

get ready to assemble

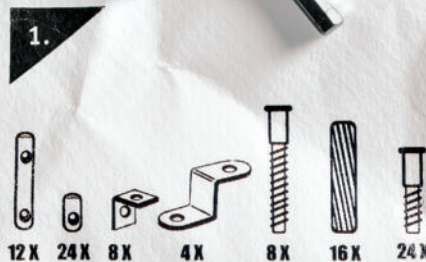
This primer will help you put together any piece of furniture—without spitting nails.

NOT TOO LONG AGO, ready-to-assemble (a.k.a. RTA) furniture was synonymous with mediocre craftsmanship. You'd have thought twice before setting even a pizza box on an RTA table, and so there really wasn't much point in attempting to assemble it in the first place. But RTA furniture has vastly improved: It's more durable and better designed, and it's sold by everyone from Walmart to West Elm. Yet it can still be frustrating to buy and build (which material to get? which nail goes where?). Before you put another Allen wrench to an entertainment center, read this guide. You'll find all the help you need, short of beaming in Bob Vila to turn the screws.

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“Ah, to build, to build! This is the noblest art of all the arts.”

Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, *Michael Angelo*



when buying RTA furniture...

COME WITH CAREFUL MEASUREMENTS. Before heading to the store, be sure to write down the dimensions of the space where the furniture will go. And remember to allow for breathing room around the pieces. “My husband and I had planned a wall of closets for our little bungalow,” says contractor Amy Matthews, the host of *Sweat Equity*, a home-improvement show on the DIY Network. “Once we nailed the first closet together and stood the monster up, we felt as if we had shrunk to hobbit size. It was way too big.”

KNOW YOUR MATERIALS. One of the most important things to consider is what your furniture is made of. The most common RTA materials are:

■ **Particleboard, engineered wood, and plywood.** These materials are generally at the lower end of the price spectrum. Particleboard (wood chips that are glued together) is not particularly strong “and doesn’t hold up well if you need to take it apart and put it together again,” says Barbara Kavovit, creator of the Barbara K tool line for women. Engineered wood, also called medium density fiberboard (MDF), is made of compressed wood fibers; it looks like wood and is just as tough. Plywood is another durable option; it’s composed of layers of wood or engineered wood stuck together.

■ **Laminate and wood veneer.** Next in line, pricewise, are laminate (layers of plastic glued to plywood) and wood veneer (slices of rare wood, such as ebony or mahogany, glued to a flat surface, which is often a less expensive wood, such as pine). Laminate looks like wood and is fairly durable, but unlike wood, its color and the finish won’t fade. With wood veneer, you get the best of both worlds:

the grained, rich look of high-quality wood without the hefty price tag.

■ **Solid hardwood.** The strongest—and typically the most expensive—material, it’s great for entertainment centers that need to hold a lot of weight. Hardwood often has dovetailed joints (interlocking trapezoidal pieces) and protective finishes.

INSPECT FLOOR MODELS FOR IMPERFECTIONS. Your piece of furniture will most likely fare like the one in the store, experts point out. So check floor models for such red flags as inconsistencies in color, chipped veneers, gaps where the edges meet, sagging between seams, and glued sections that seem to be coming apart.

ASK A FEW KEY QUESTIONS.

■ **Find out about the company’s return policy.** Do you need a receipt? Will you have to pay to ship back something that’s damaged?



how to sidestep common slipups

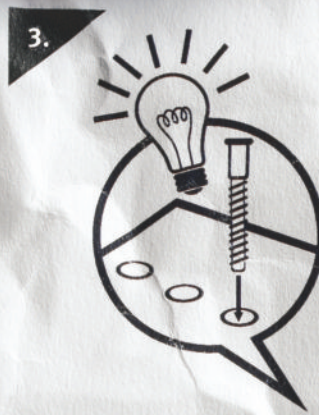
Mistakes don’t have to happen. These expert techniques will make all the difference.

■ **To avoid splitting wood while driving in a nail:** Place masking tape over the area to keep it intact. Once the nail is in, peel off the tape.

■ **To avoid smashing your thumb:** Use the ThumbSaver (\$20, thumbsavertool.com), a tool that has a forked, magnetized head to hold screws, nails, and staples in place (so you don’t have to).

■ **To avoid pesky gaps where edges should meet evenly:** Keep the hardware loose until all the pieces are together, then tighten them.

