

Precision



Window Trim

A systematic approach ensures better joints and a faster installation

BY ANTHONY VITALE

Somewhere along the way, we've decided that it's the apprentice's job to run base or to find and mark studs. There's nothing really wrong with that, but I also like to throw window and door casing into the mix. The skills required to case an opening are fundamental to finish carpentry, and the conditions are pretty similar from one opening to the next. Learning how to case from the get-go teaches you prep; detailing; nailing pattern; understanding the difference between level, plumb, and straight; and how to set and sight reveals. You've got 12 different tools you're going to use to get through the process.

The method I teach apprentices started somewhat out of frustration. Various factors can throw off miter joints when you stick-build a casing around an opening, and it can take a lot of time and effort to get the joints right. Throw a junior carpenter into the mix and the results aren't always great. But that's not the case with bench building. Doing the assembly work on a tabletop takes the irregularities of an opening out of the equation and makes the process simple enough that anybody on the crew can do it. That frees up senior carpenters from having to micromanage and troubleshoot, and makes it easy to scale up for big jobs. □

Anthony Vitale is a finish carpenter and the owner of Probuilt Woodworking in Clinton Township, Mich. Photos by Matthew Millham.

OPENINGS NEED WORK

Window and door jambs tend to get banged up and dirty during construction, and we need to clean and repair them so they don't compromise and complicate the trimwork we're installing. Although not comprehensive, the photos shown here reflect some of the most common fixes we make when working our way through a house.



1

Fix the jambs. Lever joints closed, and nail them off. Glue down chips, then sand them flat. Chips and open joints will show in the finished opening and must be fixed while fully accessible.



2

Reestablish the gap. Use a wallboard saw to cut back the drywall around the window, which frees up the jambs so that they have room to be nudged into proper alignment if necessary.



3

Scrape it down. Clean up any errant drywall compound with a scraper or chisel, taking care not to damage the jamb. Skip this, and the trim won't make continuous contact with the jamb.



5

Round it over. Jamb edges often show dings, and even if they don't, a sharp edge doesn't hold paint as well as a slight roundover, which can be added with a compact router and a 1/8-in. roundover bit.



4

Sand out imperfections. Keeping the sander flat, sand across the faces of the jambs to get a clean surface and to flush up the corners. Sanding takes you down to clean wood and ensures a more consistent finish.



6

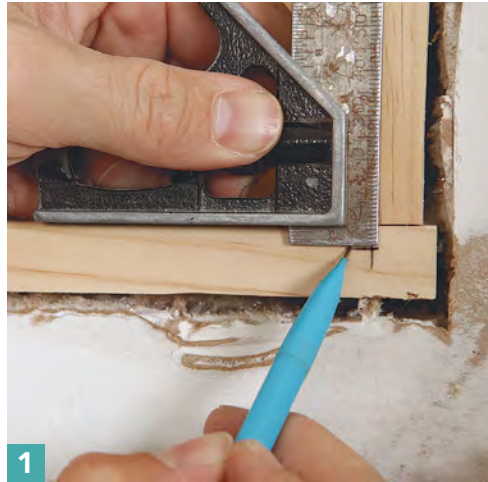
Ease the corners. Use 150-grit sandpaper to finish off the inside corners of the jambs, matching the router bit's radius where the router can't reach.

DEVELOP A PRODUCTION MINDSET

Keeping the tape measure in your tool bag and marking stock in place eliminates read and transfer errors. Once you've measured the opening and cut the stock to rough lengths, put the tape away. For rough sizing, I like to cut stock about a foot longer than the opening—or even more than that with wider casing. That sounds like a lot, but with this 4-in.-wide casing, it really only leaves 4 in. of wiggle room once you subtract the 4 in. for each miter. I want my crew to be methodical about rough sizing, but I don't want them to lose time doing it. The critical accuracy comes when marking the stock in place on the opening and cutting to those lines.

A quick tip on getting the most out of your stock: Cut the long lengths first (usually door legs and larger openings), and use the cutoffs from those for smaller openings. That way, you're not chopping down 16-footers for 3-ft. windows and can use your cutoffs a bit more efficiently.

