

Removing Wallpaper and Preparing the Wall for Paint

From the first test strip to the final coat: removing paper and adhesive, repairing damaged drywall facing, and inspecting the finished wall.

By Joshua Christopher | Version 1.0 | October 3, 2026

My standard: I test a small area first, use steam when the paper will not peel cleanly, and reserve wallpaper remover mainly for leftover adhesive. After washing, I usually wait until the next day before sanding. I seal torn drywall facing before patching, finish-sand the repairs, prime the entire wall, and inspect before and after each finish coat.

1. Inspect the wallpaper and the wall underneath

I begin with the [SPATE framework](#). Before deciding how to remove wallpaper, I need to know what is underneath it and how firmly it is attached.

Look for a loose edge or corner. Peel it back carefully and inspect the exposed area. If there is no edge to lift, I cut and remove a small test piece, roughly 3-5 inches across. Cut through the wallpaper only; do not cut into the drywall facing.

The test should answer four questions: What is the wall made of? Is there an existing paint or primer layer? How many layers of wallpaper or backing remain? Does the paper release cleanly, leave adhesive, or pull away the drywall facing?

Field practice

If the paper comes off easily and leaves little residue, I continue peeling. In my experience, that is uncommon. Usually, the test tells me it is time to bring in the steamer.

SPATE check	What to establish on this job
S	Identify drywall, plaster, existing coatings, loose paper, and damage beneath the wallpaper.
P	Select the remover, repair materials, sealer or primer, and compatible finish paint.
A	Test removal, steam and scrape, wash, dry, repair, prime, and finish in that order.
T	Prepare the steamer, scoring tool, scraper, sponge, abrasives, patching tools, and inspection light.
E	Check working conditions and dryness, then inspect at every stage before covering the work.

This guide focuses on removal followed by painting, including repairs to damaged drywall facing. Soft, crumbling, or extensively damaged walls need assessment and repair beyond a skim coat.

2. Protect the room and make the work area safe

We use tape and 4-mil plastic to protect the surrounding surfaces that are not being stripped. Cover floors, trim, fixtures, and nearby furnishings against water, wet paper, and adhesive. Arrange protection so runoff stays in the work area, and keep the walking route secure and free of slippery waste.

Manufacturer direction

ROMAN directs users to disconnect electricity to the work area at the electrical panel before removal. Wagner's 725 steamer manual warns against allowing steam or water into electrical outlets and switches. A plug cover alone is not a waterproof barrier. Keep those locations dry, and arrange a safe power supply for the steamer according to its manual. [1, 3]

Official safety guidance

EPA warns that disturbing old paint in pre-1978 homes can create hazardous lead dust. Before cutting, scraping, or sanding coatings beneath wallpaper, establish whether lead is present and follow the applicable lead-safe work practices. EPA recommends a lead-safe certified contractor for this work. The 4-mil plastic described above is splash protection, not a specification for lead containment. [6]

Manufacturer direction

The Wagner 725 manual calls for gloves and eye protection against hot steam and drips. Keep the steamer stable, use the specified grounded electrical connection, and follow its shutdown and cooling instructions before refilling. These are reference directions for that model; use the manual for the machine actually on the job. Follow the selected remover's label and safety data sheet for handling and protection. [3]

3. Steam first; score when the paper needs it

I first try steaming without scoring. If it releases easily in sheets, there is no reason to add another step. If it does not, I use a palm-sized wallpaper scoring tool with rotating cutting wheels.

Work the scoring tool in circles across the wallpaper so steam can reach the adhesive. The goal is to perforate the covering, not gouge the wall.

Manufacturer direction

ROMAN specifies light pressure when scoring and warns that excessive pressure can damage the wall. Its published removal process uses remover solution; my usual starting method is steam. Whichever method is used, test it on a limited area before committing to the whole wall. [1, 2]

I start at the top of one end of the wall and work down a vertical strip, then move across to the next strip. Apply steam according to the equipment instructions and check whether the paper has loosened enough to lift with a metal wallpaper scraper.

