Tips & Techniques

Tips & Techniques is a forum for readers to exchange Information about methods, tools and jigs they've devised. We'll pay for any we publish. Send details to Tips, Fine Homebuilding, *P. O. Box 5506, Newtown, CT 06470-5506.*

edited and illustrated by Charles Miller

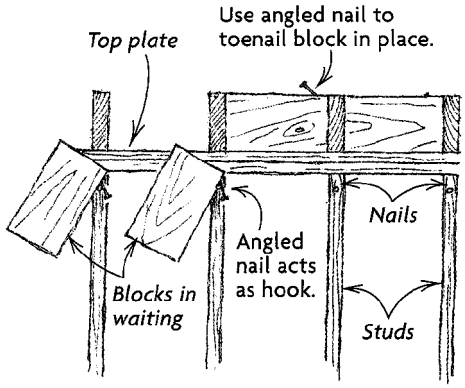
The 25-ft. fish tape in your tool belt

I needed to pull wire in a wall to hook up some speakers on my porch. I thought about buying a fish tape, but the cheapest one at Home Depot was $17—too much for a one-time-use tool. Thinking about the problem on the ride home, I hit on the idea of using my 25-ft. tape measure instead. Pulling the tape all the way out, I found that its inner end has a slot that hooks to the rewind spring. I separated tape from spring and kept the spring from rewinding hopelessly into its case by wrapping its end with a cable tie. Then I fed the tape into the wall. When the tape reached the bottom of the cavity, I tied a length of mason's twine to the slot. I pulled the twine with the tape, then pulled the wire with the much-stronger twine. The tape went back together nicely, and my only cost was the fraction of a penny for the cable tie.

—Jeff Van Dine, Gold Bar, WA

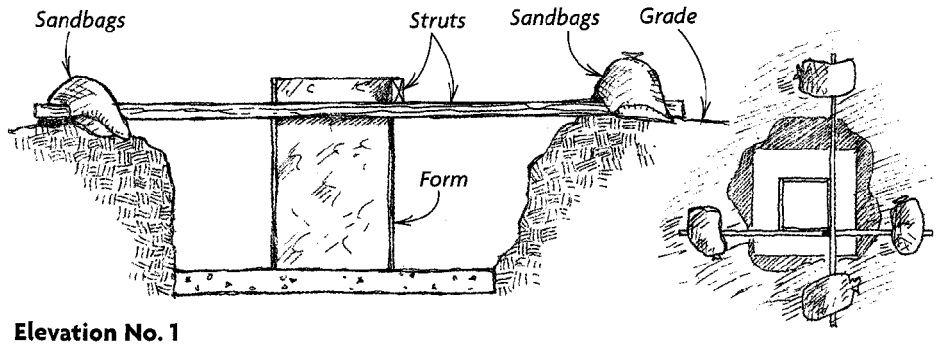
A methodical approach to blocking

Here's a slick way for one carpenter to walk a wall while installing blocking with a minimum of wasted effort. As shown in the



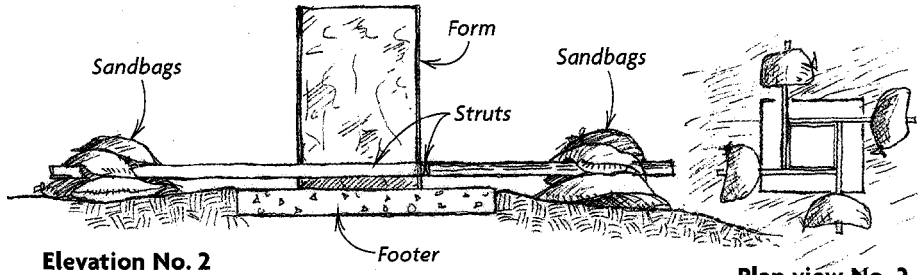
drawing above, I start a 16d nail in the corner of each block at the angle required for toenailing. Next, I put a nail partway, into each stud just below the location of the blocks. Then I hang a block on each one of these nails, using my angled nails as the hooks. As the blocks are picked off their nails, their hanger hooks are driven home as toenails.

