

HOME  
IMPROVEMENT

# How To Finish Drywall

BY STEVEN WILLSON,  
Home Improvement Editor  
PM Illustrations by  
George Retseck

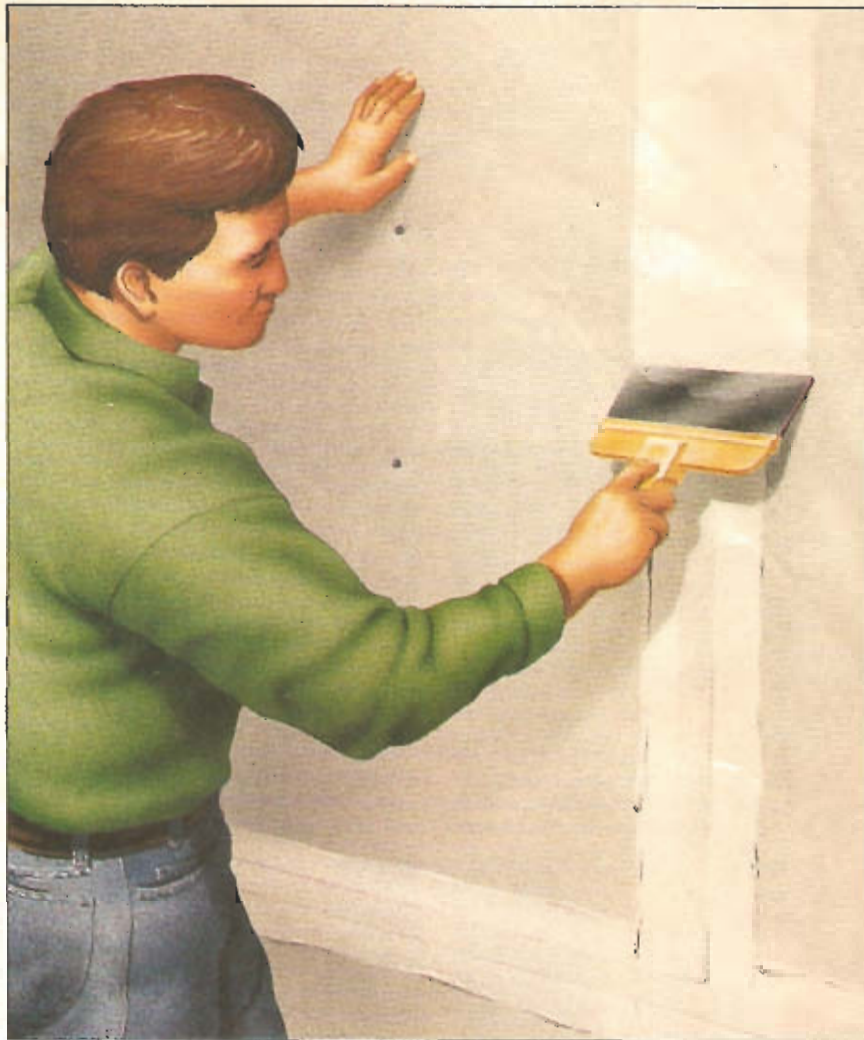
● There are few home improvement tasks greeted with more dread than finishing drywall. You may call it taping, or even Spackling, and you may be able to avoid expletives altogether when talking about it. But if you're like most people, you hope that you've already done your last finishing job. Unfortunately, if you enjoy working on your home and have even modest plans for remodeling in the future, you are bound to be confronted by this old nemesis again. So it could be worth your while to check out the tips and techniques we discuss here.

### Before you begin

The selection of tools we show here (Fig. 1) is not the only one that will work. Some people prefer a 6-in. knife for applying the first coat of compound. And then they follow with a 10-in. knife for the second coat and a 12-in. blade for the final skim coat. Generally speaking, these wider knives are harder to control, so that's why we recommend a narrower knife for each step. Regardless of your preference, just make sure that the knife blades are all very flexible. You should be able to easily bend the blades as shown.

Your selection of compound is just as important as your selection of tools. Compound is available in two types. One is called a setting compound that hardens by a chemical reaction. The other is a drying compound that cures by evaporation. The latter is available in powder or a ready-mix version, but for most people the ready-mix version is much more convenient.

