

Refinishing Cabinets with Stain and Clear Finishes

Choose the right route for the existing finish, then control stain, repair color, clear coats, and the final inspection.

By Joshua Christopher | Version 1.0 | September 24, 2026

Start with the existing finish and the requested color. Strip failed finishes or prepare for a lighter color; retain sound finishes only when the darker-color system is compatible. Approve a finished sample before production. **My standard:** Control color at every stage, protect the tint with clear, and inspect the whole set under different lighting before it leaves the shop.

1. Inspect the finish and agree on the color

Stained-cabinet refinishing begins with two decisions: what can remain on the wood, and what color the client wants. This guide covers stripping and restaining, darkening a sound existing finish, localized color repair, and building a compatible clear finish. For the shared cabinet preparation, handling, and repair procedures, see Refinishing Cabinets with Painted Finishes.

Field practice

My first considerations are the existing finish, its condition, and its color. If the client wants a lighter color, I remove the finish and address the previous stain to work toward the natural wood color. If the finish is failing with chips, checking, or other defects, I remove it. If the coating is sound and the client wants a darker shade, I can retain it and work with it.

What the inspection finds	Route through the work
Lighter color requested	Remove the finish and enough old color to establish a suitable starting surface. Test the achievable result before promising a match.
Chipping, checking, or other finish failure	Remove the failing coating. Do not build a new finish on an unstable layer.
Sound finish and a darker color requested	Clean, prepare, repair, and test a compatible color-adjustment system over the retained finish. See Section 10.
Thin veneer	Protect the veneer thickness. Do not automatically use the solid-wood sanding sequence.

Identify the wood, any veneer, and the existing coating as far as possible. A finish that looks sound still needs a compatibility test with the proposed new system. Returning every piece to its original natural color may not be possible without unacceptable material loss.

Field practice

For a custom color match, we usually get a separate piece of the same wood species. I stain it and apply the intended clear finish so the client reviews a finished sample. I want the sample to represent the finished job, not just the stain before clear coating.

Keep the approved sample and a record of the preparation, products, measured color additions, and application sequence for production and later touch-ups. A separate sample may absorb differently from old cabinet wood, so also test an inconspicuous part of the actual work. Mohawk requires pretesting finishing products for the intended use. [6]

2. Label the parts and prepare the work area

Field practice

We remove and label the doors, drawer fronts, and hardware. Our cleaning, protection, and shop organization follow the same routine as our painted-cabinet work. The removable parts go to the shop; the fixed cabinets require a suitable work area at the home.

Clean grease and contamination before sanding or recoating. Remove cleaning residue and let the surface dry. Keep the labels and hardware organized so each part returns to its original location. The detailed cleaning and repair methods are in Entry 010.

Official safety guidance

Official spray-area requirements: Lacquers, solvents, and aerosol touch-ups require a work area designed for their fire, exposure, and overspray hazards. Applicable OSHA spray-finishing rules address mechanical exhaust, replacement air, ignition sources, electrical equipment, grounding, and residue control. A household fan or temporary plastic enclosure does not establish compliance. Use a properly designed facility or an assessed compliant arrangement; do not spray until those controls are in place. [12, 13]

Official safety guidance

Protection and waste: Select eye, skin, and respiratory protection from the product SDS and exposure assessment. Where workplace respirator use is required, OSHA requires the appropriate respiratory-protection program, including medical evaluation and fit testing for tight-fitting respirators. [14] Keep stripper waste separate from stain-cleanup waste. Old Masters warns that oil-stain-soaked rags, steel wool, and residue can ignite spontaneously; its instructions call for a sealed, water-filled metal container and disposal under local fire rules. Never leave these materials in a pile. [2, 3]

3. Strip the old finish when removal is required

Field practice

I prefer chemical stripping to sanding off an entire finish. In my experience, sanding alone creates much more dust and takes longer. Today I use a brush-on stripper such as Citristrip.

