

# Replace Your Vanity

Add style to your bathroom with this basic carpentry and plumbing project

BY TYLER GRACE

**M**y business specializes in interior renovations, so I'm no stranger to gutting an old bathroom and building it from the studs and subfloor back to a fresh finished space. But in many cases, all that's needed is a facelift to bring the aesthetics into the current decade. Typically, such jobs involve new flooring, trim, plumbing fixtures, lighting, and the cherry on top of the updated finishes: a new vanity.

At its core, the workflow for replacing a vanity is pretty straightforward—turn off and disconnect the plumbing, yank the old vanity out, put the new vanity in, and reconnect the plumbing—but the devil is in the details. If you want the work to look and function at a professional level, there are some subtle steps to the process. You have to know the tricks for removing the old vanity without causing unintended damage, and how to fit the new one without relying heavily on shims and caulk. Moreover, some cautionary knowledge about the plumbing will go a long way toward ensuring that you won't need to make multiple trips to the store for plumbing parts, and that leaks won't ruin all your hard work.

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# METHODICAL DEMO

Removing the old vanity is straightforward work, but these tips on sequencing and site protection will ensure that the task goes smoothly and doesn't risk damaging the rest of the room. First and foremost, before starting the demolition, unpack the new vanity and inspect it for defects or damage, and double-

check measurements to be sure that the location of the existing plumbing will be compatible with the placement and size of the new cabinet. You don't want to discover that you chose the wrong replacement vanity after the old one is already sitting at the curb for trash pickup.



1

**Plan on spillage.** There will be water in the faucet supply lines and a slug of dirty water sitting in the drain trap. Keep things dry by setting a bucket on top of a towel.



2

**Plug the drain pipe.** After removing the sink trap, use a rag or a reusable drain plug to block sewer gases from wafting into the room.



3

**Slice the seams.** To minimize drywall damage, cut the caulk around the cabinet and countertop with a sharp utility knife.



4

**The top goes first.** Use a stiff prybar to separate the countertop from the cabinet, and lift the whole top, complete with faucet, from the old vanity.



5

**Prep the pipes.** Escutcheons will interfere with the old cabinet removal and new cabinet installation, so remove them with metal-cutting snips.



6

**Screws are last.** Back out the screws holding the cabinet to the wall studs, being careful not to strip their heads.

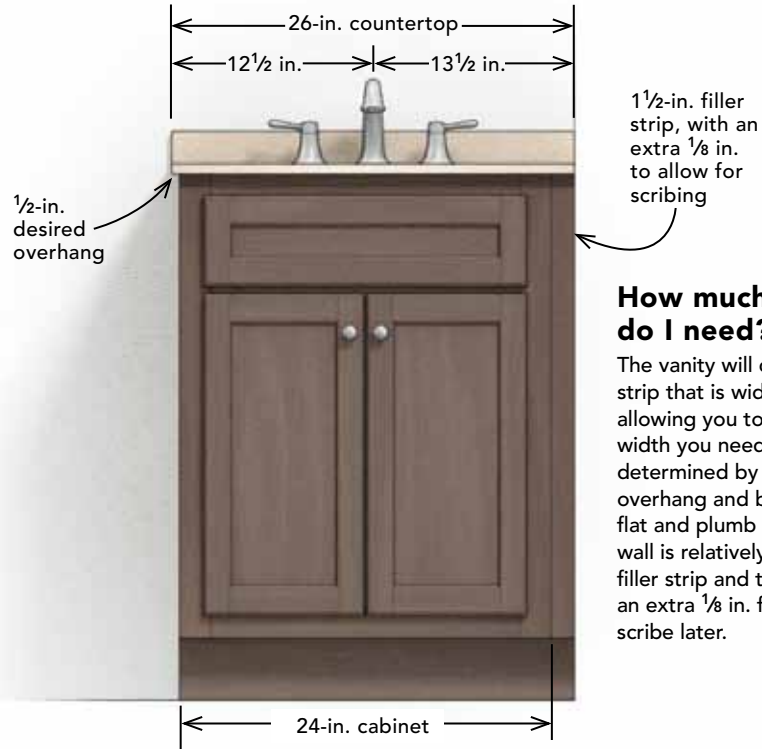


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**Up then out.** When removing the cabinet, lift up and away from the wall, being careful not to bend plumbing stub outs.