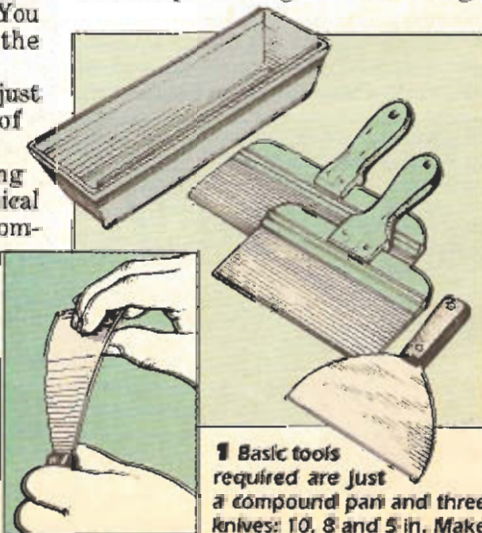
For this job we used USG's relatively new ready-mix drying compound called Lightweight Plus 3. It's supposed to shrink less, weigh less and be easier to sand than the company's standard drying compound, without



sacrificing any strength. After using the product to finish an entire house, we have to agree.

You also have a choice when it comes to joint tape—between paper tape and self-sticking fiberglass mesh tape. The great advantage

of the fiberglass tape is that it eliminates the need for the first coat of compound—and that's a big deal. But tape manufacturers say the fiberglass product should be used only with setting compounds, not drying ones. In our opinion, the difficulties of working with a setting compound outweigh the advantage of using the fiberglass tape.



1 Basic tools required are just a compound pan and three knives: 10, 8 and 5 in. Make sure knife blades are flexible.

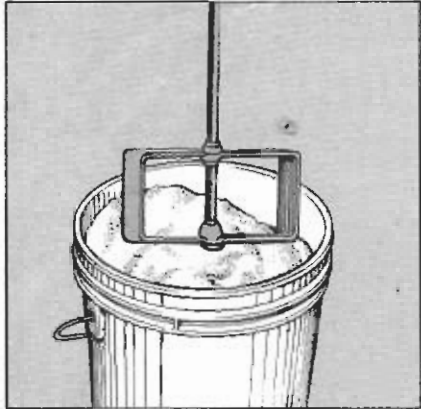


2 Premixed joint compound is the best choice for most work. Buy an inexpensive cover tool to open the 5-gal. buckets.

One last tip: If you buy your compound in 5-gal. pails like we did, be sure to buy an opening tool like the one shown (Fig. 2). It costs about \$1, and opening these pails without one is very frustrating.

## Getting started

There are probably as many approaches to the finishing process as there are finishers. But a few rules of thumb are appropriate for beginners.



**3** Though not required, your results will improve if you stir the compound with a mixing paddle chucked into an electric drill.

First, always keep your knives as clean as possible. This means wiping off the excess compound on the edge of the pan after each pass with the knife. Second, never mix dried compound into fresh compound. Even the smallest piece of dried debris will leave a messy gouge in the finished surface. If dried compound does find its way into your pan or pail, remove it immediately. Finally, remember that the surface of the compound will



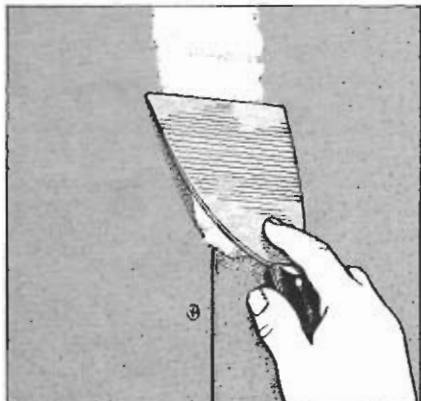
**4** Begin work on the butt joints by loading a 5-in. knife with compound. Scrape the excess compound off both corners of the knife.

be only as smooth as the stroke you use to apply it. In the beginning, make a concerted effort to lengthen your strokes and keep the knife aligned with the direction of the joint. Until you get the knack, compound will certainly squeeze off the knife and fall to the floor. But by loading the knife with less compound, you can minimize the mess.

