

Beginner's Guide to Painting Furniture



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Please Note: Like with most things, there is more than one right way to paint furniture.
Everything in this guide is how I paint furniture after 15 years of experience.

But, you'll find different answers to some of these questions and different steps for how to paint furniture ALL OVER THE INTERNET. It doesn't mean that either way is bad or wrong.
It's just different.

It's always best to try new products and steps for furniture makeovers, then decide which ones you like, you find easiest to do, and will use again.

This Beginner's Guide to Painting Furniture is a starting point for painting furniture. With answers to how I would paint furniture. Hopefully, my opinion and experience will help you decide what to do on your next, or first, furniture makeover! 😊

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If you are ready to give furniture painting a try, but don't know where to start, this post is for you! It's everything you need to know about how to paint furniture for beginners.

How to Paint Furniture for Beginners

Furniture painting can seem overwhelming for beginners, when you see all of the types of paints available. And, there are so many, many ways to paint furniture. From just a simple single color over the entire piece to layering many colors for a true artistic look. So many options can make it feel like it's hard to do.

But painting furniture is absolutely not hard. You just need to learn the basics and give them a try. With practice you can add in new furniture painting techniques or new types of paint to design your own looks.

What Kind of Paint Do You Use on Furniture

I recommend using paints on furniture that are **easy to use, low VOC (or fumes), water-based, fast drying, and durable**. To keep things simple, let's talk about 4 of the most popular types of paint used on furniture.

Latex Wall Paint

Most interior latex wall paints can be used on furniture. A lot of beginners start furniture painting with latex or acrylic wall paint. They are easy to apply with a nylon brush, paint sprayer, or foam roller. They're water-based, so easy to clean up with just water.

Latex and paints have low VOC's, meaning they have low fumes. So, you can use them to safely paint furniture indoors.

You don't need to use a top coat on latex paint, unless you want to. But, you should use a [good water-based primer](#) under latex paint.

I recommend using an eggshell or satin sheen on furniture. It looks pretty, hides imperfections better. And, that sheen makes it easier to wipe off dirt and spills.

Latex paints dry a bit slower than acrylic paint. And, latex paints take longer to fully cure, or harden too. I have used 3 layers of latex paint on furniture that didn't fully harden for 3 months. That's a long time, guys. Setting a lamp on that paint would leave a dent in the paint because it hadn't cured.

You can make latex paint dry and cure faster by mixing it into chalk paint with this [DIY chalk paint recipe](#). That recipe will make your latex paint harden faster and easier to sand for distressing too.

Acrylic Wall Paint

Like latex paint, most interior acrylic wall paints can be used on furniture. They are easy to apply with a nylon brush, paint sprayer, or foam roller. They're water-based, so easy to clean up with just water.

Acrylic paints also have low VOC's, meaning they have low odor and don't release dangerous fumes. So, you can use them to safely paint furniture indoors.

Acrylic Paints cure faster than latex, generally. So, they are ready to set things on within a day or two. And, acrylic paints are more flexible than latex paints. So, acrylic wall paints are my preference over latex these days.

Acrylic paints are a great furniture paint for beginners. I really love the [Magnolia Homes by Kilz line](#) of Acrylic paints. I use them a lot.

This Magnolia Homes by Kilz says it is a paint and primer in one. I usually ignore that when it comes to furniture. It's generally referring to use on walls. For furniture, it's probably best to always use a [good water-based primer](#) under latex and acrylic wall paints.

I recommend using acrylic paint in an eggshell or satin sheen. It doesn't require a top coat. The one limitation is that **it doesn't sand well for distressed paint looks**. So, if you want to distress and layer paints, use chalk paint instead.

You can make acrylic paint dry and cure faster by mixing it into chalk paint with this [DIY chalk paint recipe](#). That recipe will make your acrylic paint harden faster and easier to sand for distressing too.

Oil Based or Alkyd Paints

Oil Based paints provide a durable finish BUT take much longer to harden. They are also a lot harder to clean up. You have to use Mineral Spirits or Paint Thinner to clean up oil based or alkyd paints.

And, oil based paints have high VOC's. They release strong fumes or gases for days or weeks after using them. We know now that breathing in those fumes is not good for you. In fact, some areas have outlawed their sale.

Oil based paints also have special rules for safe disposal. Which is just another reason why they are not easy to use. In fact they are a giant pain to use.

Oil based paints also yellow over time. Which isn't ideal when you are wanting a nice crisp white on furniture or [wood trim](#) in your home. So, I say **avoid oil based or alkyd paints on furniture** and home trim. Don't use oil based paints if you are learning how to paint furniture.