Keep the scraper at a shallow angle and move it under the loosened paper. If the paper resists, I steam it again. Scraping harder can turn a removal job into a larger wall repair.

Field practice

My readiness check is the paper itself: it starts to loosen and moves away with the scraper. If it is still holding tight, I return to steaming. I try to avoid using liquid remover as the main removal method; I usually save it for the glue left behind.

Do not compensate for resistance by holding steam indefinitely in one spot. Follow the machine's dwell guidance, check the exposed wall, and reassess if its facing starts to soften or tear. Remove remaining backing as well as the decorative face before moving to adhesive cleanup. [3]

4. Remove adhesive and rinse the wall

Once the paper is off, inspect for glue. Some adhesives I encounter appear green or reddish; others are much harder to see. Color is only a clue that material remains, not a reliable way to identify the adhesive.

For visible or stubborn residue, I apply a ROMAN wallpaper remover with a brush and use the scraper to lift the softened adhesive. I then wash the wall with warm water and a sponge.

Manufacturer direction

Use the directions for the exact ROMAN remover purchased. Concentrates and ready-to-use products are not interchangeable instructions. Observe the specified dilution, application, and dwell time, then rinse with clean water and let the wall dry. [2]

Run your hand along the washed surface to find remaining slick or raised areas. Change the rinse water and clean the sponge so removed adhesive is not spread back across the wall. Do not rely on appearance alone: glue can remain where the wall looks clean.

Field practice

I want the wall clean before repairs begin. Anything that remains after washing gets another check when the surface is dry; small, dry remnants can be addressed during sanding. Heavy adhesive needs removal, not concealment under patching compound or paint.

5. Let the wall dry, then address remaining buildup

I normally wait until the following day before sanding. That is my work sequence, not a guarantee that every wall will be dry overnight. Check the wall itself; humidity, ventilation, and how much water it absorbed affect the wait.

For remaining dry adhesive, grit depends on the amount and hardness of the buildup. I may use 120 grit, or occasionally 80 grit on particularly heavy deposits. Those are localized adhesive-removal choices, not a direction to sand an entire drywall wall with coarse paper.

Manufacturer direction

Sherwin-Williams advises allowing the wall to dry thoroughly and recommends fine-grit sanding for leftover residue. My occasional use of 80-120 grit is more aggressive and is limited to heavy buildup. Stop before abrading the drywall facing; return to controlled adhesive removal if sanding is damaging the wall. [5]

Inspect as you work. Remove remaining loose paper and unsound coating without enlarging the damage. Dust off the surface so it is possible to see what needs repair.

At this point, I move to repairs. I do not complete the fine finish-sanding step first and then repeat it after patching.

6. Seal torn drywall facing before patching

Where removal has torn the drywall's paper facing, remove loose or lifting fragments first. The remaining surface must be sound enough to repair. Do not apply wet patching compound directly over ragged, unsealed facing.

Field practice

I spot-prime the damaged facing before patching, using a suitable oil-based primer. Once that is dry, I skim or patch the area. I use joint compound where there are many repairs or larger areas, and spackle for smaller, isolated defects.

Manufacturer direction

Rust-Oleum lists Zinsser GARDZ, a purpose-made water-based problem-surface sealer, for damaged drywall facing before joint compound or spackle. It also seals residual wallpaper adhesive after raised adhesive has been removed. This is a manufacturer-documented alternative to my oil-based preference, not a claim that ordinary water-based primer performs the same function. Follow the selected sealer's drying and repair instructions. [4]

Spread the repair material smoothly and feather it into the surrounding wall. Let it dry as required for that product and the depth of the repair. If a broad area is uneven, skim the affected area rather than leaving a series of abrupt patch edges.

For primer selection and the distinction between sealing damage, blocking stains, and gaining [adhesion](#), see [Choosing the Right Primer](#).

7. Finish-sand, remove dust, and prime the entire wall

After repairs dry, I finish-sand with **220 grit**. I want the repairs level with the surrounding wall and their edges blended smoothly. Check by touch and with a work light held so it reveals ridges, depressions, and scratches.