Joint sequence usually begins with the butt joints—those on the ends of the boards—followed by tapered joints—those along the edges—followed by inside corners and then outside corners. Keep in mind that the inside corners have to be done in two steps because you can only work on one side of the joint at a time. If you try to finish both sides at once, your knife will foul the first side while you work on the second side.

## Butt and tapered joints

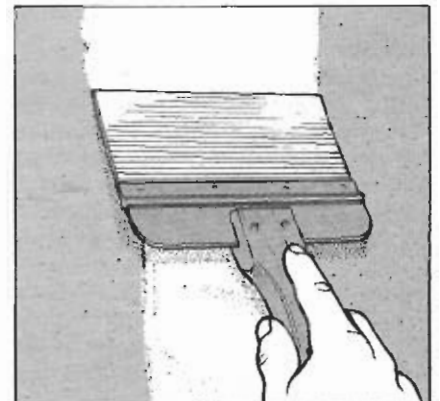
Begin work by mixing the joint compound (Fig. 3). Although this isn't absolutely necessary with ready-mix compounds, it does smooth out the compound and make it easier to apply. Starting at a butt joint, load up a 5-in. knife, making sure its corners



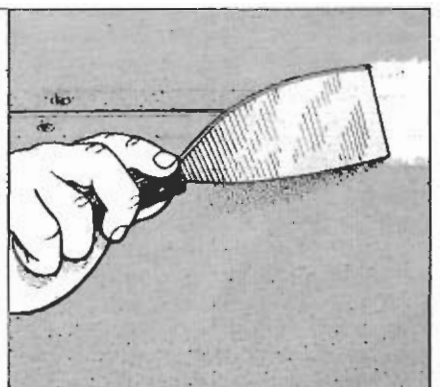
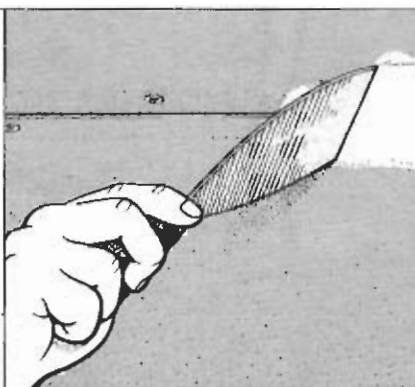
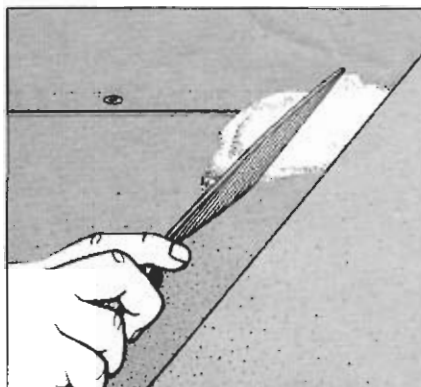
**5** Starting at one end of the butt joint, apply the compound to the wall. Use one continuous stroke until the knife is empty.



**6** Once the entire joint is covered smoothly with compound, cut a piece of tape and embed it in the compound over the joint line.



**7** Having embedded the tape in the compound, cover the tape with another coat of compound using an 8-in. knife.



**8** Finishing ceiling joints is difficult because the compound tends to fall. Proper knife control (as shown from left to right) can prevent this mess. Press the knife firmly against the ceiling. Then, as you draw it across the ceiling, flatten out the blade.

are clean (Fig. 4), and apply the compound starting at one end of the joint (Fig. 5). Work as smoothly as you can, reloading the knife when you run out.

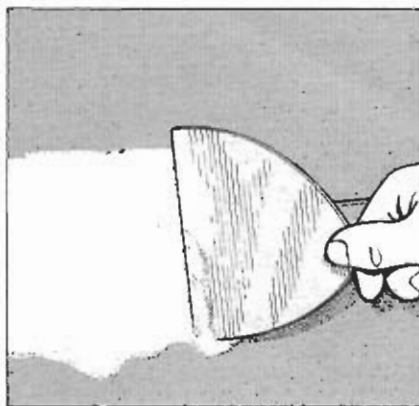
Then, clean off the knife on the side of the pan and smooth the entire joint in one stroke. Don't press so hard that you remove all of the compound. If you scrape the surface clean in an area, reapply compound because the paper tape won't stick to the paper covering on the drywall without compound underneath. Once the compound is smooth, cut a piece of joint tape to length and embed it in the compound using your fingers (Fig. 6). Align the middle of the paper directly over the middle of the butt joint.