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■ **See if the company provides free phone support.** This is important should things get hairy.

■ **Inquire about the specific material.** For example, many times solid-wood pieces will be labeled “wood,” but that could be anything from pine, which can be flimsy, to cherry, which tends to be durable.

■ **Take matters into your own hands.** If the salesperson’s only response to these questions is a blank stare and a shrug (we’ve all been there), use your cell phone to call the store’s customer-service hotline while you’re shopping. Many representatives have access to information not listed on the label.

when assembling RTA furniture...

OPEN THOSE BOXES ASAP. Missing parts are common, and sometimes pieces arrive scratched or gouged. Check out the shipment right away so that if you notice a part is missing or damaged, the company will still have the replacement item in stock. When it’s time to get down to business, heed the THIS END UP and DO NOT OPEN WITH SHARP TOOL warnings rather than shredding through the packaging. “I saw someone slice off a portion of a dresser’s finish with a knife before the pieces were even out of the box,” says Matthews. Place the furniture panels on the floor and clean each one with a cloth so that dirt won’t interfere with adhesives and even the tightest of corners will be dust-free.

GATHER YOUR TOOLS. Have these six on hand: a locking metal measuring tape, an Allen wrench (included in most RTA kits), an electric screwdriver

or drill, a hammer or a rubber mallet, 60- to 80-grit sandpaper to smooth out any frayed edges, and a carpenter’s level to check that surfaces are straight. Use a muffin tin to organize screws, nails, and pins. Sorting will make construction more efficient, and you’ll be less likely to misuse components.

CHOOSE YOUR WORK SPACE WISELY. It’s best to assemble furniture in the room in which it will live, so you won’t have to carry it up the stairs or take it apart once you realize it doesn’t fit through a doorway. “Once, I put together a bookcase in the hallway of my apartment building,” says Kavovit. “I thought it would be easy because the pieces seemed small in the box. When I started to build it, it took up so much space that no one could get down the stairs. Everyone was trapped! I had to disassemble it, and by that time it was so trashed that I just threw it out.”

AND YOUR WORK SURFACE, TOO. Try to work on an even, firm floor—that means hardwood or concrete instead of carpeting, which can be bumpy and unstable. It’s also a good idea to flatten out the cardboard packaging and use that to protect your floors and the furniture’s finish. If you must assemble the piece on carpeting, place the cardboard on top of it to create a smoother work surface.



how to sidestep common slipups

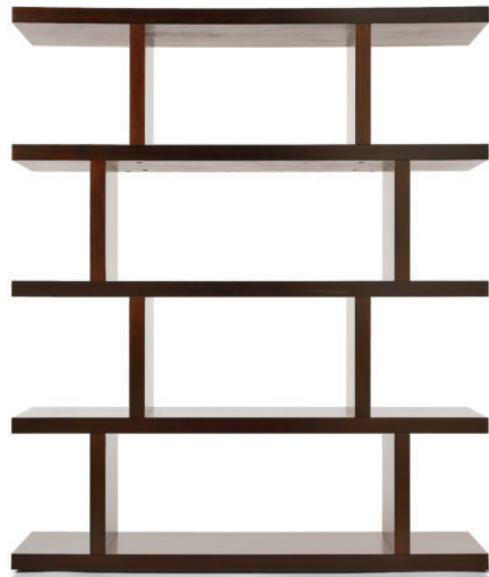
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■ **To avoid problems when working by yourself:** Use spring clamps as hands. Irwin Quick Grip padded clamps (\$6 each, home depot.com) protect furniture from scuffing. “You can lock and release them with one hand, and they come in many sizes,” says carpenter Amy Devers, the host of *To the Rescue*, on the DIY Network.

■ **To avoid struggling to drive screws into predrilled holes:** Rub the tops of the holes with a slice of bar soap and the screws will penetrate the wood more easily.

constructive criticism

Real Simple challenged associate editor (and furniture-assembly novice) Sharon Tanenbaum to put together four readily available bookcases. Three days, five bottles of water, and a sore thumb later, here are the finished products (shown from easiest to put together to most difficult), along with a play-by-play of her highs, her lows, and everything in between.



