THE PREP-PROCESS CHECKLIST

10 Steps a Real Professional Should Describe Before They Ever Open a Can of Paint

Every painter will tell you they do good work. Almost none of them will volunteer, unprompted, a detailed description of their preparation process. That silence is where the difference between a lasting job and an early failure lives.

Paint applied over dirty, loose, unprimed, or poorly repaired surfaces will fail. It may look fine on the day the crew leaves. But within months (sometimes weeks) you will see it: peeling edges, bubbling near windows, fading color, cracking around trim. That is not a paint problem. That is a prep problem.

This checklist gives you the 10 steps a true professional should be able to describe clearly before any painting begins. Use it on estimate calls, during walk-throughs, or when reviewing proposals. The more confidently and specifically a contractor describes these steps, the more confident you can be that the result will last.

How to read each step:

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
The specific language and detail you should hear	Why skipping this step shortens the life of the job	What it signals when this step is vague or absent

STEP 1 Surface Inspection

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They walk you through the surfaces to be painted, noting peeling areas, stains, moisture damage, cracks, rot, or any problem areas that need attention before prep begins.	Without a thorough inspection, problem surfaces get painted over rather than repaired. Moisture, rot, and adhesion failures get locked under fresh paint and become bigger problems later.	A painter who does not inspect surfaces before quoting is guessing at the work, and may find problems mid-job that were never discussed with you, and present them as unexpected charges.

STEP 2 Cleaning and Washing

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe washing surfaces with a cleaning solution or pressure washer to remove dirt, grease, mildew, chalk, and contaminants. For interiors, this includes wiping down walls and trim.	Paint does not bond well to dirty, greasy, or mildew-covered surfaces. Skipping this step is one of the most common causes of early peeling, particularly on kitchens, bathrooms, and exterior wood.	Any contractor who says 'we wipe things down as we go' or skips describing cleaning entirely is likely applying paint to surfaces that are not properly clean.

STEP 3 Scraping Loose and Failing Paint

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They explain that any loose, bubbling, peeling, or flaking paint will be scraped back to a firm edge before new paint is applied. This may be done by hand or with power tools.	Painting over loose paint is like gluing something to a surface that is already falling apart. The new paint will pull away along with whatever it is adhering to beneath it.	If a painter says they 'feather the edges' without mentioning removing the loose material first, they are covering a problem rather than solving it.

STEP 4 Sanding and Surface Smoothing

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe sanding rough areas, sharp paint edges, and any surface irregularities to create a smooth, even substrate. This may include hand sanding or power sanding depending on the surface.	Unsanded edges and rough spots show through paint. A smooth surface produces a smooth finish. Sanding also improves adhesion between old and new paint layers.	A painter who skips sanding often produces a finish with visible ridges, lap marks, and rough texture, especially noticeable on trim, doors, and cabinetry.

STEP 5 Patching and Repairing Damaged Surfaces

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe filling nail holes, hairline cracks, dents, and surface imperfections with appropriate patching compound, then sanding smooth after drying.	Every unfilled hole and crack is visible under paint, often more visible after painting because sheen highlights surface irregularities. Repair is part of a professional finish.	A painter who says 'we patch as we go' without describing a defined process may apply minimal patching under time pressure, leaving visible flaws in the finished surface.

STEP 6 Caulking Gaps and Joints

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe applying paintable caulk to gaps between trim and walls, around window and door frames, along baseboards, and at any joints where two surfaces meet.	Gaps let moisture penetrate, which causes paint to bubble and peel at edges. Caulked joints also produce a finished, seamless look that clearly distinguishes professional work from amateur work.	Missing or deteriorated caulk is one of the most visible signs of a rushed paint job. If a painter does not mention caulking, ask directly whether it is part of their process.

STEP 7 Spot Priming and Full Priming

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They explain where primer will be applied (bare wood, patched areas, stained surfaces, new drywall) and why. They should be able to describe which type of primer is appropriate for each surface condition.	Primer seals porous surfaces, improves adhesion, blocks stains, and promotes even topcoat coverage. Skipping primer on surfaces that need it often results in uneven sheen, bleed-through stains, and paint that does not hold.	A painter who says 'we prime if needed' without any specific description of which surfaces require it likely uses primer inconsistently, or skips it to save time.

