

Faux Wainscoting

Moldings and paint create a traditional look

by John Langan



Don't let your eyes fool you — the illusion of elegant wainscoting in this stairwell was created with a few pieces of molding and paint.



PHOTOS BY MARK MACEMON

Wainscoting is often used to add character and boost the formality of a dining room or den. But look around any home and you'll find many areas that can benefit from this architectural detail: For example, a few panels can transform an open stairwell into a showcase of elegance. And if you use the approach shown here, you can afford to add wainscoting anywhere you please.

Installing traditional wainscot panels is expensive and requires tricky trim carpentry — especially in a staircase. But you can achieve the same look by building shadowboxes that are simply empty frames made of trim moldings and attached to the wall. The project is inexpensive and relatively easy, and the results can fool even seasoned trim carpenters.

Plan the layout

During the past few years I've installed dozens of millwork shadowboxes for clients who wanted the look of recessed-panel wainscoting in and around stairwells. I've made the box frames with many different styles of profiled molding, but my favorite combination is chair rail molding and base cap molding. I use the base cap to make

frames (square or rectangular for room walls, parallelograms in stairwells) and to cap the baseboard in some cases. The chair rail is attached as in any typical installation.

The trickiest (and most vital) part of the process is devising a layout that is well-proportioned and pleasing to the eye. Chair rail for wainscoting is typically installed 32 to 36 in. above the floor, which is one-third the height of an 8-ft. ceiling (a good rule of thumb to determine chair-rail height in any room). Some styles of wainscoting, such as Arts and Crafts style, are installed much higher. In stairwells, I prefer to set the top of the chair rail 36 to 38 in. above the top of the stair stringer.

I call the space between wainscoting elements (frames, baseboard and chair rail) the margins, and I usually try to make them about 3 in. Frames should also be uniform width within a run. That means that in most installations the frames will be wider on some walls than on others. The alternative is to make all of the frames in the room the



You can achieve a convincing recessed-panel appearance using only base cap molding (top) and profiled chair rail molding (bottom).

same size except at the start or finish of a run, as you do when laying tile. But I've found that the eye is less troubled if width variations differ from wall to wall than if they differ within one run on the same wall.

Determining the number and size of frames to install in each wall section takes a bit of trial and error. Start by measuring the length of the run. (In stairwells, measure along a horizontal line from the start to the end of the run — do not measure parallel to the stair slope.)

Next, make a rough estimate of a typical frame width, such as 20 in. For most wainscoting designs, I prefer not to make boxes narrower than 12 in. or wider than 36 in. Divide the wall-run measurement by the approximate frame width to get an idea of the number of frames. If you do not get a whole number, round the number up or down and then divide the wall-run measurement by that number.

For example, dividing 20 in. into a 107-in.-long wall yields 5.35, which can be rounded down to 5. The run (107) divided by 5 equals 21.4 in., which is about what you want the width to be. Installing five frames means you will have four margins. (The number of margins is always the number of frames minus one, unless you decide to add margins at the ends of the run, in which case you add one to the number of

Cutting acute and obtuse angles

Making parallelogram frames requires you to cut both obtuse and acute angles. Because most power miter saws cut only angles between 45 and 90 degrees, you'll need to make an auxiliary fence for at least one pair of angles.

To make the fence, use an 8-in.-long scrap of 1x6 and secure it to the extension wing of the saw, to the left of the blade. Set the board tight against the back fence and leave about 1/2 in. extending beyond the blade. Swing the saw to the left to cut a 45-degree miter. This creates a fence that will allow you to cut at a 45-degree angle when the saw is set at 0 degrees. Every degree that you swing the saw closer to this miter will yield a cut one degree less than 45 degrees. For example, to set up for a 66-degree cut, you subtract 66 from 90, yielding 24. Then you subtract 24 from 45 degrees to find the cutting angle (21 degrees) at which to set your saw.

To make the cut, position the molding against the fence and secure it with a clamp. The resulting cut will be the left-hand piece. To cut the right-hand piece, create an accessory fence on the right side of the saw and follow the same steps. — JL

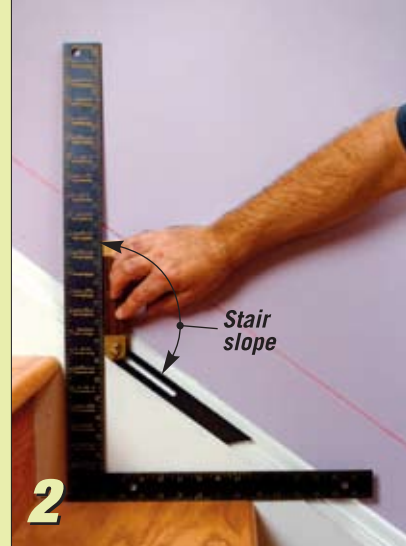


PHOTO BY JOHN LANGAN

HOW TO INSTALL FAUX WAINSCOTING



1 Snap a parallel chalk line 3 in. above the staircase stringer to mark the lower horizontal margin.



2 Measure the slope of the staircase using a square and a bevel gauge. A typical staircase slope is 132 degrees.



3 Paint the molding and margin areas using a brush and semigloss paint; then paint the interior of each frame with a short-nap roller.



