Cutting your Own Mattes and how to Save Money in Print Competitions
11/11/25

By Larry Dunn APSA, SPSA, MNEC

By cutting and reusing your mattes for competition you can both save money, time and storage space. For competition, I make my prints in three sizes, 10x15", 12x12" and 9x16". Instead of permanently mounting my prints to the backboards, I use Archival Mounting Corners. This gives me the ability to replace prints within a matte and reuse the matte multiple times. I can then store the prints in paper boxes and not have a huge stack of permanently mounted prints on backboard that I need to store.

Cutting mattes seems like a very difficult and daunting task and it is one reason I have been given by photographers for not wanting to participate in competitions or exhibitions, but really it is not that difficult.

Perfect mattes begin with perfectly squared matte boards and foam-core backing boards. It is important to begin with a squared matte board and foam-core backing board in order to cut square matte openings with parallel borders.

Since for most club print competitions and for the NECCC Individual Print Competition the largest permissible entry size is 16x20", I recommend starting with the standard 32" x 40" stock size. This can be either white, black or colored if you prefer. You will want to get Acid Free Matte board. It will come in 4 or 8 ply thickness. The 4 ply thickness will work fine for competitions and will be a bit less expensive than the 8 ply board and easier to cut. The Foam-core backing board will come in 1/8" or 3/16"thickness. For the competitions the 1/8" thickness will be fine, less costly and easier to cut.

Matte board and Foam-core backing board can be purchased from Blick, Michaels or most major art supply retailers.

The actual size of the board you get will probably be a fraction larger to allow for changes in humidity during shipping and storage. A full sheet of matte board and foam-core backing board may be squared by trimming off the excess, creating a true 32" x 40" board. This is a valuable first step, before cutting the boards to the 16" x 20"size.

Depending upon the style of matte cutter you are using, a full sheet of matte board may not fit in the machine. The matte board and foam-core backing board may have to be manually cut to a smaller size before they can be used. Check the instructions that come with the cutter—they should state the maximum size of board the machine will accommodate.

Once the board is squared and trimmed to a smaller size if necessary for the matte cutter, the next step is to cut the board to the outside dimensions of the matte—this is called "blanking" the board.

Here is a link to the website from Logan, a manufacturer of matte cutters:
https://www.logangraphic.com/learning-center/complete-picture-framing-guide/trimming-matteboard-size.php

Here is a list of tools that you will need to cut Mattes and the Foam-core backing board and finishing the presentation for competition or exhibition:
- Matte cutter with extra blades
- Utility knife with extra blades
- Cutting blades
- Matte cutting pad
- Pencils

White eraser – Stadedtler
48" Metal ruler
T Square
Lineco Linen Hinging Tape – 1"

Lineco Archival Mounting Corners – 1.25"

Scotch ATG Adhesive Transfer Tape & Dispenser

ZIG Photo Signature Pen

The following steps are for Cutting your Matte and Foam-core backing board for 16x20" boards. (This same procedure is used but modified for other size boards.)

1. Take your T-square and place flush against the long side of the board at the corner and see if the corner is a right angle. If there is a "gap" of board showing, this means the board is not "square".

2. **Make all your pencil marks on the BACK of the matte board.**
3. Take you pencil and run a line down the T Square edge to mark the cut you need to make to make the board square. Mark the corner as the "square corner"
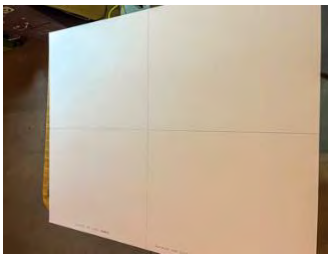

4. With a metal straight edge, cut along the line you made on the matte board to square the bottom off.
   Do not try and make the cut in one pass with the knife. Make the first cut with a gentle

pressure and the next one with a heavier pressure. You may need to make three passes to get the cut completed.

