

Designing With Interior Trim

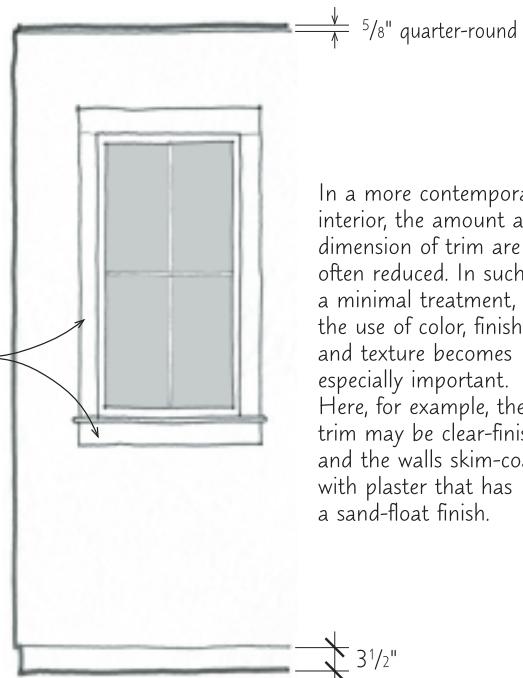
by Katie Hutchison

Though often unsung, interior trim can enhance how we relate to rooms of different sizes and personalities. As ceiling heights increase from the conventional 8 feet to 9 and even 10 feet, the type, dimension, and placement of trim components vary according to fundamental rules of scale, proportion, and hierarchy. In this column, we'll explore those principles, and how they relate to ceiling height and room personality. Whether you're designing a traditional or a more contemporary space, the same concepts apply.

As usual, there are no hard and fast rules, just a framework of context to guide your trim design decisions.

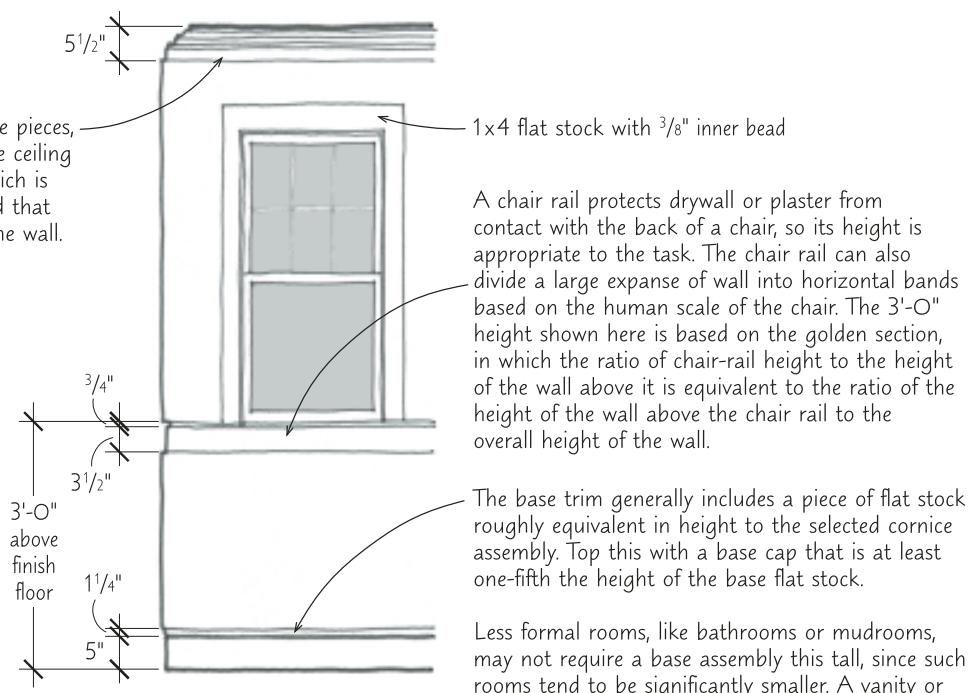
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Contemporary Interior Trim, 8-Foot Ceiling



In a more contemporary interior, the amount and dimension of trim are often reduced. In such a minimal treatment, the use of color, finish, and texture becomes especially important. Here, for example, the trim may be clear-finished and the walls skim-coated with plaster that has a sand-float finish.

