

Mat Cutting 101

A HOW-TO SPECIAL



With today's wide selection of mat-cutting kits, it's never been easier to cut your own. Read on to learn how one pro does it.

YOUR BEST PHOTOS DESERVE FRAMING, RIGHT? THE FIRST STEP IS CUTTING THE PERFECT MAT.

Text/photos by Peter Kolonia

YES, YOU CAN BUY OFF-THE-shelf mats at any art-supply store. But they're often too simple in design (single mat) and too insipid in color (white, off-white, etc.) to do your photos justice. Fortunately, cutting your own mats isn't too tough. It's surgery, but not brain surgery.

Making your own mats saves you

money, frees you from the constraints of conventional window sizes (4x6, 5x7, 8x10), and lets you pick colors that will add impact and life to your prints. Mats are essential for framed photos because they hold the glass and picture apart, preventing the photo's emulsion from sticking to the glass (a.k.a. "plating").

Mat cutting is like many crafts: the more you do it, the easier it gets. Dave Stein, owner of the Four Corners framing shop in quaint Long Valley, New Jersey, explains how to get started: "Before you cut a mat you should know the size, color, and style of the frame it's going into. Before you select a frame, you should know something about the wall (or

shelf) where you'll display it." A large empty wall, for example, probably would require a large frame and mat, while a wall or shelf that already displays framed art could take something smaller.

The biggest challenge facing first-time mat cutters is selecting the right color(s). Solve that, and you're more than halfway home. Let's assume you're cutting a double-window mat. This is actually two mats. One has a window that abuts your photo and is called the inner mat. The second, outer, mat (a.k.a. the "face" mat) sits atop the first and is of a contrasting color. The face mat's larger window allows a small (1/8- or 1/4-inch) ribbon of the contrasting inner mat to show.

To pick the best colors, check

MAT CUTTING STEP-BY-STEP



Start your double-window mat by gathering the tools you'll need: a freehand mat cutter such as the \$20 Dexter Mini shown here (A) or mat cutting kit (we recommend a kit; see the sidebar that follows), ruler (B), double-face tape (C), a burnishing tool (D), razor blades (E), linen tape (F), and a pencil (G). Step #1: Clean your work area and cover it with craft paper (1).

your photo for elements you'd like to enhance. It could be color or content. If, for example, a portrait subject is wearing a red shirt, a mat of the same shade of red will cause the viewer's eye to jump to that shirt. Pick a boldly saturated color and one more muted, soft, or pastel. The bold color will become your inner mat, and the pastel color your face mat. If both mat colors are bold, it will draw the viewer's eye away from your photo. If both mats are soft, they may not attract the eye to your picture with adequate force. Stein stresses, however, that there are many exceptions to these rules.

Another color-selection strategy takes the color of the surrounding walls into account. If you have a relatively small photo that will hang on a large, otherwise empty wall, pick a face mat color that contrasts with the wall. Your framed photo will stand out more powerfully.

If you can't decide on a color, choose something muted or neutral, such as off-white or light gray. Black is often used for its simplicity and neutrality, but it's actually a very strong, compelling, and harsh color, and should be used with care.

Stein explains that the easiest way to pick mat colors is to bring the photo to a framing shop. Framers often have dozens, even hundreds, of mat corners in a rainbow of

colors, which come in kit form from mat-board manufacturers. "You can place these corners around the photo and see exactly how your matted photo will look," he explains. "It's much more efficient than looking at color swatches or charts." Mat board purchased at a framer may be more expensive than those from an art-supply house, but in just a few minutes, you can place dozens of color combinations around your photo to see which work best. On-line suppliers? Stein says, "The shipping is prohibitively expensive."

When buying mat boards, buy more than you think you'll need—accidents happen. Also, if you're still unsure about color choices, buy a few extras to give yourself options. (For more about mat

MAT CUTTING STEP-BY-STEP



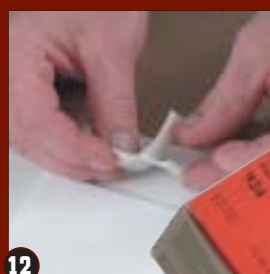
Next, place mats of different colors around your photo until you find a color combination you like. Decide whether you want a straight **(2)** or beveled **(3)** window cut. Beveled cuts surround and highlight the photo with a ribbon of white. But if the photo is high key, beveled cuts can blur the line between picture and mat. Likewise, if you're cropping outside the photo **(4)**, a straight cut may be preferred.