When casing a whole house, a lot of the efficiency comes from using production methods. That generally means doing one task with one tool—say, cutting all of the miters for all of the casing in a room or floor of the house—before moving on to the next step in the process. This cuts down on setup and adjustments, and you don't have to keep track of 10 different tools at once.



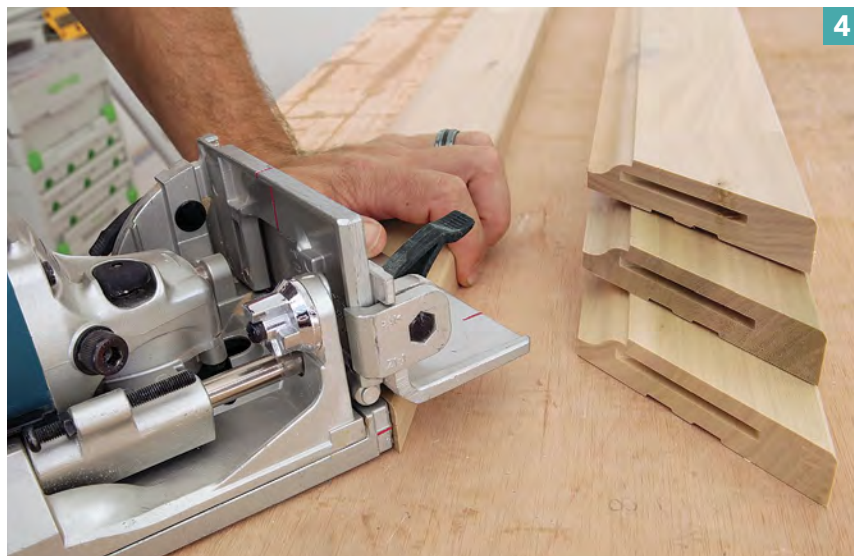
1 Mark reveals. Set a combination square to $\frac{3}{16}$ in., and mark reveals at each corner. Even on stain-grade work, the resulting crosshairs will get hidden behind the finished casing.



2 Mark in place. Transfer the marked reveals to the stock, and label each piece to indicate its place on the opening—top, bottom, left, and right—and the opening it belongs to.



3 Kiss the line. Cut all of the left-hand miters, then swing the saw to 45° the other way to cut all of the rights. Take most of the line to ensure that the finished casing will hide the reveal marks.



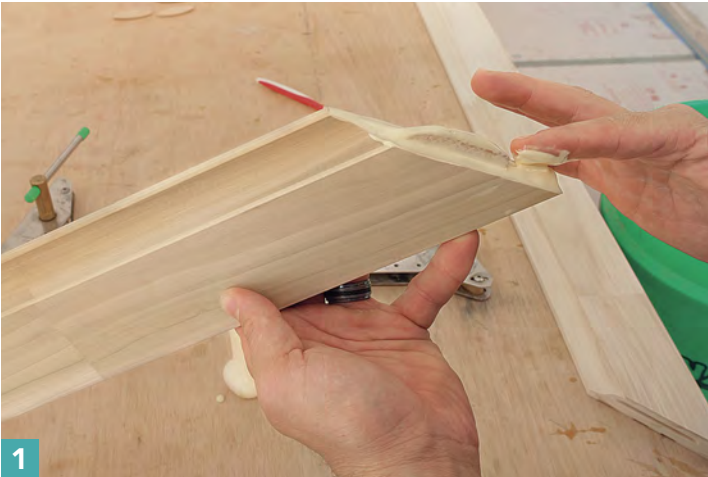
4 Cut the slots. Align a biscuit joiner to a common spot on the casing, aiming to keep the biscuits close to the short point of the miter, which is the more vulnerable to opening up. Register the joiner to the show side of the casing when possible to aid in keeping the faces of the intersecting pieces in plane.



Set the stage.
Arrange all of the parts in their proper position, stage biscuits and clamps at each corner, and have glue and cleanup materials at the ready.

