

Exterior Painting & Staining Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist

Plumb Bob
Press



Tim Carter

Exterior Painting / Staining Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist

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Painting a house can be expensive. If you want it done right, you better make sure the contractor does it the way this Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist suggests! Preparation, as well as the paint, is an important component of proper house painting. Know what to ask when talking with prospective contractors.

Click on the titles to read these columns, contained right here in this document. At the end of each section, there is a link to more information available at the AsktheBuilder's web site.

But first, here are links to four exclusive Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist videos that will help you with Finding a Pro, Contracts, Payments and Change Orders.



Before



[Finding a Pro](#) is not always done on the Internet or using the phone book. Tim explains a better method.



After the bids are in and the contractor selected, what should be in the [contract](#)? Tim outlines eight items that must be in your contract.



[Payments](#) are important. When do you make them and how much? Tim explains three important concerns regarding your payments.



[Change Orders](#) can cost more than just additional money. They can delay the whole project. Discover what to do ahead of time.

Exterior Painting

[House Painting Tips](#) - House painting is done by thousands of homeowners each year. This exterior house painting chore can be rewarding if you do a few important things before you apply the paint.

[Paint or Stain the Exterior](#) - Paint or stain - which is better? For minimal home maintenance, either house paint or wood stain could be the choice. There are several things to consider in house painting. The good news is there are new exterior paints and stains that will last many years if applied correctly.

[Painting Tips](#) - Your painting results can look like a professional job if you use some pro techniques. Follow these tips to patch, caulk and complete painting prep work correctly for the key to your success!

[Exterior Painting Prep Tips](#) - Painting your home requires prep work. Proper cleaning, caulking and scraping are key to a superior paint job that will last for years. Here are some time saving tips to properly prep your house for painting.

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[Exterior Painting](#) - For more tips on painting, staining and types of paints, click on the link to the left and read more of the AsktheBuilder's columns.

House Plans & Planning

[Home Plans](#) - House plans with detailed interior and exterior elevations and exact specifications will help make your dream home become reality. Be specific with house floor plans, and make your plans reflect exactly what you want down to the smallest detail. Avoid problems by drawing up precise home plans before your new home construction begins.

[Building a New Home - Get Organized](#) - Building a new home requires hundreds of choices. Get organized by keeping all of your choices and plans for your new home building project in a binder so no decisions fall through the cracks. Blueprints and specifications along with this binder will keep track of the entire project. Select amenities for your new home at the start so that workmen can plan openings and utility adaptations to stay on schedule.

[Detailed Plans and Specifications Minimize Mistakes](#) - Detailed blueprints, plans and specifications will help you avoid being sued by a contractor. Keeping a detailed account of work each day, along with photos, will arm you with data should a problem with your contractor arise.

[Home Remodeling](#) - Remodeling and new home construction share a lot of common items. But they differ in one major area - remodeling is done in the house where you are living. Daily routines are altered. Certain areas of your house may be unavailable during remodeling. No kitchen or bathroom will be a real problem. Read these tips to help minimize your interruptions.

[House Plans](#) - Additional columns covering house plans can be found online in the House Plans section of Askthebuilder.com.

Payments

[Contract Payments](#) - Detailed contracts noting exact contractor and homeowner specifications and listing payment schedules help avoid payment disputes.

[Payment Suggestions](#) - Before payment or work begins, establish detailed contracts, building plans, payment dates, affidavits and helpful construction reports.

[When to Pay for Remodeling Plans](#) - Never pay all of the money due for remodeling plans before the plans are complete. Once you give cash in advance for incomplete work, you lose all of your leverage. Up-front payment has left tens of thousands of people disappointed when the person never finished the job after being paid.

[Payments](#) - Read other online columns regarding making payments during construction at the AsktheBuilder.com website.

The columns shown above are only a sampling of the columns available to help you. Check the [AsktheBuilder](http://AsktheBuilder.com) website for more information on this and all aspects of Home Improvement.

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Homeowner: _____

Contractor: _____

Address: _____

Address: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

City/State/Zip: _____

Phone: _____

Phone: _____

Email: _____

Email: _____

Contractor's License Number # (where applicable): _____

Project Location (Jobsite Address): _____

Date Bid Submitted: _____ Date of Plans & Specifications: _____

CHECKLIST

Do you intend to scrape all loose paint as a part of your preparation? Yes No

Do you intend to thoroughly wash (soap and water) and rinse all surfaces which are to be painted? Yes No

After you wash the existing surfaces, will you scrape any additional paint which was loosened by the washing process? Yes No

Describe the method you intend to employ to clean the existing surfaces.

If this is an older structure (built before 1965), there is a high likelihood that existing paint contains lead. If this condition exists on this house, what methods will you employ to control any lead dust or scrapings that contain lead from contaminating the air or soil around the house?

What cracks, if any, do you intend to caulk?

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If you have to work over existing roofing, what measures will you take to insure that the roofing is not damage by equipment or splattered with paint?

If you are painting over existing paint, does the finish paint manufacturer recommend the use of a bonding primer? Yes No

How many coats of paint do you intend to apply (not including the primer)? _____ Coats

Who is the manufacturer of the paint you intend to use? _____

Does this manufacturer offer a product warranty? Yes No

If yes, how long is the warranty? _____ year(s)

Painting aluminum siding requires special oil based primers. Latex or water based paints almost always contain ammonia. This ammonia can react with the oxidized aluminum and produce a gas which bubbles the finish. Do you intend to use a thinned (12 ounces of thinner per gallon) oil primer? Yes No

Painting in direct sunlight can cause water based paints to dry too rapidly. This prevents the paint from developing an adequate mechanical and chemical bond with the primer/substrate. What do you intend to do to insure that the paint dries as slow as possible?

Will you apply the finish paint according to the manufacturer's instructions and specifications? Yes No

Do you intend to use drop cloths to protect landscaping and paved areas? Yes No

Who will perform the work? Own employees Sub-contractor Combination

Will you remove all debris and empty paint cans from the jobsite? Yes No

Will you leave extra paint and color formulas behind for touch-up needs? Yes No

What is the length of your **(installer's)** warranty? _____ year(s)

Does it cover all labor and material? Yes No

Are you a member of the local Better Business Bureau? Yes No

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OPTIONAL ADDITIONAL NOTES

JOB COST BREAKDOWN

Materials	
Permit	
Demolition and Debris Removal	
All Necessary Materials	
Labor	
Total Labor	
Insurance	
Workman's Compensation	
Unemployment Tax	
Overhead	
Profit	
TOTAL JOB COST:	

PAYMENT SCHEDULE

Excessive advance or periodic payments before or during the work is completed often put a homeowner at risk. The homeowner basically become a lender. This is especially true if the job does not require any special or custom ordered materials at the beginning of the job. A fair payment schedule is one that allows the homeowner to pay only for labor and material that has been completed in a satisfactory manner. Periodic payments can occur every 3 - 4 days for small jobs or each week or month for large jobs. On large jobs, the amount of money paid out at any given time should not exceed the total sum of the items listed in the above cost breakdown plus a proportionate amount of contractors overhead and profit for completed in-place work. A homeowner should not have to pay full price for work that is unsatisfactory or incomplete

Do you agree with this philosophy? Yes No

If "Yes", please complete the Payment Schedule below:

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PAYMENT SCHEDULE

First Payment: _____% of Total Job Cost.

To be paid when the following work is complete:

Second Payment: _____% of Total Job Cost.

To be paid when the following work is complete:

Final Payment: _____% of Total Job Cost.

To be paid when all work is complete and satisfactory and all debris is removed from jobsite.

