Honing guides are not a one-size-fits-all affair. We examine the weaknesses and strengths of four popular models.

Understand Honing Guides

BY CHRISTOPHER SCHWARZ

With the exception of your two hands, there is no such thing as the perfect honing guide for every shape and size of woodworking tool.

Some guides are great for short tools. Some are great for chisels. Others excel at gripping odd-shaped tools. But none of the guides handle all the tools all the time.

During the last decade, I've taught a lot of people to sharpen chisels and plane irons, so I've gotten to use many of the student's honing guides. Some of these guides I've purchased for our shop at *Popular Woodworking*. Other guides haven't impressed me much.

The honing guides in this article are four models that I've found to be useful and commonly available. Now, I don't think you need to buy four honing guides to get your tools sharp. Depending on your work, you might need one or maybe two.

Many sizes and shapes. *Here are some of the tools I sharpened (or attempted to sharpen) with the four honing guides. From the left: plane irons for a block plane, spokeshave, bevel-up smoothing plane, bevel-down smoothing plane and shoulder plane. The chisels include: a dovetail, fishtail, Japanese, bevel-edge, skew and mortising tool.*

Or, perhaps if your hands are willing, you might not need any of these guides at all.

The Case for Guides

More often than not, I use a honing guide when sharpening. Though I can (and do) sharpen without them, I find them to be brilliant at providing repeatable and quick results. And when I teach sharpening, I like to show students how to use a guide. Many woodworkers sharpen infrequently and have difficulty training their hands to do what they want every single time.

I'm not hostile to hand-sharpening. If you like the process and your results, please don't change. But I also bristle when hand-sharpeners run down people who use guides. The act of sharpening already causes enough anxiety among woodworkers.

About the Dull Tools

Hand tools come in a wide variety of sizes and shapes, so I selected a broad range of shapes that have been both easy and difficult for me to secure in honing guides.

Some of the tools are common and are (usually) easy to secure in guides, such as 2"- and 2 1/4"-wide plane irons, a 1/2"-wide bevel-edge chisel and a 1"-wide Japanese chisel.

Other tools are tricky because of their shapes, such as a short spokeshave iron, a T-shaped shoulder-plane iron, a fishtail-shaped bench chisel and a skew chisel.

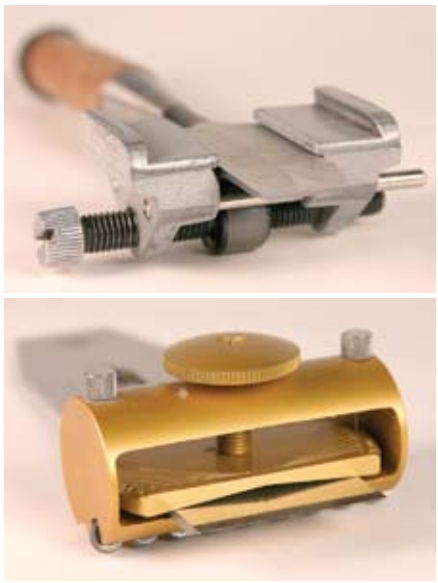
PHOTOS BY THE AUTHOR

Guidance on guides. *Some woodworkers have drawers that are filled with honing guides that have disappointed them. We explore four guides that we use in our shop and explain their pros and cons.*

Online EXTRAS

The gold-colored SharpSkate is the most unusual honing guide in the test. To see its inventor demonstrate it, go to:

popularwoodworking.com/feb08



From the sides or from above? *Honing guides can clamp the work from the sides of the tool (above) or from above and below (below). Neither tool-holding system is perfect.*

And I threw in one tool, a traditional English mortising chisel by Ray Iles, that gives almost all the honing guides a fit.

About the Guides

Honing guides have, in general, two ways of going about their job of holding the work. Some guides clamp a tool on its sides; the others clamp a tool from above and below.

Neither system is superior in all cases. The side-clamping guides excel at grabbing most common woodworking tools and holding them square, no matter how aggressively you work. But these jigs fail when trying to hold tools with an unusual shape or size.