GLUE IT UP, SET IT ASIDE

Have a bucket of clean water, a rag, and a toothbrush at the ready to clean up squeeze-out. I like to use Titebond II for casing joinery because it is thinner than many other glues and has a good open time. Clam Clamps (miterclamp.com; \$60 to \$70 each, plus shipping) are my go-to for mitered casing joints because their multiple grab points lock the casing together in three dimensions, allowing me to move the glue-up as soon as it's assembled and make room on the table for the next. Pinch clamps just don't have the same grab and stability, especially not on wide casing. The process goes quickly—about seven minutes per casing. As each casing is completed, set it against its opening to dry out and fully cure, which takes about a day. Don't rush this; the joints should be completely set up prior to final sanding and fastening them in place. Assemble the casing on a large flat table or workbench. I have a handful of these lightweight torsion-box benchtops (an adaptation of Ron Paulk's bench) that sit on sawhorses. If I need a bigger work surface, it's easy to put two or more of them side by side.



1 **Don't starve.** Squeeze glue into the biscuit slot and onto the face of one side of the miter, insert a #20 biscuit, and smear the glue around with a finger. There should be plenty to coat the other workpiece.



2 **Assemble and clamp.** Starting at the head and going one at a time, assemble each joint flat on the bench, aligning the corners and pushing the miters tight by hand while tightening the clamp.



3 **Clean the joint.** After clamping a miter, use a clean, damp rag to remove the squeeze-out from the face and back of the joint and from the table. Rinse the rag in a bucket between joints.



4 **Brush the profiles.** Use a damp toothbrush to remove glue from the profile, wiping the brush clean on a damp rag frequently.



5 **Bottoms in.** Because the legs are already locked in, both of the bottom joints must be assembled at the same time. A few taps with a soft-faced hammer help with positioning.

CASING AND BACKBAND WORK TOGETHER

Rather than install and complete each casing one by one, I nail off the inside perimeter of each casing, then switch nails and fasten the outer perimeter. When that's done, I move on to the backbands, which wrap around the outside perimeter of the casing to add depth and hide the clamp marks. As with the casing, the backband stock is initially cut to rough lengths, usually 4 in. to 6 in. longer than needed. I cut all the left miters first, then the rights.



Miter backup. Apply circles of construction adhesive to the back corners of the casing, staying about $\frac{3}{4}$ in. away from the edges, to bolster the miters and provide extra holding power.

1



3

Nail inside. Use $\frac{1}{4}$ -in. 18-ga. finish nails to fasten the inside perimeter of the casing, starting at the head. Keep the nails 2 in. off the miters and spaced roughly 8 in. o.c.



4

Nail outside. Use 2-in. 18-ga. finish nails to fasten the outside edge of the casing. Place the nails so they'll be hidden by the backband, keeping them 4 in. to 5 in. off the miters and spaced roughly 12 in. o.c.



2

Head first. Use the crosshair reveals as guides to align the head of the casing first.



5

Mark the backband. Hold the backband stock against the casing, mark it in place, and label it.



6

Leave a hair. When cutting the backband, leave the lines. The tiny bit of extra length aids in getting the miters tight and ensures that the pieces aren't too short.



7

Start low. Start installing the backband at the bottom of the window. Before nailing each piece, apply a bead of wood glue to the backband where it abuts the casing.



8

Nail it off. Center the bottom backband on the casing, and nail through the bottom with 1 1/4-in. 18-ga. finish nails. Keep the nails 4 in. off the corners and spaced roughly 10 in. o.c. For the backband legs, don't nail them off entirely right away; leaving the tops of the legs free makes it easier to align the top miters. Buttress the backband miters with two nails into each as they're assembled, going up into the legs from the bottom and down into the legs from the head.



9

Work to the top. Install the backband legs next and the backband head last, cleaning up squeeze-out as you go. Apply glue to the miters before assembling each joint, line them up by hand, and hold them tight while nailing. After nailing the miters, drive the last nails into the top of the legs.

Final sanding. Use 150-grit sandpaper to flush up the joints, clean up the faces, and break the edges of the backband.



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