INSURANCE DOCUMENTATION

Contractor's Workman's Compensation Risk number or Private Policy number and Carrier number:

(PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF YOUR CURRENT STATE CERTIFICATE OR PRIVATE CARRIER CERTIFICATE)

Contractor's Liability Insurance Company and Policy number:

(PLEASE ATTACH A COPY OF CERTIFICATE OF INSURANCE)

ANTICIPATED STARTING DATE: _____

PROJECTED COMPLETION DATE: _____

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REFERENCES (List only jobs of similar scope and nature)

Job completed approximately 4 years ago:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Job completed approximately 2 years ago:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Job completed within the past 60 days:

Name: _____

Address: _____

Phone Number: _____

Bidding Contractor's Signature: _____

Date: _____

Optional Comments

End of Checklist

CONTRACTOR HIRING GUIDE & CHECKLIST HELPFUL HINTS

Thanks for purchasing one or more of my Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist products. I am quite sure you will be pleased with how they help you find a professional - or more importantly - allow you to quickly spot a scoundrel!

You will run into some resistance from contractors when they see the Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist(s). Some will reject it entirely. That is OK. Be patient and continue to call contractors until you find one who accepts the Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist at face value - a document that protects both you and the contractor.

USE TIPS

1. Insist that all questions be answered. Incomplete answers can lead to incomplete jobs.
2. Test the contractor's phone number on several occasions. Do you get a machine, voice mail or a human? Humans solve problems, not machines. Note response times. If it takes days to get a return call, this could spell trouble if you start a job with this type of person.
3. The cost breakdown is so important. It allows you to compare quotations quite easily. You can see why one quote is low and another is high. On larger projects, a blank space in the breakdown tells you an item has been forgotten!
4. Insurance coverage is mandatory. You want real copies with current dates to show that you will be covered if someone gets injured on your job. Remember that sub-contractors must have their own separate insurance coverage!
5. Start - Stop Dates will help you determine if the contractor is serious about your job. Ask about who will be working on your job and when they intend to show up. Ask about delays - what causes them and how long might they last.
6. References are critical. The key is to find ones from the different time periods. Ask the people different questions. The most recent reference can provide you with interesting data. For example, did the workers arrive when promised? If there was a delay, what was the problem? How long was the delay? Was the jobsite kept clean? Did anybody play loud music? What would the referral do differently if allowed to start the job over from the beginning?
7. Ask the referral from two years ago about warranty claims. Was repair work necessary? Were their severe problems? Was the contractor responsive? Were the defects fixed correctly the first time or were repeated attempts necessary?
8. The oldest referral has good information too. Ask how well the work has held up. Ask what they would do differently? Would they hire the contractor again, OR have they since found a different contractor who does better work? You might be surprised by their answers!

9. Contract Documents - Give serious consideration to attaching/referencing the Checklist as a part - or addendum - to your contract that you and the contractor sign. It can be used as a fact sheet/specifications describing what was promised by the contractor. Since I am not an attorney, I can't give legal advice. You may wish to consult with an attorney to see if your state law permits these kinds of attachments or addendums. I believe that virtually every state permits you to do this.

HOW TO REALLY FIND A PRO

Finding a reliable, competent and skilled builder or remodeling contractor that can do all of the work will take some time but it is by no means impossible. If you understand some of the basic principles by which these people work, the task is not as mystical as it may seem. Quality contractors are proud of their work. They want it to be perfect or nearly so and they do not want any call-back or warranty problems. To achieve trouble free results, they know that high quality materials are an integral part of each project. Real professionals know that problems are public relations nightmares and drain profits.

Knowing this, you start your search for contractors by visiting the businesses that supply quality materials to these individuals. You might be surprised to find out that these businesses are often places that you have never heard of. In your instance, open the Yellow Pages and look under the heading Paint Supplies. Many of the listings under this heading will be businesses that cater primarily to contractors and not consumers like you. Visit two or three of these places if possible. Try to do this in the middle of the morning or the mid-afternoon. Never go early in the morning, at lunch or the end of the business day. These are busy times when contractors are picking up supplies.

Once there, ask to speak with the manager or possibly the owner. Briefly describe your job to this person. Ask for a customer who has been buying for 15 or more years, one that routinely buys the highest quality materials, and who pays his monthly bill on time. If the business manager obliges you, you will have a list of high quality candidates. The final question to ask, if possible, would be names of contractors that this person would use to work on his or her own home.

If the manager will not release names, then go to Plan B. Do a stakeout of the business in the early morning and get business cards from the contractors who are buying supplies. Look for ones who are driving well kept vehicles that project a look of professionalism. You will still need to do more detective work, but your chances of hiring a pro are quite good.

Thanks again for your purchase. Don't hesitate to email me if I can help you in any way. Simply go to my website - AsktheBuilder.com - and look for the [Ask Tim](#) icon on the home page.

[Click here for other Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklists](#) available from AsktheBuilder.com.

Best regards!

Tim Carter - AsktheBuilder.com

HOME PLANS

Home plans are the core documents that communicate what the home owner wants and what the builder needs to build. Without great house plans, a new home construction project can quickly become a sea of confusion, frustration and arguments. Many people think that house plans are just pretty pictures and floor plans, but believe me, they serve a far more important purpose.

Can you remember the last time you were involved in a dispute over anything? Chances are you prevailed if you had some form of tangible written evidence, photograph or object that proved your statements were true. But all too often people argue about spoken words that frequently turn into broken promises, simple misunderstandings, or worse yet - deception. This misery takes place everyday in the residential building arena. Homeowners get into heated disputes with builders and remodelers about any number of issues.

The sad fact is a vast majority of new home construction disputes can be settled quickly and efficiently with crisp plans and specifications that are developed long before the first spade of soil is turned at the jobsite. There are many reasons why good plans and specifications never get developed. Often the customer is unwilling to pay for the time and effort to produce the documents. Another common reason is the homeowner looks at a set of blueprints and thinks they are sufficient. Without ever seeing a first-class set of prints I can see why they might feel a deficient set will make do. After all, if they are good enough for the building department then they must be good enough for all involved.

Perhaps a few examples of dispute issues might convince you that you need top drawer plans and specifications for your new home. Imagine if you will a discussion between you and your builder about crown molding. You say you want it in all downstairs rooms. The builder agrees and draws one simple squiggly line on the plans in the cross section and adds "Crown Molding" with an arrow pointing to the line.

Months later while walking through the house as the finish work is being completed you see a small and simplistic paint-grade crown molding that is barely noticeable up in several rooms. You grumble and wonder why the carpenter didn't install the two piece stained oak crown molding you "thought" you mentioned to the builder.

As you walk into the bathrooms upstairs you shake your head and wonder who in the world put the toilet paper holder on the opposite wall from the toilet. It is barely reachable. Fortunately the carpenter who installed it walks in and you ask about the placement of this fixture. He simply states that is where he always put them. Need I go on?

The failure to develop good specifications and plans can also lead to cost overruns and a limited product selection for your finishes. A great set of plans includes numerous interior elevations that show you in two dimensions what a wall will look like when it is finished. These elevations can be as detailed so as to show exact locations of electrical outlets, switches and yes, toilet paper holders. New computer software allows architects and designers to show these in three dimensions as well.

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Knowing what you are going to see before it happens can often prevent costly change orders. Many people are unable to visualize what something might look like looking at a simple floor plan. Elevations help solve this problem.

Plans and specifications that do not include the actual selections of all fixtures, cabinets, tops etc. can cause you problems if you try to decide what you want during construction. A builder may ask you to go to the tile store 6 weeks before he needs the tile. But once there you fall in love with a special order tile that take 10 weeks to get. Who will pay for the time delay should you decide to order the special tile?

There are hundreds of scenarios that can be described. But one thing is for sure: Detailed plans with clear and precise specifications that outline each and everything you want will save you if push comes to shove. Time and again when I consult in the forensic construction expert work I perform I find that a great set of plans that were ignored by a builder or sub leads to their capitulation if the dispute is headed for a courtroom.

