

# Simple Home Repair

*by Judy Ostrow*



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**Malestrom 20-7-2009**

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*This book is dedicated with love to Sam, Adam, and Rachel, my biggest cheerleaders.*

## **ALPHA BOOKS**

Published by the Penguin Group

Penguin Group (USA) Inc., 375 Hudson Street, New York, New York 10014, USA

Penguin Group (Canada), 90 Eglinton Avenue East, Suite 700, Toronto, Ontario M4P 2Y3, Canada (a division of Pearson Penguin Canada Inc.)

Penguin Books Ltd., 80 Strand, London WC2R 0RL, England

Penguin Ireland, 25 St. Stephen's Green, Dublin 2, Ireland (a division of Penguin Books Ltd.)

Penguin Group (Australia), 250 Camberwell Road, Camberwell, Victoria 3124, Australia (a division of Pearson Australia Group Pty. Ltd.)

Penguin Books India Pvt. Ltd., 11 Community Centre, Panchsheel Park, New Delhi—110 017, India

Penguin Group (NZ), 67 Apollo Drive, Rosedale, North Shore, Auckland 1311, New Zealand (a division of Pearson New Zealand Ltd.)

Penguin Books (South Africa) (Pty) Ltd., 24 Sturdee Avenue, Rosebank, Johannesburg 2196, South Africa

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ISBN: 1-101-03585-4

Library of Congress Catalog Card Number: 2007924618

Interpretation of the printing code: The rightmost number of the first series of numbers is the year of the book's printing; the rightmost number of the second series of numbers is the number of the book's printing. For example, a printing code of 07-1 shows that the first printing occurred in 2007.

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## Introduction

There's a truism about houses: sooner or later, whatever can go wrong, will go wrong. Most people recognize this phrase as Murphy's Law, but after twenty-five years of fixing things, I know that it's also the First Law of Homeownership.

Because stuff goes bad—often in a hurry, usually when you least expect it, and most likely when there's a tiny balance in your checking account—being able to diagnose a small problem before it's a big one, and even fix it yourself, is a very nice aptitude to develop.

That's what got me excited about writing *The Complete Idiot's Guide to Simple Home Repair*:

After about a year in our first house, we had a new baby and lots of bills, and the First Law of Homeownership kicked in. Pipes froze, the pump died, and the gutters started leaking. I noticed that moss was growing on the garage roof! My husband traveled all the time, and so the ball was in my court. I had to fix some of this stuff myself, or we'd go bust paying repair people.

So I took the next step: I started learning about my house's structure, systems, and appliances, and started down the DIY highway.

I was a bit tentative at first, but the simple repairs I completed successfully encouraged me to try others. When I did call repairmen, I asked them to explain what they were doing, and why. I picked their brains about the finer points of my house's plumbing, wiring, heating, and appliances. Pretty soon, my friends were calling *me* to walk them through the fixes for their own appliance breakdowns and plumbing disasters.

In this book, I pass along what I've learned, along with lots of good advice from fellow DIY-ers and seasoned pros. I hope you find that acquiring these skills is fun and empowering. And I hope that the knowledge will save you money; it's saved me and my family plenty!

Taking care of a home is quite a bit like taking care of ourselves; keeping it in shape requires maintenance and, when needed, tweaks and touch-ups to keep it looking and functioning at its best. Like our own bodies, a home has lots of parts and systems that need care and attention. We can do a good portion of the work ourselves. And when things happen that are beyond our scope and ability, we call in an expert.

This book will acquaint you with many modest efforts you can make yourself to keep a house in shape. It's designed as a sensible, starter volume for someone who's never worked on a house before but wants to learn. It tells you what tools you need, and how to work safely. There are no big, complicated repairs here—no major surgery. But you'll find lots of step-by-step instructions, many illustrated, to help you become well acquainted with your house and take a role in its well-being.

**Malestrom 20-7-2009**



## **How to Use This Book**

*The Complete Idiot's Guide to Simple Home Repair* contains 19 chapters and 3 helpful appendixes. Here's how it's structured:

**Part 1, "Getting to Know Your House,"** is a beginner's guide to equip and prepare yourself for doing home repairs effectively and safely. It tells you everything you need to know about the tools, supplies, and safety equipment that anyone interested in DIY repairs should have. It also provides you with an orientation about your home's systems, and how you can control them.

**Part 2, "Skin Deep: Repairing Surfaces and Openings,"** teaches you some basic repair techniques you'll use for your home's most visible parts. You'll find out how to make dinged and dented walls and ceilings look new, and remove some of the squeaks and bounces in floors and stairs. This section will also help you get your home's simplest moving parts—the windows and doors—moving smoothly.

