

## Measure Twice, Cut Once: Life Lessons from the Shop

Measure Twice, Cut Once – September 2021

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Is there a better-known woodworking saying than “Measure Twice, Cut Once”? Even when lumber prices were not on a wild ride, this has always been good advice. A misplaced rip cut can often be patched invisibly, but wastes time. Other errors invariably lead to creative dynamic redesign or kindling.

Norm Abram’s 1996 book, *Measure Twice, Cut Once*” includes a chapter titled “Measure Twice, Cut Once, but Don’t Measure at All if You Can Avoid It.” Norm explains

*Never measure unless you have no choice. Instead, base your marking and cutting on the actual situation. For example, I would never measure an exterior wall for a piece of siding, then go off and measure a length, cut it, and bring it back to install. ... It’s the actual length that’s important, not the numerical symbols on my tape measure.*

What’s more, tape measures vary, repeated measurements of a single dimension vary, measurement errors accumulate, and we might goof transcribing any single measurement. Wood moves. Eyesight dims. There are countless reasons to double-check measurements or markings.

No one knows definitively where the phrase originated. The *Oxford Dictionary of Idioms* cites a “Russian proverb, ‘Measure seven times, cut once,’ originally referring to carpentry and needlework, meaning that care taken in preparation will prevent errors.” Elyse Bruce, in a 2014 blog post on [Historically Speaking](#), reports that “Numerous sources state that the adage is from Medieval times, and was used by carpentry guilds as much as by tailors, however, none provided proof to substantiate their claims. That being said, it was listed in books at the end of the 19th century as a Cheshire proverb that was used in 1688 as “*score twice before you cut once*” ... again without a reference as to where this information was found.” She goes on and points to the autobiography of the great Italian artisan Benvenuto Cellini (1500-1571), which used a variation of the Russian proverb.

This is wise advice at work, in the family, and in our social circles, too. Similar phrases like “look before you leap,” or “count to ten” may convey the value of caution before acting, but don’t measure up to **MTCO**. A 2012 [Psychology Today](#) article notes that “Measuring twice means making sure that one has thought of all the things that could go wrong before acting or making a decision.” How often have we seen someone at work skate out onto thin ice before looking into the facts. Or deviated from the normal process as a short cut, only to spend twice as much time when things go awry?

Have you received or sent an ill-considered, intemperate email or text? Or sent an otherwise appropriate email to the wrong person, with unfortunate consequences? What was required to mop up the ensuing mess?

In the era of Zoom, measuring twice might include double-checking to see if your microphone and camera are either on or off, as the occasion might require. I'd like to think that woodworkers, with our ingrained habits of planning and taking safety precautions, are more inclined than others to measure twice and cut once.