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BUILDING A NEW HOME - GET ORGANIZED

DEAR TIM: My husband and I are getting ready to build a new home. I am astonished at all of the details that need to be addressed. Each time we have a meeting with our builder all sorts of decisions need to be made. I am afraid that lots of information is going to fall through the cracks before the final walk through. What is a good way to keep track of all of this information? Julie J., Stillwater, MN

DEAR JULIE: Many people decide not to build a new home for this very reason! They are overwhelmed with the decision and product selection process and simply don't know where to start. Many people are afraid of making the wrong decision. The key is to approach the task in an orderly manner and start making product selections and decisions long before ground is broken.

The building and remodeling playing field is actually a minefield. Making decisions out of order or selecting a product without checking for conflicts with other products can trigger an explosion of extra costs and delays. Once upon a time a client of mine picked two elegant wall light fixtures that hung on each side of a bathroom medicine cabinet. Once they were installed I quickly discovered they prevented the medicine cabinet from opening. Because the homeowner had fallen in love with the fixtures, the problem was solved by relocating the electrical boxes. It was a costly mistake that I paid for.

You can avoid nightmares like mine with a simple job organizational binder. This is a nifty tool that works alongside your blueprints and any written specifications. I have found that the binder works best when it contains a section for each room of the house as well as a separate section for the exterior. Typical things you would find in each section would be photographs or illustrations of fixtures, installation instructions for appliances, fixtures or products, technical information showing supply pipe sizes, wire sizes, and the proper rough-in locations of these utilities.

Each section of the binder should also have a room finish schedule. This is a table that communicates to the builder and his subcontractors exactly what you want on every wall, floor ceiling, trim, door surface in each room. If the data in these schedules is accurate it is entirely possible for the workers to finish the job with little or no verbal communication.

You will need more than one binder for the job. At the very minimum you need three: one for you, one for the builder and one that is safely stowed in a lockbox at the job site. The subcontractors need the job site binder to refer to as they work each day. Use clear plastic pocket protectors to keep the individual pieces of paper safe from wet job site conditions.

Creating a complete organizational binder means that you need to make product selections before construction begins. This may seem unusual but you might as well resign yourself to it. There are numerous advantages. Pressure decisions are eliminated. Because it is early in the process, you have time to get items that might have to be special ordered. Waiting until the last minute to make selections often eliminates certain items because the job may have to grind to a halt for weeks or months.

Carpenters, plumbers and electricians need to know what they are installing three or four months from now so they get openings, pipes and wires in the correct spots. Every time I have tried to use

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ESP because I was trying to guess what a customer would want, I guessed wrong. Providing your builder with the correct information simply takes the guesswork out of the process.

If you really want your job to run smoothly you and your builder need to look at all of your selections and insure that there are no conflicts. Imagine your dismay when you discover that the electrical outlet for your night stand is behind your bed. Similar frustration happens when a central vacuum outlet becomes hidden behind a door that is always open. Pesky mistakes like this can be avoided with a little thought and attention to detail.

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DETAILED PLANS AND SPECIFICATIONS MINIMIZE MISTAKES

DEAR TIM: Recently, I received a summons to appear in civil court. The contractor who walked off my job is suing me for the remainder of the unpaid money stated in the contract. Because he avoided repeated calls and letters, I hired other workers to finish the job. What do you think is the best evidence I can produce to prove to the court system that I was a victim? In my opinion he deserves no money. Sue D., Sedona, AZ

DEAR SUE: Let me begin by telling you that I am not an attorney and can offer no legal advice. I can tell you, based upon my many years of being involved in differences of opinion with homeowners, what has saved me from having to work for free. The items that eventually become supporting evidence can be a thorn in one's side as the job progresses, but they are worth their weight in gold if a dispute arises at a later date. Hopefully you have many of the following things.

Perhaps the most powerful weapon a homeowner can possess when the going gets rough is an excellent set of plans and specifications. All too often standard plans have far too little detail. Too much is left to interpretation. For example, if the plans say you are to get crown molding does this mean a small thin piece of molding or a large combination crown molding? Detailed plans and specifications make these issues black and white not various shades of gray.

Almost every job requires multiple face to face meetings where many issues are discussed. It can be hard to take notes during these meetings, but this written record of the discussions can help jog the memory of a participant when the wrong light fixtures or floor tile are delivered or installed. These notes become iron clad if you write a letter summarizing the key points and send a copy to all who participated in the meeting. To make the notes armor plated, consider including a sentence stating that if a participant disagrees with anything in the letter they must respond in writing in a timely manner.

Photograph or video tape the progression of the job. Be sure to use a camera that can burn the date onto the image. Take many photographs, including close up photos, of things that will be hidden at a later date. Photos of structural connections where things are nailed or bolted together are often critical. Try to photograph concrete forms just before the concrete is poured. Imagine how difficult it is to guess the thickness of a concrete slab without doing destructive testing or using an expensive diagnostic device. A 35 cent photograph may come to your rescue.

A detailed diary of the events that happened each day can be very helpful. Long delays or periods of time when no one showed up to work are cast in stone with written daily notes kept in a journal. It is very hard to reconstruct events if they are taken from memories that are six or nine months old. Write down who showed up and what was accomplished. Photographs can be added to the diary that show daily progress.

In certain instances, weather data may help support your arguments. If you are not a trained meteorologist, data that you keep may not be considered accurate or true. Fortunately you can obtain vast amounts of weather data at little or no cost from your local National Weather Service office. They keep hourly logs of temperature, humidity, precipitation etc. On more than one occasion this precise data has won a court case for me.

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Almost all jobs have changes as the work progresses. These change orders must always be in writing. In addition to the description of what is changing and the cost of the change, each change order must contain a section that states how much extra time the change will add or detract from the job. You can see the value of this added feature when it is used in conjunction with the start and completion dates that are contained in the original contract.

Finally, if all communications break down, then all contact with the contractor must be in writing. All letters must be sent certified mail with a signed receipt request. You want to be able to prove that you tried your best to keep the lines of communication open at all times.

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CONTRACT PAYMENTS

DEAR TIM: You and other people constantly write about how homeowners need to protect themselves from contractors who take their money and perform shoddy work or no work and disappear. What about homeowners who don't pay for work? I have had several customers who nit pick a job to death and withhold tens of thousands of dollars until several small items are completed. I have bills to pay just like everyone else. What is a fair way to solve money problems between homeowners and contractors? Robin S., Kansas City, MO

DEAR ROBIN: Touche! Years ago, I was in a similar situation. I am convinced that hundreds and thousands of homeowners torment contractors for all sorts of reasons. Some of them are legitimate while others are based on past bitter experiences, lack of goodwill, and distrust of contractors as a whole. Unfortunately, there is a small group of very bad homeowners who simply wish to cheat contractors out of money just as there are deceitful contractors who abscond with hard earned homeowner dollars.

When I perform autopsies on these problems, I typically discover a common flaw. The contract between the parties is very vague about the payment terms and conditions. In some instances, wording allows contractors to get too much money in advance. In other instances, homeowners advance money to contractors in a spirit of good faith. Unless these homeowners are working with a contractor who has the highest level of professionalism and honor, the advancement of money before certain things are complete can be a recipe for disaster. The incentive to continue to work at the highest level of efficiency and quality has been removed once the money has been paid.

Contractors routinely present contracts to homeowners that contain loopholes. Imagine language that states, "Payment is due upon completion of work." Well, if I were a homeowner, I could feel justified in holding back the monies if the job were not completely finished. Imagine the nightmare of a job where \$100.00 worth of exterior work can't be completed until the spring thaw yet \$80,000.00 or more is due upon the total completion of the job. If both parties agree to the terms of a contract, then I maintain that they should abide by what the contract states.