**Part 3, "The Circulatory System: Plumbing and Fixtures,"** deals with all the places where water runs through your home: kitchens, baths, and the supply lines that deliver this most necessary element to the fixtures you use every day. Tackle emergency repairs and learn the techniques to address minor problems with plumbing fixtures and fittings.

**Part 4, "Mission Control: Wiring, Appliances, Heating, and Cooling,"** covers the systems and conveniences that make your home run like it's the twenty-first century. While your wiring, many appliances, and the heating system in your home may be complex and major repair beyond your beginner's scope and talents, you can learn some simple fixes and do some needed maintenance on your own.

**Part 5, "Preventive Maintenance: Safety and Upkeep,"** teaches you about installing, maintaining, and using the necessary equipment for home safety. It also provides you with a routine to keep up with the maintenance of your house, inside and out, to prevent small problems from becoming larger ones.

To round out your beginner skills, you'll find a Glossary of the specialized vocabulary for house parts, systems, and repair techniques you should know; a chapter-by-chapter list of Online Resources for additional information about specific repairs, tools, materials, and training; and helpful Home Inspection Checklists that you can photocopy and use to keep track of your home's condition—both inside and out—on a regular basis.

## Extras

For every repair in the book that requires tools and materials, you'll find a helpful checklist to gather what you need. And in every chapter are little helpful nuggets to further expand your knowledge without flipping back and forth in the book. Watch for them:

### def·i·ni·tion

The boxes quickly clarify words and phrases related to house parts and home repair that you may not have encountered before.



### Ounce of Prevention

These little "red flags" let you know when you must be extra careful, or when you can take some action to save time or money.



### What Pros Know

Experienced DIYers and repair people who fix houses for a living know a lot of facts and shortcuts. Get their tips here!

## Acknowledgments

For as long as I've been learning about home repair, I've had patient, willing teachers to guide me in learning the empowering secrets of getting hands-on with a house. And I am so appreciative that because of them, I've developed some mechanical know-how that I would otherwise have never possessed.

First there was my dad, who engaged me with the sweet smells of the lumber yard, deep bins of nails, screws, nuts, and bolts, the mysteries of his big metal tool box, and all those gadgets in the basement. He could fix anything; I am still in awe.

I bow to my first carpentry teachers, Patti Garbeck and Lizabeth Moniz, who helped me get past the noise and speed of power tools and tame, if not defeat, the fear factor. They'll both tell you that respect for your tools and what they can do is a good thing.

For learning about my own houses I owe a lot of helpful and talkative (once I got them started) contractors: Steve Sferra, Richard Gates, Bob Warner, Todd Lawson, Curt Haskell, and many others who've let me look over their shoulders.

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## xx The Complete Idiot's Guide to Simple Home Repair

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A great hardware guy or woman is invaluable when you're looking for just the right tool, material, or part for a job. Thanks to Joe di Pietro, Jr., at Chubby's Hardware in Pound Ridge, New York. Whenever I was stumped, he could point the way. I hope everyone who reads this book can find a hardware salesperson as helpful.

On safety issues, thanks to Lorraine Carli, a spokesperson at the National Fire Protection Association, for her help with a most important subject.

For the ways of old doors and doorknobs, I thank Mike at Old House Parts, in Kennebunk, Maine.

For her pictures that saved me thousands of words, I am deeply grateful to my illustrator, Karen Burgess, whose clean and beautiful drawings will surely help any beginning repair person. And to her model, Lisa McCarthy, thanks for demonstrating some intricate repair moves that made the illustrations just right.

I deeply appreciate the editorial assistance that made the book's concept a reality. Mike Sanders at Alpha Books set everything in motion. Warmest thanks are also due to Lynn Northrup, Jan Lynn, and Ross Patty, whose thoughtful suggestions and unflagging attention made the journey through their word processors feel like a spa makeover. I am also grateful for the encouragement of my agent, Bob Diforio, without whom this wonderful project would not have come my way.

