

AN ORGANIZED APPROACH TO SHARPENING RAZORS

I use the combination of the traditional thumb test and thumbnail test as a “system” for diagnosing the state of a razor and as a guide while I’m working on a razor. You can find detailed discussions of the two tests at classicshaving.com in the “How to ... and why” section. My description of the tests should be good enough as an introduction.

THUMB

Do this test when you first pick up a razor.

Support the razor gently with the edge pointing up and lightly drag your thumb **across** the edge in a few places along the blade:

- 1) If the thumb slides easily and there’s no grab, go to the thumbnail test;
- 2) If the razor grabs slightly, do 3 swipes on 8K stone and 15-20 on strop, then repeat test;
- 3) If the razor grabs but you feel no edge do 10 swipes on strop, then repeat test;
- 4) If the razor grabs really well or moves with the thumb, you will also feel an edge- shave.

THUMBNAIL

You have failed the thumb test.

Rest the blade on top of the thumbnail with edge pointing down and tilt the thumb downward slowly. If the razor slips sideways go to the 4K stone.

If not, bring thumb back to level and slide the blade on thumbnail from one end to the other:

- 1) If the blade slides smoothly and doesn’t dig in, go to the 4K stone (dull);
- 2) If the blade digs in but doesn’t move smoothly, go to the 8K stone (coarse);
- 3) If the blade moves smoothly and feels like it’s digging in, but you feel a gap or bump, you have a nick at that spot;
- 4) If the blade moves smoothly and feels like it’s digging in, go to the strop;
- 5) If the blade digs in but makes a rough, scraping sound you have an over-honed edge.

I described this in a simple form with just a Norton 4/8 (or a two sided barber hone) and a strop. You may be using one or more additional finer stones or pasted strops.

A feature of this approach is that you're always moving up to a finer medium. There's no turning back. And you're doing it when the tests show you've maximized a step. Usually, each finer step begins to show some improvement in the edge. When it stops you move up to the next finer level.

It takes time to develop the "feel" in the thumb test. You can calibrate yourself by practicing with a fresh single-edged blade.

The traditional way to do the tests is with the thumb or thumbnail damp, but you may find that a dry test works better for you.

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