Home Upkeep: Painting Interiors

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Cooperative Extension Service
South Dakota State University
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Home Upkeep: Painting Interiors

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When it comes to painting, there may be only two kinds of people. Some will change the color of their living room walls nearly as easily as they change the pillows on the couch. The others have convinced themselves that interior wall painting is just too big a job—too many kinds of paints to choose from, let alone colors; too much work to prepare the surfaces. Sometimes even choosing between brushes and rollers stops them cold.

So, year after year, they put off repainting. That's hard treatment of the walls.

Painting walls is investment protection. The right paint, properly applied to a carefully prepared surface, is a barrier to decay. Your home is one of your biggest investments. Painting now saves repair later.

**First Steps**

Now if you're talked into painting some rooms, don't rush right into it. Look at the walls and answer these questions:

1. What is the type of surface you're going to paint? Wood? Metal? Masonry? Dry wall?
2. What is the condition of the surface? How ready is it for painting?
3. Are there any special requirements? Like mildew resistance? Child safety? Hard wear?
4. How much care will you give the wall after it's painted?
5. Do you need surface reflection to brighten a dark room?

Your answers will help determine which one of the many kinds of interior paints now on (and coming onto) the market you will select. Each paint has specific uses, characteristics, and qualities. With all the differences, however, they still fall into three basic types.

**A Primer on Paints**

Paint is a mixture of three substances: (1) solid pigments which contain the color; (2) a liquid vehicle or film former that bonds the pigment to the surface; and (3) a solvent that makes the paint easy to apply but then evaporates, leaving behind the color.

The three basic types of paints are (1) water base/latex, (2) alkyd, and (3) enamel (not a true paint).

**Water base/latex**

These paints may also be called vinyl or acrylic base, depending on the ingredients used. Water is the solvent. As it evaporates, the color remains.

**Advantages:**
- Easy to apply, no lap marks
- Fast drying
- Little odor and fumes
- Easy clean-up
- Easy touch-up
- Best for light-wear areas
- Non-flammable
- Any paint can be applied over it
- Non toxic

**Disadvantages:**
- One coat may not cover
- May have dull look
- Will rust many metals
- Some colors may yellow with age

**Use on:**
- Dry wall
- Plaster
- Masonry walls
- Most surfaces painted with flat oil or latex

**Alkyd**

Some solvent other than water, usually an oil-base blend, is used to suspend resins and pigment.

**Advantages:**
- Durable
- Scrubbable
- One-coat hiding power (higher pigment concentration)
- Richer, smoother finish
- Good for covering surface imperfections

**Disadvantages:**
- More difficult to apply
- Slight odor
- May darken over time
- Longer to dry

**Use on:**
- Wood, plywood
- Particle board, hardboard
- Any painted or wallpapered surface
- Areas susceptible to wear and dirt (kitchen, bathroom, woodworking)

**Enamels**

Enamels are made with a varnish or resin base and are not true paints. However, they are often mentioned as a type of paint.

**Advantages:**
- Tough, can withstand extensive cleaning
- Water resistant

**Disadvantages:**
- Require undercoat unless surface already has a finish

**Finishes**

As you select the color and correct paint for the surface, you will notice you have to make another choice: the finish of the paint. A number of finishes are available for both solvent and water thinned types. Select one appropriate to the surface use and appearance.

**Gloss** has a high shine, and is especially good for areas requiring frequent cleaning. The high propor-
tion of resins binds the ingredients together and helps them stick to the wall.

Semi gloss is not quite shiny, not quite flat. It has moderate durability.

Flat is low-glar. There is no shine. It doesn’t pick up reflections. It is appropriate for cracked or uneven surfaces. Finishes called eggshell, satin, sheen, or silk are all similar and are flat finishes.

Primer

Another choice you can make rather easily is whether or not you need a primer.

Primers help the finish coat grip the surface by sealing pores. Primers also bind loose, chalky, or powdery surfaces.

Primers can be either latex or solvent base. A latex primer works well on masonry which contains alkali that will destroy alkyd primers. Latex does not work well on raw wood. An alkyd primer can be used on raw wood, but not on wallboard as it will create a nap on the paper.