The top-and-bottom clamping guides are best at holding the weird stuff that's thick, tapered or odd-shaped. These jigs aren't as good at holding the tool square as you work. The work can shift out of square, especially if you are removing a lot of metal or correcting an edge that isn't square – your finger pressure will force the tool to shift in the guide.

Let's take a look at each of the four guides and their weaknesses and strengths.

The Side-clamp Guide

When I started sharpening woodworking tools, the first guide I bought (and the one I still use the most) is the common-as-dirt side-clamp honing guide. This is sometimes called the Eclipse guide after the name of a popular English brand. The guide is rugged, common and inexpensive (less than $20).

It grabs wide tools (up to 3 1/4" wide) using the two lips at the top of the guide, and it is designed to clamp bevel-edge chisels (up to 2" wide) in the dovetailed channels below.

This guide is great if you don't have a lot of unusual tools. It's my first choice for clamping my 2"-wide smoothing plane irons, block plane irons and (as long as they aren't too narrow) most chisels.

The guide's narrow, 1/2"-wide roller gives you lots of control over the shape of your cutting edge. If you apply uniform pressure on the tool's bevel, your cutting edges will be straight. If you want a slightly curved cutting edge, you can shift your finger pressure exactly where you want to remove metal, and you'll end up with a cambered cutting edge for a smoothing plane or other bench plane.

Where this jig fails is with tools that have sides that are some other shape than a straight line. A fishtail-shaped chisel is a nightmare with this jig, as are skew chisels.

The tool also doesn't like thick chisels without bevels on the sides – such as mortising or firmer chisels. The chisel's thick flanks won't nest in the guide's dovetailed ways.

It also doesn't like narrow block-plane blades. Once a tool is skinnier than 1 3/8", then you can't (easily) grip it with the lips on the top of the guide. And good luck getting much of anything unusual into the dovetailed-shaped channel below. The guide doesn't like tools thicker than 3/16" down there.

You can fiddle with the jig to get it to hold most spokeshave blades, some shoulder plane irons and some scraper plane irons (which have to be honed at a high angle).

What else do you need to know about this guide? These jigs can be poorly made. I've seen more than 100 of these in my career, and I'm amazed at how some are perfect and others are covered in globs of paint. Use a triangular-shaped file to remove excess paint in the guide's dovetail channel. And keep the jig's wheel oiled. It's easy for the wheel to get clogged and stop turning. When that happens, you end up sharpening a flat spot on your wheel and the jig is worthless.

And finally, I recommend you always secure your work in this guide using a screwdriver. Hand pressure alone isn't enough to prevent your tools from slipping.

Richard Kell's No. 1 Honing Guide

Recently I've become enamored with this side-clamping jig because it handles some difficult tools with great aplomb. Plus, it's a beautifully made tool and rolls smoothly in use on its Ertalite TX low-friction wheels.

Richard Kell makes two versions of this guide. The No. 1, which handles tools up to 1 1/4" wide, and the No. 2, which handles tools up to 2 5/8". The large guide isn't ideal for shops that sharpen on 3"-wide sharpening stones. That's because when you clamp a wide plane iron into the large guide, the wheels are pushed out so far that it's difficult (or impossible) to keep the jig and iron on your stone. You could build a sort of platform around your stone (or you could sharpen with sandpaper stuck to glass), but building a platform is more work than is reasonable in my opinion.

The smaller Kell guide, however, is ideal for narrow and unusual tools, and it is the only tool that easily holds the Ray Iles mortising chisel. The secret to the jig is, I think,

Grab up here or down there. *The side-clamp guides hold wide tools with the lips on top of the guide. It holds the bevel-edge chisels (and some other tools) using the dovetail-shaped channel below.*

Good and straight. *The Kell jig is great for short tools that need straight edges, such as plow plane irons or this dovetail chisel. It's a versatile jib because you can also clamp things below the jig's guide bars, as shown.*

the plastic washers that do the actual clamping. These clear plastic washers are tough but grippy, so they can hold a tool that has a slight irregular shape, such as a handmade Japanese chisel.

The other brilliant part of the Kell jig is that you can clamp your work either above or below its stainless steel guide bars. That makes gripping unusual shoulder-plane irons and dovetail chisels an easy proposition.

