

Wiping Varnish

The Only Finish You'll Ever Need

Wipe it on for a low-luster look or brush it on for a higher sheen

BY MICHAEL PEKOVICH

For me, the ideal finish for handmade furniture is a silky smooth, low-luster finish that lets the beauty of the wood shine through. Over the years, I've tried countless products and techniques trying to achieve this look. Some required elbow grease and homemade concoctions. Some took weeks to apply. Some looked great at first only to fade over time.

Finally, I've found a finish that gives me the durability and flawless look I want along with easy application. The answer is wiping varnish. It's a versatile finish that is thin enough to wipe on, but dries hard even when applied in thicker coats. This allows me to build the finish quickly, then end with thin coats that give me just the look I want. My brand of choice is Waterlox, a tung-oil-based varnish. It builds quickly, levels well when brushed on, and adds a beautiful amber tone to the work.

In finishing, the technique is just as important as the product, and the directions on the back of the can just don't cut it. I'll share the simple steps I've discovered for fast, dependable results. I'll also show you how to apply wiping varnish for a high-luster look, suitable for high-style furniture.

Michael Pekovich is Fine Woodworking's art director.



Simple steps to a flawless finish

As opposed to oil finishes, which must go on in thin coats, wiping varnish lets you build the finish fast, level it, then continue with thin coats that dry quickly. One secret to a durable finish is to build to a little higher gloss than you're aiming for, then rub it out to a lower luster. This way you have a thick enough film for adequate protection with the sheen you want.

Step 1

FLOOD IT ON AND WIPE IT OFF

For this thin-film approach to work, careful surface prep is crucial to remove any mill marks, sanding scratches, or tearout. Be sure to sand to P320 grit, or higher for blotch-prone woods.

With that done, begin applying the finish by brushing on a liberal coat. The finish will penetrate the bare wood, so apply more finish to any areas that begin to look dry. After 10 minutes or so, wipe the entire surface dry.

On open-pored woods like oak, the soaked-in finish can sometimes seep back out of the pores for a few minutes. Wipe away these shiny damp spots; they're tough to remove later. Let this coat dry overnight.



A brush is fast. It allows you to apply a heavy coat evenly, and the bristles let you work into the corners. Any brush will do. Wipe away the excess finish, working in the direction of the grain.

Step 2

WIPE ON A COAT AND LEAVE IT

The second coat also will go on heavy, but this time you'll leave more of it behind. So now you should switch to a clean cotton cloth, as wiping is easier to control than brushing.

After coating the surface with circular strokes, wipe the finish gently in the direction of the grain, working to level it without wiping it off. Let it dry overnight.



Apply the finish with circular strokes. This helps to ensure an even coat (above). Smooth the finish with straight strokes (left). Follow the grain along the length of the workpiece for the smoothest application.

My favorite wiping varnish

When I proposed featuring Waterlox in this article, my editor asked how it stacks up to similar finishes.

To find out, I compared Waterlox Original and three other wipe-on finishes: Zar Tung Oil Wipe-on Finish, Sutherland Welles Ltd. Wiping Varnish, and Minwax Wipe-on Poly. I applied each finish to a cherry sample board using the

two methods in this article. I noted how fast each one built, how well it leveled, and how each finish toned the wood.

In the wipe-on test, each finish performed well. The Waterlox, Zar, and Sutherland Welles finishes built faster and created a darker tone than the Minwax. The Waterlox was darkest. The brush-on test showed similar results, but Waterlox leveled the best.



Step 3

LEVEL THE SURFACE

Once the first two coats have dried, there may be areas of raised grain or dust nibs, so it's important to smooth the surface. The easiest way is to apply a thin third coat of finish and wet-sand it with P400-grit paper. The result is a sealed, smooth starting point from which to begin applying the remaining coats. Wet-sanding lubricates the sandpaper and prevents clogging, allowing the paper to cut more aggressively while still leaving a fine scratch pattern. Let it dry overnight.



Wet-sand the third coat. Use a cloth to apply a third coat (above), then use folded sandpaper to work the wet finish with the grain (below). Afterward, use the cloth again to even out the still-damp finish, as you did in Step 2.