3 Use a story stick to mark the chair rail height, the margins and the tops of the frames.



4 Draw vertical reference lines at the ends of the stair stringer to mark the starting point and end of the staircase run.



5 Apply glue (we used high-tack molding glue) or panel adhesive to the back of the trim pieces.



6 Drive a few finish nails or brads into the chair rail, preferably at wall stud locations.



7 Attach the frame pieces according to the wall layout, using glue and a single fastener driven into the center of each piece. Adjust the pieces as needed and then nail the ends.

frames.) Subtract 12 in. (four margins at 3 in.) from the total length to get 95 in. Now simply divide 95 by five to get the exact width of each frame: 19 in.

Frame height is simply the distance from the top of the baseboard to the bottom of the chair rail (measured perpendicular to the moldings) minus 6 in. (3 in. for the top and bottom margins).

Draw layout lines

For shadowbox wainscoting to look convincing, you should paint everything from the baseboard to the chair rail the same color (typically a different color from the wall above) after the moldings have been attached. This approach lets you draw or snap layout lines directly onto the wall because you'll be painting the area anyway.

Start the layout by snapping chalk lines 3 in. above the baseboard to indicate the lower horizontal margins (photo 1, opposite). There are plenty of ways to measure and lay out the frame locations, but the easiest and most reliable is to use a story stick.

To make a story stick, first measure the angle of the stair stringer using a square and a bevel gauge (photo 2). Set a miter saw to that angle and trim the end of a piece of scrap. Cut the other end of the stick parallel to the first cut so the length of the stick equals the planned distance from the top of the baseboard to the top of the chair rail. Draw a line on the story stick parallel to the cuts to indicate the location of the top horizontal margin. Rest the story stick on the top of the baseboard and mark the margins and chair rail loca-

tions (photo 3). If you wish, you can snap reference chalk lines for the chair rail and margin locations.

To determine where the frames should start and stop, use a 4-ft. level to extend a plumb line up from the top and bottom points of the main stair stringer (photo 4). Then cut a 3-in.-wide spacer and use it and the level as guides to outline the edges of the frame locations.

Install the frames and rails

The chair rail makes a good reference for ensuring that the frames are installed correctly, so I like to attach it first. Cut the pieces to fit individually, and fasten them to the wall with glue (photo 5) and nails (photo 6).

When cutting the parallelogram-shaped frames for the stairs, you will have to cut pairs of obtuse and acute angles. Typically, the obtuse angles (greater than 90 degrees but less than 180 degrees) for the frames are about 132 degrees, and the acute angles (less than 90 degrees) are about 48 degrees. To determine the cutting angles for your saw, subtract the angle of the stairs (see photo 2) from 180 and divide the result in half. For example, a stair angle of 132 degrees subtracted from 180 leaves 48. Divide the remainder in two to get the acute cutting angle — in this case, 24 degrees.

If you're familiar with miter saws, you know that most will cut only angles between 45 and 90 degrees. I've developed a trick for cutting sharp angles on my power miter saw (see "Cutting Acute and Obtuse Angles," p. 53). You could also use a hand miter box and a

spacer block to make the cuts.

Cut all of the frame pieces. Because each frame will have both an acute angle and an obtuse angle at opposite ends, cut all of the acute angles first. It is much easier to measure the length of the piece for the obtuse angle once the acute angle has been cut.

After you've cut all of the pieces, you're ready to assemble the frames. I prefer to follow my layout lines and build the frames right on the wall. Start with the top piece of the frame and apply glue to the back. Position it and nail it in the center only — this way you can still make fine adjustments when fitting the miters.

Attach the other pieces of the frame, nailing in the center only (photo 7). Fit the miter tight, and nail both ends of all pieces. I like to lock-nail the corners of the miter with a small finish nail for added strength. Install all of the remaining frames. I prefer to install the nonangled frames last.

Run a thin bead of paintable latex caulk around the inner and outer perimeters of each frame. Finish the job by painting the chair rail and everything below it with semigloss paint. The shine of the paint enhances the shadow line, creating the illusion of a recessed flat panel. When painting, I cut in with a brush on the molding first and then roll the "panels" inside the frames with a short-nap roller (photo 8).

Using these tricks of the trade, you can add the beauty of wainscoting to any space in your home. Accurate measurements and careful layout are the keys to success, so take your time. You'll be rewarded with a rich appearance that far outweighs the project's minimal expense. ♦

Club member John Langan is owner of JL Molding Design of Hillsborough, New Jersey.



For more information go to www.HandymanClub.com/FromHandy and click on the Web Extras box.