With a 5-in. knife, smooth the tape into the compound and wipe off any excess that squeezes out. Your goal is to get enough compound on the wall to hold the tape, but not so much that you leave a noticeable bump. After a little practice, you should be able to get a relatively smooth surface with the tape straight and flat.

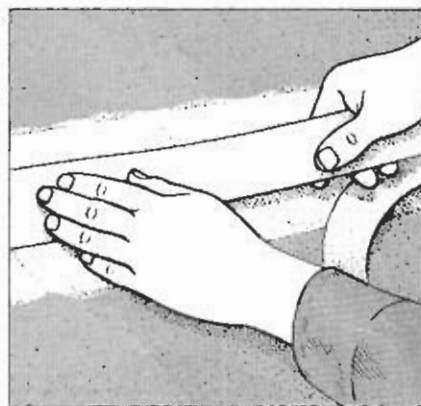
Once the tape is in place, cover the entire joint with more compound, this time using an 8-in. knife (Fig. 7). Use the same techniques as described with the 5-in. knife.

Certainly one of the most difficult joints is a ceiling butt joint. In the first place, you are working over your head, which is always awkward. And in the second, a butt joint has no tapered edges that tend to hold compound better. To start such a joint, load your knife as before and press it against the ceiling. Then slowly move across the joint in a smooth stroke, progressively flattening the knife as you move (Fig. 8). This will help reduce falling compound while at the same time yield a smoother surface. It does take time to get the feel of it, but with practice, you can keep the mess to a minimum.

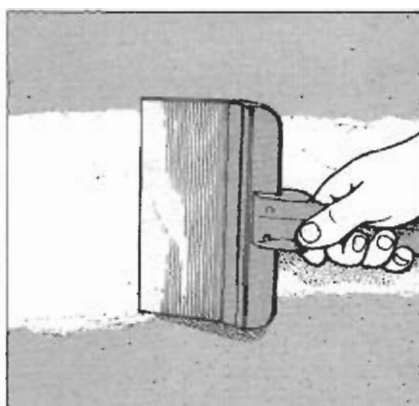
The tapered joints are easier to finish because of the depression built into the long edges of all drywall panels, but they are approached just like the butt joints. First, you fill the joint with compound using a 5-in. knife (Fig. 9). Then, you embed the tape with your fingers (Fig. 10) and smooth it into place with the 5-in. knife. Last, finish up the first coat by applying compound with an 8-in. knife (Fig. 11). When you are doing your flatwork, as the butt and tapered joints are sometimes called, it makes sense to cover the screw- or nail-heads, too. Just apply joint compound over each of them (Fig. 12), and scrape off the excess.



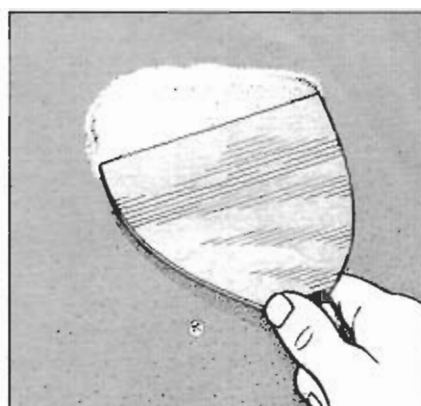
**9** When all the butt joints are taped, turn to the tapered joints. Using a 5-in. knife, fill the tapered area with compound.



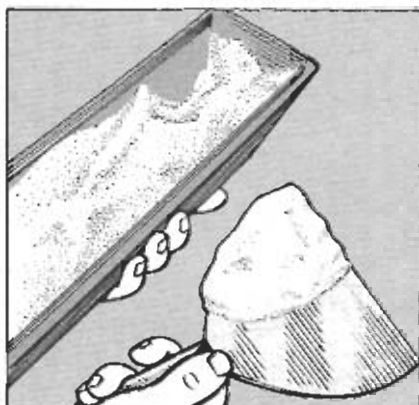
**10** Once the base coat is smooth, embed the tape in the compound. Keep the middle of the tape directly over the joint line.