There are countless ways to solve payment problems. Several have worked well for me no matter how large or how small a job might be. One element missing in almost every contract I have seen is a tiebreaker clause. It is wise for the parties to agree up front on an independent inspector who is willing to give a ruling as to the quality and completeness of work. In the event of a dispute between the parties, the inspector issues a written ruling that goes one way or the other.

I have found that it is very effective to state that progress payments are made on given dates for the work that is in place and completed to the satisfaction of the homeowner and/or independent inspector. A job cost breakdown that assigns a fair and real number to each aspect of a job is invaluable for this to happen in a fair way for both parties.

The homeowner has a given amount of time to make the payment after the bill is produced. Since the homeowner knows when monies are due, all inspections would have to be scheduled in advance. This allows the homeowner to feel confident the work is satisfactory as he writes the check to meet the deadline. The contract could contain language allowing the contractor to pull off the job if the

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money is not paid on time. No contractor really wants to do this for any number of reasons, but it limits the amount of financial exposure to a fixed sum of money. It also gives the contractor some leverage as very few homeowners want their job to be at a standstill.

Set standards in the contract, if possible and reasonable, with respect to work meeting the building code or more importantly set forth manufacturers' specifications. A benchmark of quality must also be established or you may never meet certain homeowner's expectations. The independent inspector may come into play in this event as well.

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PAYMENT SUGGESTIONS

DEAR TIM: My house was severely damaged by a natural disaster. My husband and I hired a contractor who was referred by a friend and whose state license is in good standing. We visited other smaller jobs to review his work. We signed a contract with him to perform \$250,000 in repairs. He has taken all of our money and only 1/3 of the work is complete, much of it against code. What should we have done to avoid this nightmare? J.C.

DEAR J. C.: After reviewing all of the details of your story, I can see that this person was a con artist from the start. All of the facts that you have presented indicate that this individual was not capable of performing a job of your scope. Furthermore, it appears that he had every intention of stealing your money. He has no honor and makes life miserable for all honest, stable, and trustworthy contractors.

Some state laws permit contractors to ask for and accept deposit money the day the contract is signed. In many cases, deposit money forwarded by a homeowner to a contractor is nothing more than a loan. You put yourself and your money at great risk if you advance money to a contractor for no good reason. Some contractors use deposit money to pay the bills of other jobs currently in progress. This business practice is often referred to as under-capitalization. In other words, their financial gas tank is running near empty.

Contractors deserve advance money in certain instances. For example, they may have to order custom non-returnable objects such as kitchen cabinets or custom windows or doors. A build/design firm may want the cost of the design work and the building permit covered as these items can only be used on your job. Design and planning costs can be negotiated during the bidding process. Costs for custom materials can be verified by asking for copies of the quotes from suppliers. Honest contractors generally will not hesitate to provide you with these numbers.

I also noticed that you allowed the contractor to begin work without finished, detailed plans that were approved by your local building department. This was a critical error on your part. It is vitally important to have finished plans and specifications BEFORE the contract is signed. The plans should be an integral part of the contract documents. An investment of \$250 or so with an attorney to review your contract would have been very prudent. The contract could have contained language telling the contractor that all work must be performed in accordance to the plans and specifications.

Payments of additional monies as the work progresses must be tied to specific progress points. You can agree to pay weekly or monthly for work that is complete and satisfactory. To aid you in determining what is a fair price to pay at each of these times, a detailed cost breakdown of the job costs is required. Had you obtained this breakdown of costs on your job, the money to pay for the yet unfinished work would still be in your possession.

I suggest that you contact your local building department as well. Often these agencies provide written progress reports during construction. These reports tell you whether or not the work is being completed in accordance with the building code laws. Make the contractor submit these reports, if they are available, at each request for payment.

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In addition, be sure you receive notarized affidavits from each person who has worked on your property or material supplier who has delivered materials. If your contractor has not yet paid these people, your nightmare is just beginning.

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WHEN TO PAY FOR REMODELING PLANS

DEAR TIM: My husband and I are remodeling our home to accommodate for our new arrival. We've been working with an architect who is not fully licensed at this time. This individual has been drawing up plans for our new project. The plans are not yet signed and sealed as he wants to send them to a licensed architect to have this done. But he wants us to pay the full amount of the plans prior to getting them signed and sealed. We're not sure if we should pay for the plans until everything is finalized. Please let me know if we should pay for them up-front or if we should wait until the plans are completely done. Julie S., Orlando, FL

DEAR JULIE: Congratulations on the expanding family! The answer is very simple if you ask me. I feel you should never pay in full for something until such time as you are completely satisfied. The fact that the unlicensed architect-to-be asked for the money before the job is complete is very troubling to me.

There are all sorts of reasons you should not pay in full until the job is complete. The money in your account is the only leverage you possess. The instant you hand over all of the money for the plans, you then rely on integrity, hope and good will to get what you want. This individual may have all of these qualities and more, but I do know he does not yet possess good business sense.

I can produce countless examples in the real world where you do not pay for things in advance in-full before you get them. There are many things where you do put down a deposit and possibly make timed payments as the work progresses, but to pay in full before delivery is a recipe for disaster.

Here is a true story that just happened to the son of a close friend. This young man wants to become a commercial pilot. He signed up for flying lessons and all the necessary ground school training to get the commercial license. The cost was staggering - somewhere above \$15,000. My friend co-signed a loan for his son with a bank, took the funds and paid the flight school for the flying lessons and schooling. They did this in advance to get a slightly reduced price. A month ago the flight school went bankrupt and the son only had 10 percent of his training complete.

The son and father still owe the money to the bank and they have virtually nothing to show for it. A similar thing could happen to you. This unlicensed architect may have made an enormous amount of mistakes in your plans. It could take many hours of redrawing to correct them. Once he has the money, he may be reluctant to make the changes in a timely manner. One thing we know for sure is that his incentive to do so will be greatly reduced. In fact, he will find that the additional work will create a large mental obstacle as he feels he is not getting any money to correct his mistakes should they exist.

At this point in time, you have enormous leverage. The plans he has been working on are of no value to anyone but you and your husband. No other homeowner would have interest in them as they are house-specific remodeling plans.

You simply tell this person that you are more than willing to write a check for 90 percent of the total due once the plans are signed and sealed by a real licensed architect. You then tell the architect-to-be that the remaining 10 percent of the money will be paid as soon as the building permit

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is issued. Keep in mind that the building department may request minor changes in the plans before a permit is issued. You still want to have some financial leverage in the event this happens.

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HOME REMODELING

25 Things You Must Know If You're Remodeling

Remodeling is as different from building a new home as night from day. When you visit your new home construction site, you can look around and then go home. You don't have to deal with the workers and the mess.

Remodeling is the exact opposite. Your normal routine is rocked to its core. Strangers, whom you have never seen, invade your home. The excitement of the job starting soon wears off and becomes a dull headache.

If the remodeling job is a major one, such as kitchen remodeling, or bathroom remodeling or even a room addition, the impact on your life will be significant. Many people are not prepared for the disruption, dust, and missed deadlines.

To make a remodel job go smoothly, it requires enormous amounts of planning. Be sure to convey your bathroom remodeling ideas or basement remodeling concerns or whatever room you are doing to your contractor at the beginning of the remodeling projects. The remodeling contractor is responsible for this, but you must make sure he or she has covered all of the bases. In my opinion, you can only do this if you have a clear understanding of all of the things that can go wrong during the remodeling process. With this knowledge, you can already have a strategy in place to eliminate problems before they happen.

Asbestos and Lead

Harmful basic chemical elements lurk like hidden time bombs in many existing homes. Two of the most prominent are asbestos and lead. Asbestos was commonly used in insulation pads that sat on top of furnaces and was used in wrapping materials around forced-air heating and cooling ducts.