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**Malestrom 20-7-2009**

# Part

# 1

## Getting to Know Your House

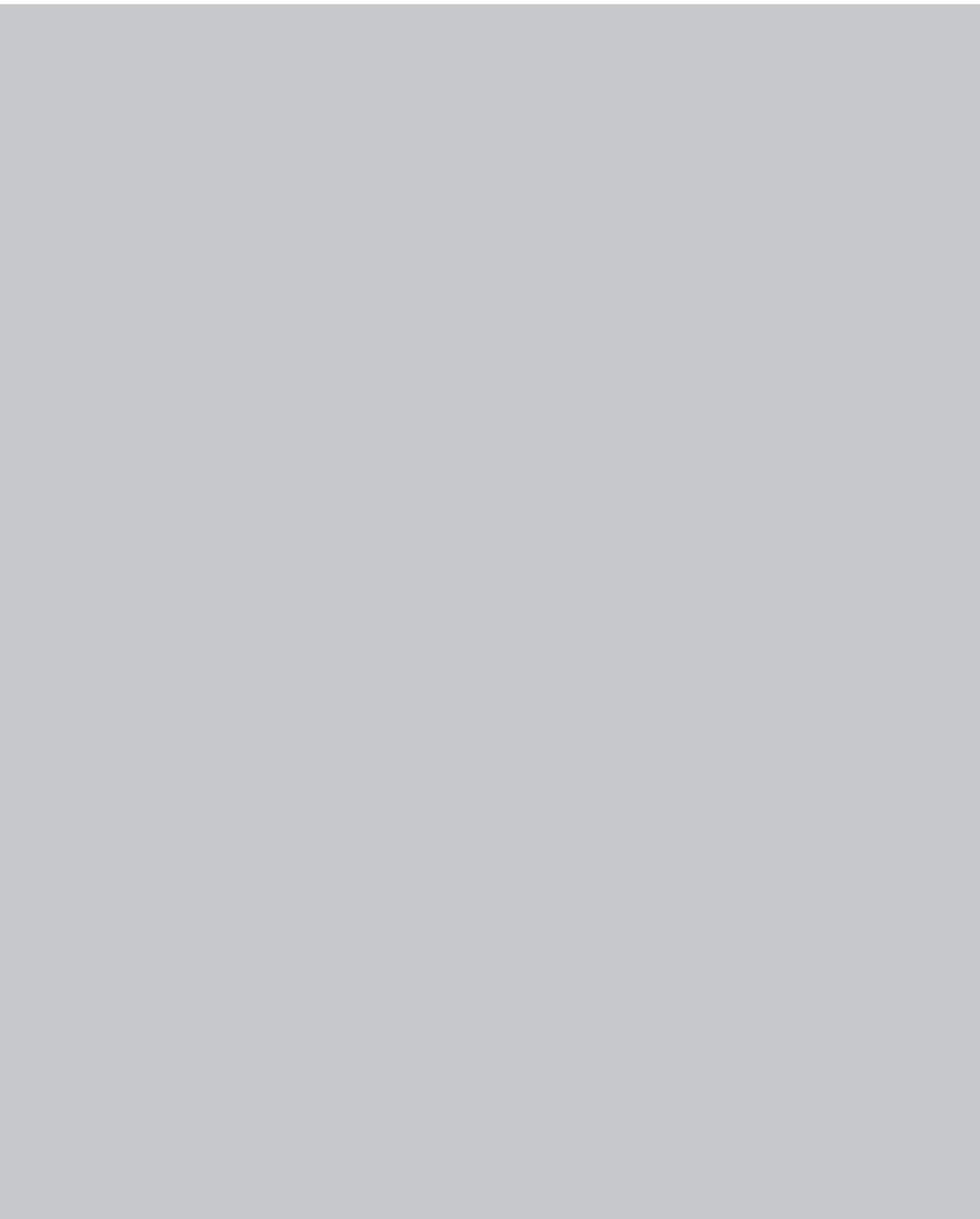
Of course, your house is more than the sum of its many parts: it's your *home*. But even before you start the little jobs that will make it look better or run more smoothly, you need to know some basic information.

First of all, the right tool makes common repairs easier and quicker, and you should acquire a basic assortment. Also, if you're going to do repairs yourself, you need to do them safely. There are a few important rules for keeping you, your family, and your home safe when doing repairs, and they're simple to learn. Next, you need a few basic supplies that you can use for a variety of repairs, as well as a couple of things that will serve you well in small emergencies. And finally, if your house has electric power, a gas supply, and running water, you need to know where the main controls for each system are located, and how to start and stop them.

Even if you were never a Scout as a kid, the organization's motto is a good one: "Be prepared." By the time you finish Part 1, you'll be equipped and ready for lots of the little glitches and mishaps that homeownership is sure to send your way.



"Do we have some kind of water shut-off thingy?"



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# Chapter

# 1

## Your Personal Tool Kit

### In This Chapter

- ◆ When it comes to tools, quality counts
- ◆ The basic categories of tools
- ◆ Must-have tools in your starter set
- ◆ The one power tool you'll need for repairs
- ◆ How to choose the right tools for you

I've never tried it, but I could probably knit a sweater using two pencils, and coax a nail out of the wall with the tip of a metal ruler. But pencils weren't designed for knitting, and the ruler isn't really a nail-pulling tool. Having the right equipment for a task usually makes the work easier, quicker, and safer.