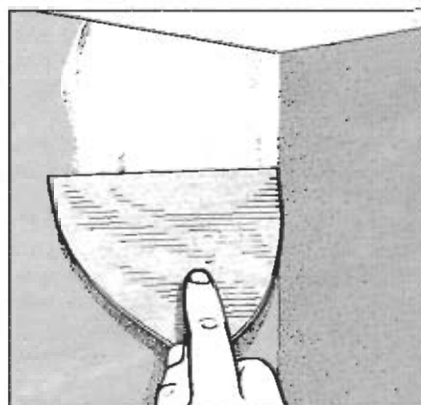
**11** Smooth the tape into place using the 5-in. knife, and then cover the entire joint with compound using an 8-in. knife.



**12** Fill the nail or screw depressions with compound using the 5-in. knife. Scrape off excess compound before proceeding.



**13** To reduce compound squeeze-out when working on inside corners, load only one knife corner with compound.



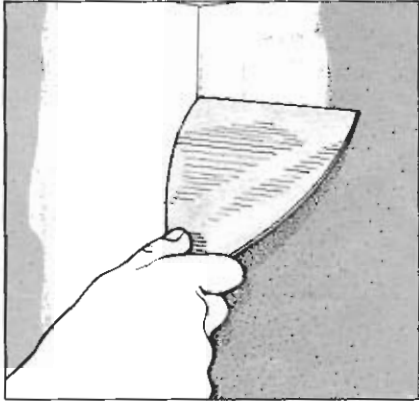
**14** Press loaded knife against inside corner and move it smoothly along joint. Very little compound should squeeze out.

### Corner joints

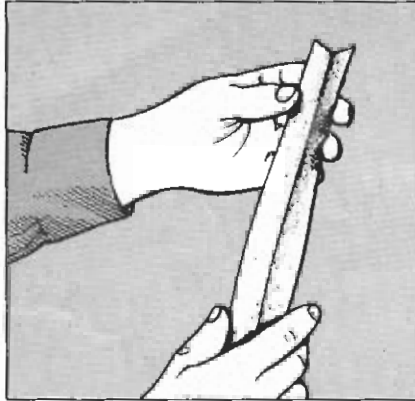
As mentioned earlier, inside corner joints are more difficult, because each stage—except the first—of the finishing process has to be done in two steps, to allow drying time in between. Although this seems inconvenient, sensible planning will allow you to organize your work in a way that incorporates the needed drying time.

To start an inside joint, first load a

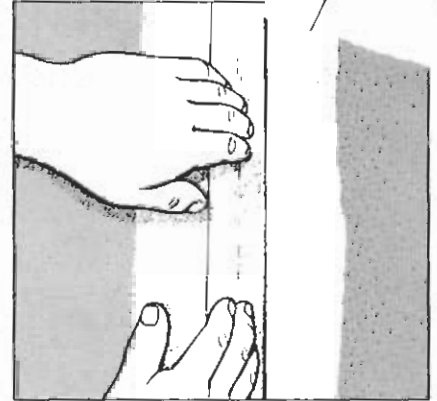
5-in. knife on one corner only (Fig. 13) and then apply the compound to one wall with a smooth, steady stroke (Fig. 14). By working in this fashion, you will limit the compound that squeezes out. Then load the other corner of the knife and coat the other side of the joint (Fig. 15). You are bound to foul the first side when you coat the second, but just try to avoid it as much as possible.



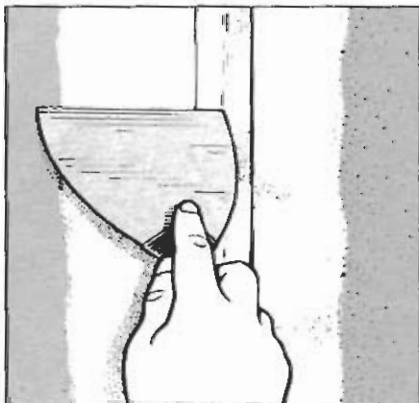
**15** Once one side of the joint is coated, load the other corner of the knife and apply compound to the other side of the joint.