Chalk Paint is another one of my absolute favorite paints on furniture! **Chalk paint is a great furniture paint for beginners**. It is water based and can be easily cleaned up with water.

Chalk paints are a very low VOC paint with practically no odor. So, they can be safely used indoors. They're also easy to apply with [nylon brushes](#), [foam brushes](#), [foam paint rollers](#), or specially made [chalk paint brushes](#).

Chalk Paints dry fast and cure faster and harder than wall paints. They are also great for layering paint colors to create pretty, distressed paint looks.

Chalk-style paints are usually actually latex or acrylic paints with something like plaster of paris mixed in to make it act like chalk paint. Meaning, it dries harder, cures faster, and is easier to sand than normal latex and acrylic wall paints.

I like chalk paint and chalk-style paint. You can find cheap and expensive options online, in stores, or at specialty shops. I say avoid the expensive stuff. They're really no different than the cheap stuff.

The only limitation with chalk paint is the limited range of colors available. Most chalk paint lines might have 20 to 30 colors. That's why I like to buy latex or acrylic wall paint that's available in hundreds of colors, then I mix that into [easy homemade chalk paint](#).

Best Paints to Use on Furniture

Here's some of my favorite paints to use on furniture. All of these fit my requirements for safe, easy to use, easy to clean up, fast drying, durable paints. And, all of these are great for beginners that want to learn how to paint furniture.

- [Rust-Oleum's Chalked Paint](#)
- [Country Chic Chalk Style Paint](#)
- [Retique It Chalk Style Paint](#)
- Magnolia Homes by Kilz acrylic interior paint or chalk style paint
- My [DIY Chalk Paint Recipe with Plaster of Paris](#) and Latex or Acrylic Paint

Quick Steps to Paint Furniture

Here's a quick look at the general steps for how to paint furniture. There are 7 steps on this list, but 4 are optional depending on your furniture and the paint you pick.

- Clean and degrease the furniture.
- Repair damage with wood filler or Bondo, if needed.
- Sand to get a smooth finish and better grip, if needed.
- Wipe down with a tack cloth.
- Apply a good, water-based primer, if needed.
- Apply 2-3 coats of paint.
- Apply 2-3 coats of top coat, if needed.

How to Paint Furniture

Here are the basic steps for **how to paint furniture for beginners**. These steps to furniture painting will work with most Chalk, Chalk-Style, Latex, and Acrylic Paints. This is really the easiest way to paint furniture for long lasting results.

Step One

Prep your furniture for painting by cleaning off built up dirt and oils with a degreaser safe for wood, [like TSP](#).

Step Two - Optional, won't always need to be done.

Repair any small dents, dings, cracks and damage with paintable wood filler. [Repair furniture damage with bondo all purpose putty](#), if the damage is bigger than a quarter. Sand the repair smooth with 180-grit sandpaper once the filler is dry.

Step Three - Optional, won't always need to be done.

Lightly sand the entire surface of the furniture with 180-grit sandpaper. If the furniture you are sanding looks great already and has a smooth finish, just lightly sand the finish to make it easier for the primer to stick.

You want to have the surface smooth and looking great before painting. I recommend just hand sanding with a sanding block. Power sanders in corners can sometimes cause damage to furniture. You only really need a power sander on really uneven, chippy old paint surfaces.

Be sure to always wear a mask when sanding. And, be careful sanding laminated furniture. Sanding laminated furniture too much can remove the laminate or veneer and you'll be left with rough plywood or chipboard.

You can usually **skip sanding** if the surface is smooth and undamaged AND you are using chalk paint or chalk-like paint. If you are using chalk paint or chalk-like paint it will stick to most surfaces without sanding or a primer.

Laminated furniture, non-wood furniture or high gloss paints and stains should probably still get a light sanding for a better bond with the chalk paint. It's better to be safe than sorry.

Step Four

Wipe down the furniture with a [tack cloth](#) to remove all dust. This is one of the most important steps to learn for how to paint furniture. It's easy to do, but if you skip this step your paint will look terrible.

Step Five - Optional Step, won't always need to be done.

Apply a good water-based primer. You need primer **if you aren't using chalk paint**. Chalk paint sticks to almost anything. You might also need a primer on non-wood furniture or even laminated furniture, before using chalk paint. Just to be extra sure it will stick.

Follow the directions on the primer for the best results. Use a quality nylon brush, foam roller, or foam brush to avoid brush marks. Allow it to fully dry before step six.