So where are the warts? The small Kell won't clamp fishtail-shaped chisels or sharpen skew chisels. The small Kell guide also won't hold a standard spokeshave, smoothing-plane or block plane blade.

Also, it will not allow you to create a blade with a curved cutting edge. The jig forces your edges to be straight, like it or not. The upside to this is that if your only hand tools are chisels (or you have mortising chisels that give you sharpening fits), the Kell is an excellent choice.

One final note: I'm also quite fond of the way you secure tools in the Kell. Unlike the other side-clamping honing guide, you don't need a screwdriver to torque the Kell down. Here, finger pressure is enough.

Veritas Mk. II Honing Guide

The second honing guide I bought was actually Veritas's ancestor to this jig. I bought that older jig – which also clamped tools from above and below – to handle my odd-shaped tools. That jig served me well, but tools would shift around more than I liked.

This improved version of that older guide is more complex, but the changes added accuracy, versatility and clamping power.

The Veritas is the only jig that allows you to set the sharpening angle with an included blade-registration jig.

You select the angle you want to sharpen at, then set that angle on the included blade-registration jig. Clip the jig to the front of your guide then insert your tool between the jig's two clamping bars (up to $2\frac{7}{8}$" wide). The blade-registration guide sets the sharpening angle and holds the tool square while you clamp it in place using two thumbscrews. Then you remove the blade-registration jig and start sharpening.

It's remarkable what tools the Veritas will hold. With the exception of the Ray Iles mortising chisel, the Veritas grabbed every tool securely without complaint.

And it's amazing the wide range of sharpening angles the jig can be used to achieve. Because it is so adjustable, you can use it to sharpen weird angles (such as 20° back bevels on handplane irons) that advanced sharpeners sometimes require.

What are the downsides to the jig? They are minor. The base model from the factory will sharpen your tools straight across only. Making a curved edge with this jig is nigh on impossible without modifying the jig – thanks to the $2\frac{1}{8}$"-long straight roller. Veritas makes a Camber Roller Accessory ($19.50) that replaces your straight roller with one that has a slight cigar shape. That allows you to camber your cutting edges with finger pressure – just like the side-clamp honing guide.

Veritas also makes a Skew-registration Jig ($26.50) that allows you to set all sorts of oddly skewed tools in the honing guide.

Like all honing guides that clamp from above and below, there is always the slight chance that your tool will shift in the guide, especially if the tool is narrow, if you are working aggressively or if you are fixing an out-of-square cutting edge. And this is something to be careful of with the Veritas.

One way to help prevent this is to take care when securing your tools. The two thumbscrews that control the jig's clamping bar should be advanced so each one is applying the same amount of pressure. If one of the thumbscrews is doing most of the work, the tool is more likely to shift.

The other thing to watch for on this jig is the position of its roller. The jig allows you to tweak the roller down a couple degrees so you can create a secondary bevel on your tools. You need to remember to return this roller to its highest position when you are done sharpening, or you will introduce some minor errors to your tools that can add some sharpening time later on to fix. It's a minor point, but it is something to which to pay attention.

Pick an angle, any angle. *The Veritas Mk. II honing guide sets your sharpening angle with an included blade-registration jig. The clamping bars allow you to grip a variety of shapes.*

Supplies

Woodcraft
800-225-1153 or
woodcraft.com

- Side-clamp honing guide #03A21, $11.99

Tools for Working Wood
800-426-4613 or
toolsforworkingwood.com

- Richard Kell No. 1 honing guide #EE-HGRK, $56.86

Lee Valley Tools
800-871-8158 or
leevalley.com

- Veritas Mk. II honing guide #05M09.01, $54.50

JapaneseTools.com
877-692-3624 or
getsharper.com

- SharpSkate honing guide $149.95

Prices correct at time of publication.

The SharpSkate

The newest honing guide is the SharpSkate, which was developed by sharpening guru Harrelson Stanley of JapaneseTools.com. Like the Veritas, the SharpSkate clamps blades from above and below. But other than that, the SharpSkate is different than all the other honing guides in this article.

