

Preparing and Painting Interior Doors and Trim

Keep sound existing paint, repair damaged areas, and build a smooth, washable finish with careful preparation and inspection between coats.

By Joshua Christopher | Version 1.0 | October 3, 2026

My standard: For a typical painted interior door, I keep the door hanging, remove the handle and lock, and protect the hinges with hinge magnets. I clean and scuff the surface, remove loose paint, feather the edges, fill defects, and spot-prime as needed. I prefer a water-based trim enamel in satin or semi-gloss, applied in two finish coats with 320-grit sanding between coats. The surface and the finish the client wants determine whether I brush, brush and roll, or spray.

1. S / Substrate: Inspect the door, trim, and existing finish

Start with the [SPATE framework](#): identify the surface, the product already on it, and the condition of that coating before selecting the next product. A painted wood door presents an existing paint film to the new coating; exposed wood at a repair presents a different surface. Smooth faces, grain patterns, profiles, and corners also affect how the finish should be applied.

Field practice

I rarely need to strip an already-painted door completely for a normal repaint. Even with some bubbling or [peeling](#), I can usually remove the loose paint, sand and feather the edges, and repaint over the sound coating. Complete removal becomes a different discussion when the client wants to return a painted door to natural wood or stain, or when an old clear finish has begun failing.

Check the extent of any failure before deciding that local repairs are enough. If the remaining coating keeps lifting or will not provide a sound base, expand the preparation to address that failure. Painting over it does not restore [adhesion](#).

Official safety guidance

Before disturbing old paint, consider lead. EPA advises using lead-safe practices in pre-1978 homes and recommends a lead-safe certified contractor for work that may disturb lead paint. Ordinary sanding and cleanup are not substitutes for the required containment, dust control, and safe work practices. [\[1\]](#)

This entry covers routine interior repainting. Stripping for a natural finish, extensive coating failure, and specialized factory coatings require a preparation and finishing system selected for that specific surface.

2. A + T / Application and Tools: Protect the work and remove hardware

Field practice

For a standard door, I normally leave it hanging. We remove the door handle and lock and use hinge magnets to cover the hinges. This gives us access to paint around the hardware locations without coating the hardware itself.

Protect the floor, adjacent walls, and anything else outside the intended paint area. Keep the door steady while working and arrange access so the wet face will not be bumped. Keep removed hardware together for reinstallation.

For spraying, prepare the surrounding space and follow the coating and equipment instructions for ventilation, protective equipment, masking, and application. The [airless spraying guide](#) covers that equipment workflow.

3. S + T / Substrate and Tools: Clean, scuff, and feather

Field practice

I clean doors and trim much as I clean cabinets: a Scotch-Brite pad and a degreaser, followed by a clean cloth to remove the loosened grime and cleaner residue. Once the surface is clean and dry, 180 grit is my normal starting point for scuff sanding a sound painted surface.

Remove loose paint from failing areas and feather the remaining edges so the repair blends into the surrounding coating. Preserve door profiles and molded details while sanding. Remove sanding dust before proceeding.

Manufacturer direction

Sherwin-Williams' Emerald Urethane Trim Enamel directions call for cleaning, thorough rinsing, drying, removing failed paint, and dulling glossy surfaces. INSL-X specifically says to clean before sanding so contamination is not driven into the surface. Follow the selected cleaner's residue-removal instructions as well. [2, 4]

A surface that still feels greasy, sheds loose paint, or has a noticeable ridge at a repair is not ready for the next step.

4. P + A + T / Products, Application, and Tools: Fill defects and select primer

Field practice

I use wood filler for small nail holes and Bondo for larger holes. Once the repair is ready to sand, 180 grit is generally fine. For a high-gloss finish, I may work through 220 and 320 to refine the surface further.

Use a filler suitable for the material and repair size. Follow that exact product's mixing, curing, sanding, and coating instructions. Feather the repair, remove the dust, and check that it is level with the surrounding surface before applying primer.