Asbestos was also used in floor tiles, roofing, piping, adhesives, etc. In other words, it can be found just about everywhere. You need to make sure you identify potential trouble areas in your home and make sure your contractor deals with the danger in an approved manner during the asbestos removal.

Lead is a very serious hazard that can be found in many homes built prior to 1978. If your remodeling job involves scraping, sanding or removing anything that might contain lead paint, you better make sure all precautions are taken so your home does not become listed as a Superfund site. Lead poisoning is a possibility if not handled properly.

Bid Breakdowns

When you are soliciting bids from different contractors for your upcoming remodeling project, it is imperative that they submit detailed itemized bids. You need to know how much money is allocated for the labor and material for each part of the job.

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This information will be used by you to why the low bidder is low and why the high bidder is high. If there is an enormous amount of disparity between contractors when you compare the cost of the same task, this is an area that needs further discussion. For example, if you are getting a new roof put on and painting done and you have specified the exact shingle you want, then the actual itemized number for the shingles should be within \$50 or so of one another as both contractors should have calculated the same number of shingles.

The breakdown will also be an invaluable tool when you need to make payments. When a payment is requested, it becomes your job to view the work that is complete and ensure it is satisfactory. Refer to the initial bid breakdown and make sure to only pay for that amount of work along with a pro rata portion of contractor overhead and profit.

Customizing Touches

One of the most fulfilling things, I experienced as a remodeling contractor, was doing extra special things for customers. Creating special nooks or crannies, delightful custom window seats, maybe it was a special set of steps leading from a deck to a patio.

If you start to gather photographs from magazines and even the Internet that depict things you especially like, an experienced carpenter, painter or other trades person might be able to create it for you with very little extra work.

But you need to communicate these wants and desires in the planning stages. Photographs are an ideal tool for communicating what you want. My wife did this exact thing with me as she saw a gorgeous wood picket fence in a magazine. Without any plans and just working from the photo, I created a nearly exact copy. It doesn't cost one dime to ask for a price or express an idea.

Debris Removal

It is surprising to many people how much debris and garbage are created during a moderate to large remodeling job. The problem on a remodeling job is that you don't want it scattered or piled in the yard or left inside if at all possible. Any trash that is combustible represents a serious fire hazard as it is commonly stacked so there is lots of air around it. A spark from a plumber's torch, a carelessly discard cigarette, etc. can create an inferno that can cause serious damage.

To make matters worse, when debris is being created, often the structure is being altered. Some structures can lose much of it's fire stop characteristics, especially if drywall and plaster have been removed. Open walls and ceilings provide a pathway for rapid fire spread.

Include in your contract that all debris will be cleaned up each day and placed in a metal container that is placed safely away from your home. Request that the work area be broom clean each day and vacuumed at the end of each work week.

Duration of Job

The last thing you want is your house torn up for an extended period of time. If you have seen your friends', relatives', co-workers' and neighbors' homes go through a remodeling job of any size, you know it can take a while. Anything that delays the job causes the pain threshold to rise exponentially.

Using your past experience and observations of other people's projects, you might be able to get a feel for the length of time a job should take. If a contractor says they can do a small room addition from start to finish in 10 days, ask him what magician will show up. You may be surprised as he may have the addition pre-built at a modular home factory!

It is possible to compress time schedules, but your job during the bidding process, is to request a detailed time line of what tasks are going to happen each day or each week. Compare the schedules that each contractor provides to see if each one has accounted for each task. If a contractor refuses to produce a schedule, it might be a sign of disorganization.

Dust Control

Even small remodeling jobs create dust. Large-scale demolition can create dust storms within homes. When you are interviewing contractors, during the bidding process, have detailed discussions about dust.

Take notes during these discussions. If the contractor says something that doesn't sound right, ask for clarification. When you talk with past customers of each contractor, ask specific questions about how well dust was controlled.

Some dust is inevitable, unless the contractor sets up a negative pressurization environment where the work is taking place. This setup costs extra money and is widely used by the mold abatement companies if you or someone in your family is sensitive to dust.

Keep in mind that homes equipped with recirculating forced air systems must be turned off during periods of dust creation. The return air aspect of the system can inadvertently pull dust into the system and broadcast it throughout the home.

Extra Telephone

It seems as if everyone has a cellular telephone today. But it is entirely possible for a battery to die or a cell phone to be forgotten at home or become damaged at the jobsite.

The last thing you want is a contractor or one of his subcontractors using your phone. One or two phone calls is not bad, but day-after-day use of your home phone can become very annoying.

It gets worse, some contractors give out your telephone number because they might expect a return call. You then become an unpaid secretary or a receptionist for the branch office of your contractor.

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The solution is simple. Place language that your contractor must install a temporary land telephone line or at the very least buy a temporary cell phone that is kept at the jobsite for all subcontractors and employees to use. We have more options now than ever with respect to communication.

Fumes

Many parts of the remodeling process can and do create fumes. The assembly of PVC plumbing pipes creates very noticeable fumes. Soldering copper tubing creates fumes as well, Drying paint liberates vapors into the air that contain a brew of different chemicals.

Urethanes, adhesives, etc. all create fumes that can invade your home during time periods where windows must be closed. These accumulated fumes can cause discomfort and actually sickness to people who might be acutely sensitive to some of these very peculiar chemical vapors.

Temporary space heaters used for all sorts of heating and drying purposes can create deadly carbon monoxide. Fumes can enter your home quite by accident and cause a problem. A heater placed innocently next to an air intake might cause massive amounts of carbon monoxide to be injected into your interior air. It is extremely important to discuss fumes with the bidding contractors and what they plan to do to minimize them in your home as they work.

HVAC Sizing

If your remodeling project involves adding additional space, there is a strong possibility you will have to upgrade or modify your existing heating and cooling system. Your existing furnace and air conditioner might be at the limit now with respect to the amount of heating and cooling BTU's they can handle.

It is extremely important that you discuss this possibility with the remodeling contractors during the bidding process. Talk with them about heat gain and heat loss calculations. If the contractor or sales person squints or tilts their head when you mention those words, you might be talking with the wrong person.

Once you have awarded the job to a contractor, it is imperative that the heating and cooling contractor come out and gather the necessary data to perform the needed calculations. These tell them whether or not your existing heating and cooling equipment will work.

Insurance Certificates

Unfortunately, we live in a society that seems to be over-populated with attorneys. These people need to feed their families and some of them seem to love to work on accident claim cases. You need to make sure you are never named as a party to one of these lawsuits.

You can do this by taking about insurance certificates with the bidding contractors. It is not always enough for a remodeling contractor to show you he has coverage for his employees. What is important is that each and every person who shows up to work at your home is indeed covered.

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Although it is a lot of work, you must insist upon doing it. You must make it very clear to the bidding contractors that they must supply you with current workman's compensation and general liability insurance certificates for all subcontractors who plan to work on your job. These documents need to be produced the day the contract is signed.

Matching Materials

Clothing, automotive, etc. styles change on a constant basis. The same is true for products used to build your home. Your existing home may have very unusual interior and exterior woodwork or plaster. If your remodeling contractor is a professional, he or she will know how to get exact matches on many of the materials used in your job.

There are many woodworking mills that can easily create identical profiles for door and window casing as well as crown molding and baseboards. It will cost more than buying stock trim, but the long-term value you add to your home by doing this will be well worth it.

With lots of extra effort, it is sometimes possible to get very close matches on brick and even ceramic tile. If you are trying to match brick, always go for the color match first and then the texture match. From the street, you rarely can detect texture but readily notice differences in color.

Pavement Problems

Do you have a gorgeous driveways, sidewalks and patios right now? If so, it would behoove you to take very good photographs to prove it. Remodeling activity almost always causes damage to existing paving materials around a house.