Field practice

We brush the stripper on, keep the working surface wet, and remove the coating as it softens and bubbles. We replenish the stripper as needed to remove as much finish as possible. A plastic scraper lets us scoop the softened finish into a waste container without using a sharp metal edge against the wood. For the remaining residue, I have used medium-to-coarse steel wool with mineral spirits, then addressed remaining finish during sanding after cleanup and drying.

Manufacturer direction

Citristrip's Stripping Gel tutorial specifies a thick application, removal with a plastic scraper or brush, and cleanup with a clean abrasive pad and After Wash or odorless mineral spirits. The wood must be completely clean and dry before refinishing. Follow the exact stripper's label and SDS for dwell time, chemical-resistant gloves, ventilation, and waste handling. This is residue removal, not a claim that mineral spirits chemically neutralizes every stripper. [1]

For a reader following the cited Citristrip procedure, use its specified abrasive-pad cleanup. Steel wool is my reported field method, not a substitute for checking the stripper and next coating's directions. Remove all abrasive fragments and residue before advancing. Inspect profiles and corners as carefully as the flat faces.

4. Prepare the bare wood for stain

Field practice

We typically sand the following day after stripping and cleanup. Where old stain remains and the wood can tolerate sanding, I start with 120 grit and follow with 180. If there is no stain to remove, we can start with 180. I sand with the grain and stop at 180 before staining. I reserve 320 for finish work.

The following day is a scheduling habit; complete cleanup and dryness determine readiness. Do not sand a damp or residue-laden surface. Inspect for scratches, remaining coating, uneven old color, and glue or repair material that could change stain absorption.

Surface or stage	My usual abrasive choice
Old stain on wood thick enough to sand	120, then 180, with the grain
Bare wood without old stain to remove	180 before staining
Sound retained clear finish being darkened	220 during preparation
Sealer and ordinary finish preparation	320 when the coating is ready; follow its recoat instructions
Color-bearing tint coat	Very light 320 or 400 to remove nibs without removing color, only where the selected system permits this preparation

Manufacturer direction

Old Masters Wiping Stain specifies 120- or 180-grit preparation on clean bare wood and removal of sanding dust. Its color depends on wood type, porosity, and application method. Test before production. [2]

Treat thin veneer separately

Field practice

On thin veneer, I have used lacquer thinner and steel wool to remove old stain, followed by a rag with mineral spirits to clean away loosened color and residue. This can avoid sanding away the veneer itself.

This solvent route is conditional, not an approval for every veneered assembly or stain. Test the actual thinner and cleanup solvent in an inconspicuous area, following their labels and SDS. Stop if the veneer lifts, softens, or otherwise deteriorates; do not flood the assembly. If the solvent does not remove the color safely, revise the color goal or repair plan rather than sanding through the veneer.

Complete necessary wood repairs before staining. A filler does not absorb stain like the surrounding wood; approve its appearance on a finished sample. If a smooth, filled-grain finish is part of the scope, use a grain filler compatible with the chosen stain and clear system. The grain-filling methods are described in Entry 010; a stained finish also requires a color match for the filler.

5. Select the stain and condition the wood when needed

Field practice

I have used several stain lines, including Minwax and Old Masters. I normally start with a wiping stain, choosing it for the wood and requested color. When wiping stain does not give enough color, I may choose a gel stain or a dye stain. Old Masters is my usual gel-stain choice.

Growing up in my family's shop, I saw custom colors made with Mohawk concentrates and reducers for stains, glazes, and tinted lacquers. Those were formulated systems; simply adding reducer to one concentrate is not a recipe for every kind of stain.

Field practice

I recommend considering conditioner for pine, maple, birch, and oak. Walnut and mahogany generally do not need it in my usual work. I use the same product line for conditioner and stain, typically Old Masters. We brush conditioner on with a nylon brush, let it sit about ten minutes, and rub and wipe off the excess with a soft cloth. I usually wait until the following day to stain.

Treat the species list as my starting preference. The sample determines whether conditioner improves the result for that wood and stain; the decision is not simply hardwood versus softwood.