Field practice

Spot-priming is usually enough for my typical repaint when the rest of the coating is sound. For a drastic color change, I may prime the entire door. I use paintable caulk for gaps where trim meets the wall and for open trim joints that need filling.

Primer selection must account for the surface it will actually contact, including sound existing paint, exposed material, filler, or a stain. See [Choosing the Right Primer](#) for the distinction between stain blocking and bonding. Caulk belongs in appropriate stationary gaps, not in the working clearance between the door and its frame.

Manufacturer direction

Benjamin Moore's ADVANCE sheet distinguishes full priming of new surfaces from priming or spot-priming previously painted surfaces as needed. Emerald's sheet says primer can improve hiding during a drastic color change and places caulking of interior trim gaps after priming. Match the primer and caulk sequence to the selected system, including the caulk's paint-ready time. [2, 3]

5. P / Products: Choose a washable trim enamel

Field practice

I like a water-based trim enamel in satin or semi-gloss for washability. Products I use include Sherwin-Williams Emerald Urethane Trim Enamel, Benjamin Moore ADVANCE, and INSL-X Cabinet Coat. The client's desired appearance and the job conditions help determine the choice.

Manufacturer direction

These products are not all the same resin type. The cited Emerald sheet identifies a water-based urethane-modified alkyd; ADVANCE is a waterborne alkyd; Cabinet Coat is a urethane-reinforced acrylic. Use the sheet for the exact product and sheen being applied. [2, 3, 4]

The following manufacturer times illustrate why a single drying schedule cannot cover every trim enamel. These are the cited U.S. products at 77 degrees F and 50% relative humidity; they are not hardware-installation or door-closing times.

Product and cited sheen	Dry to touch	Recoat
Emerald Urethane Trim Enamel, satin, K37 series [2]	1 hour	4 hours
ADVANCE, semi-gloss, 793 [3]	4-6 hours	16 hours
Cabinet Coat, satin, CC-65XX [4]	1 hour	6 hours

Manufacturer direction

The manufacturers qualify drying times by job conditions; cool temperatures and high humidity can extend the wait. Emerald also identifies film thickness as a factor. Check the current container and data sheet, allow the coating to dry adequately, and respect the recoat interval before applying the next coat. [2, 3, 4]

6. A + T / Application and Tools: Match the method to the door

Field practice

For a smooth door with no grain pattern, a client may request a more factory-like finish. In that situation I spray. Most of the time, I brush and roll: I brush the edges and corners first, then roll the face to blend out the brush strokes. On a door with a grain pattern, I brush in the direction of that pattern.

My normal choice for a smooth door is a 1/4-inch velour or suitable mohair-blend cover. For water-based enamel, choose a cover labeled for that coating. The brush and roller selection guide explains the difference between natural mohair and blends suitable for water-based products, as well as brush selection for enamel.

Roll the accessible flat sections consistently. Use the brush where a roller cannot reach a recess or profile; keep the finish even at the transition. Avoid leaving a heavy deposit in corners or along the lower edges of panels. The interior crew techniques guide gives more detail on brush loading and maintaining a wet edge.

Manufacturer direction

Emerald recommends a synthetic brush and a 1/4- to 1/2-inch synthetic roller cover. Cabinet Coat specifies a synthetic brush and a cover with a nap shorter than 1/2 inch, and cautions against overworking paint that is beginning to dry. Confirm the chosen applicator is suitable for the exact coating. [2, 4]

7. A + E / Application and Environment: Apply two coats and inspect between them

Field practice

My standard is two finish coats. Between coats, I sand with 320 grit. I inspect for goobers, runs, imperfections, and uneven finish so the next coat goes onto a smooth surface.

Here, "goobers" means the unwanted specks or bumps that interrupt an otherwise smooth finish. Give the first coat enough drying time to sand cleanly. If the coating is still soft or gums up the abrasive, stop and allow more drying. Remove the sanding dust before recoating.

Use a light touch around edges and profiles so sanding does not cut through unnecessarily. If it exposes bare material or removes the required primer layer, restore the appropriate primer system before finishing that area. Apply the second coat after the preparation is complete and the product's recoat requirement has been met.

