

Back to Basics



by Paul Cascio

Paper Training: How to Apply and Trim the Frame Backing

Welcome to “Back to Basics,” my new column dedicated to reviewing the fundamentals of professional picture framing. Whether you’re a freshman framer or a seasoned veteran, the road to success begins with a mastery of basic technical skills. These skills are the DNA of framing—its building blocks, which include basic mat cutting techniques, frame joinery, fitting and more.

If you’re a rookie, just entering the field, this column will serve as a primer to help you get started. For the experienced framer, an occasional trip down memory lane for a quick review can be helpful, and a lot of fun too. Consider it a tune-up to help you sharpen your skills, explore different viewpoints, and provide new insight on what may prove to be faster, more efficient ways to frame. After all, it’s what you learn after you know it all that really matters.

Now as you know, there’s more to professional framing than making frames. Making money is important too. That’s why, in addition to the technical skills, we’ll occasionally stray from the saw room and visit the sales counter where we’ll explore the business side of framing.

For those of you who enjoyed my previous column in *PFM*, “The Guerrilla Framer,” you’ll be pleased to know that I haven’t abandoned my roots, nor have I completely traded in my camouflage fatigues for a Norm Abraham’s-style plaid shirt. Instead, I’ve decided to combine the two. (Although at age 49, I should probably stick

to wearing vertical stripes.)

For this column, I’ll focus my efforts on the basic skills of framing, the ones that are often neglected or taken for granted. In “Back to Basics,” you won’t find frame of the month fancy. Nosiree, not at all. Instead, you’ll find simple fare—meat and potatoes served up with a just little bit of spice to keep things interesting. Sort of an Emeril with corner samples. BAM!

Now, if there is one thing I know from visiting online framing forums, it’s that if you talk to 10 framers about almost anything, you’re virtually assured of getting at least 11 different opinions. So, in the way of a disclaimer, let me just say that the techniques I’m going to share with you in this column are by no means presented as the only way, or even necessarily the best way to do something. These are simply the methods that I’ve been using, or those which I believe are easy to learn and use, or are fast and efficient in terms of time and cost.

If you think you have a better, more efficient, or faster method, I encourage you to contact me. So enough with the introduction and formalities. To kick things off, I’ve decided that the first thing we’ll tackle is actually one of the very last steps in creating a custom frame—applying the backing paper, or dust cover as it’s sometimes called.

Now, you may ask, “Why start at the finish line?” The reason is simply that throughout my 16 years in framing, I’ve seen more variation in tools and techniques for applying and trimming the backing paper

than for probably any other procedure in framing.

Some framers apply the paper to the frame; others, including me, put the frame on the paper. Some use a special trimming tool, of which there are many to choose from, while others prefer a bare razor blade. Many trim face-down; others face-up. I find it interesting that such a seemingly simple task can cause so much confusion and I'd like to share a method that I use that I believe is efficient in terms of time and cost, and looks great too.

Advantages

- Provides a smooth, tight fit with clean edges
- No tape residue to remove.
- Easy to master; requires little practice.
- Fast
- Frame remains face-up to protect finish
- No special tools needed

What I really like about this method is that because I'm trimming with the front of the frame (picture side) facing up, instead of down, there is less risk of the frame getting scratched by dust, glass bits, or other debris on the work surface that might go undetected.

I also like it because the backing paper covers the entire back of the frame from edge to edge. This means I won't have to wear out my thumb removing excess ATG tape from the edges of the frame.

Best of all, it looks great.

Required Tools and Materials

- Single-edge razor blade
- ATG tape gun
- Kraft paper
- Spray bottle of water (optional)

For best results, it's important to work on a carpeted table. Inexpensive commercial-type loop carpet works best and lasts for years. The carpet serves as a cutting board and provides a non-slip surface. More important, its resiliency allows you to insert your razor blade below/behind the frame to keep the blades in the correct position. This prevents the blade from slipping and cutting the side of the frame.

Here are the steps for applying and trimming the backing paper.

- 1) Cut a piece of Kraft paper several inches larger than the frame dimensions. (I prefer the black Kraft paper, to brown, which looks like it had a previous life as a grocery bag.)
- 2) Using your ATG gun, apply adhesive to the back of the frame. Apply the adhesive as close to the edge of the frame as possible, but avoid going over the sides (see Photo 1).
- 3) With the front side facing you, stand the picture vertically near the edge of the Kraft paper (see Photo 2) and with a hinge motion, slowly lower the frame onto the paper.



Photo 1: Applying the ATG tape in preparation for the backing paper.



Photo 2: Lowering the frame onto the backing paper.



Photo 3: Optional step of creasing the paper against the frame edges.



Photo 4: Cutting along the edges with a razor blade.



Photo 5: Ensure clean corners on the paper by cutting about an inch past the frame corners.



Photo 6: After cutting along all sides of the frame, the excess paper should lift easily.

- 4) *Optional:* Crease the excess paper against all the edges of the frame (see Photo 3).
- 5) Starting at a corner, carefully insert the razor blade into the paper so it penetrates at about a 30° angle under the under the frame (see Photo 4). While applying slight upward pressure with the blade and slight downward pressure on the frame, slice along the edge of the frame. (This keeps the blade in contact with the back of the frame and prevents it from slipping out and accidentally damaging the side of the frame.) Continue slicing until you are about an inch or more past the end of the frame to ensure clean corners (see Photo 5).
- 6) Remove excess paper (see Photo 6).



Photo 7: This optional step of a quick spritz of water tightens the paper.

- 7) *Optional:* Apply a quick spritz of water from your water bottle. When it dries, the paper will be drum-tight (see Photo 7). I have been using this method for years and it does not affect the inside of the framing package since the amount of water is so minimal.

- 8) Apply hardware, bump-ons, and the all-important sticker (see Photo 8) with the name of your business and any other information you usually include.



Photo 8: The final step—adding the sticker with your business name.

It may take a few tries before you master this technique, but once you do, I think you'll find it to be economical, and a great timesaver that also gives a very clean and professional appearance to the back of your frames. Happy framing. ■

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