Manufacturer direction

Old Masters Wood Conditioner calls for a polyester/nylon brush, 5-15 minutes of penetration, and thorough removal of excess. Allow at least 8 hours before oil-based stain, or at least 24 hours before water-based stain. The surface must be dry and free of grease, wax, and residue. Old Masters advises against tack rags because they may leave adhesion-interfering residue. These times belong to this conditioner, not every brand. [4]

6. Apply and wipe the stain evenly

Field practice

We brush on the stain and wipe off the excess with a cloth, working with the grain. I start on one side, keep a wet edge, and work across the piece. On a cabinet door, I brush the entire door, then begin wiping where I started brushing and follow the same direction and sequence across it.

Size the working area to the stain's open time and conditions. Remove excess from profiles and corners; do not let one area dry while the neighboring area is still being wiped. Check consistency against the approved sample as work progresses.

Field practice

Staining is normally one coat in my process. If I need deeper color, I usually adjust it with tint during finishing. A second oil-stain coat can remove color while adding it, so it does not always make the wood darker the way someone expects. If the stain itself must supply more color, I may change to gel stain or dye stain.

Manufacturer direction

Old Masters allows additional coats of its Wiping Stain or Gel Stain after the specified drying interval; one coat is my practice, not a universal product restriction. Do not thin these ready-made stains. For either stain under a lacquer, Old Masters calls for a compatibility test. Its drying instructions differ by stain, color, and following finish, so check the specific product before sealing. [2, 3]

Field practice

I normally wait 24 hours after staining before spraying the sealer.

Do not confuse conditioner-to-stain time with stain-to-sealer time. A clock alone does not establish that heavy stain in a recess has dried. Follow the stain and sealer instructions together and allow more time when conditions require it.

7. Select and apply the compatible sealer and clear finish

Field practice

I typically use Mohawk lacquer. Finisher's Choice, CAB/Acrylic, and DuraCoat are products I have used. When the client requests varnish and no tinting is needed, I also use varnish. I choose the sealer for the topcoat; for the usual Finisher's Choice route here, I use its compatible clear sealer.

Manufacturer direction

Mohawk identifies Finisher's Choice Clear Lacquer Sealer as a companion to Finisher's Choice Clear Lacquer. This is a clear system for stained wood, not the white sealer discussed for painted cabinets. Other lacquers and varnishes need their own approved sealers, preparation, and application schedules. [5]

For example, the current L48C5200 sealer and L41C5240 clear lacquer sheets each list a 45-minute laboratory recoat time and specify 320-grit scuff sanding between coats. The clear lacquer limits the **total system to 4 dry mils**. These are the named 275-VOC products' directions, not universal values for all sheens or formulations. Temperature and humidity affect the laboratory times. [6, 7]

Field practice

I apply sealer, sand with 320 when it is ready, remove the dust, and begin the clear finish. My ordinary lacquer sequence is three finish coats: inspect after the first, apply the second, then give the surface its thorough final sanding and inspection before the last coat. If the first coat is perfect, my field routine has sometimes proceeded directly to the second.

Manufacturer direction

For the cited current Finisher's Choice products, follow their required sanding between coats even when the surface looks good. Plan the number and thickness of all sealer, color, and clear applications within the product's total film limit. Additional tint or high-gloss work is not permission to exceed that limit. [6, 7]

CAB/Acrylic and DuraCoat are alternatives, not interchangeable names for this schedule. The example CAB/Acrylic L50C7260 sheet specifies 320-grit intercoat preparation; DuraCoat Pre-Cat L42C5510 specifies 320-400 and a 4-dry-mil total-system limit. Confirm the exact version before use. [15, 16]

8. Restore repair color and grain before the first clear coat

Field practice

After sealer preparation and before the first clear finish coat, I address repair color. We sometimes use a shop-mixed Mohawk dye toner over a Bondo repair to bring its background color toward the surrounding wood. With a matching graining pencil, we carry nearby grain lines onto the repair. The following clear coating protects the completed color work.

My shop may call this toner or shading work. It is separate from the overall tint adjustment after the first clear coat. Do not sand away the drawn grain while preparing the next layer.