Remove the sanding dust before coating. Run a clean hand over the surface again: dust should not be sitting between the wall and its primer.

Field practice

Once the wall is clean, dry, sound, and smooth, I prime the entire wall. My usual choice after wallpaper removal is a multipurpose oil-based primer compatible with the finish paint. Local sealing before a repair and full-wall priming afterward are separate steps in this process.

Manufacturer direction

Sherwin-Williams' after-removal guide also describes a water-based route, naming its Multi-Purpose Latex Primer. Oil-based primer is therefore my preference, not a universal manufacturer requirement. Where damaged facing or adhesive residue remains, use a product specifically approved for that condition; Rust-Oleum's GARDZ instructions require a clean, dry, sound surface and removal of raised adhesive first. [4, 5]

Check the chosen primer's label for application conditions, ventilation, coverage, and recoat time. A coat that feels dry is not automatically ready for its next coat. Select tools for the actual product and surface using [Selecting Brushes and Roller Covers](#).

8. Inspect the primer and apply the finish coats

I inspect the dry primer by touch and with a work light. Priming can reveal defects that were less obvious in the uncoated wall. If I find one, I correct it, sand as needed, remove the dust, and spot-prime the repair before applying finish paint.

For this full repaint, I apply **two finish coats**, observing the product's recoat interval. Inspect after the first coat so the second coat completes a sound job rather than hiding a problem that still needs attention.

Look for missed areas or [holidays](#), uneven coverage, roller marks, patch outlines, and differences in sheen or [flashing](#). Inspect the final dried coat under the work light and the room's normal lighting, from more than one angle.

Field practice

I do not routinely sand between painted wall coats. I sand when an imperfection needs correction. Inspection at each stage is what keeps a small repair from becoming a much larger job after the finish is on.

See [Repainting Previously Painted Interior Walls](#) for the full repaint sequence, [Interior Painting Techniques for a Paint Crew](#) for application, and [Diagnosing and Correcting Paint Flashing](#) if repairs or sheen differences remain visible.

9. Exception: wallpaper that will not release

Field exception

I prefer to remove wallpaper before painting. Occasionally, it remains tightly bonded despite steaming and repeated removal attempts, with no bubbling or loose edges to lift. In those exceptional cases, I have used an oil-based primer and painted over the existing wallpaper. This is a fallback, not my standard removal process. Primer selection and compatibility with the intended finish coat still need to be checked.

This exception does not apply to loose, bubbling, or [peeling](#) wallpaper. Coating over it leaves the finish dependent on the paper and adhesive underneath. Discuss that limitation with the client and test the proposed system before choosing this route. Refer to [Choosing the Right Primer](#) for the related field discussion.

Sources and editorial record

Field practice: Joshua Christopher's supplied wallpaper-removal interview and his earlier approved guidance on torn drywall facing, primer selection, and interior repainting. First-person statements describe that experience. Manufacturer directions and official guidance are identified separately; they do not endorse every field preference in this article.

Editorial version 1.0: October 3, 2026. Manufacturer references checked October 3, 2026. Product formulations, labels, and equipment instructions can change; use the current directions for the products and machine on the job.

[1] ROMAN Products. How to Remove Wallcoverings. Work-area electrical isolation, test removal, and scoring guidance. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)

[2] ROMAN Products. Wallpaper Removal Kit. Scoring pressure, product-specific remover directions, and final rinse. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)

[3] Wagner. 725 Wallpaper Steamer Owner's Manual, Form 2416309A, 0720. Electrical protection, hot-steam precautions, equipment operation, and removal procedure. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)

[4] Rust-Oleum / Zinsser. GARDZ Problem Surface Sealer, Technical Data GDZ-01, revision March 13, 2019. Damaged drywall, adhesive residue, surface preparation, and subsequent coatings. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)

[5] Sherwin-Williams. How to Paint After Removing Wallpaper. Cleaning, drying, fine sanding, repairs, primer, and finish coats. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)

[6] US Environmental Protection Agency. Lead-Safe Renovations for DIYers. Older paint, containment, dust control, and cleanup. Reviewed October 3, 2026.

[Open source](#)