



Highlights: Painters

Painting is the easiest way to upgrade a home's look, inside or out. **Bay Area Consumers' Checkbook**, available at www.checkbook.org, offers a primer on hiring a painter and also gives advice for doing it yourself. Highlights from Checkbook's report include:

Tips for hiring a professional painter

- Many people do their own painting, but you'll probably want to hire an expert if you're putting a few coats on every room or the exterior of a house two stories or higher. And if your home was built before the 1978 lead paint ban, you'll want a pro to deal with that.
- Despite modern formulations that resist cracking, peeling, mold, and mildew, the skills of the painter are still more important than the paint. If the painter doesn't clean mold, scrape off loose coatings, sand, prime, and properly repair drywall, siding, and trim, even the best paint won't last.
- You'll want to get several proposals. Checkbook's undercover homeowner got bids from nine professionals to repaint the walls, ceiling, and trim for a living room, dining room, family room, bathroom, and kitchen. Prices included removing kitchen wallpaper and costs for paint and supplies. Prices ranged from \$1,380 to \$6,512—a difference of more than \$5,000.
- In addition to consulting Checkbook's ratings of painters, look for contractors with references from previous customers in your neighborhood for jobs within the past year, or with other particulars that reach beyond two or three satisfied customers. Also ask for references from paint suppliers. A few phone calls will help you determine if the candidate is highly regarded or barely known.
- When asking for references from previous customers, give more weight to contractors with long track records of successful projects and more years in business. Experience matters, particularly with a traditional manual skill like painting.
- Invite several candidates to inspect the job, compare their proposals, and then make sure to put in writing a contract that includes details of prep work; paint specs by brand name, type, color, and product number; the number of coats; and a full description of the work, including items sometimes left out like cabinet interiors and shutters.
- When selecting paint, or working with a contractor to select paint, first check the *Consumer Reports* paint ratings. In its tests, some relatively inexpensive paints performed better than more expensive paints and cost \$10 to \$20 less per gallon.

Tips for working with a professional painter

- *Do some prep work.* You're paying for painting, not for workers to move furniture or clear kitchen cabinets. It's one thing to ask for help moving a large bookcase, but first pack up all the books on it—and all your knick-knacks in the room.
- *Make space for painters.* Move your car out of the driveway so the painter can park a van full of supplies near the house. Allot them an area on-site for stowing tools and materials.
- *Keep up on daily schedules.* Ask when the crew will start and finish work each day.
- *Communicate.* Brief meetings to discuss the job—preferably every day—help quash misunderstandings.

- *Deal promptly with surprises and changes.* No contract can anticipate every possibility. Materials may be unavailable. Large chunks of rotten siding may crumble along with the old paint. Exterior jobs may be stopped cold by a week of steady rain.
- *Be aware of extras.* Changing your mind about a color after the trim is already painted is an extra. The procedure then is to work out a mini-contract with the painter, called a “change order,” that briefly describes what was and what will be, and establishes a price for the extra work. Be mindful that no painter can foresee that a small hole by the gutter is the entry for a horde of squirrels that chewed up your ceilings. When a questionable extra pops up, look for a middle ground.
- *Don't call after work hours.* Once the job starts, limit discussions about the job to work hours. Describing paint problems is a lot easier when you're both on-site looking at them.
- *Put up with noise.* Listening to music or podcasts makes the day shorter. Avoid intruding on workers' routines.

Tips for doing it yourself

- *Clear the area.* Move everything out of the room, or push it into a pile in the center and cover with a drop cloth.
- *Minimize cleanup.* Tape drop cloths in place so they won't shift as you work and move ladders. Also, remove light fixtures and electrical cover plates so you won't have to paint around them or clean them after painting.
- *Light it up.* Flooding the room with bright lighting will make it easier to identify cracks and uneven surfaces, and help you to apply even coats of paint.
- *Prep the walls.* Even the best paint can't hide obvious defects. How well you fill cracks, scrape, and sand will make or break the job. If drywall seams are cracked or blistered, cut them open, add layers of compound, and sand them smooth. Dig out cracks, scrape flaking paint until you hit solid material, and sand down any hard edges of the old paint surface. Lightly wash all surfaces with a sponge dampened with warm water and a little soap or liquid detergent.
- *Prime raw surfaces.* Cover any spackled areas with a prime coat, brushing out the edges to avoid lap marks later on.
- *Conceal stains.* Coat blemishes such as grease stains and crayon marks with pigmented white shellac, the generic name for stain-killer products such as B-I-N and KILZ. It prevents color from bleeding through the final coat of paint.
- *Mask edges.* Use painter's masking tape in places where it's difficult to coat one surface neatly up to, but not onto, another—a skill called “cutting in.”
- *Keep rooms ventilated.* Open windows and set up fans to keep air moving; this helps the paint dry and reduces fumes.
- *Paint in sections.* Paint one area at a time—from a corner to a door or window. Cut in the edges with a brush so you won't have to roll right up to the trim. This speeds paint rolling and reduces lap marks—edges of paint that dry before you get back to them and continue around the room.
- *Start high and work down.* Start with the ceiling, then crown moldings, then walls, and finally baseboards.
- *Double-roll it.* When painting walls, after cutting in around trim, lay a few heavy horizontal swaths of paint onto the immediate work area. As they start to drip, roll out horizontal and slightly angled strokes to spread the paint; then switch to vertical strokes to finish. If there are any drips or laps still showing, repeat the vertical strokes with less pressure, lightly lifting the roller off the wall at the end of each pass to produce an even and continuous coat.

Checkbook's editors are available for interviews. Please contact Jamie Lettis at 202-454-3006 or jlettis@checkbook.org to schedule.