Traditional Interior Trim, 8-Foot Ceiling



A cornice is often composed of multiple pieces, including a crown mounted against the ceiling and a projecting piece of flat stock, which is generally received below by a bed mold that transitions back to flat stock against the wall.

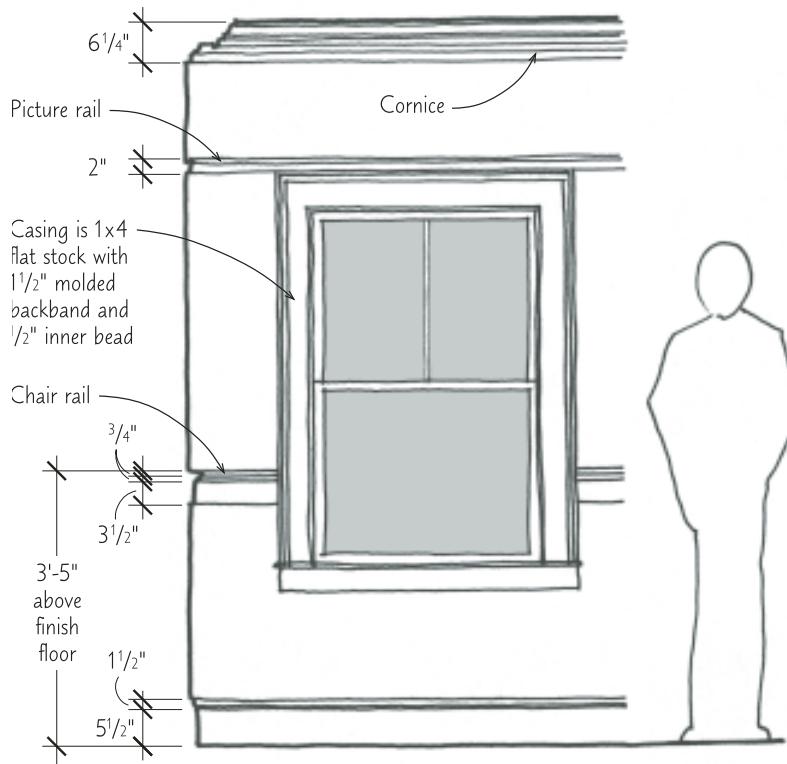
In a room with a somewhat low ceiling height, choose a crown with greater ceiling coverage to compensate for the smaller vertical dimension. In a room with a taller ceiling height, a crown with more wall coverage is appropriate.

A chair rail protects drywall or plaster from contact with the back of a chair, so its height is appropriate to the task. The chair rail can also divide a large expanse of wall into horizontal bands based on the human scale of the chair. The 3'-0" height shown here is based on the golden section, in which the ratio of chair-rail height to the height of the wall above it is equivalent to the ratio of the height of the wall above the chair rail to the overall height of the wall.

The base trim generally includes a piece of flat stock roughly equivalent in height to the selected cornice assembly. Top this with a base cap that is at least one-fifth the height of the base flat stock.

Less formal rooms, like bathrooms or mudrooms, may not require a base assembly this tall, since such rooms tend to be significantly smaller. A vanity or bench works well with a shorter 4-inch base, which corresponds better to furniture proportions.

