Understanding the levels of drywall finish

If you’re not always sure how to choose the best level of finish for your projects, you are in good company. We get many questions about this subject.

To create an acceptable industry standard, five trade associations worked together to develop the consensus document that details the levels of finish, Recommended Levels of Gypsum Board Finish (GA-214-10).

If you refer to GA-214-10, you will find the minimum requirements to obtain Level 0 through Level 5 of gypsum board surface finishes. The recommended levels vary depending on your project, the type of gypsum board you specify, its location within a structure, and the type of illumination that will ultimately strike the surface. Level 0 addresses temporary construction, and at the other end of the spectrum is Level 5. Level 5 is highly recommended for surfaces where high-gloss paint is specified or severe lighting conditions will occur.

As Thad Goodman, NGC construction design manager for the Central/Midwest region, says, “A Level 5 finish should be provided in critical light areas to minimize small imperfections in the joints and surface of the gypsum board. There are various ways to create a Level 5 finish. Be sure to be clear in your specifications as to the method you want used.”

As you probably already know, a skim coat is not a Level 5 finish unless it is preceded by each of the other four levels. There is also a distinction depending on whether you specify gypsum board or fiberglass mat gypsum panels. Fiberglass mat gypsum panels require a Level 5 skim coat.

“The surface of gypsum panels made with fiber-glass facers is not as smooth as paper-faced gypsum board. To ensure paint will not flash or expose the difference between the texture of the finishing products against the field of the board, a Level 5 is required,” adds Goodman.

Keep in mind, to achieve a Level 5 finish, you’ll be incorporating joint compound — and winter weather will impact its drying time.

“If the temperature drops or humidity rises, you’ll need to allow more than the traditional 24 hours between each application of joint compound,” says Eric Marsal, NGC construction design manager for the Southeast/Gulf region.

When specifying Level 4, pay special attention to long corridors, large areas of walls, and large/multiple windows. These areas pose potential concerns in achieving acceptable wall finishes and may need to be specified differently.

Some other key considerations when selecting your finish level: Write your specs to include a mock-up. Always specify the use of a primer. Coat the prepared surface with a “drywall primer” prior to the final application of paint. This is an important step before final decoration because applying high-quality, high solids primer can minimize most decorating problems. The paint sheen you choose is also an essential component to the level of finish it will require. The higher the sheen, the more difficult it is to deliver a wall that your owner will approve.

For details, check out “Reviewing 5 Levels of Gypsum Board Finish” on our website. We also offer a continuing education course on this subject (click here).

Call us today with any questions. We’re here to support you and your projects.