

BY NIELSEN CRIST

## Lessons in Scribing

**Scribing material** is a fundamental skill that carpenters use frequently. If you have ever run the baseplate of a circular saw along a straightedge, you've scribed something, albeit something that is straight. The same idea can be applied when the edge is not straight.

Various tools can be used to transfer the contour of a nearby surface onto a workpiece: a compass, shims, the edge of a pencil, washers, a straightedge, or a site-made jig—whatever can create a line parallel to the edge of the material, however irregular that edge might be. While there are many situations where it is necessary to scribe, I will take you through two common ones: scribing baseboard to an uneven floor and scribing a material to an irregular surface like stone (see page 10).

### SCRIBING BASEBOARD

If a customer doesn't want shoe molding or if the floor is so out of level or humped that the shoe mold won't cover the gaps, you will

need to scribe to the floor. For example, if you have a straight piece of baseboard and the floor has a  $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch bump or irregularity, you can temporarily attach the piece to the wall to prepare to scribe. Set your scribe tool to the depth you need (in this case,  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch), and follow the contour of the floor. If you tack your base in place level, then once it's cut, it will drop into level. If it was not tacked level, your piece will drop and be parallel to its tacked position. This is important to note, depending on what you need to align with.

A word of caution: In an old house, if a room is 2 inches out of level (not uncommon), and you choose to run the top of 5  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch baseboard level, the base over the high spot will be only 3  $\frac{1}{2}$  inches tall. If there are no level features above the baseboard, then it may look better to run the base out of level. The base can still be scribed, just not as much, and your corner joints may get complicated.

To begin, let's look at a straightforward example of scribing baseboard in the photos below and on the next page.



With the baseboard shimmed level, measure how much it needs to drop ( $\frac{1}{8}$  inch here) to match the plinth block. Tack the baseboard in place to set up to scribe (1, 2).

Photos by Nielsen Crist



Baseboard can be scribed to fit the floor using a scrap of wood cut to the thickness that the baseboard needs to drop. By running a pencil along the scrap and marking the baseboard, you can see what needs to be removed (**3, 4**). The author makes the first cut with a planer with a 5-degree back bevel, which makes finer adjustments easier and helps the base sit tighter to the floor, but you can use a table saw or jigsaw instead (**5**).



A hand plane works well for final touch-up; alternatively, a sander could be used (**6**). The trimmed baseboard meets the plinth block as intended with a clean line at the floor (**7**). Here, a compass is used to scribe a window sill; this technique can be used for baseboard too. Set the compass to the amount that needs to be removed and run the tool as shown (**8**).



### MATING MATERIAL TO FIT AN IRREGULAR SURFACE

Running finished material into stone is one of the more dramatic looks when it comes to scribing. It doesn't have to be the most daunting, however, if you are willing to take your time. With a very irregular surface such as stone, it may be necessary to cut the material in stages. You can always remove a bit more material, but if you remove too much, you run the risk of ruining your piece.

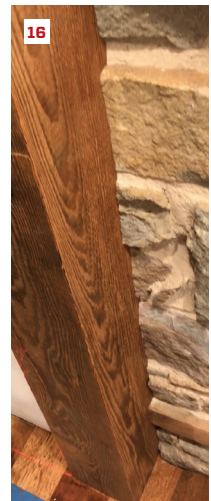
Remember, too, when you're scribing, the far edge of the workpiece will move toward the scribed edge by the same amount that

the points of the scribes are set apart. Make sure you leave yourself enough material so that far edge doesn't fall short. Another key concept is that when you're scribing, the cut edge will be parallel to where the workpiece was when you marked it. If, as you scribe, the workpiece isn't in line with its ultimate desired position, it will not line up when you install it.

*Nielsen Crist is owner of Nielsen Crist Carpentry in Bedminster, N.J., and offers training to other contractors in all things carpentry.*



Using an AccuScribe Pro, the author draws the contours of the stone onto the workpiece. Be sure to hold the workpiece parallel to its intended position (9). Test the fit and repeat as needed. A rasp, sander, or knife can be used after the first cut with a jigsaw. Patience is important; you won't get it right the first time (10-12).



After the first cuts are made with the jigsaw, back-bevel the workpiece with a grinder or saw and then sand it. This thinner leading edge makes doing fine adjustments for fit easier and helps the material more closely mate to the stone (13, 14). The finished product of a close scribe is always satisfying, but it takes a lot of trial and error. It is best to work slowly up to the irregular edge to be matched by removing small amounts from the workpiece each time. Taking too much off in one area can affect the piece at other points of contact (15, 16).