Tint, toner, and shading describe different things in different shops

Here, **tinting** means adding color to a compatible finish for an overall adjustment. **Repair toning or shading** means locally adjusting the background color so the repair fits its surroundings. **Graining** means continuing the wood's visible grain pattern across the repair.

Manufacturer direction

Mohawk's toner names do not specify a single chemistry: Guitar Lacquer Toner and Ultra Classic use transparent dyes, while Tone Finish Toner uses pigments. A dye toner can alter the apparent color but is not inherently an opaque hiding coat. Test the full repair; do not promise that a transparent dye will conceal every filler, especially when a lighter background is needed. [10]

Manufacturer direction

As a product-specific mixing example, Mohawk M561 Dye Concentrate's reviewed Black technical sheet permits up to **1 oz. per quart of finish** for a toner in the listed compatible finishes, including nitrocellulose and CAB lacquers. It requires testing with the selected finish and is for interior use. This is a different colorant from M500 Base Concentrate; do not transfer one product's mixing allowance to another. [9]

Use measured additions and the directions for both the exact colorant and receiving finish. Where a transparent color cannot hide the repair, select a suitable compatible repair-color system rather than overloading the lacquer with dye. Confirm compatibility of the graining product before applying clear.

9. Adjust the overall color and protect it with clear

Field practice

For overall tinting, we mix Mohawk Base Concentrate into compatible Mohawk lacquer. We have done this for years and judge the color visually, but the amount depends on the color and depth of adjustment. It is important not to use too much. I introduce this tint after the sealer and first clear topcoat.

Manufacturer direction

Mohawk's 55th-edition catalog recommends **1-3 oz. of M500 Base Concentrate per gallon of lacquer** for shading and tinting. This is a recommended proportion, not a universal maximum for all colorants or approval of every coating. The catalog excludes water-reducible, shellac, and alcohol-based coatings from this concentrate's recommended uses. Check current directions and compatibility for the actual lacquer. [8]

For repeatable work, measure the mix and spray a sample before the cabinets. Compare color only with comparable preparation and clear finish; a wet tinted layer is not the same as the final dried system. Apply color evenly so overlaps do not become darker bands.

Field practice

After the tinted coat, I sand very lightly with 320 or 400, just enough to remove nibs or high spots. Aggressive sanding can remove the color. Then I apply an untinted clear coat. When that is ready, I do our thorough finaling before the final untinted clear coat. The careful final sanding takes place on the clear layer over the tint.

My tinted sequence: sealer > sand and remove dust > first clear coat > tinted coat > permitted light de-nibbing > untinted clear > thorough finaling > final untinted clear.

This sequence places two untinted clear coats after the tint. Preserve color without skipping the receiving coat's adhesion requirements. Where the product requires more intercoat sanding than the color layer can tolerate, establish an approved alternative schedule with the supplier before production. Count every added layer toward the specified total film thickness. The current Finisher's Choice directions in Section 7 govern when that product is selected. [6]

Finaling is the detailed inspection and preparation immediately before the intended last coat: examine every face, edge, profile, nib, run, and uneven area; correct defects; remove dust; and confirm readiness. If a defect survives this step, the next coat may not be the final coat after all.

10. Darken a sound existing finish without stripping

Use this branch only after the initial inspection, cleaning, and a successful compatibility test. It does not call for applying bare-wood conditioner or repeating the stripping route.

Field practice

If the existing finish is sound and we are going darker, we sand with 220, remove dust, and wipe clean. Then we complete the necessary repairs. We use tint, toner, or both to get the requested color. Once the color is right, we apply an untinted clear coat, do our thorough final sanding and inspection when it is ready, and apply the final untinted clear coat.

Repair bare areas with the selected system's appropriate local sealing and color work. A full new sealer coat is not automatically required over every sound existing finish. This is a compatible lacquer color-adjustment route, not a direction to glaze with an unrelated stain and then lacquer over it. Follow the exact products' limits for adhesion, intercoat preparation, and film build. Test for lifting, wrinkling, or adhesion failure before committing to the whole job. [6]

11. Inspect, protect, reinstall, and touch up

Field practice

We do not let cabinets leave the shop without a thorough color and shading inspection. Another set of eyes helps. We inspect from different angles and under different lighting, take photographs under those conditions, and review the pictures. I want this right before we load for delivery.