# FIT THE CABINET

Scribing—a transferring technique used to cut the cabinet for a perfect fit against the walls and floor—elevates the quality of your vanity installation and eliminates the need to caulk and to hide irregularities created by shimming. For vanity cabinets that have a solid back, this process needs to be done in two phases: an initial scribe to level the cabinet and fit it against the side wall, and then, after the back has been cut so that it can be slid into position against the back wall, a second round of scribing for a final fit. The process isn't hard to learn, but the sequencing has to be correct.



## How much filler do I need?

The vanity will come with a filler strip that is wider than necessary, allowing you to rip it to whatever width you need. That width is determined by the countertop overhang and by how far from flat and plumb your wall is. If the wall is relatively plumb, attach the filler strip and then rip it to leave an extra ⅛ in. for doing the final scribe later.

**1** After ripping the filler strip with a bevel, fasten it to the cabinet with countersunk screws.



**2** Level the cabinet with shims, then scribe it to fit against the floor.

Set the scribe tool to span the widest gap between the cabinet and the floor/wall. Keeping the tool at a right angle to the surface being traced, transfer the contours of the floor/wall to the cabinet.





**Use a level to span the gap.** Slide the cabinet as close to final position as the plumbing stub outs will allow, then set a level across the cabinet to mark where its top edge will contact the rear wall.



**Measure and record.** Measure each pipe position relative to two points—the corner of the wall and the horizontal reference line—then mark the measurements on the wall.



**Holes in two steps.** Drill penetrations using a hole saw slightly larger than the diameter of the pipes. Start from the back side, stopping when the pilot bit pokes through, then use that hole to position the drill bit to finish the hole from the inside.



**Final scribing.** With the cabinet in place, do a fine-scribe along the side where it meets the floor and wall, and scribe the bottom and right end of the applied toe kick before cutting the excess from the left end and installing.



**Establish a reference line.** Pull the cabinet out of the way, and then extend the level line across the wall from that point.



**Transfer to the cabinet back.** Using the cabinet's side and top edges as your reference points, mark the location where each pipe will protrude through the cabinet back.



**Scribe the back edge.** The drilled holes allow the cabinet to slide into final position against the back wall, where it can be shimmed level and then scribed along the back edge of the side panel so it fits tight to the wall.



**Shim the gap.** Fasten the cabinet to the rear wall with screws long enough to penetrate at least 1½ in. into the studs, being sure to drive them through the fastening rail near the top edge. When fastening to the side wall, add scraps of wood and/or shims to match the width of the scribed filler strip.



# COUNTERTOP AND PLUMBING COME LAST

Install as much of the faucet plumbing as you can prior to setting the countertop. This not only reduces the gymnastics of working in a dark, cramped vanity cabinet, but it makes it easy to ensure that the handles and spout are aligned correctly and spaced evenly. When installing the drain assembly, don't reuse parts from the old vanity. The cost savings would be

minimal, but even if drain parts were expensive, it still would not be worth the potential for leaks. On that note, you can leave the cabinet empty for a few days just to make sure there are no leaks. It's easier to adjust a drain trap or snug up a compression fitting than to replace an entire vanity because of an unnoticed leak.



**Get a good mark.** A strip of painters tape makes a pencil-friendly path for marking hard, glossy countertops with a scribe tool.



**Sand to fit.** Solid-surface counters can be cut and shaped with carbide tools and then sanded down to a scribe line using an angle grinder equipped with a sanding disk.



**Easy access.** It's much easier to install and align the faucet before setting the countertop than it is to reach underneath after it's installed.



**Wet set.** After confirming that the countertop scribe fits the wall, apply adhesive caulk to the inside edge of the cabinet to avoid visible squeeze out as the top is set and taped into place to cure.





**UNDERSINK SUCCESS** Most faucet packages include all of the components you see from the finished side of the sink, and sometimes even supply lines. The rest of the drain assembly and optional escutcheons must be purchased separately. It pays to spend the time planning what you need up front; otherwise, you'll spend it making multiple drives to the home center or plumbing store for the parts you forgot.