Dumpster deliveries, concrete trucks, lumber trucks, etc. can not only crack and break apart paving, but they can spill seas of motor or hydraulic oil on pristine concrete or blacktop.

It is imperative that you and the bidding contractors talk about how your paved surfaces will be impacted by the remodel job. Document what each contractor says and decide who has the best plan to protect your current investment. The last thing you need is an argument that a crack or an oil stain was already there. This is the reason for the photos you took prior to the remodeling project.

Be aware that large loaded delivery trucks can weigh as much as 20 times what your car weighs. It is no wonder thin concrete slabs crack and blacktop driveways crumble when a truck backs up onto it. Read the delivery tickets that are signed by the workers and most have damage waivers that relieve the truck companies of responsibility if a person allows them to drive onto your paved surfaces.

Payment Schedules

This is one of the most important parts of your remodeling job. The money you possess is the only leverage you have to ensure your job gets completed and done to a level of quality you have agreed upon in your contract.

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All too often, people advance large sums of money to the contractor when the contract is signed. The only time this is necessary is when your job requires special order materials to be ordered before the job starts. Examples of this might be semi-custom or custom cabinets, a custom front door, custom garage doors, etc. Any materials that are commodity items that can be purchased at supply house do not qualify.

Keep in mind that your contractor should have open accounts at all suppliers. If he does, why would he need advance money? He doesn't pay workers in advance, nor does he pay for supplies in advance.

You must always retain a sufficient amount of money to complete the project no matter what stage it is in. When you do pay for completed work, the contractor must supply you with notarized affidavits from all who have work on the job as well as all companies that have supplied material. Never issue a payment without having these documents. Get your payment calculator out and be sure the total amount you pay each time needs to match the amounts on all of the affidavits.

Plans - Triple Check Accuracy

As with new construction, the plans, blueprints, and written specifications are the primary tool that communicates to the remodeling contractor, suppliers and all subcontractors what is going to happen at your home. The ideal set of house plans would be ones that are so complete and so detailed that no one ever has to ask you a question. It is possible to do this as I have been blessed to work on such a job.

But this goal is very hard to reach. It requires you to think through the simplest things, such as the exact place where a toilet paper holder might go. You need to make all product selections, even paint and stain, before the job is even bid.

Is there a value to all of this? Absolutely, yes. If your plans are this complete, the bids you receive should be highly competitive. Dishonest contractors can't play the famous bait and switch game with absurdly low allowances for things when plans and specifications are complete and accurate.

Plumbing Disruptions

Many remodeling jobs involve plumbing. What may seem to be a very simple task of just turning off your main water valve and turning it back on can wreak havoc in an older home. When water lines refill from the rapidly incoming water, it can dislodge pieces of sediment from the sides of the older pipes. This sediment can clog faucet aerators, toilet fill valves and faucet valve cartridges.

It is very important that you discuss all plumbing jobs with your contractor before work begins. If water needs to be shut off to solder pipes, what happens if a small fire starts? If drain lines need to be cut into to install a new branch drain line, how long will the toilets in the house be inoperative? These simple questions need solid answers.

Avoid major plumbing changes on Fridays. If leaks develop after workers go home, will you be able to get instant repair service over the weekend? If you must have work done on a Friday, have a

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contingency plan in place. Make arrangements such that you can easily contact the plumber or the remodeling contractor in the event of plumbing problems.

Porta-Potty

Bathrooms are private places. The last thing you need is a bunch of strangers with dirty clothes and muddy boots walking onto the clean throw rugs in your bathrooms or powder rooms.

Major remodeling jobs that will see many people at your home for weeks on end need a temporary toilet facility. Many of these are quite discreet and they allow you to maintain control of a very important part of your home. This is an important issue and you should not budge on it.

Make it very clear to the bidding contractors that a temporary toilet must be on the jobsite and that it must be serviced once or twice a week.

Pre-Order Materials

Any type of delay on a remodeling job creates havoc and stress. You can minimize delays by making sure the exact materials you need are at the jobsite long before they are needed.

This concept may seem simplistic, but it is often overlooked. If you have a safe and secure place to store products that are not readily available, why not buy them in advance and have them on hand?

Examples of this would be specialty faucets, hardware, light fixtures, ceramic tile, special-order windows and doors, and any other material that is not ordinarily in stock. It is also very important to inspect these items to make sure there are no defects and that they are exactly what you ordered. It is not uncommon for the wrong product to be shipped.

Protecting Finishes

Imagine how many trips up and down your stairs a remodeling contractor and his subcontractors might make as they remodel a second-floor bathroom. Without protection, the stairs, carpeting, handrails, walls, etc. can easily be damage or scuffed.

I suggest having a very frank and open discussion with your contractor about what steps will be taken to protect all existing surfaces both inside and outside of your home. Take very good notes and write down in the contract any promises the contractor makes with respect to what he or she intends to do.

The marketplace is crammed with many surface-protection products that help contractors keep dirt and dust away from things that are important to you.

But keep in mind it doesn't stop with existing materials. Many a new tub has been scratched by a drywall or ceramic tile subcontractor. Finish carpenters can scratch new hardwood floors with tools when they come back to install toe stripping. Discuss all of these issues with your contractor so things that are in excellent shape stay that way.

Scheduling

One of the top complaints of homeowners who have gone through a major remodeling job are delays caused by scheduling snafues. Large construction projects employ special people who are experts at coordinating the arrival of both materials and workers so that the job continues from start to finish with no disruption.

Small remodeling contractors can create simple charts that do the same thing. The trick is to correctly identify the realistic amount of time it takes to do a particular task and then place it in the right position on the schedule.

The next task is to determine which jobs can occur on the job at the same time. It is often possible for a plumber to be working inside a room addition while a bricklayer or siding contractor is applying the outer skin to the job.

Request a written schedule from your contractor in the bidding phase. See if any of the contractors you are talking with can produce one they are currently using on an existing job. If they can't, you better talk with past customers to see if the jobs they did progressed with little or no interruptions.

Selecting the Real Professional

I often think this is the Holy Grail of both new home building and remodeling. Every homeowner wants the best contractor, who is both professional and honest. These people do exist. They can often be found in just about every city and county in the nation.

If you hope you have the right contractor for the job, you may already be in trouble. You can't ever base decisions on hope. You start the process of finding the professional by conducting a thorough and in-depth interview. This may seem unusual, but it is a common practice in the business world.

You can ask very interesting questions and get some fascinating information. For example, ask a contractor the names of the last three books he has read. Ask if he attends remodeling conventions. If not, ask why. Ask them if they volunteer time. If so, where? Do they coach children's teams? When asked to produce an ID, does the contractor show you a driver's license or some other card? Never forget that it is your home and it represents an enormous investment. You must be sure you and your contractor are a close, if not perfect, fit.

Temporary Kitchens and Baths

If you have never kneeled down to wash dishes in a bathtub, you are not missing a thing. It is miserable and it is humiliating. It is also unnecessary.

If your kitchen is going to be torn up for several weeks, ask the bidding contractors how they intend to provide you and your family with temporary sinks, cooking appliances and refrigeration. Creative and professional remodeling contractors can often throw together a temporary kitchen that can roll into and out of the kitchen in progress each day.

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Bathrooms are even more critical. It is not uncommon for a professional remodeling contractor to build a temporary shower in some location while the primary bathroom is being remodeled. Sinks and toilets are a must. There must always be functioning sanitary plumbing fixtures for you at all times. Excuses are reasons for failure. Do not tolerate them.

Trees and Landscaping

The landscaping around your home may be priceless. How many years has it taken a particular tree to reach its current height? You may have tens of thousands of dollars invested in expensive flower, bushes, shade plants, etc. The last thing you need is permanent and irreversible damage to your trees and vegetation caused by an unknowledgeable contractor, subcontractor, excavator or delivery truck driver.