Surface Preparation

Paint will hide a lot of mistakes, but it can only be as good as the quality of the surface which it covers. On a flawless, clean surface a paint job will look great and last for years. On a flawed or improperly prepared surface, a paint job will surely fail, and sooner than you expected.

One of the most important steps in obtaining a professional and long lasting paint job is preparing the surface for the new coat of paint. About three fourths of all paint failures occur at this step.

Before painting:

(1) Scrape off peeling, flaking paint. Blend edges by sanding rough spots smooth. If moisture was the cause of the peeling or flaking, eliminate the moisture problem before repainting. Remove old wallpaper for a quality finished look.

(2) Clean loose material out of cracks and holes and fill with spackle, patching plaster, or other compound (Fig 1). Sand smooth and even with surrounding wall when dry. Fill any nail holes, prime nail heads with a rust inhibitor.

(3) Clean walls and woodwork. Remove grease and dirt with a grease cutting cleaning agent such as tri-sodium phosphate (TSP). For shiny, glossy, and greasy surfaces, use ½ to ½ cup TSP per gallon of water. Rinse well. Dry thoroughly.

TSP is not a brandname; it is a non-sudsing cleanser often sold in hardware and paint supply stores, lumber yards, and some grocery stores.

(4) Apply primer to newly repaired and cleaned surfaces before applying the topcoat. A primer may not always be necessary on all surfaces, but it aids in good topcoat adhesion and a smooth surface. Any repairs should be primed.

(5) Be prepared to ventilate the room while painting and for the time afterward that is specified on your paint can.

(6) Protect all surfaces you don’t want painted. Remove as much furniture as possible, cover the remaining pieces and the floor—paint strays to the oddest places. Loosen lighting fixtures and remove cover plates (Fig 2).

Tips for Special Walls

If you must paint over wallpaper, be sure it is firm and even. Metallic colors in the wallpaper will “bleed” through; don’t try to paint over them. When painting a light color over dark paper, first coat the paper with a mixture of one part wood alcohol to four parts shellac and allow to
Fig 2. Wrap up the room before you start painting or making repairs. It will save you a lot of grief and clean-up later.

dry. Then cover with two coats of latex type paint.

In painting **new** plaster, brick, or concrete, wait; allow about 3 months for the wall to "cure." If a white, powdery deposit has formed, wash it off and treat the area with an alkali-resistant primer. The porous, rough textured surface will need a coat of thin paint or primer, about 12 hours of drying time, and then a coat of full strength paint.

To paint **old** brick or concrete, scrub thoroughly with a detergent solution. After it is thoroughly dry, apply a masonry primer. Dab with the end of the bristles (you are "stipling") to make the paint penetrate the texture, then "lay off" with normal paint strokes for the finished coat.

**Paneling** should be roughened slightly with sandpaper for better adhesion. Then re-clean before applying paint.

The key to good paint adhesion is to prepare the best surface condition possible. This may mean scraping, sanding, scrubbing, rinsing, and/or priming. The actual painting is going to be a cinch when you get to it.

**Now It's Time to Paint**

Read the manufacturer's directions for paint mixing instructions. Most paints must be mixed well; however, others (enamels) should not be mixed.

If the paint needs mixing, have the paint dealer mix it by machine when purchasing the paint. There is no foolproof way to know how long dealer mixed paint can sit before it separates. If you paint within a week or 10 days, you should be safe.

Before painting, check the paint to see if it is well mixed. Stir with a paddle. Has the heavy pigment settled to the bottom?

If so, pour most of the liquid into another can. Stir the thick part until smooth. Do not stir in a circular motion; "roll" the paddle from the bottom of the can to the top. Add a little of the liquid you had poured off and "roll." Repeat until evenly mixed.

Thin only as a last resort if the paint "sags" as you apply it, if it is too thick and "globby," or if you just can't get the pigment stirred up. Thinning may change the color a little. Thin water base paints with water and solvent base paints with mineral spirits or thinner. Follow the manufacturer's instructions.

There are two primary methods for applying interior paint—brush and roller. Each has its advantages and techniques.

**Brush**

The brush ensures good contact for surfaces with pores, cracks, and crevices. It is especially good for primer coats, and it is flexible.

