water. You may need to scrub the walls with a wire brush to remove the glue.



**With the right prep, the wallpaper may peel easily off the walls. If it needs a little coaxing, use a scraper with a sharp blade. Be sure to remove all the glue before painting.**

Paper Tiger scoring tool







## SPOT-PRIME THE CEILINGS

Ceilings are the least likely area in the kitchen to need a lot of prep work. Spot-prime repairs and stains with a stain-blocking primer. Cut in the edges first when applying topcoats, and roll all the coats in the same direction. As you move forward, roll back into your work to smooth the paint. Finish the ceiling before applying the final coat of paint to the walls.



walls thoroughly, the paint won't adhere, and debris will show up in the finish.

It is important to clean the kitchen with a product that removes grease. Krud Kutter ([www.krudkutter.com](http://www.krudkutter.com)), a cleaning product available in paint stores, works well. Mildew is a common problem in bathrooms. I've always had success removing mildew with a simple 3:1 water-to-bleach solution.

I also have painted bathroom walls, particularly around the shower, where wax from hair-care products has built up. You may not see wax buildup, but if you notice a gummy substance on your sandpaper in the bathroom, it is probably wax. Wax is more difficult to remove. You may have to use a

surface-prep product or deglosser like Wil-Bond ([www.wilsonimperial.com](http://www.wilsonimperial.com)) to remove wax. Be careful; these products sometimes are toxic and flammable.

Wear rubber gloves when you wash, and give cleaning products time to work. This way, you'll do less scrubbing. When I am done washing the walls and trim, I rinse everything with warm water. Once everything has had a chance to dry, I continue with the general prep work: patching, sanding, and caulking.

### A light sanding and good primer set the stage for the topcoat

Kitchens and baths typically are painted with glossy paints. Unfortunately, new paint doesn't

adhere well to glossy surfaces. Therefore, it is a good idea to sand and prime all glossy surfaces. Sanding with 100-grit sandpaper creates a tooth that helps primer and topcoats bond to the surface. When you're finished sanding, use a damp rag to dust the surface.

Primers seal the surface and help the finish coats to bond. I use oil- and shellac-base stain-blocking primers in kitchens and baths. These primers are durable, stick to almost anything, and are impermeable to water. For both the walls and trim, I use Zinsser's B-I-N Primer Sealer ([www.zinsser.com](http://www.zinsser.com)) because it dries quickly and cures almost immediately.

On matte surfaces, like most ceilings, you can get away with spot-priming. Just prime



## START WALLS BY CUTTING IN THE EDGES

The walls generally take three full coats: one coat of primer and two coats of paint. If you're changing the color of the room, tint the primer to the paint color to help the topcoats cover. Apply the final coat of paint after the ceiling is complete but before finishing the trim. Cut in the walls around cabinetry, fixtures, and appliances with a 3-in. square brush. Use a paint conditioner to increase the paint's drying time and decrease brush marks.



**“Glossy paints tend to show imperfections in the walls and the paint job, so patching and sanding should be done with extra care.”**

newly repaired areas and any areas that are stained. This saves time without compromising the quality of the paint job.

### **Dry time doesn't mean downtime**

In general, the best sequence for painting a room is from the top down: ceilings first, walls second, and trim last. It is easiest to cut the walls to the ceiling, and the trim to the

walls. In some rooms, though, particularly kitchens, painting becomes a juggling act because of the many surfaces and the many coats of paint. If you have to prime and put two topcoats on the ceiling before you start the walls, you end up with a lot of downtime while you wait for paint to dry.

The trick is to juggle the order so that you always have something to work on. While the



## PAINT THE TRIM LAST

Trim is almost always painted with glossy paint. It should be sanded and primed to help the topcoats bond. Use a 2½-in. sash brush. The angled bristles ease the challenge of cutting clean lines on the edges of casings and moldings.



primer dries on the ceiling, you can start priming the walls. With most primers, by the time you are done priming the walls, the ceilings will be ready for a coat of paint. Topcoats take longer to dry, so after applying the first coat of paint to ceilings and walls, you're at a good time to start priming the trim. The final coats, however, still should go on in order.