The best way to ensure you preserve all of your plants is to arrange a consult with a certified arborist long before your project begins. Get written instructions from this person as to what needs to be done to make sure all trees and plants will survive the remodeling ordeal.

Make these written instructions part of the bidding documents and part of your contract. Be sure the contractor you choose has sufficient general liability insurance to cover damages and that the policy specifically covers damage to trees and landscaping.

Valuables

This is an uncomfortable subject, but one that must be discussed. There is no doubt in my mind that your home contains valuables. They may be cash, jewelry, guns, art or stamp collections or even musical instruments.

Remember that your remodeling job will bring with it people you have never met, and employees who work for those people who may have never been properly screened. Never tempt these people by leaving valuable objects in plain view.

If you have things of great monetary or sentimental value in your home, it may behoove you to move them to another safe location during the remodeling process. Accidents can happen. Fires can start. Worse yet, loose talk at a drinking establishment might tip off criminals who learn about all of the wonderful and tantalizing things within the confines of your four walls. Eliminate this problem from the start by eliminating the source of temptation.

Weather Protection

Many remodeling jobs involve opening up your house to the weather. Extreme jobs could actually involve tearing off your entire roof or a part of it to add a second story or a large dormer. The job might be as small as adding a skylight. But Mother Nature might spoil the fun with a pop up thunderstorm or five days of non-stop rain. A snowstorm may even be thrown in for good luck.

The point is simple. You must know how your remodeling contractor is going to protect your home against all forms of weather while your home's outer defenses have been compromised by

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work-in-progress. You need to understand that giant tarps can blow away in moderate winds. Wind pressure can be enormous over large expanses of plastic or fiberglass.

Not only can rain and wind-driven rain be a problem, but extremes of heat and cold can create enormous amounts of discomfort. Discuss with your contractor, before the job starts, how air leaks will be stopped until such time as enough work is in place to minimize any loss of conditioned air from your home.

Work Days

Within a week or two, you will grow tired of the flow of people who come to your home to perform the remodeling work. It is important for your sanity and peace of mind for the workers to maintain a strict work schedule. When you get home from work, the last thing you need is noise, dust and activity at your home. Yes, that may be part of your families ordinary activities, but you don't need additional input for the remodeling contractor.

When you are bidding the job, ask each contractor to state the normal times workers will arrive and leave each day. Ask about weekend work. If you do not want workers to be around on weekends, make it clear for the beginning.

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HOUSE PAINTING TIPS

DEAR TIM: There is still some time left to paint my house before the weather turns. I have the time to do the job right and I would really like the paint job to last. I am interested in knowing any secret tips you have discovered that really make a difference. In other words, are there a few things I can do that will allow me to get the new paint job to last an additional five to seven years? Russell W., Riverside, CA

DEAR RUSSELL: There are several things you can do, all of them quite simple, that will extend the useful life of an exterior house painting job. Some of the tips you have heard before, but some may shock or surprise you. The ultimate exterior paint job, in my opinion, blends the best paint with attention to detail in all preparation steps before you even shake the can of paint and pop open its lid.

How many homeowners do you think read the entire label on a paint can? If past emails I get are an accurate barometer, I would say less than 5 percent of the public truly reads and understands the instructions. Reading the label on the paint can is the first thing you should do. Pay particular attention to the advice given about compatible primers and the amount of time you must wait before you apply a second coat.

When you read the label, my guess is you will see language that tells you to apply the paint to a clean, dry surface. Unfortunately many people do not follow this critical advice. It is important to understand that paint is simply glue with color added to it. If you want glue to stick well to an object, it really helps if the surface is totally clean and is dust-free.



Caulk is a powerful weapon to stop water intrusion that can ruin a new house painting job. PHOTO CREDIT: Kathy Carter

It is very tempting to use a pressure washer to rapidly clean the outside of your home. The trouble is, they don't always remove all of the dirt. You can prove this on your home or on a dirty car. Use a pressure washer and get the tip of it as close to the surface as you feel comfortable so as to avoid surface damage. Let the surface dry. Then come back and hand wash a section with soapy water using a sponge and/or mild scrub brush. I guarantee you will see a difference and the brush and sponge will remove dirt left behind by the pressure washer.

To make matters worse, these tools can inject water behind the exterior skin of your home and cause paint failure problems soon after the job is finished. Water that is driven deep into the structure will eventually make its way back out as a liquid or a gas and can cause bubbles, blisters and peeling in the brand-new paint.

Once all loose paint has been scraped off, look for cracks where water can enter the skin of your home. Caulk these cracks and wipe the water-based caulk with a damp sponge to produce a professional looking joint. Make sure the caulk tube says the caulk is paintable.

Priming new masonry surfaces or bare wood is very important. Even more important is covering the primer as soon as possible with the finish paint. If the primer says it can be top-coated with the finish

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paint in 24 hours or less, then do so immediately after the time has expired. The finish paint can actually bond both mechanically and chemically to the primer if you do not wait days and days to apply the finish paint. My advice is to only prime as much area as you can finish paint the following day.

If you are working with paint on an older home, be very cautious. Houses built on or before 1978 can be coated with paints that contain lead. It is estimated that there are tens of millions of homes that have lead paint on either their interior or exterior surfaces. Scraping, sanding and removing the paint can create lead dust which is very toxic and poisonous. The Environmental Protection Agency has very helpful tips at their website to help you deal with this hazard.

High-quality paint is easy to find. Look for products that have two important ingredients: urethane and acrylic resins. These two components are the glue part of the paint. Urethane is extremely sticky and once cured and dried, it acts much like epoxy. Paints that contain these resins can be found at national brand paint stores and at large retailers that have hardware and paint departments. Unfortunately I have not been able to locate these paints at home centers.

Avoid painting in direct sunlight and on windy days if possible. Direct sunlight can cause rapid drying which creates a skin over the freshly-applied paint. As the remaining water in the paint dries, the paint develops bubbles. Wind causes paint to dry too quickly and can stop some paints from achieving the best bond to the surface being painted.

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PAINT OR STAIN THE EXTERIOR

DEAR TIM: The cedar siding on our modified A-frame house needs to be re-stained. But a neighbor suggests that we paint the house. Can you paint a house that has been stained? Is it a good idea? To add further confusion, a different neighbor says that painting the house will stop the wood from expanding and contracting leading to possible structural damage. Who is right? What would you do? Robert L., Lake Geneva, WI

DEAR ROBERT: Neither of your neighbors is 100 percent correct. Neighbor number two's advice is the least accurate in my opinion. Even if painted, the wood siding will absolutely continue to expand and contract. In fact, that is why paint often peels and flakes from wood siding. The seasonal expansion and contraction of the wood breaks the bond between the wood siding and the paint.

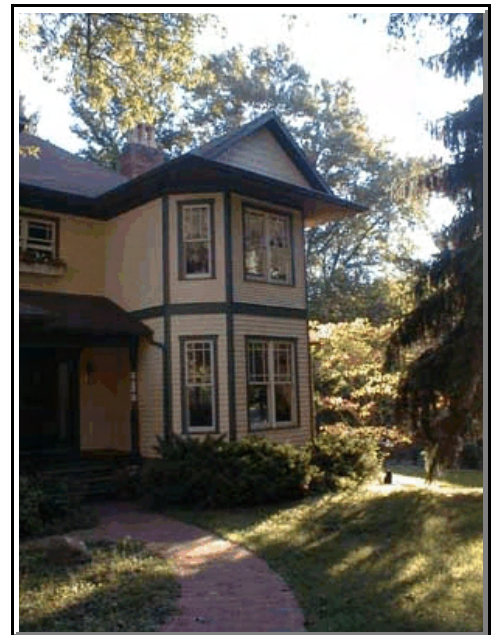
What's more, there is no connection between structural failure and expanding and contracting wood siding. The wood siding on a house is not supposed to act as a structural component. It is simply a skin that protects the structure from the elements. Keeping the skin of your home in good condition is necessary and you must maintain it with one of the two coatings you are contemplating.