Step Six

Apply 2 to 3 coats of chalk paint, chalk-like paint, latex paint, or acrylic paint. Follow the directions on the paint container for the best results. You usually only need 2 coats. But some light colors and red colors need 3 coats.

Remember latex interior paint and acrylic interior paint are designed for walls. You can use them on furniture with the tips discussed in the section above about latex and acrylic paint. I like eggshell and satin sheen latex and acrylic paints on furniture.

Chalk paint and chalk-light paint will likely need a light wet sanding with a fine grit sanding block after the final coat to get a super smooth, furniture store feel to the paint. You can read more about this in [how to get a smooth finish with chalk paint](#).

After wet sanding, wipe down the paint with a clean damp cloth to remove the residue.

Step Seven - Optional Step, won't always need to be done.

Apply a Protective Finish. I love the professional looking light sheen and durability in [General Finishes Flat Out Flat](#) or [Minwax Polycrylic in Matte](#). The sheen in these products looks just like the sheen on expensive furniture from furniture stores.

Again, follow the directions on the product you are using for the best result. That's the last step to learn for how to paint furniture for beginners. Not too hard, right?!

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More DIY Tips for Painting Furniture

Like with most things, there is more than one right way to paint furniture. My DIY Tips for Painting Furniture come from 15 years of experience painting and staining new and old furniture.

But, you'll find different answers to some of these questions and different steps for how to paint furniture ALL OVER THE INTERNET. It doesn't mean that either way is bad or wrong.

That person just has a different way to do things, that works for them.

It's always best to try new products and steps for furniture makeovers, then decide which ones you like, you find easiest to do, and will use again.

These DIY Tips for Painting Furniture are my answers to how I would paint furniture. Hopefully, my opinion and experience will help you decide what to do on your next, or first, furniture makeover!

What Kind of Paint Do You Use on Furniture

I recommend using paints on furniture that are **easy to use, low VOC (or fumes), water-based, fast drying, and durable.**

You can find a more detailed explanation for what I think are the pros and cons of Latex Paint, Acrylic Paint, Oil-Based Paint, Chalk Paint, and Chalk-like Paint in that post.

But, the quick answer here is that I usually use chalk paint or chalk-like paint on furniture because it dries fast, cures (or hardens) fast, is easy to sand and distress, has very low VOC's and odor, and durable.

I also like acrylic wall paints like Magnolia Homes by Kilz line of interior paints and Chalk Style Latex Paints, like Rust-Oleum's Chalked line of paints on furniture.

Why Do People Use Chalk Paint on Furniture

I like to use chalk paint on furniture because it dries fast and cures hard. That harder finish is more durable and is ready to put things on within a day or two. Drying fast means I can apply a 2nd coat faster.

And a huge benefit with chalk paint is that it doesn't require a primer. Chalk paint sticks to most finishes without a primer and without prior sanding and stripping of the old finish.

Some chalk paints don't even require a top coat. Though I generally like a matte or [flat top coat](#) on furniture, just for extra durability and a nice sheen.

Chalk paint also provides rich, even color with generally just 2 coats. So, in my experience, chalk paint has less steps and saves time. You just have to know how to use it properly. I think chalk paint became so trendy 15 years ago because of how easy it makes painting furniture, even for beginners.

Every once in a while I [get a comment on YouTube](#) about how chalk paint looks hard to use. I honestly couldn't disagree more. It's my go-to furniture paint and one of my favorite DIY Tips for Painting Furniture because it is so easy to use.

I think sometimes it can seem hard because there are just so many ways to use chalk paint, so many furniture style options and techniques, that it can be confusing to newbies.

Can You Paint Furniture Without Sanding First

Technically, yes. If you are using chalk paint or chalk-like paint it will stick to most surfaces without sanding or a primer. Just be sure to clean the furniture with a degreaser like TSP first.

You may need to sand any rough spots smooth first. Paint won't level out uneven or rough spots in an old finish. So, you will need to sand and/or patch rough spots to make sure the finish is damage-free and smooth before painting.

Some non-wood or laminate furniture with slick, non-porous finishes should have a light sanding before painting too. It never hurts to do a light sanding if that means the paint will last longer. :)

Can You Use Regular Wall Paint on Furniture

Yes, I use wall paint on furniture all the time. But for most wall paint, I mix it into my own [homemade chalk paint](#). It's a simple recipe and quick to do. I like mixing it into chalk paint because it makes the wall paint dry faster and cure harder and faster than it normally does. And, it's easier to sand because it loses some of the plasticity that wall paint has.