Photographs supplement direct comparison with the approved sample. Check the doors and drawer fronts together so an individual piece does not pass inspection while looking wrong beside its neighbors.

Field practice

I usually plan the final coat late in the day and allow overnight drying. Finishing at 4 p.m. and starting the following morning at 8 a.m. gives about 16 hours. Once the coating is ready for contact, we protect the parts with clean packing blankets or soft pads. We reinstall the labeled parts and inspect for nicks, dings, and contact damage.

The 16-hour example is a planning habit, not a universal pack-time or full-cure specification. Touch-dry, handle-dry, ready for padding, and fully cured are different conditions. Confirm the actual coating's packaging and service directions before wrapping, stacking, installing hardware, or putting the cabinets into use.

Field practice

After installation, we make a final check just as we do with painted cabinets. We use compatible Mohawk aerosol touch-up products. For a nick or ding, we fill if needed, sand, remove dust, restore the color and grain where needed, and rebuild the clear finish. I inspect the repair again for color, sheen, and texture.

The shared repair method in Entry 010 uses localized repair coats, followed when needed by finaling and finishing the affected section to its natural boundaries. Keep the stain-and-clear system intact. Choose the exact compatible aerosol; the brand name alone does not establish a match. Mohawk's aerosol range includes different clear and color products. [\[11\]](#)

Damaged high-gloss doors generally return to my shop. Satin and lower-sheen repairs may be possible on site when the required work-area controls can be provided. Aerosol work still follows the spray precautions in Section 2. Complete the final installed inspection and give the client the selected finish's cleaning and cure instructions.

Editorial record

By Joshua Christopher. Field methods supplied during the cabinet-refinishing interviews for this encyclopedia; compiled and reviewed September 24, 2026. Manufacturer guidance is identified separately. Product examples do not imply that every formulation in a brand's range is interchangeable. Version 1.0.

Sources

[1] Citristrip. Paint & Varnish Stripping Gel tutorial: application, plastic scraper, abrasive-pad cleanup, and protection.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[2] Old Masters. Wiping Stain: preparation, application, compatibility, drying, and oil-soaked waste.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[3] Old Masters. Gel Stain: preparation, additional coats, compatibility, drying, and oil-soaked waste.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[4] Old Masters. Wood Conditioner: application, wiping, and intervals before oil- and water-based stains.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[5] Mohawk. Finisher's Choice Clear Lacquer Sealer: compatible product pairing.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[6] Mohawk/Finishworks. Finisher's Choice Clear Lacquer 40 Sheen, 275 VOC, L41C5240 technical sheet: intercoat preparation, drying, testing, and total film limit.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[7] Mohawk/Finishworks. Finisher's Choice Clear Lacquer Sealer, 275 VOC, L48C5200 technical sheet: recoat time and sanding.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[8] Mohawk. 55th-edition catalog, page 44: M500 Base Concentrate shading and tinting recommendations.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[9] Mohawk. M561 Dye Concentrate Black technical sheet: finish-toner loading and compatibility.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[10] Mohawk/Finishworks. Stringed Instrument Brochure, 2025: dye and pigment toner distinctions.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[11] Mohawk. Aerosol product range: product-specific selection for clear and color touch-up work.

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[12] OSHA. 29 CFR 1910.107: spray finishing using flammable and combustible materials.

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[13] OSHA. 29 CFR 1926.66: criteria for design and construction of spray booths.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[14] OSHA. 29 CFR 1910.134: respiratory protection.

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[15] Mohawk/Finishworks. CAB/Acrylic Clear Topcoat 60 Sheen, 275 VOC, L50C7260 technical sheet: intercoat preparation.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)

[16] Mohawk/Finishworks. DuraCoat Pre-Cat Clear Lacquer 10 Sheen, 550 VOC, L42C5510 technical sheet: sanding and total film limit.

[Open manufacturer / official source](#)