

The Finish Carpenter's Tool & Setup Cheat Sheet

From the crew at Let's Build Stuff — built on 20+ years of production finish carpentry across 150+ custom homes a year. This is the actual truck setup, not a shopping list.

The Nail Guns (the core of the kit)

Gauge / Type	What it's for	Nail lengths
15-ga finish (angled)	Main fastening — door jambs, closets, heavy casing, wall cleats, exterior trim	2-3/4" primary; 1-1/2"–2-1/2"
18-ga brad	Mitered corners, casing, moulding, general trim — the default gun	1-1/4"–1-3/4"
23-ga pin	Returns, delicate profiles, small ornament — not optional anymore	3/4"–1-3/8"
1/4" crown stapler	Cabinet backs, bead-board, panel moulding backs	1/2"–1-1/2"
Framing (21°)	Step stringers, porch framing, blocking	2-3/8"–3-1/2"

Gauge rules: default is 18-ga · 15-ga for heavy stock (jambs, casing $\geq 3/4" \times 3"$, exterior) · 23-ga for returns and delicate miters · we don't use 16-ga.

Saws

- **12" sliding compound miter saw** — the workhorse. Every trim, casing, base, and crown cut. No "factory ends" — everything gets cut clean.
- **Track saw** — cabinet boxes, shelving, long rips
- **Jigsaw** — notching around boxes, curves · **Oscillating multi-tool** — undercutting jambs, trimming in place
- **Coping saw** — coped inside corners when called for · **Circular saw** — stringers and framing-scale cuts

Measuring & Layout

- 25' tape · combination square (3/16" reveals) · speed square · chalk line · stud finder · digital angle finder
- **Levels, sized to the job:** 6" torpedo (jambs, outlets) · 2' (casing-adjacent, chair rail) · 4'

(base runs, wainscot) · 6' (door jambs) · cross-line laser (wainscot, built-ins, shelving)

The level rule most guides get wrong: casing doesn't need a level — you're matching the reveal off the jamb. Levels are for jambs (plumb), base runs, chair rail, and anything that must truly be level. Working tolerance: about 1/16" over 4'.

Power, Drive & the Bag

- Cordless drill + impact driver · #2 Phillips, #2 square, T-25 Torx · 3/32" and 1/8" pre-drill bits · self-centering hinge bits (5/64") · 1" spade bit for handrail brackets
- In the bag: hammer (for bumping, not fastening) · flat bar · utility knife · chisels (1/4"—1") · block plane · rasp/file · pliers · nail set · cedar shims · pencils + Sharpies

Fasteners & Consumables

- 18-ga brads 1-1/4"—1-3/4" · 15-ga angled 2-3/4" (primary) · 23-ga pins 3/4"—1-3/8" · 1/4" crown staples · 21° framing nails
- Construction adhesive (PL Premium / Liquid Nails HD) · Titebond II/III for miters and scarf joints · cedar shims · Bondo or Minwax high-performance for filling our own miters

What's NOT on the truck (and why)

Caulk, nail-hole putty, spackle, sandpaper, paint/stain/primer, tack cloths — that's **painter scope**. A crisp scope line keeps both trades fast and accountable. We fill our own miters; the painter fills nail holes. We sweep up; the cleaning crew vacuums.

Jobsite Setup

- Ram board / floor protection (most builders require it) · two pair of sawhorses for the cut station · 50–100' extension cord (bring your own power) · broom + dustpan + trash bags — *a clean job is a happy job* · first aid kit on every truck

Rules from the Foreman

- "Watch your door margins — make sure they're not too tight." (Doors and trim swell after painting.)
- "Set the jambs today, hang the doors next time."
- "If steps need fall protection, they need it on both sides."
- "Self-close hinges only go on house-to-garage doors — one top, one bottom."
- "Putty is not the savior like with painted — stained trim makes you refine your skills."
- "Make a list, check it twice, then tell me." (Material orders.)
- "Look everywhere before saying we're missing something."
- "Guess high and come in under."
- "Just always make sure you can count to ten at the end of every day."
- "Slow down when you need to slow down."

Want the full step-by-step guides — doors, trim, stairs, closets, built-ins? It's all free at letsbuildstuff.co/learn.