—Jon Sherman, Steamboat Springs, CO



Elevation No. 1

Plan view No. 1



Elevation No. 2

Plan view No. 2

Sandbags as concrete-form anchors

Jonathan White's method for anchoring pyramid-shaped footing forms on a sloped site *(FHB* #134, p. 34) brought to mind another approach that I have used to solve similar problems. As shown in the drawings above, a combination of struts and sandbags can often be a suitable substitute for conventional anchorages when applied in certain applications. Rocky soil or winter conditions are two such situations when driving stakes into the ground just won't work. Strut-braced forms also have the advantage of not obstructing the mouth of the form, and they don't require the loss of valuable anchorage materials, such as threaded rods, inside the cast concrete.

Please note that I've deliberately not given any dimensions to these configurations. They would depend entirely on the specific size and shape of the form being used. For more detailed information on formwork, I suggest you contact the American Concrete Institute (248-848-3700).

To use this method, I first place my form on the footer or subgrade to evaluate the working clearances and the best approach path for the concrete. Then I use whatever scraps of furring strips or 2x3s I have available as strut material. I attach them parallel to grade and make them of sufficient length to project well beyond the form. They should stay clear of my working space and my approach path.

I then fill sandbags with whatever backfill is handy and place them atop the struts in sufficient quantity to counteract the weight of the concrete in the form. I am typically working with post pedestals in the 1-cu. ft. to 2-cu. ft. range, and it's easy to pile on more than enough bags to deal with these loads. My criteria is to use enough bags that when I shove the form hard, it shows no appreciable movement. And I keep plenty of bags on hand should I need more bracing.

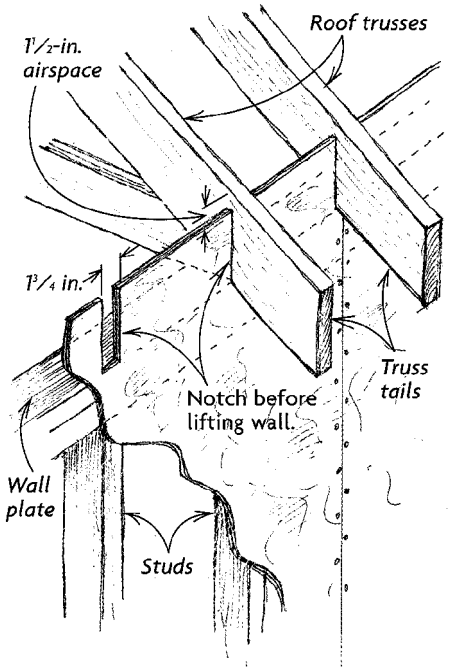
The sandbags should be placed so that they drape over the struts and make positive contact with the ground or with additional sandbags placed below the struts, as shown in elevation No. 2. On occasion I have also placed additional bags around the base of the forms to provide more lateral and torsional resistance. The critical thing to keep in mind is that concrete is heavy, is surprisingly plastic and prefers to assume the general shape of a cow pie rather than the shape you have in mind. It never hurts to overbuild or overbrace forms more than you think is necessary.

By the way, 25-lb. and 50-lb. woven poly-fiber seed and feed bags are excellent for sandbags. They are likely to be available for free from your landscape subs and local livestock farms.

—Christopher T. Gale, Fallston, MD

Wall-sheathing insulation stops

I switched to blown-in cellulose insulation in attics of new homes a few years ago. Watching the installers prepping one job, I saw the trouble they had to go to stapling cardboard insulation stops between the



rafters or trusses above the exterior-wall plates to keep the insulation from falling down into the soffit.

I came up with the idea (drawing above) of letting the exterior-wall sheathing extend above the top plate and become an integral insulation stop when I was framing my next house. Instead of trimming 1 ft. off the last row of the sheathing to end it flush with the top plates, I decided to let it run above the plate. I calculated the height between the bottom and top truss chords at the point above the outside face of the exterior wall. Then I deducted 1½ in. from the distance to leave a ventilation slot between the top of the wall sheathing and the underside of the roof sheathing, and cut off the rest.

After the wall sheathing was nailed on, I marked the roof-truss layout along the top edge of the sheathing and squared down the lines to the top-plate level. Then, before lifting the walls, I cut 1¾-in. slots for each truss to drop into.