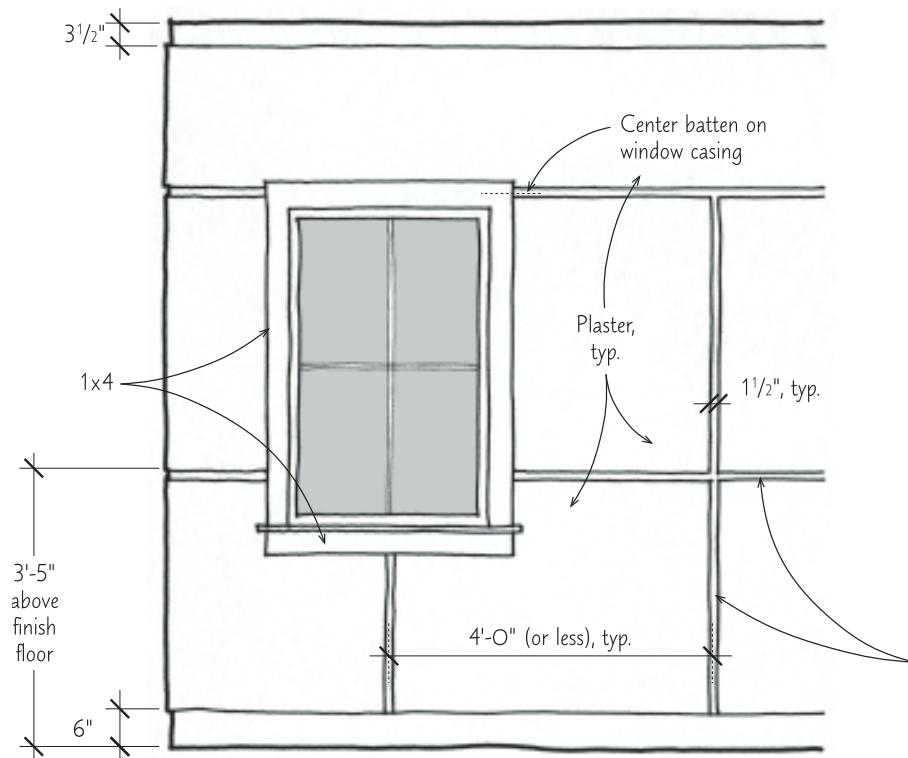
Traditional Interior Trim , 9-Foot Ceiling



In a taller, traditional space, molding sizes and the number of elements that compose them may expand. In keeping with the golden section, the chair-rail height increases. A picture rail may be introduced, running across the top of the window casing, as shown in this example. Like the chair rail, the picture rail serves a practical function. Its placement here is also intrinsically tied to the human scale, since it corresponds to the window-head height — typically 6'-8" or 7'-0" above the finished floor, based on average adult sightlines. The addition of the picture rail allows a further division of the wall plane, which keeps the wall height from being too overwhelming.

The taller space also accommodates a larger window with a lower sill that can be a pleasing interruption in the horizontal bands of trim.

Contemporary Interior Trim, 9-Foot Ceiling



In this taller, more contemporary space, the trim is spare, though it is still used to divide the wall expanse, as in the traditional example. Flat stock takes the place of the traditional built-up cornice and base. Narrow wood battens on the plaster assume locations similar to that of a picture rail and chair rail. Adding vertical battens creates a grid on the wall area that's tied to our sightlines. It allows the horizontal band of plaster above to be more closely associated with the ceiling than with the wall below. This treatment introduces a rhythm that keeps the wall surface from reading as a scaleless monolith.

Battens are made of 1/2" stock, while the rest of the trim is 3/4" stock, typ.