Homemade chalk paint works exactly like the store bought brands. But, it's usually cheaper to buy wall paint. And, wall paint is available in hundreds of colors. So, it's easy to get the exact color you want when you make your own with wall paint.

There is one wall paint that I've used a lot on furniture without mixing it into chalk paint. It is the Magnolia Homes by Kilz Interior Paint. It is an acrylic based wall paint that I think acts a lot like chalk paint, in that it dries fast and cures fast.

If you decide to use wall paint on furniture, I recommend using an eggshell or satin sheen. They look great and the sheen is easy to clean when the finish gets dirty. Higher sheens highlight dents, dings, and brushstrokes. Higher sheens are also not as nice when mixed into chalk paint.

Can You Paint Over Old Paint on Furniture

Yes, you can paint over old paint on furniture. It's the easiest way to give furniture a new look. But, if the old finish isn't smooth or in perfect condition, you should sand the old paint finish smooth and patch dents and damage before applying new paint.

Wear a mask whenever you sand old finishes. When the old finish is smooth, dusted off, and ready for new paint, you can apply a great water-based primer before applying the new paint.

Or, if the new paint is chalk paint or chalk-like paint, you can skip the primer on lightly sanded old paint. Chalk paint is great at sticking to most surfaces. See the full details for painting over an old finish in the instructions for painting furniture starting on page 7 of this guide.

Can You Paint Over Old Stain on Furniture

Yes, again. You can paint over old stain finishes on furniture. You should lightly sand the old finish to scuff the surface. That will get it ready for a strong bond with the new paint. You should also repair any damage before painting.

Then clean off the sanding dust, prime the old finish, then paint with the new furniture paint. Wear a mask whenever sanding.

How Do You Paint Bare or Unfinished Wood

If you [build your own furniture](#), like me, or have stripped furniture that is ready for a new paint look, here's how to paint unfinished or bare wood.

This might sound strange, but for bare or stripped wood that doesn't have a finish, I use Danish Oil as a primer.

Technically, it's a type of stain that I often use alone, to stain wood. But, it makes a great primer too. That's because Danish Oil soaks into wood and hardens in the wood to make it more durable. Soaking into the wood means that it is also sealing the wood making a nice smooth starting point for paint.

But don't worry, it's not too smooth. Paint sticks well to Danish Oil. Watco, the company that makes Danish Oil, even recommends Danish Oil as a primer under paint. I used Watco under the paint on my [Easy DIY Wood Drawer Fronts](#) just last month.

Wiping on Danish Oil is so much faster than applying primer. But, you can always use a primer instead. I recommend using a [Water-Based Primer](#) under paint on furniture.

Just be sure to sand the bare or unfinished wood to 180-grit to prep the wood for the Danish Oil. And, don't forget to remove all the dust before applying the Danish Oil or Water-Based Primer.

What Paint to Use for Solid Color Painted Furniture with a Sheen

Here is the easiest way to get a solid color with a pretty, professional looking sheen on furniture. Start with a smooth, ready to paint piece of furniture again. Sand and repair damage, as needed. Then remove all dust with a tack cloth.

Then, if you're using Magnolia Homes by Kilz interior paint or another latex or acrylic wall paint, apply a water-based primer first. Let it dry per the directions on the product. Then apply 2 to 3 layers of a latex or acrylic wall paint with an eggshell or satin sheen. Be sure to let it fully dry between coats. That's it!

If you're using chalk paint, chalk-like paint, or a wall paint that was turned into homemade chalk paint, then you can skip the primer on pre-sanded old finishes. Just apply 2 to 3 coats of chalk paint to get a beautiful, even color across the furniture. Follow that with 2 coats of a good water-based top coat with the sheen that you like.

What Paint to Use for Distressed or Layered Paint Looks on Furniture

To get a beautiful distressed paint look with layers of paints and stains, sanding is key. Nothing I have used sands as well as chalk paint and chalk-like paint.

So, I always use Danish Oil as a base stain, if needed. Followed by highlights of one or two chalk paint colors on the spots I want to distress. Then 2 layers of the main chalk paint color across the entire piece of furniture.

I sometimes use chalk paint with Vaseline to easily distress furniture. You can put Vaseline on the stain or lower paint layers exactly where you want the top coat to be removed. It makes distressing easier. Here's my steps for [how to use Vaseline to distress furniture](#). Here's a great example of [how I layered and distressed paint](#) on a buffet.