A high quality paint or an epoxy fortified synthetic resin water repellent applied to the cedar siding will stop water from entering the wood. Minimizing or eliminating water penetration into the siding should be your primary goal. The aesthetic look of your home should be secondary. A house that has strong curb appeal does add value, but beware of making this your primary objective.

Water repellents and paint are coatings. A paint is considered a film that lays on top of the surface. Many water repellents soak into the wood and do not leave a film at the surface. Some water repellents do create a film or skin at the surface. The problem with films or surface coatings is that they eventually peel. When this happens, you are forced to scrape or strip the loose and peeling film off before you can apply a second coat. For this single reason, I try to avoid coatings that are films.

Penetrating water repellents do not peel, but they wear out. When it is time to re-coat the wood, you simply do not have to scrape the wood. This can save a tremendous amount of work. No matter which coating you choose to use, you will still be faced with lots of other work. You will still have to carefully and thoroughly wash the siding with soap and water and then do what is necessary to apply the coating of your choice. Scraping or stripping loose films is simply an additional step to a process.

If you really want to be confused, just look at my home. It is redwood siding and painted! My wife and I love Victorian style architecture and I built a Queen Anne Victorian home. These painted ladies just don't seem to look good with semi-transparent stains, so I painted the home for Kathy. Did I know I



Even the best paint put on by the best painter will fail. But semi-transparent water repellents also wear out. Photo credit: Tim Carter

Exterior Painting / Staining Contractor Hiring Guide & Checklist

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was going down the high-maintenance highway when I popped the lid off the first can of primer? You bet I did. But I also decided to use a paint that contained a blend of water-based urethane and acrylic resins. These are very sticky and I am confident it will be many years before my paint film peels or blisters.

Keep in mind that painting you're a-frame home may significantly change its appearance. Certain architecture styles lend themselves to a certain look. When I think log cabin and A-frame, I see in my mind a rustic wood look. If you say two-story colonial or Victorian, the image in my brain is paint. If you paint you're a-frame, will it lower its value to a potential buyer? That may not concern you, but it could be a factor in another person's mind.

If you do decide to paint instead of applying the epoxy fortified synthetic resin water repellent, be sure you hand wash the siding as you would your car. Avoid pressure washing this delicate wood. You need the wood to be perfectly clean. Read the label of the finish paint and follow the directions to the letter with respect to any primer they say you must use. Never forget that paint is simply a glue with color added to it. Both the primer and the finish paint must be the best glues and they stick best to clean surfaces.

Semi-transparent water repellents for wood come in many different formulations. Unfortunately a majority of them are made from natural oils that are food for mildew and algae. The best water repellents are ones that are made from synthetic resins. Do a search on the Internet for epoxy water repellents and you will quickly discover good ones.

The urethane - acrylic resin house paints are also readily available. They are sold at national chain paint stores as well as several major retail stores that have tool and paint departments. Look at the label and when you see the words "urethane and acrylic", you know you have a winner. Be sure to pay strict attention to the temperature ranges when the paint can be applied. Do not stray outside of these ranges.

The best weather to apply paint is when the temperature is near 70F and the winds are calm. An overcast day is much better than a sunny day. It is best for paint to dry slowly.

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PAINTING TIPS

So you want your upcoming paint job to really be first class? Well, who doesn't? Painting always seems so easy, yet when completed the results are not often the greatest.

Prep Work - - It's the Key!

By far the most unglamorous part of painting is the work you should do before you pop the top to the paint can. In the trade, it's called prep work. There is so much to do to achieve that really professional look. Surely you don't think it happens by accident?

First, you need to always start with clean surfaces. Invariably it says this on a paint can, but few people go to the trouble to wash walls. Remember, paints are simply glues. They stick to things.

Filling holes and patching cracks: The paint can only do so much. In fact, many people think that paint can fill or bridge small cracks, because they see how thick the paint is. Well, I can understand where this comes from. Paint companies know that much of the vehicle - the component of paint that makes it a liquid - in the paint evaporates into the air as the paint dries. This is why they recommend applying paint three times thicker - referred to as mil thickness - than the finished dry mil thickness. More on this in a moment. Take the time to fill all holes and cracks. The best time to do this, believe it or not, is at night time. Holes and lines show up much more when sunlight is not pouring through a window or door. Try this yourself, and see if I'm not telling you the truth!

Caulking

This is where most people miss the boat. The pros use caulk like a runner drinks water. Lots of it. Each and every crack between woodwork and wall and woodwork and woodwork must be filled for that first class appearance. I always recommend priming the areas which are to be painted first. This way, the cracks always seem to be better defined.

Caulking is an art. For interior purposes, I recommend using an acrylic caulk, matched closely in color to what you are painting. Cut the end of the tube close to the size of the cracks you are caulking. Apply the caulk, 2 feet at a time. Wipe the bead with your finger to smooth the joint and to press it into the crack. Then *now here is the important part* wipe the part you just caulked with a damp sponge. This removes excess caulk from the areas adjacent to the crack. This step is often overlooked by the novice.

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EXTERIOR PAINTING PREP TIPS

Exterior Scraping, Cleaning & Caulking Tips

The majority of homeowners and workers seem to desire instant gratification. The condition is growing worse each year. A homeowner decides to paint something in a weekend or just one day. They jump right in and paint. This is a big mistake. You must restrain yourself or your mate and have them perform the necessary surface preparation.

Remember, paint is nothing more than colored glue. When was the last time you saw glue that will stick well to a dirty, dusty surface?

Scraping

This is fairly straightforward. Loose paint must be removed. You can do it in any number of ways. Flat putty knives, or "pull" scrapers work very well. You may wish to use both tools. Pull scrapers are those that have shallow U shaped cutting blades. They really cut through old oil paints.

I urge you to wear goggles when scraping overhead. I have scratched my eyeball cornea on two occasions from paint scrapings. It is very painful and costs lots of money for medical care! Wear goggles!

Scraping is the first operation in surface preparation. Remove as much loose paint as possible. You then wash and rinse. I guarantee you that you will have to scrape certain areas again. Look closely at locations where bare wood is exposed. Where paint begins, the film may have lifted ever so slightly. Scrape these spots again. Resist the temptation to sand the edges of the paint smooth. Why? Because if the paint is old - say before 1978 - there is a great chance it contains lead. All you will be doing is generating toxic lead dust!

Washing

This is by far the most important aspect of surface preparation. I don't care how wet you get, you must hand wash your house. Use a large grout sponge and copious amounts of soapy water. Regular liquid dish soap will do just fine. It produces lots of suds. Experiment with soft brushes or whatever to make the job easier. Rinse the washed areas quickly so the dirty water doesn't dry!

Avoid pressure washing. Why? For one, it doesn't remove all of the dirt! It can also drive water deep into or behind wood siding or trim. I have seen people spray upwards on a soffit. They flood the soffit, the wood swells and 2 months later the new paint peels off! Pressure washers are instant gratification tools!

Caulking

Water that enters the end grain of siding or trim boards causes paint failure. You must do what you can to minimize and/or eliminate this kind of intrusion. I prefer the standard acrylic latex caulks for this purpose. Do NOT caulk the bottom edge of clapboard siding! These boards must be allowed to move and breathe. That small crack allows the siding to move. It can also allow water vapor to escape.

Always wipe caulking with a moist sponge as soon as it is applied. This will produce a clean, crisp joint instead of a finger smeared mess.

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