

Stripping

Tips to take
your wall from
paper to paint with
minimal damage

BY MIKE DiBLASI

In the 30 years I've been a professional painter, I've stripped a lot of wallpaper. The fundamental idea is to make it as easy as possible to remove so you don't damage the wall underneath. To do that, it helps to understand how wallpaper is made.

Wallpaper has two layers: facing and backing. The facing has the pattern, and can be made of vinyl, paper grasses, fabric—almost anything. No matter what the facing is, you need to get past it so you can get to the backing, which is held to the wall with water-soluble adhesive. Unless the paper was hung using the wrong glue or applied to an unprepared wall, the wallpaper paste should give up its grip after a good soak with water. Many folks are under the impression that you need to use a steamer to release the glue, but the reality is that only 1% of our work pulling off wallpaper requires a steamer—almost always because the walls were improperly prepared. I'll talk more about how we wet the glue later. First comes the prep.

Protect the house

Before any wallpaper removal starts, it's important to protect the house and



Wallpaper

its occupants' stuff from the dust that often comes from the removal process. We remove all of the furnishings from the space and cover the entire floor with Ram Board surface protection, using blue painter's tape at seams and around the perimeter. Once the floor is covered, we close off the workspace by taping plastic over doors or building temporary walls with plastic sheeting and support poles. If the floor is especially valuable or easily damaged, we coat the floor protection with water-based polyurethane, which adds to the board's water repellency and dries quickly with little odor. It can take a long time to cover the floor and build enclosures, so we include this work as part of any proposal and remind potential clients we're doing all we can to protect their house and belongings.

Just scratch the surface

The facing on vinyl wallpaper, owing to its tear resistance, usually pulls off as a single piece. Start at the top or bottom of a panel and try to lift a corner and begin the separation. If you can get the facing to split from the backing, continue to pull slowly and steadily. Unfortunately, the facing on paper wallpaper rarely comes off its backing as a single piece. Instead you have to sufficiently abrade or score it to create openings to access the backing. Zinsser has sold a tool in hardware and paint stores for decades exactly for this purpose—Paper Tiger—which has several spiky wheels that move in a random pattern as you roll it across the wallpaper. It works, but I don't like it because its spikes leave thousands of tiny holes in the drywall or plaster behind the paper. If the wall is being painted (instead of repapered), all those tiny holes will have to be repaired, which wastes a lot of time.

A faster and less-damaging way to get through the facing is to use a random-

PULL OFF THE FACING



TRY PEELING FIRST

Wallpaper is made up of two layers—a facing and a backing—and you need access to the backing because it's the layer that's glued to the wall. If you're lucky, the facing will separate easily with the help of a putty knife, so always start there before trying more involved methods.



SAND THE FACING

If the facing tears off in small pieces, you'll need to settle for leaving it in place and abrading it so that you can access the backing in order to wet and remove it. Sand the whole surface, using 36-grit paper in a sander connected to a vacuum, always wearing a respirator.



PLASTIC PREVENTS A MESS

After sanding, tape 3-mil plastic to the baseboard with high-humidity masking tape to catch and contain the wet, gluey wallpaper as it's removed. Fold over the untaped edge so the plastic holds any water that runs onto the floor. Leave the very top of the baseboard exposed so you can reach all the way to the bottom of the wallpaper.

GET AT THE GLUE

MAKE IT WET

The key to removing wallpaper is to wet the backing and not rush the process. Let nature's universal solvent do its work. If we can make a mess, we'll use a garden sprayer because it puts out a lot of water quickly. In finished spaces, we use an airless sprayer, which keeps the floor relatively dry.



WAIT FOR BUBBLES

You can tell when the water has done its job because the backing will start to bubble, usually about five to 15 minutes after you wet the surface. You can start scraping a few minutes after the first bubbles appear.



orbit sander. Good dust collection while sanding is a must, so we hook the sander to a dust-collecting vacuum and use filter bags and HEPA filters, and we also wear respirators because even with a good vacuum there's still a lot of dust in the air. On this project, we used a Festool ETS 125 with their Saphir 36-grit sandpaper. The sander is connected to a Festool CT 36 Dust Extractor. I also have a Bosch 3725DEVSN and a Fein Turbo II vac that work just as well.

Before tearing into the paper with the sander, it's important to know whether you're dealing with plaster or drywall underneath. If the wall is plaster, you can sand a little more aggressively, because the plaster surface is tougher than drywall's paper surface. If you're working over drywall, you need to go slow so you don't burn through the drywall's white-paper face. If you reach the drywall's brown-paper layer, you will have to repair and prime the surface before painting or repapering. Sometimes we'll dial back the power on the sander to avoid burning through.

Sanding the two walls in the stairway shown in the photos took about an hour. You can tell when you've sanded enough because you start to see the backing in spots. There's no need to remove the entire paper facing, you just want to get through the facing's protective coatings so the water can reach the backing and reactivate the paste.

SCRAPE TO GET STARTED

Use a 4-in. taping knife to start removing the paper. Plaster walls are somewhat wavy and the small knife is less likely to catch on the uneven surface. Once a few inches of paper are separated from the wall, pull gently on the lifted section. If the wall was properly prepared and the paste is completely wetted, the paper will pull off easily with only occasional scraping necessary.