What Paint to Use for Faux Metal Finishes

You don't need to faux paint metal looks anymore. I mean you can, if you want. But that's the old hard way to get a pretty metal finish on furniture, decor, and cabinets. Now, you can buy chalk-like paints that have flecks of the actual metal in the paint.

So, copper, brass, and iron chalk-like paints look beautiful and contain bits of those metals. You can apply the paint just like other chalk paints. And, it looks like pretty, shiny metal.

And, you can leave it like that or spray it with a green or blue oxidizing spray that reacts with the metal in the paint just like real metal oxidizes. Here's how I created 20 different [faux metal patina paint finish looks](#) using copper, brass, and iron (rust) paints.

How to Get Rid of Dust Nibs in a Top Coat

If you have a few dust nibs, or tiny bumps, in the last fully dry layer of top coat, grab a brown paper bag for an easy fix. Lightly sand the top coat with the brown paper bag in a circular motion. This will usually remove nibs without scuffing the look of the top coat.

A brown paper bag has the same grit as something like 3000 grit sandpaper, depending on the bag. A brown paper bag can sometimes even out uneven sheen on top coat that can be caused by brushing over partially dry top coat too. But that only works in mild amounts of uneven sheen.

Do You Have to Use Wax Over Chalk Paint

Not at all. You can, if you want to. When Chalk Paint became popular, 10 or 15 years ago, everyone was putting chalk paint on it. When I learned about chalk paint the companies selling it recommended using wax as the top coat to bring out the color of the chalk paint and to add a nice sheen to the paint.

So, I assumed you had to use wax as the top coat. I think most other people did too. But, now we know you can use normal water-based polyurethane or water-based polycrylic over it too.

I prefer a poly over chalk paint. Poly still makes the color of the chalk paint pop and adds a nice sheen. Poly is also more durable than wax. So, it helps to protect the finish a bit more. Poly is also easier to wipe down and clean off than wax.

So, I only use wax over chalk paint if I am using a dark wax to add that darker detail to the paint color. You can see how I did that in this [Blue DIY Chalk Paint Bathroom Vanity](#). You could also get a similar antiqued look to wax by using a glaze, like [General Finishes Van Dyke Brown](#).

5 Best Furniture Paints

Here's some of my favorite paints to use on furniture. All of these paints are safe, easy to use, easy to clean up, fast drying, durable paints. And, all of these furniture paints can be used in my step by step beginner furniture painting tutorials.

- [Rust-Oleum's Chalked Paint](#)
- [Country Chic Chalk Style Paint](#)
- [Retique It Chalk Style Paint](#)
- Magnolia Homes by Kilz Acrylic Interior Paint or Chalk Style Paint
- My [DIY Chalk Paint Recipe with Plaster of Paris](#) and Latex or Acrylic Paint

3 Easy Furniture Stains for Beginners

Here are the 3 types of wood stains I always pick for furniture makeovers and new wood furniture builds.

- [Watco Danish Oil](#) - I love this because you simply wipe it on, let it soak in, then wipe off the excess. Easy Peasy! But, it's more transparent than the next 2.
- [General Finishes Gel Stain](#) - Just follow the directions and you'll get beautiful, rich results!
- [Minwax Wood Finish](#) - Great range of colors available at most stores.

3 Best Top Coats for Furniture

I like a subtle sheen when it comes to top coats these days. These top coats have a professional looking, store bought furniture subtle sheen.

And, I always use top coats that are easiest to apply with a durable finish in just 2 or 3 coats. Here are my top 3 top coats for beginner furniture painting projects.

- [General Finishes Flat Out Flat](#)
- [Minwax Water-Based Polycrylic in Matte](#)
- [General Finishes High Performance Top Coat](#)

Best Paint Stripper for Furniture

I've used quite a few types of paint strippers over the years. Some high fume, strong chemical strippers in home remodeling and one stripper that works without all the fumes. The best paint and stain stripper I've tried, that's easy to dispose of, and that doesn't have strong fumes is [Citristrip Paint Stripping Gel](#).

Here's a full tutorial all about [stripping paint from wood furniture](#). It has written steps and a walkthrough video to show you how to get the best results with Citristrip Paint Stripping Gel.

That's the end to this beginners guide to painting furniture.

If you are looking for more furniture makeover design inspiration. Here's [20+ Step by Step Furniture Painting Tutorials](#). I'll keep adding more tutorials to this list as I post them. So, keep this link saved. 😊

Good luck with your project, guys!