

Wainscot for a Window

A simple frame and panel with applied moldings gives an ordinary window an extraordinary appearance

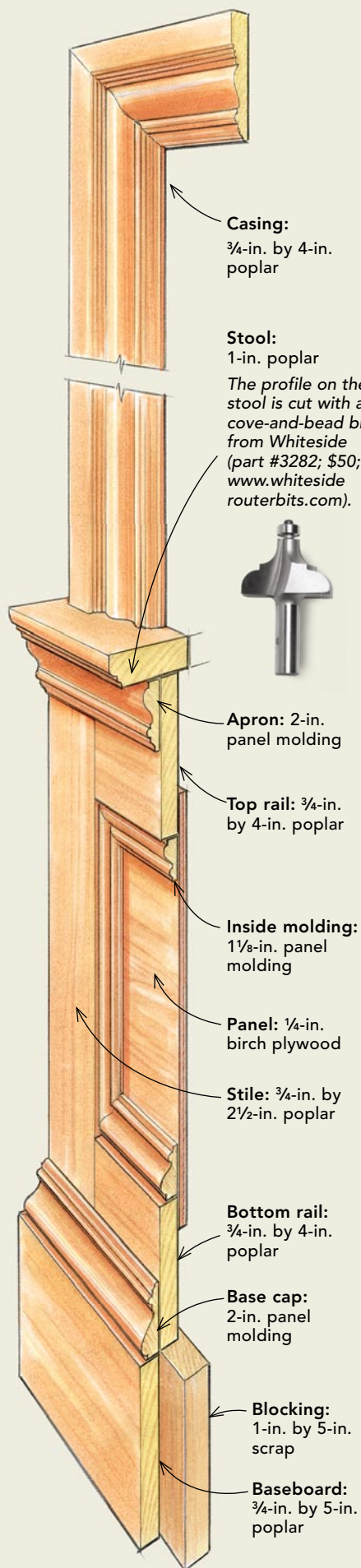
BY GARY STRIEGLER

Window-trim details can have a huge effect on the overall look of a room. With the right combination of materials and molding proportions, window-trim details transform a drab space into an elegant one. Getting those details wrong, however, really can disrupt the room's design.

Many of the houses I build have large windows with sills that are close to the floor. If I install a tall baseboard molding, I'm left with a strip of awkward-looking drywall beneath the window. To avoid that strip, I like to build a wainscot panel that extends from the windowsill to the baseboard molding. This detail grounds the window by connecting it to the baseboard and the floor. The window gains mass, and the little bump-out created by the wainscot has a big impact, breaking the wall plane with molding profiles that add visual interest.

Gary Striegler is a builder in Fayetteville, Ark. Photos by Christopher Ermides, except where noted.





Casing:
3/4-in. by 4-in.
poplar

Stool:
1-in. poplar
The profile on the stool is cut with a cove-and-bead bit from Whiteside (part #3282; \$50; www.whitesiderouterbits.com).



Apron: 2-in.
panel molding

Top rail: 3/4-in.
by 4-in. poplar

Inside molding:
1 1/8-in. panel
molding

Panel: 1/4-in.
birch plywood

Stile: 3/4-in. by
2 1/2-in. poplar

Bottom rail:
3/4-in. by 4-in.
poplar

Base cap:
2-in. panel
molding

Blocking:
1-in. by 5-in.
scrap

Baseboard:
3/4-in. by 5-in.
poplar

Molding profiles dictate the proportions

This wainscot detail works well when these profile sizes are used on a window from 18 in. to 30 in. off the floor with 6-in.- to 7-in.-tall baseboard. Use casing widths ranging from 3 in. to 4 1/2 in. Working outside these dimensions can make the field of the panel either too small or too large, which creates awkward proportions. Before you cut, take the time to plan the size of the wainscot panel carefully, and make a cutlist for the rails and stiles. Because the area behind the panel is going to be hidden, I lay out the dimensions right on the wall, sometimes going as far as drawing everything to scale if I'm concerned about how the overall proportions will look. This takes some time, but it lets me work out problems before any wood has been cut.

ASSEMBLE PIECES ON A WORKBENCH

With the rails and stiles cut, I assemble the frame with pocket-hole joinery, then add the plywood. During assembly, I make sure that the good side of the rails, stiles, and plywood will face outward when the panel is attached to the wall. I find it easier to build the frame and apply the stool, apron, and inside-panel moldings on a workbench before installing it.



1 Join the frame with pocket screws. I bore two pocket holes at each stile-to-rail joint, spacing the holes about 4 in. apart along the top rail where the stool will be attached later. Before attaching the plywood back, I smooth the frame with an orbital sander.



2 Add the inside molding after the plywood is attached. I glue and staple 1/4-in. plywood directly to the back of the frame, keeping it clear of the pocket holes on the top rail. On the front, I install the short pieces of panel molding first, then nail the longer pieces to fit so that I can spring them in slightly for a tighter joint.



Tip: Back-bevel the miters with a block plane or a utility knife for a tighter joint.

3 Screw the frame to the stool. I mill the stool from 1-in. poplar with a cove-and-bead bit, then attach it to the frame with pocket-hole screws. I use a combination square to set the frame back ¼ in. from the stool's edge, the thickness of the plywood attached to the back of the frame. Kreg's Right Angle Clamp has a foot on one end and a peg on the other to hold parts together until screws can be driven. Cost: \$25; www.kregtool.com



ADD THE FINAL MOLDINGS AFTER THE

Once the frame is built and the moldings are applied, I attach the unit below the window, keeping the top of the stool ¼ in. to ⅜ in. beneath the top of the jamb to create a reveal. Blocking and baseboard moldings are next; then I install the casing around the window to complete the job.

5 Level and clamp the panel in place. If the windows were installed properly, leveling the panel unit will keep the reveal between the stool and the jamb even. If the window isn't perfectly level, I hide the difference in the reveal before I nail the unit to the wall.



4 Add the apron now to save your knees. While the panel is upside down on the workbench, attach the apron molding and apron returns. Remember to run each return past the back of the frame ¼ in. so that it will meet the wall when it's installed.



Locate boxes with centerlines

Plumb a line down the wall at the window's center, and draw a line down the center of the back of the panel. Measure off these two lines and the top of the stool to pinpoint the cutout for an electrical box. An alternative approach is to have an electrician locate electrical boxes horizontally in the baseboard.



PANEL IS ON THE WALL



6 Add blocking at stud locations to support the baseboard. Only a small part of the baseboard will overlap the bottom of the panel, so this backing provides nailing blocks for the baseboard.



7 Nail the base cap to the panel after the baseboard is installed. I like to glue and nail the returns at the ends of the baseboard before attaching it to the wall. Once this is done and the base cap is on, I run a small cove strip to hide the 1/4-in. gap left by the plywood panel. To eliminate this step, remove the drywall to allow the stiles to sit flush against the wall.



8 Install the head casing last. Nail the legs of the casing on first, keeping the same reveal between the casing and the jamb that was used between the stool and the jamb. Cut the head casing to fit, fine-tuning the angle as needed for a tight miter joint.