RINSE AND REPEAT

After pulling the wallpaper panels from a section, wash the wall with warm water and a grout-scrubbing sponge. The sponge and water remove any remaining paste from the wall. Change the water about every 300 sq. ft., and finish rinsing each stripped section before wetting the next.



WORK IN SECTIONS

Once you've removed the paper and rinsed the wall, start over by wetting another three or four panels. Don't leave the wet paper during lunch or the glue can set up again and you'll have to wet it and wait again.

Improper prep

Occasionally we run into wallpaper that's been applied to the wall without sizing. Applied like paint or primer, sizing creates a slick surface that allows you to easily position the paper while you're hanging. It also makes it easy to remove the paper when it's time for a change. If the wall wasn't prepped correctly, wallpaper removal becomes much harder. When this happens with a plaster

wall, we can usually just sand all the way through the wallpaper to remove it, but if it's improperly prepared drywall, you will almost certainly damage the drywall's paper surface. You can fix damaged drywall by sealing the surface with a specialty primer (see "Toolbox," p. 43). Fortunately, the plaster walls in this early-20th-century farmhouse were in good repair, and properly prepared with primer and sizing.

The fact that the walls were in good repair brings up another point. Sometimes plaster walls are in such rough shape that the only thing that's holding them together is the wallpaper. You can often tell from bulges in the paper, but sometimes the plaster's poor condition isn't obvious. In an old house, you'll usually see some localized damage from leaks or broken pipes. Whether the damage is localized or widespread, I advise

PREP FOR A NEW FINISH

CLEAN UP RIGHT AWAY

Once you're finished pulling off the paper in the entire room, carefully roll up the plastic and wet paper. If you leave it there, someone will inevitably walk through the wet mess and get wallpaper paste on something in a neighboring room.



GIVE IT A GOOD LOOK

Using a bright raking light, look over the entire wall for damage and feel the surface to be sure there's no remaining wallpaper paste. Areas that feel rough or have a nonuniform sheen need to be rinsed again with clean water.



TEST THE WALL

When burnished with a rag dipped in denatured alcohol, water-based paint will rub off on the rag, meaning it's suitable for an acrylic-latex topcoat. Oil paint is unaffected by the burnishing test. If the paint is oil, we top-coat a small section as a test. If the test patch dries without sags or wrinkles, we paint without priming. If the patch wrinkles or sags, we prime with a hi-bond primer.

clients that we will have to make plaster repairs before we can prime and paint. If the damage is widespread, it may make more sense to put on another layer of wallpaper over the existing wallpaper instead of making extensive repairs.

Use hot water

When it comes time to wet the backing, we always use the hottest tap water we can get. If the paste is especially tough, we'll boil water

with an induction tea kettle. It's impossible to handle boiling water, so we pour it in roller pans and apply it with 9-in. rollers. There are chemicals sold to make wallpaper easier to remove—DIF from Zinsser is a common example. It works well, but I try to avoid it because it smells really bad and is not typically necessary with properly prepared walls.

Removing the wallpaper happens in sections. I wet the wall, wait five to 15 minutes, and then scrape off three or four panels (6 ft.

to 8 ft.) at a time. Once I've scraped off the paper, I rinse the wall with water.

Prep for a new wall covering

If we're going to repaper and the wall is in good shape, we re-size with whatever sizing the paper manufacturer requires. If we're going to paint, we need to determine if the underlying paint or primer will create adhesion problems with the new layer of paint, so we paint a small area using the planned



PATCH IT UP

Before painting, fix any damage to the wall with joint compound and spot-prime the repaired areas with a general-purpose primer, like Fresh Start from Benjamin Moore or Multi-Purpose Primer from Sherwin Williams.



MAKE REPAIRS CONSPICUOUS

It's easy to miss a spot when you're applying compound to walls coated with white primer. Adding some blue chalk to all-purpose joint compound highlights patched areas so they can be sanded smooth before painting or repapering.



GARDZ from Zinsser (about \$30 per gal.) is a special primer made for sealing damaged drywall before skim-coating or repairs. It works well for repairing the damage that comes from pulling wallpaper from improperly prepared drywall.

BONDING PRIMER can often solve adhesion problems from oil-based primers sometimes found under wallpaper. They are meant to stick to slick surfaces and are compatible with almost any water or oil-based topcoat.



TOOLBOX



At \$280, a SureFire **RECHARGEABLE HEADLAMP** may seem like an extravagance, but its perfectly even light, free of hot spots, makes it easy to search the wall for damage and to ensure all of the glue residue has been washed off. The Fenix rechargeable headlamp (above) has a hot spot in its beam, but at \$75, it's a more reasonably priced second favorite.

Skip the sponges in the home center's paint and decorating aisle. Instead, go to the tile section and buy a **SCRUBBING SPONGE** for grout. Its textured side is good for removing any remaining bits of paper, and it costs half as much as a wallpaper sponge.



topcoat as a test. If the test area ends up showing sags or wrinkles, we re-prime with a bonding primer and then paint with the chosen topcoat.

Removing wallpaper may not be fun—and the process may be more involved than you would expect—but it is satisfying. □

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