RIPPING Rock
(a How-to Rock (and How-Not-To!))

Drywall hangers call long, skinny pieces of drywall "rips." Rips of drywall are used on the jambs of windows, the faces of soffits, wraps for beams or posts, etc. Rockers hang many rips every day, so it’s important to know how to cut them accurately and quickly.

There are a couple of tools on the market designed to cut rips of drywall. One fairly recent addition is a short T-square with little ovoid slits in it where you can set your blade and then drag the thing down the sheet while sliding the cross piece on the edge of the drywall. The other tool is a gizmo that pinches the sheet between sets of cutting wheels. I’ve tried both these tools and found them limited in application.
The fastest, most versatile and coolest method is the Rocker’s Parallel Cut.

On a horizontal cut, you’ll be walking backward, so look over your path before you begin or you might step in a hole or out and over a balcony!

When an apprentice tries this cut for the first time, his reaction tends to be one of shock: “Wow... that’s really hard. I can’t do it.” This isn’t completely true. It is a difficult technique to master, but I’ve never found someone who couldn’t learn it.

The parallel cut is done with a tape measure and utility knife, making a cut that is parallel to one of the sides of a piece of drywall. That piece of drywall needs to be steady, and it needs a smooth edge to guide your hand. Your knife should be sharp. (The knife’s blade should always be sharp. I’ve seen blood spout from various parts of my body due to a dull blade!)

If you wield the knife in your right hand, grasp the tape in your left, the knife in your right, and pull the tape blade out with a spare finger on your right hand. Place the knife blade on the inside or outside of the tape blade’s hook.

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Secret Tricks

Okay, all the basics are in place, and we’re set to go on the sheet. Whether
cutting horizontally or vertically, or whether you prefer your knife blade on the inside or outside of the hook, the real secret of executing this cut is the ability to make your hands move at the same speed and direction. The left hand rides smoothly and gently on the top edge of the drywall, and the blade in the right hand smoothly scores the face of the rock.

The most common error is focusing on the tension in the tape blade. The apprentice who does this finds himself pulling or pushing on the tape blade. His hands sort of leap-frog each other, making a cut that resembles a series of waves. Once the tape, tape blade and knife are in position on the sheet, you should almost forget about the tape blade. Concentrate on moving your hands in a synchronous fashion, at the same speed and in the same direction. When that occurs, the tape blade gives just the light guide needed to ensure a parallel cut that is lovely to behold!

So, you rip the sheet vertically or horizontally. Fold it away from the cut, score the back if needed, then snap it back toward you. Piece of cake!

Here’s a variation on this theme. Occasionally, you have to cut a drywall rip that may be only 1 inch wide. Or you become obsessed with the beauty of what you’re hanging, and you feel the need to cut a half-inch rip (been there!). Rips that small are tricky. First, it’s difficult to get both hands, a tape and a knife in a small enough clump to cut something like that. And second, when you try to fold the rip back, it’s so thin and fragile that it might crumble. The technique for cutting these tiny rips falls under the category of
“eyeball-drywall.” (Eyeball-drywall is all those drywall-related activities that require the use of hand-eye coordination without the aid of a measuring device.)

**Cutting Right Along . . .**

Use your tape to measure a point a half-inch from the smooth edge of the drywall. Set your knife at that mark with its cutting-edge pointed in the direction you intend to travel with your cut. Set your thumb on the edge of the drywall and consciously “lock” your hand in that position.

Now run your thumb down the sheet scoring its face with the knife (cut #1 in the diagram on page 74). Before folding the rip back, away from the cut, turn the sheet over and rip the back to correspond with the front (cut #2). Still on the back of the drywall, make another parallel cut about a quarter of an inch away from cut #2. Angle this cut so as to make a small wedge in the drywall. Then make one final deep pass of the knife along the same path made by cut #2. The wedge-cut (#3) allows the last cut to penetrate deeper into the drywall.

Now fold the rip back, gradually working your way up and down the piece until it comes loose all at once. Depending on the consistency thickness and size of your rip, you can dispense with the last two cuts. For example, if I were cutting a one-inch rip of half-inch drywall from a “fresh” sheet (not too dry or too moist), I would probably just cut the front and first back rip. But if that same one-inch rip had to be cut from five-eighths-inch drywall, I would add the third and forth cuts.

See? Piece of cake!

**About the Author**

Pat Carrasco is a drywall hanger, trainer and writer. He lives in Montana and is working on a book about drywall hanging.