

DIY Guidelines

Part 1 – Preparing the Surface

The appearance of a finished surface depends more on smoothness than any other factor. Smoothness also plays a very important part in the durability or longevity of the coating, as a rough surface will have small sharp edges and thin spots in the coating that is applied to it. These spots will show a premature “burn-through” or wearing due to insufficient coating thickness, so it’s necessary to get the surface sanded smooth before any finish is applied.

Any wood that is to have a finish applied to it **must be sanded smooth**. This is a process that seems to be greatly misunderstood. We hear people saying “*I can’t sand my wood, too much will be lost*”. This is a common misconception. Yes, you will lose some wood thickness, but it is absolutely necessary. No, you won’t lose too much. Maybe you will need to re-glue a couple of thin plugs, but that’s easy. We do it all the time.

Equipment

Sandpaper is sandpaper. There are some brands that last longer than others, but don’t get hung up on this. All good boat and hardware stores carry decent brands. What you need are 3 different grits- 80 grit, 150 grit and 220 grit. Get plenty of each.

Power sanders are necessary. We like to use Porter Cable random orbit machines for the heavy sanding. Both Porter Cable and Ryobi make good machines for smaller areas and finer grit sanding. These brands cost a little more than cheap gear, but they last a LOT longer, and they do a far better job than cheap junk, and the operator doesn’t get as tired. Worth every penny.

The Process- Bare Wood

This is a brief article, and if our description doesn’t make enough sense, then go to your library and check out a stack of books. There are lots of good ones that take a lot of time to go into the basics, but relax- the important part is all right here.

Step One- Sand the wood COMPLETELY smooth

Start with 80 grit paper. Use the machines for everything you can, and hand sand the tight spots. Sand and feel the results with your bare hand as you go, and keep using the 80 grit until the wood is completely smooth with absolutely no high spots. Get rid of the dust with a small broom or an old paintbrush.

Step Two- Stains in the Wood

If your wood has black stains from weathering, now is the time to get busy with the teak cleaner. Use any good two-step teak cleaner to remove excess oil, stains or discoloration from weathering. For other wood types, use a mild one-step wood cleaner if required. Follow the manufacturer’s instructions carefully and fully rinse to remove all residue. Allow the wood to dry completely for a minimum of 24 hours.

Step Three- Resume the Sanding Program

After sanding with 80 grit, and whether or not teak cleaner is used, what you have now is smooth wood with small gouges in it from the 80 grit sanding. These must be smoothed out or they will show through the finish, and this is what the 150 grit is for. Simply repeat the sanding process using the finer grit, sanding and feeling with your hand as you go. You will notice a big difference, and the start of a silky smoothness.

Step Four- The Finish Pass

You probably guessed this one- sand everything again with the 220 grit. This is to reduce the gouges left by the 150 grit.

All sound like a lot of hard work? It’s really not. Matter of fact, it’s less work to get this done right, compared to dealing with premature coating failure. Proper sanding is not as hard as you think, and the results are very rewarding, not to mention absolutely necessary!

Previously Varnished Surfaces

One of the nice features of Bristol Finish is that it can be applied over existing finishes, saving you a lot of labor if what you have to start with is in decent condition. Of course, if what is there is badly deteriorated, it's got to go. If it's missing patches, it should go. You don't want the project looking all spotty in color.

Coating Removal

There are generally only two different coating removal situations that most boat owners face. The first is if your boat has been slathered with teak oil for years. If this is the case, go and get plenty of teak cleaner and get to work. No coating will stick to teak oil. If this has been done for many years, it may take a couple of passes with the cleaner, but it's fast and easy.

If there's old thick, failing varnish on the boat, it's got to be removed. The best way we've found to do this is with a heat gun and scrapers. This is the cleanest way we've found, and you avoid the toxic mess of paint remover.

In either case, after removing an old coating, then this is where you start with the sanding program that's described above.

Existing Coatings in Good Condition

Areas that have an existing finish on them generally need only a fine sanding with 220 grit paper, to remove any oxidation on the surface, and also any minor roughness.

Sand by hand using even pressure, and making sure that the sandpaper is changed frequently enough. Use a red ScotchBrite pad on any corners and sharp edges, to make sure that the coating is not removed all the way to the wood. Wipe away the dust frequently to make sure that all areas are evenly sanded and uniformly dull.

The Project Moves Along

After all of the sanding is done, get all of the dust and such off of the boat with brushes or brooms. Now you're ready to have a look at any potential problem areas that need to be addressed. These are described in the next article, DIY Guidelines Part 2.

These steps may sound like a lot of work and bother, but trust us- the old saying is completely true - proper and thorough preparation accounts for at least 90% of your success. These prep steps will pay off for many years to come, and make that beautiful finish stay that way for a long time!