Home repair and improvement can be broken down into a handful of actions: measuring and marking, cutting, fastening and joining, taking apart (also known as demolition), and applying. A few tools can do more than one thing, but this way of sorting them will help you remember what their primary use is.

If you can, hold a new tool in your hand before you buy it; it should be a comfortable fit, like a good pair of shoes!

## Quality Counts

You can buy a cheap set of tools, and they'll probably work fine, at least for a while. Expect to replace the bargains after a couple of years. Often made of lesser-grade metals and plastic, the tips, teeth, and edges of inexpensive tools will show wear sooner, rather than later. When it comes to tools, quality counts ... and costs. Most of the well-known brand name manufacturers produce tools at differing quality levels, with professional grade being the best and most expensive of the lot. Good tools will probably last a lifetime, and you can leave best-quality equipment to your grandchildren!

Sets of multiple sizes of screwdrivers, wrenches, and the like will be cheaper than buying each item singly. However, unless you're planning to repair your whole house yourself, unassisted by friends or hired hands who have their own tools, don't go overboard. Buy the best equipment you can afford and, except for the most basic tools, buy them as you need them.

If cash is tight, and you're *really* good about returning things you borrow, neighbors and friends might loan you their equipment. Take good care of borrowed tools, and return them *promptly*. Most folks I know are very possessive of their toolbox, and want things returned in the same condition as when they were loaned. If your borrowing etiquette is poor, most lenders won't give you a second chance!

## Measure Up: Rule(r)s of the Road

A sturdy 20- or 25-foot retractable *measuring tape* is indispensable for all kinds of jobs around the house. Some people opt for the lighter-weight, 12-foot model, but eventually realize that the longer one is more versatile.

These come in plastic or metal cases, and the best have a stop lever so that you can extend and hold the tape in its extended position, without holding on to the case. This is a particularly good feature when you're marking the distance of long runs around a room.

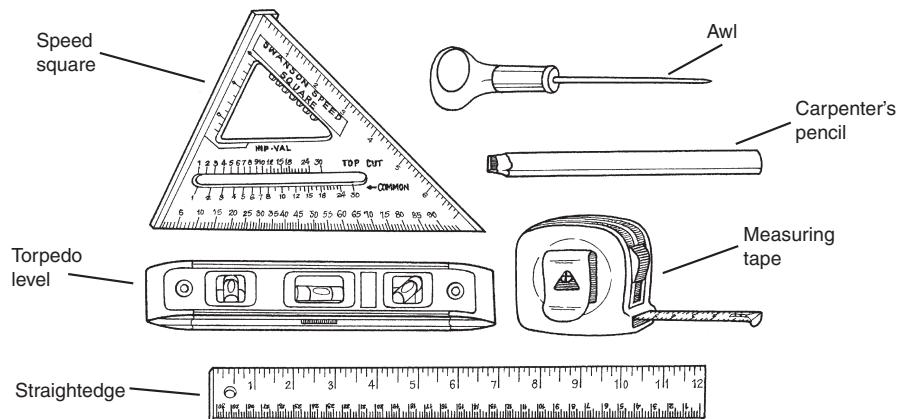
About those little tick marks along the tape: carpenters can tell at a glance whether a mark indicates  $7\frac{3}{8}$  inches or  $7\frac{5}{8}$ . If you're not so good at fractions, get a tape with a fractional read. This measure has the intervals—eighths, quarters, and halves of inches—marked clearly with the appropriate fraction, so you don't need to guess.

Better-quality tapes also have a clasp that makes it easy to attach the case to your belt while working, so you don't have to constantly hunt for it.

A metal ruler—also known as a *straightedge*—is another handy device for measuring. It serves as a ruler and as a rigid guide for a utility knife or glass cutter when you want to score a surface. An 18" straightedge is a good size for lots of jobs. Straightedges are also available in plastic; metal is slightly more expensive but much more durable.

A *speed square* has a lot of uses in carpentry, allowing you to mark angles, then draw guidelines. One of the straight sides of this triangular device has a lip, which can fit along the edge of a piece of material (a 2×4 piece of framing lumber, for example) letting its other straight side serve as a guide for marking/cutting a piece of wood or other material at a perfectly perpendicular angle (90 degrees). Speed squares are made in metal and plastic; I like the heft and feel of the metal variety.

Unless you're planning to do lots of carpentry, you don't need a big, fancy, and expensive carpenter's level. Instead, opt for a small *torpedo level*, so called because of its shape, to check whether shelves, rods, curtain poles, doors, and other household objects are hanging straight horizontally (level) or vertically (plumb). The torpedo level is one type of spirit level, so called because the measuring device employs a vial filled with liquid, usually ethanol—the "spirit"—containing an air bubble that falls between guidelines when the instrument rests plumb or level.



Measuring and marking tools.



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