

## Tool Sharpening

Andrew Davis, March 2016

Not too long ago I took the two-week hand-tool course at North Bennet Street. I had been forewarned by others that I would not touch a piece of wood for about 3-4 days, spending that first allotment of class time sharpening my chisels and plane. That's when I learned that a chisel isn't ready for real woodworking when it comes home from Home Depot, Rockler, or Woodcraft; it's merely roughed in and ready for the owner to make it sharp. It was a true awakening. I came to realize that sharp tools are safer than dull tools and that sharp tools can make life a lot easier and make finished products more precise. After the class ended, I found that I was using my hand tools for more tasks once I got back home, not looking to do everything on my tablesaw, etc.

What I didn't come to realize till later is that if you ask two woodworkers about sharpening practices, you get three opinions on the merits of waterstones, oil stones, diamonds, grit numbers, leather honing techniques, the correct angle, honing guides, hollow grinds, micro-bevels, Tormek devices, polishing compounds, etc.. In fact, my NBSS class spent more than a day changing the plane blade angle from the factory setting of 25 degrees to 27.5 degrees, the favored angle of the class instructor. Much superior results, he asserted.

Any google search will show an abundance of web sites and videos on how to sharpen, hone, and strop an edge onto any chisel or plane blade. On Paul Sellers web site, you can find one of many opinions such as, "controversial though it may seem, and though adopting micro-bevel methods for sharpening chisels may seem to make sense, a freehand convex bevel actually gives exactly the same sharpness as any micro-bevel method, but takes only a fraction of the time to develop. A convex bevel keeps its edge longer, is stronger than most other bevels and needs no special equipment beyond a pair of hands." One of his de-mystifying videos, on working magic with really cheap chisels, can be found at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ki8tt-VjwqI>

Everything you wanted to know about tool sharpening but were afraid to ask can be addressed in the comfort of your own shop by the sharpening bible, "The Complete Guide to Sharpening" by the recently-deceased Leonard Lee (as in Lee Valley Tools) or "The Handplane Book" by Garrett Hack.

Beyond the materials and techniques, I suspect a big part of the subject relates to work styles where the rubber meets the road. Some woodworkers sharpen their tools after using them and before they put them away. Hence, when they begin work, they are starting with a sharp tool. Others begin their work by sharpening tools that were left in a less-than-pristine state from prior tasks. This difference in work habits probably relates to how their mothers let them grow up.