Painting from a brimful can is asking for trouble. Pour part of the well
Fig 3. Dip the brush no more than half the length of the bristles into the paint, slap the metal part of the brush against the rim to remove excess. Do not draw brush across the rim. You will need to apply very little pressure as you paint. Begin with the flat part of the brush close to the surface and increase the angle as you move the brush. Finish lightly into a painted section. Up-and-down strokes are less tiring than horizontal ones.

mixed paint into another bucket. The paint can is bound to get messy as paint collects in the groove that holds the lid. Find a nail and hammer and punch a couple of holes in the bottom of the groove. Most of the paint will return to the can from the groove, and the lid will cover the holes when you seal the can back up.

Dip the brush into the container to about a third or half the length of the bristles. Slap the sides of the bristles gently against the inside of the can; don't draw the brush across the rim or you will get clumpy bristles and a lot of paint in the groove.

Hold the brush comfortably near the base of the handle and exert light pressure with your fingertips. Unload the brush with sweeping, crescent shaped strokes in a small square area. Then finish-stroke all the same direction into the previously painted area (Fig 3).

Fig 4. Lining the pan with aluminum foil helps clean-up. Fill well of pan about half full, so that roller will be less than half submerged. Dip and roll on slope and dip and roll again to saturate roller evenly. Drips mean you have too much paint on the roller.

Fill the roller by rolling it slowly into the well (lower end) of the tray. Move it back and forth until well covered. Roll it back onto the ridges in the slanted upper portion of the tray and lightly roll back and forth to remove excess paint (Fig 4).

Paint a large "V" or "W" in a 2- to 3-foot-wide area of wall (Fig 5). Then roll crosswise to spread paint evenly, and finish with light up and down strokes. Do not move the roller too quickly because it will spray droplets of paint everywhere.

The new devices you’ve seen advertised are a variation of airless spray applicators. They are most frequently used for hard to reach surfaces such as shutters, louvered doors, wicker furniture, and screens. They can be used indoors, but require extra precautions to avoid spraying paint where you don’t want it.

Where to Start?

So where do you put the first splash of new color? The following sequence is commonly used.

(1) If woodwork and walls are to be painted different colors, do the woodwork first. Then apply a strip of paint around the edges of the woodwork, where wall and ceiling meet, and down wall corners.

(2) In a room, do the ceiling first. Use a ladder or long-handled roller. Always start in a corner and work down the width of the room. Paint as wide a strip as possible. With fast drying paints, each strip should be no wider than 2 feet.

(3) For walls, start in one corner. Right handed individuals prefer starting in the upper lefthand corner, and moving from ceiling to floor. (Left handed painters start in the righthand corner.)

(4) If walls are to be papered, paint woodwork first.

(5) If the same paint will be used on woodwork and walls, paint continuously across the room. There's no need to do woodwork first.

(6) Paint windows in this order: sash, frame, trim (Fig 6).

(7) When painting baseboards, start in the center and work to the corners.

Last Words

After the paint's on, the furniture moved back in, and you've had a chance to catch up on all your other work, are there any problems beginning to surface?

Peeling may be due to moisture, or a chalky, dusty surface when the paint was applied. Blistering can occur because the surface being painted was moist—due to high
Fig 5. Make an M or V, whichever strikes your fancy, in about a 3-ft square area to spread the heaviest part of the paint load evenly over the surface. Fill in with straight strokes without lifting roller from surface. You do not need to finish up with strokes all in one direction.

humidity when painting or incomplete drying of the first coat of paint. Blistering also happens when the surface is too warm at painting time. Wrinkling of paint—ridges and furrows—is often the result of applying a coat too thickly. If the surface is too cold the same problem may occur. Did you follow the manufacturer's guidelines for the best temperature to paint?

If you are inspired to paint a room "right now" and it's winter, go ahead. The only things that might stop you would be if you couldn't provide adequate ventilation or if insufficient insulation on the outside walls makes their interior surfaces too cold.

It's hard to believe that a thin coat of paint can be so tough a film that it will protect your interior walls for years to come. Yet, properly applied and cared for, it will do just that. It's an inexpensive way for you to protect your valuable home investment.

References


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