Traditional Interior Trim, 10-Foot Ceiling

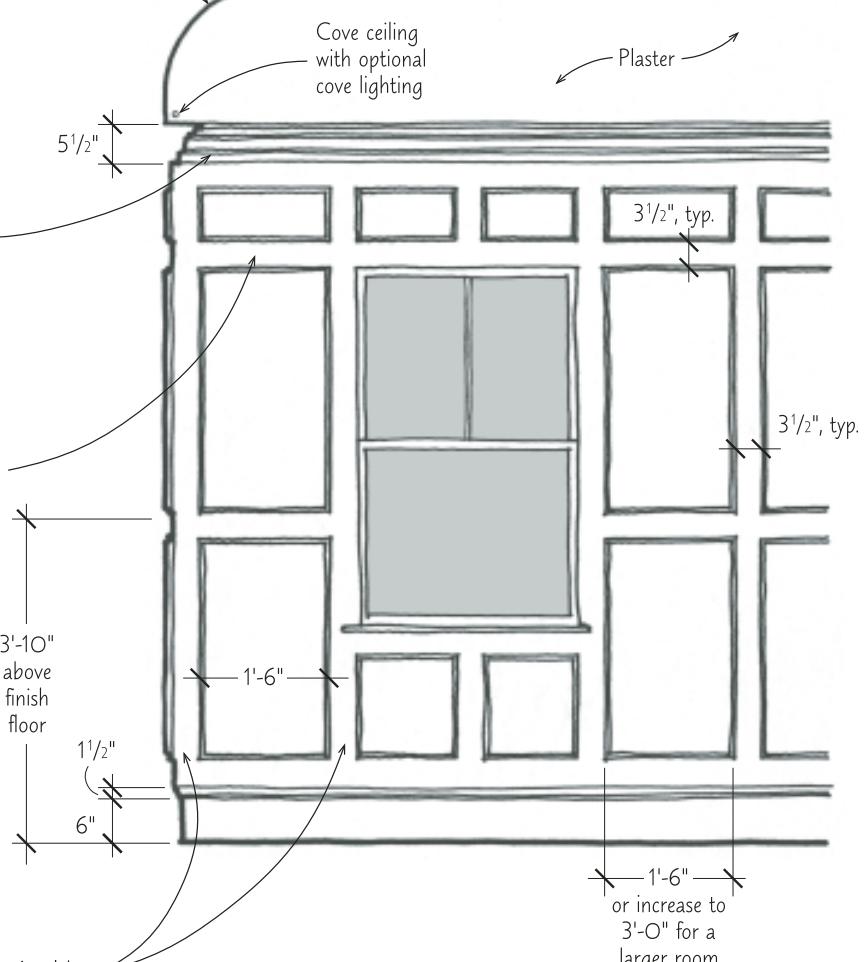
A traditional room with a 10-foot-tall ceiling may benefit from tall wood paneling and a cove ceiling.

The cove ceiling softens the corners of the room and brings the ceiling line down to the top of the wall paneling, much as the sky continues down to the treetops. It's also well-suited to continuous indirect lighting, which softly highlights the ceiling and draws the eye upward.

The crown that defines the top of the paneling is set at an elevation five-sixths the room height, which is roughly equivalent, proportionally, to the height of the capital on a classical Doric column.

While the top rail position is associated with the crown, the location of the next rail down is determined by the window head. The intermediate rail, which is 3'-10" above the finished floor, was derived from the golden section. The bottom rail is associated with the base.

The stile locations were determined by the window placement relative to the corner of the room and the width of the window itself. If the room is particularly large, the stile spacing beyond the window could be increased to twice that of the corner stile spacing, as long as a pattern is established.



Contemporary Interior Trim, 10-Foot Ceiling

A more contemporary room with a 10-foot-tall ceiling may also be suited to tall wall paneling. A flat or cathedral ceiling could work equally well with this paneling.

The half-rounds create a rhythm generated by the wider horizontal band near the base and the narrower band at the top. Inserting the square window within the horizontal band provides a graphic counterpoint. A window with a more vertical orientation could work in a similar way, while a more horizontal window might be redundant in relation to the horizontal band and weaken the overall scheme.

As in the traditional example, the crown that defines the top of the paneling is set at a location that is five-sixths the room height. The paneling itself is composed of painted MDO plywood trimmed with half-round sections at the MDO horizontal seams and at intermediate intervals. Vertical MDO seams are not highlighted with trim.