Any of these products will yield good results, but I'll stay with Waterlox. It builds quickly, levels well, and its darker tone complements the oak, cherry, and mahogany I typically work with. For lighter wood like maple that I wanted to keep light, I'd try Minwax Wipe-on Poly.

— M. P.



Step 4

ADD A FEW THIN COATS

With the foundation coats applied and the surface smoothed, continue building the finish in a series of thin coats that level easily and dry quickly enough to avoid dust nibs.

Again, start with a circular motion to apply the varnish. Then follow the grain with light strokes to even out the finish without completely wiping it off, and allow it to dry. Four to six of these light coats should build up enough finish to protect the wood without encasing it in a heavy film.



Work in a thin coat. Apply the finish in a circular motion, working it into the wood in a thin layer (left). Then wipe lightly with the grain (below). The thin coats should dry quickly enough to allow a couple of coats a day.



Step 5

RUB IT OUT WITH STEEL WOOL

For years, I applied wax with steel wool. Why not? It killed two birds with one stone, rubbing out and waxing the piece in one step. Trouble is, wax makes it hard to see the scratch pattern created by the steel wool, and it's easy to end up with an uneven sheen.

Rubbing out the surface first with steel wool alone lets you see what you're doing. Afterward, you can apply the wax with a cloth. For broad, flat surfaces, you can also wrap the 0000 steel wool around a cork-faced sanding block. Wipe the surface clean to check your progress. The finished result should be a dull, even sheen.



Create a wider pad. Start by unrolling the narrow pad and folding it into a square. Work every surface, being careful not to rub through the finish along the edges.



Cleanup is key. Pekovich uses compressed air to clear the corners of steel wool fragments and dust.

Step 6

WAX IS THE FINAL TOUCH

A coat of wax will protect against scuffing and bring out the shine. The solvents in wax can soften a fresh finish, so let the finish cure for a week or so before applying the wax. When wiping on wax, I dampen the cloth with mineral spirits first. It thins the wax and allows me to apply an even coat that's easier to buff when dry.



That's the spirit. Dampen the cloth with mineral spirits before charging the cloth with wax.



Work the wax into the wood. The mineral spirits will help the wax spread evenly and thinly (above). Then buff with a soft cloth (below). The surface should have a pleasing satin luster.



Want more protection, or a higher shine?

A higher luster requires a thicker layer of finish. Tabletops do, too. By the way, on open-pored woods like mahogany, you may also need to fill the grain first.

Seal and level the surface as in steps 1 to 3 of the low-luster finish. Then continue building the finish by brushing on heavier coats and letting them dry without wiping. Use an inexpensive foam brush for an even coat on flat surfaces and a rag for everything else. These slower-drying coats gather more dust nibs and need another round of leveling with fine sandpaper followed by steel wool to achieve an even scratch pattern.

For a satin finish, you could follow the steel wool with paste wax and buff. But for a higher polish, use a fine automotive polishing compound applied with a clean cotton cloth. It isn't strictly necessary to apply wax afterward; the luster is already nice. Still, it makes sense to apply wax to tabletops to add scuff resistance.

BUILD IT THICKER



A foam brush works fine. Apply the finish in slightly overlapping passes. Don't worry about small bubbles or brush strokes; the finish levels well as it dries.



Sand between coats. Use P600-grit paper wrapped around a cork-faced sanding block to remove any dust nibs and level the finish.

RUB IT OUT



Wet-sand to level the finish. The wood is sealed, so the water won't raise the grain. Use 600-grit paper. For curved parts, skip this step and go right to the steel wool.



Steel wool. Follow the sandpaper with 0000 steel wool. Dip it in water mixed with a few drops of liquid soap for an even scratch pattern. You can stop here for more protection with the same satin finish.

POLISH FOR A HIGHER GLOSS



Bring out the shine. The fine abrasives in commercial auto polishes offer a higher luster than steel wool. Squirt some polishing compound onto the surface and buff with a clean rag. Remove the residue with a clean cloth and apply wax.