Scaffold, \$400, cb2.com

CONDITION ON ARRIVAL: When taking the pieces out of the box, Sharon noticed that two edges on the engineered-wood bookcase had deep gouges (luckily, they were hidden upon assembly). And two shelves were mislabeled.

CONSTRUCTION NOTES: The shelves were numbered, and “thank goodness, they mostly corresponded with the instructions,” says Sharon. Because assembly required repeating the same tasks with identical pieces, it went off without a hitch. “I could have done it blindfolded, or at least while watching TV. But the finished bookshelf is heavy, so ask a friend to help you stand it up.”

THE VERDICT: “Easier to put together than my outfit most mornings.”

TOTAL TIME: 35 minutes.

BOOKSHELF PHOTOGRAPHS BY MANFRED KOH FOR THE TIME INC. DIGITAL STUDIO



Hampton, \$166, walmart.com

CONDITION ON ARRIVAL: Everything on this wood-veneer unit was well labeled. “There was no guessing what part was what,” says Sharon. “The drawings on the instructions were on the small side but clear.”

CONSTRUCTION NOTES: “So I was cruising along, thinking, Wow, I just may be the best furniture putter-together around, and then I realized the X-bracket didn’t line up! My bad—I didn’t read the directions carefully enough. Fortunately, I recruited help, in the form of editorial production director Jeff Nesmith, who just happened to be walking by. Lucky guy.”

THE VERDICT: “At a price like this, the effort is well worth it.”

TOTAL TIME: 1 hour, 25 minutes.

personalize it

Four ridiculously easy ways to put your stamp on standard-issue furniture.

■ **ADD WHEELS.** Casters add height and let you move the furniture with ease. All you need to do is screw the casters on.

■ **SKIP THE LEGS.** Many bookcases have optional feet. Take them off for a more modern look.

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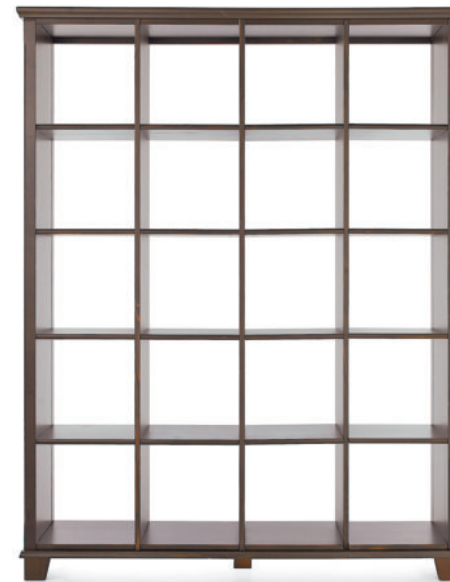
Stacked, \$429, westelm.com

CONDITION ON ARRIVAL: The MDF (with oak veneer) piece came with clearly marked and well-organized bags of hardware. However, a washer and a dowel were missing. The 18-page instruction booklet was a little daunting at first. "It looked like a dossier," says Sharon.

CONSTRUCTION NOTES: "Figuring out what went where was a bit like solving the riddle of the Sphinx. At least the holes were reinforced with metal rivets, so once I got the hang of it, the screws went in easily. This was the sturdiest bookcase that I assembled."

THE VERDICT: "When I finally hit my stride, everything came together beautifully. The piece looks great."

TOTAL TIME: 1 hour, 20 minutes.



Märkor, \$279, ikea.com

CONDITION ON ARRIVAL: As you can guess from the picture, this imposing unit—about five feet wide and over six feet tall—came with multiple components: more than 30 panels of spruce and a huge bag of hardware. And the instructions had only diagrams.

CONSTRUCTION NOTES: Realizing that this 20-cubby bookshelf was more of a two-person job, Sharon wisely enlisted the help of home market editor Kelley Carter. It took some concentration, for sure, but the two of them soon got the hang of putting the piece together.

THE VERDICT: "It was an involved process. But this massive bookshelf can hold the contents of an entire library."

TOTAL TIME: 1 hour, 20 minutes.

personalize it

(continued)

■ **UPDATE THE HARDWARE.** Swap uninspiring knobs for prettier ones. (Before buying, make sure the new hardware fits the existing holes.)

■ **CHANGE THE COLOR.** Even laminated furniture can be painted. Oil-based paint adheres best, but it is smelly and doesn't go on as easily as latex. Sand and prime the piece before painting.

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