### Glossy paints can take the heat

While I insist on oil- or shellac-base primers in kitchens and baths, I am less particular about the chemistry of the topcoat as long as the finish is durable. In general, paints with more sheen are more durable and easier to clean. For kitchens and bathrooms, I don't advise anything less glossy than a satin finish.

In high-humidity areas like bathrooms or in areas like kitchens that may need touch-ups, I avoid latex eggshell finishes. They tend to weep, and they're difficult to touch up. I prefer Benjamin Moore's Satin Impervo ([www.benjaminmoore.com](http://www.benjaminmoore.com)). It is a rich-looking, durable finish available in oil and latex.

Glossy paints tend to show imperfections in the walls and the paint job, so patching and

sanding should be done with extra care. It is also important to use top-quality brushes and roller pads ("Choosing, Using, and Maintaining Paintbrushes," *FHB* #112, pp. 80-85).

I use a 3-in. square brush for cutting in the ceiling and walls. I cut methodically, in one direction, and smooth out brush marks by always making the last brush stroke lightly back toward the place where I started. I use a 2½-in. sash brush to cut the trim. The angled bristles on this brush allow me to cut a clean line on the edges of window and door frames and along the top of the baseboard.

When rolling the walls and ceiling, I use the finest-nap roller pads I can. If the walls are new or in good shape, I use ¼-in. to ⅜-in. nap; if they are old or imperfect, I use ⅝-in. to 1½-in. nap. Roll all the coats in the same direction. Roll the walls in 4-ft. by 4-ft. sections. Then back-roll—roll from floor to ceiling—without adding paint. On ceilings, work in small sections, and roll back into areas you already painted to smooth paint and avoid lap marks. □

Painter Brian Doherty lives and works in Richmond, Va. Photos by Brian Pontolilo.

## New cabinets for the price of paint

The cure for old, tired kitchen cabinets doesn't have to involve spending thousands of dollars on new ones. Follow these steps, and your cabinets will be rejuvenated and just as durable as when they were new.

First, clean the cabinets well. Just like any other surface in your kitchen, they are likely dirtier than you think. If the cabinets are painted, chances are that they were painted with glossy paint. If they are natural wood, they likely were finished with a hard finish like polyurethane. In any case, degloss the finish with a palm sander and 100-grit sandpaper.

Take the doors off the cabinets so that you don't have to paint around the hinges, and remove the hardware. If the pulls, handles, and hinges have paint on them, you can soak them in paint remover to clean them. The drawers usually can be left in place and simply slid out a little to be painted.

Prime the cabinets, doors, and drawers with an oil-base, stain-blocking primer. After the primer is dry, lightly sand everything with 200-grit sandpaper. Then apply two coats of a semigloss or a higher-sheen paint. Use a paint conditioner like Penetrol for oil paint or Floetrol for latex paint ([www.floodco.com](http://www.floodco.com)). Paint conditioners retard paint's drying time, reducing brush marks and leaving a smooth, glassy finish. You can apply paint with rollers or brushes, but always check for drips around panels, bevels, and other profiles.

You can use oil- or water-base paints for the topcoat, but don't use latex paint on shelves. Latex doesn't cure hard enough for shelving. If you're using a latex paint for cabinets, simply use an oil-base equivalent for the shelves. Once everything is dry and reassembled, the painted cabinets are sure to have a dramatic effect on your kitchen.



**Wash the cabinets.** Use a degreasing cleanser, or Krud Kutter, and make sure to rinse and dry the surfaces before painting.



**Knock down the sheen.** Sand the cabinets with 100-grit sandpaper to remove the gloss. Wipe off any dust left by sanding.

**Set up a painting station for the doors.** Sawhorses and a couple of boards make an ideal painting station and drying rack that can be set up outside or in a garage or basement.



**Prime and use durable finishes.** Prime the cabinets with a bonding primer, and finish them with two coats of a durable, scrubable paint. You can use a roller or brush for cabinetry, but be mindful of drips, particularly around panels and beaded edges.

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