Every other honing guide that I've used pushes the tool's cutting edge forward and back on the stone, like a snowplow. The SharpSkate works the edge side to side, more like a rollerblade. The jig rolls on nine 3/8"-diameter steel wheels.

The SharpSkate's blade-clamping mechanism is also unusual. It's a serrated V-shaped clamping pad. The serrations grab your tools (up to 2 7/16" wide) and squares them in the jig. The V-shape of the pad allows you to flex the pad slightly to generate serious clamping pressure.

This pad also can be rotated to grip skew tools of any angle and has three detents (left and right) for common skew angles.

The SharpSkate is the only honing guide that could grip all the tools in the test well enough to hone them reliably and repeatedly, though its hold on the fishtail chisel and mortising chisel weren't ideal.

The advantage of sharpening side-to-side (as opposed to forward-and-back) is that you can easily sharpen on all points of your stone to spread out the wear and reduce your stone-flattening chores. It takes a little practice, but you'll be an expert in less than an hour.

Roll with it. *The SharpSkate hones your tools side-to-side, which allows you to work all the corners of your stones, even to work off the stone if you like.*

There are some quirks to the jig you should be aware of. I recommend you use a hex-head wrench to secure and release your blades. Hand pressure is not always enough to prevent the tool from shifting slightly.

Also, you need to watch where you put your finger pressure with the SharpSkate. One of the advantages of this jig is that you can use finger pressure to create a cambered cutting edge. But that finger pressure can work against you when you don't want to create a cambered or skewed shape to your cutting edge.

Speaking of cambers, one of the great advantages to the jig is you can hold small blades at a variety of angles. The downside comes when sharpening at really steep angles for smoothing planes in bevel-up tools. As you get into the really high angles (more than 40°), it's difficult to get your fingers where they need to be to create the camber with pressure.

Also, just as with the Veritas, you need to take care that the tool doesn't shift slightly out of square when working. Though the serrations on its clamping pad work well, you can still move the tool a bit when working aggressively or correcting an edge.

One final note: Be sure to keep the nine wheels clean. There's some potential for sharpening grit to accumulate near the wheels. A quick spray of water keeps everything tidy.

Conclusions

The jig or jigs you choose should match your set of tools today and what you might buy tomorrow. If you're a chisel-and-block-plane woodworker (and always will be), the side-clamping honing guide might be all you need.

The Kell is ideal for people with small-scale tools with straight edges, or it is an excellent second guide.

The Veritas is an excellent guide for beginning and advanced sharpeners because it allows you to hold a wide variety of tools and accurately set them at the right angle every time you pick up the jig.

The SharpSkate is also a good guide for people with tools of varied shapes. It might be the best guide for woodworkers who want to graduate to hand sharpening some day. The inventor rightly points out that his guide is a good set of training wheels for some kinds of hand sharpening.

For my work, I like having two guides. One that clamps tools on the sides so I can get a straight edge when I need it. And a second guide that clamps above and below so I can sharpen odd-shaped tools that I own now (and those I might own in the future). Exactly which guide or guides you purchase is up to your tools and your pocketbook. **PW**

Chris is the editor of Popular Woodworking *magazine and the author of the new book "Workbenches: From Design & Theory to Construction & Use" (Popular Woodworking Books). You can buy the book through his web site: lostartpress.com.*

Holding Power of Four Honing Guides

TOOL	VERITAS	SHARPSKATE	SIDE-CLAMP	NO. 1 KELL
Chisels				
1" Japanese	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
11/16" fishtail	OK	OK [4]	Poor	Poor
1/4" dovetail	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
1/2" bevel edge	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent
1/4" mortising	Poor [1]	OK [1]	Poor	Excellent
3/8" skew chisel	Excellent	Excellent	No	No
Plane irons				
2 1/4" bevel-up	Excellent	OK [2]	Excellent	No
2" bevel-down	Excellent	Excellent	Excellent	No
1 1/4" block plane	Excellent	Excellent	Poor [3]	Excellent
3/4" shoulder plane	Excellent	OK [4]	OK	Excellent
2 1/8" spokeshave	Excellent	Excellent	OK	No

Notes:

[1] Chisel repeatedly shifted out of square on tool's rounded surface.

[2] A steep position of tool in jig left little room for finger pressure for cambering edge.