Another possibility is the "weighted" mat **(5)**, whose lower edge exposes more white than the other three sides. It's a logical choice for photos that are signed and/or numbered. Before cutting, place mat board, frame, and photo to confirm your choices **(6)**. Next, prepare your trimmer for the first cut **(7)**. Be sure the blade is sharp and set to a depth only slightly deeper than your board.



Cut outer dimensions of both mats **(8)** to the size of your frame. Mats should be identically sized and square (i.e., with 90-degree corners). Measure image to determine window size, and lightly score window cut lines **(9)**. Cut the face mat first, following the instructions that came with your mat-cutting system. Before cutting the inner mat, place the two in register **(10)** to confirm that the inner mat cut lines are correct.



After cutting the inner mat, position the photo within it **(11)**, and tape into place with a hinge of archival linen tape **(12)**. Apply double-sided tape to the top border of the inner mat. The preferred type is Scotch's Adhesive Transfer Tape **(13)**. It's easier to work with than regular double-sided tape because the upper surface isn't exposed until you're ready for it. It's also claimed to be archival.

board selection, see the “Mats matter” box, below.)

Got your colors? It's time to mark up and cut your boards. The step-by-step photos here show you how Stein does it. Before starting, however, he offers these general tips:

- ✓ **Mat borders should be at least twice the width of the frame edges.**
- ✓ **The face mat should be lighter in color than the frame, and the frame should be darker than the surrounding wall.**
- ✓ **Mark boards lightly in pencil. Never use ink.**
- ✓ **To ensure that cuts are clean, change blades after every two or three mats. When starting a project, always assume the old blade is dull. Use a new one.**
- ✓ **Double and triple check all measurements before cutting.**
- ✓ **The backing sheet on which you cut mats should be clear and free of previous cuts, as they can impair your ability to make a straight cut.**
- ✓ **Wash your hands frequently, and avoid touching a board's face. To prevent smudges, use cotton gloves. Art-supply shops sell them for about \$12 a dozen.**

Happy cutting! 🌀

TOP 3 MAT KITS

By far the largest manufacturer of mat-cutting systems is Logan Graphic Products of Wauconda, Illinois (www.logangraphic.com; 800-331-6232). The company makes several board-mounted mat-cutting systems, as well as a number of handheld cutters. Its top-of-the-line cutters belong to the heavy-duty Framer's Edge series that includes several sizes (\$440–\$540 street), all designed for framing shops and frequent users. The Logan 700-S Simplex (\$175 street) was created especially for photographers. It handles mat boards in the most common photo sizes to 16x20 inches, can cut borders to 5 inches deep, and offers both straight and bevel cutting blades.

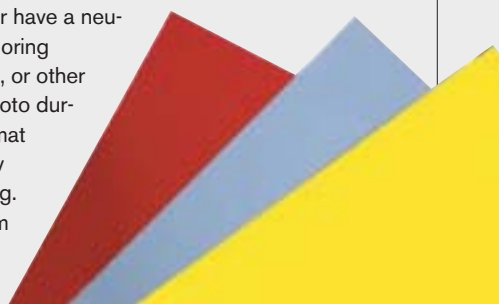
There's also the 301-S Compact (\$85 street), which Logan claims is the best-selling mat-cutting kit in the world, featuring instant-release mat guides, bevel and straight cutters, a cardboard carrying case with handle, and an instructional video with more than an hour of mat-cutting hints and tips.

CLASS CUT-UPS: Logan's most popular mat-cutting kits include (l to r) the 301-S Compact, 700-S Simplex, and the flagship Framer's Edge.



MATS MATTER

When buying mat boards, make sure they're labeled “archival” or “conservation” quality. This means they contain no chemicals or compounds that can discolor or fade the photo. Top manufacturers include Nielsen & Bainbridge, Andrews Nelson Whitehead, Columbia Corp., Crescent Cardboard, and Conservation Resources. Their boards are buffered or have a neutral pH, with no transferable dyes or coloring agents. They use no waxes, plasticizers, or other ingredients that may transfer to your photo during storage. Finally, when storing your mat boards, choose a cool location with low humidity to prevent mold and/or warping. When storing boards vertically, set them along their longest edge.



MAT CUTTING STEP-BY-STEP



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Remove protective facing from transfer tape (14) and gently place face mat over inner mat (15). Hold mats only by edges. Shift face mat until windows are square and in register. Confirm that your hands are clean, and press face mat firmly in place.



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If window cuts show burrs or stubble, clean them up with a sharp razor (16) or burnishing tool. Finally, Dave Stein recommends handling the matted photo with cotton gloves (17) until it's safely within its frame.



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Dave Stein
Four Corners Custom Framing
908-876-1191
fourcornersframing@earthlink.net