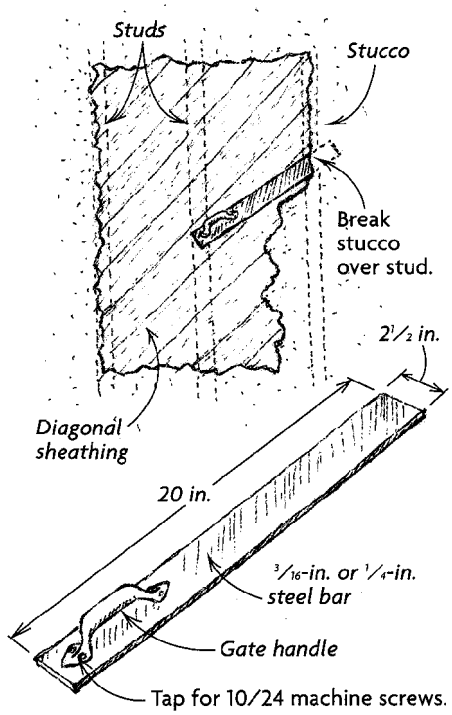
The slots had an added benefit for truss installation: They quickly positioned each truss and allowed me to float the walls beneath until they could be tweaked straight. Then I could nail down the trusses.

I used expanding spray foam to seal any gaps between the truss and the wall sheathing so that no insulation would slip by. All in all, the extra work saved me more than it cost me in time because the insulators didn't have to charge for crawling on their bellies to staple up cardboard stops. And I think it's a better detail.

—Mike Guertin, East Greenwich, RI

The stucco anvil

Here in California, we remodel plenty of stucco homes and install lots of new win-



dows in their old walls. The tricky part is making a seamless patch between the new window and the old stucco. It's important to tie the new stucco wire to the wire that reinforces the old work, and it's always a challenge to expose the old stucco wire without ruining the felt-paper membrane or damaging the sheathing beneath the stucco. As shown in the drawing above, I came up with a simple tool to help me deal with the situation.

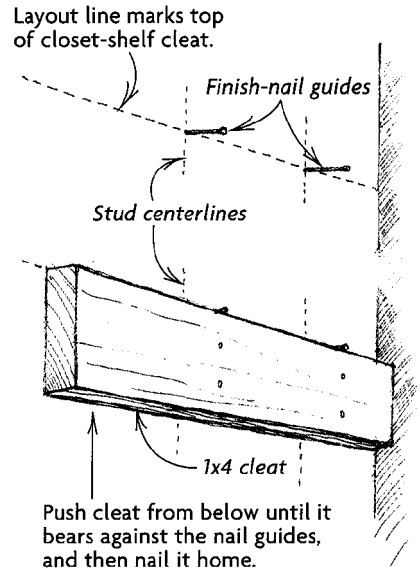
I started with a 3/16-in. thick steel bar, 2½ in. wide by 20 in. long. I tapped some threaded holes at one end for 10/24 machine screws and used them to attach a gate handle.

To use the tool, I start from the center of the opening. If I'm not enlarging an existing opening, I start the new one by cutting a hole with a masonry blade. Next, I determine the location of the studs and mark them on the stucco. Then I slide the bar behind the stucco until it's over the stud closest to the required layout for whatever I'm installing. I place the bar so that it spans two stud bays, then use a hammer to pound the stucco directly over the bar. It acts as an anvil to localize the force of the hammer blows, crushing the little pieces of stucco so that they can be pulled away from the stucco wire. Now I can weave new wire into the old, creating a web of reinforcement that ensures a patch that won't crack. If you use this trick, wear gloves and eye protection: Bits of stucco fly all over the place.

—Keith Wilson, Mountain View, CA

Locating closet-shelf cleats

Whenever I'm installing cleats for closet shelves, I cut down the amount of ladder time with the little trick illustrated below. First I draw a level line to mark the top of the cleat's location. Then I probe along this line with an 8d finish nail to locate the studs. Once the studs are found, I drive a



pair of nails along the line, one each into adjacent studs. Next, I push the cleat up from below until it encounters the protruding nails. I can now nail it home, knowing the location of the studs and that the cleat is on the layout line.

—Mark Tiley, Creede, CO