[3] Iron had to be sharpened in chisel notch, which had a poor fit.

[4] Fit in guide with some fiddling.

The rise of power tools, safety razors and pencil sharpeners years ago took away the average person's need to develop sharpening skills. Woodworkers, too, have lost the connection between sharp tools and a simple, readily called upon skill.

In my experience, many woodworkers don't use good sharpening techniques and may not have ever seen a truly super-sharp edge. Not surprisingly, honing guides offer an appealing solution for woodworkers who have underdeveloped sharpening skills. It's a quicker fix than training one's hands how to hold a tool, and all the responsibility and blame can be laid at the doorstep to a mechanical device.

Because I own Tools for Working Wood, I have a vested interest in hawking woodworking tools and aids, but the truth is that for me, woodworking is about developing hand skills. Training hands to sharpen easily and reflexively gives you confidence and makes other woodworking skills easier to acquire and then master.

When people tell me they have tried freehand sharpening but the results weren't as good as using a jig, I always probe further and have generally found bad technique, insufficient practice, or folks not trusting their own abilities.

I was lucky. I was taught woodworking by Maurice Fraser. Typically in the first class, after a 40-minute demonstration and a 40-minute hands-on session, Fraser had a group of brand-new students (it was the first class, after all) sharpen a dull chisel to razor sharpness without much trouble.

To get good at it took practice, but after that first class it wasn't anything anyone thought twice about – except maybe to reread their notes and practice some more. You can read about the way he taught sharpening at www.antiquetools.com/sharp. And a few years ago I did a video on Fraser's method for Norton Abrasives.

Why? It seems the common feeling these days is that sharpening is something that needs years of practice and only "experts" can do it freehand.

This simply is not true.

Sharpening was something that you learned quickly as a first-day apprentice, or you found another line of work. Woodworking is about learning dexterity. Training your hands to sharpen is the first step in training your hands to cut straight, chisel to a line and (in general) to not drop tools on your toe.

I disagree with a lot of teachers in the field on the subject of honing guides – teachers whom I respect – so it bothers me that I disagree with them. A lot of them say if they show sharpening using a jig, students will get sharp tools right away. Students won't be discouraged and will be able to go on to building a project. Maybe there's some truth to this, but I think students would end up with sharp tools and the ability to progress if they were instructed that freehand sharpening is a basic skill they could easily master.

'When people tell me that they tried freehand sharpening but the results weren't as good as using a jig, I always probe further and have generally found bad technique, insufficient practice, or folks not trusting their own ability.'

Freehand sharpening the way we teach it is faster and more repeatable than using a guide because you don't have to continually build secondary bevels. You can trivially sharpen and also include a true micro-bevel that can easily be erased with each sharpening (which improves overall chisel performance, not just edge strength). And of course you can sharpen any tool, because the technique for one tool is the same for others.

You can also sharpen a lot of tools at the same time without having to run each one though all the stages before attaching the jig to a new tool. When I teach people good hand technique and they practice, most of them find the experience liberating. And with their newfound skills they're able to trust their hands for more and more complicated work earlier on in their training.

If you don't believe this is possible, take a look at some early woodworking and woodcarving books. Beginner projects were far more involved in days past, and honing guides weren't really on the market in the 19th century. And by the way, if anyone tells you that the people back then weren't as efficient at sharpening as we are now with some honing guide, tell them to look at the furniture made back then. I think the tools were plenty sharp enough.

We and many other tool dealers stock the short inexpensive DVDs that I mentioned above. There are two versions showing the same technique but with different technology. You can find links to them at popularwoodworking.com/feb08.

So here's my challenge: Drop by our new showroom in Brooklyn with a chisel. If I can't teach you to sharpen it properly by hand, I'll give you a free honing guide. (I do reserve the right to first grind the chisel to a nice hollow grind on a powered grinder.)

Hopefully you'll see that you don't need the guide. — JM

Joel is a woodworker, tool collector and the owner of toolsforworkingwood.com, which sells hand and power equipment (even honing guides).

The ultimate honing guide. *You can learn to sharpen your tools without the aid of jigs without too much practice or difficulty.*