After the second coat has dried, inspect the whole painted area. Look at the face, edges, corners, profiles, and repaired spots for runs, roughness, missed coverage, and differences in sheen. A second coat is not a reason to stop inspecting.

8. A + T / Application and Tools: Correct a run and restore an even finish

Field practice

To correct a dried run, I use denatured alcohol to gently soften and break down the excess finish so I can rub it level. If needed, I follow with light sanding until the area is smooth. I spot-coat the repair, then recoat the entire door to avoid [flashing](#).

This is a localized finish-removal technique. Its purpose is to soften the coating deliberately. The response depends on the coating and how far it has cured; this field method is not a manufacturer-approved repair for every enamel listed above. Test a small area before extending the repair. If the surrounding coating starts lifting or the damage spreads, stop and reassess the repair rather than continuing to rub.

Once the surface is stable, dry, and smooth, remove repair debris and restore any primer that was cut through before spot-coating and recoating. Allow each repair layer its required drying time. See [Diagnosing and Correcting Paint Flashing](#) for more on restoring a consistent appearance across the whole surface.

Official safety guidance

Use the actual solvent's label and safety data sheet to select ventilation and protection. Sunnyside's denatured-alcohol SDS, for example, identifies flammable vapor and inhalation and skin-exposure hazards. Keep ignition sources away and use the specified eye and skin protection. That SDS is a safety reference, not approval of this coating-repair method. [6]

9. E / Environment: Reinstall hardware and check the finished work

Field practice

On a door that is in use, I do not automatically wait overnight to put the hardware back. My practical check is that the finish is dry to the touch and does not take a fingerprint before I carefully reinstall the hardware. Depending on the coating, that may be an hour or more; the actual product and conditions decide how much longer it needs.

Use that as a handling check alongside the coating instructions. It does not establish full cure, resistance to pressure beneath hardware, or readiness to close the painted door against its stop. For example, the cited ADVANCE sheet lists 4-6 hours just to reach dry-to-touch condition. [3]

Manufacturer direction

Benjamin Moore describes blocking as painted surfaces sticking when pressed together before the finish has dried and cured sufficiently. Follow the coating's drying and return-to-service guidance before allowing prolonged contact between freshly painted surfaces. A finish that can be touched lightly may still be vulnerable to pressure or sticking. [5]

Remove the hinge protection, reinstall hardware without marking the finish, and check the door's operation when it is ready for use. Inspect again for handling damage, runs, rough spots, missed edges, and an uneven finish. Complete any needed correction before considering the job finished.

Sources and editorial record

[1] U.S. Environmental Protection Agency. Lead-Safe Renovations for DIYers. Guidance on lead hazards, work practices, and certified contractors.

[Open source](#)

[2] Sherwin-Williams. Emerald Urethane Trim Enamel Interior-Exterior Waterbased Satin, K37 series, product data sheet 101.010SAC, March 2026. Preparation, caulking, applicators, resin, and drying times.

[Open source](#)

[3] Benjamin Moore. ADVANCE Waterborne Interior Alkyd Semi-Gloss 793, U.S. technical data sheet, April 10, 2023. Priming, resin, drying, and cure qualifications.

[Open source](#)

[4] INSL-X / Benjamin Moore. Cabinet Coat Urethane Acrylic Satin Trim & Cabinet Enamel CC-65XX, U.S. technical data sheet, December 2, 2025. Cleaning sequence, applicators, resin, and drying times.

[Open source](#)

[5] Benjamin Moore. Paint Sticking. Blocking causes and prevention.

[Open source](#)

[6] Sunnyside Corporation. Denatured Alcohol Safety Data Sheet, product 834. Consult the SDS for the actual solvent purchased; this reference does not identify the brand used in the field account.

[Open source](#)

Field practice in this entry comes from Joshua Christopher's author interview. Manufacturer directions and safety guidance are separately attributed. Sources were checked October 3, 2026; that check date is distinct from each document's revision date. Product examples are not an exclusive list of suitable finishes. Follow current instructions for the exact product, sheen, surface, and conditions.