**16** Cut the paper tape to length and fold it from end to end along the center depression line. Take care to avoid paper cuts.



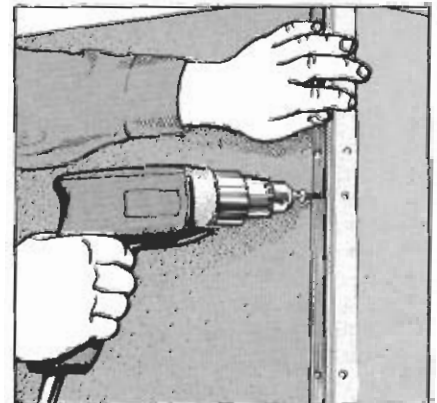
**17** Carefully press the tape into the compound. Make sure the folded edge is aligned with the midpoint of the inside corner.



**18** Lightly embed the tape in the compound using a 5-in. knife. Finish one side completely before moving to the other side.



**19** Once both sides of the tape are embedded in the joint, add another coat of compound to one side using an 8-in. knife.

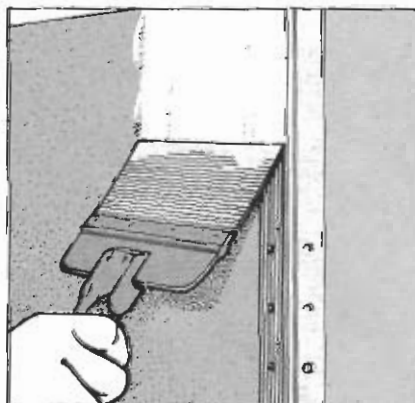


**20** Outside corners require angled corner beads. Cut the bead to length and attach it with screws driven from both sides.

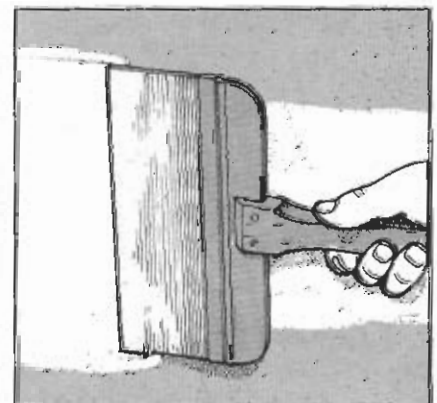
Next, cut a piece of tape to length and fold it down the middle (Fig. 16). Carefully push the tape into the joint with your fingers (Fig. 17). Make sure that the fold in the paper lines up with the corner of the joint. Embed the tape on one side of the joint at a time using a 5-in. knife (Fig. 18). Do not bear down hard. Just keep steady, even pressure on the knife and do your best to keep the surface smooth. Once the excess compound has been removed from both sides, apply a top coat to one side of the joint using an 8-in. knife (Fig. 19).

The inside corners along the ceiling are finished in the same way. When those are complete, move on to any outside corners. The first step in finishing these is to attach metal corner bead to the joint with drywall screws or nails (Fig. 20). Then, using an 8-in. knife, fill the area over the corner bead with compound (Fig. 21). Work on one side first and then finish off with the other.

At this point, you should return to coat the other side of all the inside corners, and then you'll be done with your first coat of compound. Once



**21** Fill the depression created by the corner bead with compound using an 8-in. knife. Employ the corner of the bead as a guide.



**22** When first coat of compound on all joints is dry, apply another coat using a 10-in. knife. Be sure to feather out both edges.

everything is dry, scrape off any ridges or chunks of dried compound with your 5-in. knife. If you've done a reasonable job of applying the compound, sanding isn't necessary. Remember, a depression is easy to fill on the next coat, but a ridge will prevent the knife from laying flat and will ruin any hopes of a smooth second coat. When everything is smooth again, use a 10-in. knife to apply a

second coat of compound, following the same joint sequence as you did for the first coat (Fig. 22).

Repeat the whole process for a third coat, and when it's dry, sand the surface with 180- or 220-grit paper, making sure to wear a respirator and safety goggles. Then vacuum up the mess, apply a coat of primer to the walls and you'll be ready for paint or wallpaper. **PM**