

Preparation is More than Half the Battle

Measure Twice, Cut Once – November, 2022

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This month's entry is not so much a well-known shop saying but a "truth universally acknowledged," namely that proper preparation is critical in many phases of a woodworking project. Stop me if you've heard this story before: today I went into the shop to start some stock preparation. Specifically, I planned to resaw some 8/4 walnut prior to gluing up a blank for a small tabletop. Previously I had selected some rough-sawn boards with coloration and grain patterns that look to be compatible, so that the resulting glued-up panel will be attractive.

A few days ago, having noticed that my jointer was not reliably producing edges at 90 degrees to the adjacent surface, I had painstakingly re-adjusted the recently replaced knives to now sit parallel to the outfeed table. The day before I dealt with some chronic clogging of the dust collection hose attached to my surface planer. Today, before starting to resaw, I installed a fresh wide blade in the bandsaw and did my best to tune up the tool. While removing the dull blade, I noticed the accumulation of dust so took a few more minutes to blow and vacuum.

So, in preparation for stock preparation, it was necessary to prepare the jointer, planer, and bandsaw, after having carefully selected the stock. **After several hours in the shop, I had yet to produce anything!** Except, of course, I have produced well-tuned machines ready for the next step. And this phase is not the only one demanding preparation, because eventually I'll conclude the production of parts, the joinery, assembly, and then prepare to prepare the surfaces so I can begin to finish. How many project hours could be classified as preparation?

In my professional career, I taught undergraduate and graduate business students about statistics – or in the more current lingo, business analytics. There is a canonical process for an investigation, and one step is referred to as a "data preparation." One defines a problem, specifies relevant data, collects or assembles the data, and then *prepares the data* before analyzing it. Data preparation is all about checking for suspected errors and for missing observations, reconciling differences in scale, eliminating redundancies, and dealing with other common issues by following accepted protocols. Typical diagrams or flowcharts of the entire process usually show the data prep stage as equal in size to the other steps, but practitioners know that cleaning up a dataset can require 60 to 80 percent of the total project time.

Successful gardeners know that a garden needs well-prepared soil, with proper and timely tilling, addition of organic material and other amendments according to the results of soil testing. Athletes and musicians prepare like crazy, exercising and practicing before their big events. Professionals in many walks of life pursue continuing education to remain current and to be prepared for ever-changing realities in their fields. Have you ever participated in a meeting where the agenda and presentations were poorly prepared, or speakers didn't do their homework? As a student, did you ever sit for an exam without having studied effectively?

Developing one's expertise as a woodworker involves acquiring habits around preparation. Speaking for myself, I know that I now devote much more time and attention to preparation than I did early on in my woodworking journey. My impulse to make something NOW has been tempered through experience, reading, Guild demos, and FIG meetings. Preparation frequently is a time-consuming process, and often we must prepare to prepare, but taking the necessary time is the best way I know to end up with a quality result.