Getting Clean Cuts in Plywood

When crosscutting a plywood panel, the bottom layer of veneer often splinters out along the cut line. But there are some steps you can take to prevent this from happening.

Plywood Blade – Perhaps the easiest way to avoid excessive splintering is to use a special blade with more teeth, that's made just for cutting plywood. The more teeth per inch, the cleaner the cut.

Combination Blade – But if you only have a combination blade, there are a few tricks you can use to get a clean cut. First, if the blade is crusted with sawdust or pitch, clean it thoroughly. Sometimes, however, even a clean combination blade will splinter the veneer.

There are two reasons for this. First, a combination blade has fewer teeth than a plywood blade, so it won't cut as cleanly. Secondly, the cutting edge of the teeth may be pushing the veneer down rather than slicing it off.

Blade Height – One way to avoid this is to change the cutting angle of the teeth by raising or lowering the blade. If your panel is splintering on the bottom, lower the blade. If it's splintering on the top of the plywood, raise the blade.

Scoring Cut – The most common way to get a clean cut is to score the panel along the cut line before making the cut *(Fig. 1)*. To do this, cut through the veneer layer with a sharp utility knife. While this method works, it's sometimes difficult to line up the saw blade with the scored line.

Scoring On the Saw – An easier way to score the panel is to use the saw blade itself. The trick is to make the cut in two passes. On the first pass, set the blade just high enough to cut through the veneer *(Fig. 2a)*. Then raise the blade and finish the cut on the second pass. To help ensure the workpiece stays aligned with the blade during both cuts, you can clamp an extension fence with a stop block to your miter gauge *(Fig. 2)*.

Backer Board – Another way to keep the veneer from splintering is to use a backer board *(Fig. 3)*. This is a piece of plywood or hardboard that's placed below the workpiece when making the cut. This way the veneer layer is supported and can be cut cleanly.