STEP 8 Protecting Floors, Furniture, and Fixtures

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe the specific protection measures used: drop cloths on floors, plastic sheeting on furniture and fixtures, painter's tape on hardware, and how landscaping or exterior features will be covered.	Your home and belongings should be protected as a matter of professional practice, not as an afterthought. How a crew handles protection tells you a great deal about how they treat the spaces they work in.	A painter who says 'we're careful' without describing a specific process may cause paint splatters on floors, hardware, or furniture, and may not take responsibility after the fact.

STEP 9 Masking Adjacent Surfaces

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe how lines will be protected: where tape will be applied, how glass, hardware, and outlets will be masked, and whether cutting in by brush will be used in place of or alongside tape for crisp, clean edges.	Clean lines between walls and trim, ceiling and walls, and painted and unpainted surfaces are a mark of professional workmanship. Poor masking results in bleed, smears, and uneven edges that are difficult to correct after the paint dries.	A painter who says 'we freehand the lines' without any masking discussion may deliver sloppy edges that require touch-up, or simply leave them.

STEP 10 Final Surface Check Before Painting Begins

WHAT A PRO SHOULD SAY	WHY IT MATTERS	RED FLAG IF SKIPPED
They describe walking the job with the homeowner or doing a final quality review before opening any paint, confirming that all prep is complete, surfaces are dry, and the space is ready for paint.	Rushing to paint before prep is fully dry or complete is a common source of adhesion failures. A final check shows the contractor is methodical and holds themselves to a standard.	If a painter's process goes directly from 'we prep' to 'we paint' with no described checkpoint, they may be skipping the review step, and painting over surfaces that are not fully ready.

QUESTIONS TO ASK IF THEIR PREP PROCESS SOUNDS WEAK

If a contractor's description of their prep process is vague, rushed, or missing key steps, these questions can help you get the detail you need, and help you judge whether their answers are confident and specific or evasive and thin.

■ Inspection & Cleaning

- *"How do you identify problem areas (like stains, rot, or failing paint) before you start?"*
- *"How do you clean the surfaces before painting? What products do you use?"*
- *"For exterior work, do you pressure wash? What pressure do you use, and how long do you wait before painting?"*

■ Scraping, Sanding & Patching

- *"How do you handle areas where the paint is already peeling or bubbling?"*
- *"After scraping, do you sand the edges? What does that process look like?"*
- *"What do you use to patch nail holes, cracks, and surface damage, and how do you prepare those areas before paint?"*

■ Caulking & Priming

- *"Is caulking included in your prep process? Which areas do you caulk as a standard practice?"*
- *"Where and when do you apply primer? Do you prime all surfaces or only specific ones?"*
- *"What type of primer do you use on bare wood versus patched drywall versus stained surfaces?"*

■ Protection & Masking

- *"How do you protect my floors and furniture during the project?"*
- *"How do you handle masking: do you use tape, cut in freehand, or both?"*
- *"What does your crew do at the end of each day to leave the space in good condition?"*

■ Final Readiness

- *"Do you do a final review before painting begins to confirm all prep is complete and surfaces are dry?"*
- *"What happens if you discover a prep issue (like a stain bleed or adhesion problem) after painting starts?"*
- *"Can you walk me through what the last step before opening the first can of paint looks like?"*

Using This Checklist to Compare Painters

- **Listen for specifics, not generalities.** Any painter can say "we do thorough prep." What separates a professional is the ability to describe each step clearly, in order, without prompting. Vague answers to specific questions are a reliable signal of a vague process.
- **Use the checklist during estimate calls or walk-throughs.** Ask the contractor to walk you through how they would prepare your specific surfaces. If they skip steps, gloss over details, or seem unfamiliar with any of the items above, note it.
- **Compare what each contractor describes, not just what they charge.** Two bids at the same price may reflect very different prep commitments. A slightly higher bid from a contractor with a thorough, clearly described prep process is almost always better value than a cheaper bid from one who could not explain their steps.
- **Ask for prep expectations in writing.** The estimate or proposal should describe the prep process in enough detail that you know what to expect. If a contractor resists putting this in writing, they may be planning to do less than they described verbally.

- **Trust the process over the personality.** A charming contractor who cannot clearly describe their prep process is a bigger risk than a quieter one who walks you through every step with confidence. Quality is built in the prep, and a real professional knows it.

The paint is what you see. The prep is what makes it last. A painter who cannot describe their prep process has already told you what their results will look like.

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