5. Now you have a square corner to work from.
6. Take your T-square and place flush against the bottom side of the board you just cut and see if there is a "gap" of board showing, this means that that side of the board needs to be trimmed to make it "square".
7. Take you pencil and run a line done the T Square edge to mark the cut you need to make to make the board square.
8. With a metal straight edge, cut along the line you made on the matte board to square the side off. You will now have both bottom corners square and the sides will be parallel.
9. Using the T square make a mark 16" in from the side at two locations
10. Using a straight edge, draw a line between the two marks all the way down the board.
11. Using the T square make a mark 20" and a 40" in from the bottom of the board.
12. Using a straight edge, draw a line between the two marks all the way down the board. You will now have divided the board into four 16x20" sections. **{On the back the matte board make a mark so you know which is the front and back of the board because you will be making the cutting marks on the back of the Matte board.}**

13. With a metal straight edge, cut along the lines you made on the matte board to separate the 16x20" sections.
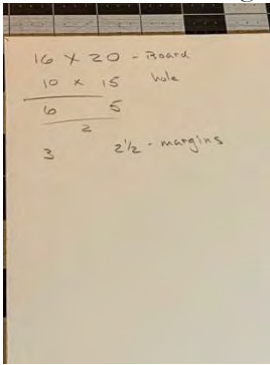
The following steps are for Cutting your matte openings on 16x20" boards.
This procedure will be for a matte cut for 10x15" print. The procedure is the same for other size mattes and boards.

Note: To make sure that the matte I cut is not larger than the print I want to use, I make my print 0.1" larger on all sides. That means, I actually make a 10.1x15.1" print for the 10x15" matte.

1. **On the back of the matte board**, or a separate piece of paper write down the size of you board and print to determine where you will need to make the marks to cut the matte. In this case it is a 16x20" board and a 10x15" matte.
   i. 16 x 20 - board
   ii. 10 x 15 – matte
2. Here comes some matte, subtract the two smaller number and the two larger numbers from each other.
   i. $16 - 10 = 6$
   ii. $20 - 15 = 5$
3. Now divide those two numbers by two
   i. $6 / 2 = 3$
   ii. $5 / 2 = 2.5$

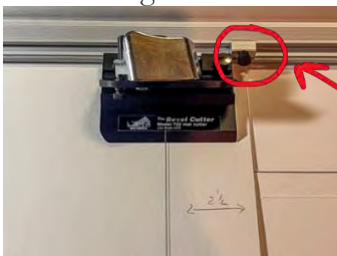4. These are the "margins around the matte on the board.

5. On the 20" side of the board make two marks 2.5" in from each side and then using a pencil and a straight edge make a mark along the board.
6. On the 16" side of the board make two marks 3" in from each side and then using a pencil and a straight edge make a mark along the board.
7. You will now have a rectangle marked on the back of the matte board that is 10x15". These are the lines you will cut with the Matte Cutter to cut out the matte.
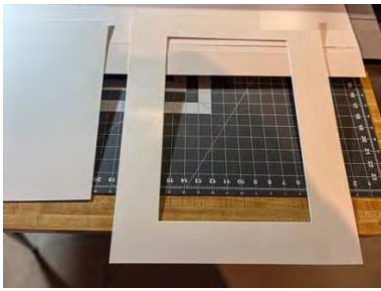

I use a Logan Matte cutter, but the directions are basically the same for use with other Logan models and other manufacturers.

1. Place a "slide Slip", A scrap piece of matte board under the matte board you are cutting. This protects the surface of the matte cutter from the cutter.
2. It does not matter which side you start with. Place the matte board on the matte cutter so the cutting bar lines up with the margin line you drew on the board. Slide the Margins Setting bar down until it is flush with the matte board and secure it.
3. Place the cutter in the grove of the cutting bar and move it until the reference line lines up with the far margin line. Move the cutting stop up to the Matte cutter and secure it .
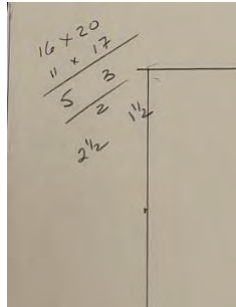

Cut stop

4. Move the cutter to the near margin line and secure the cutting stop up against it.
5. Making sure that the matte board is square with the cutting bar and the side guide, move the cutter to the far end.
6. Push down on the blade housing into the matte as far as it will go and smoothly with a steady downward force pull the cutter towards you until it reaches the near stop.
7. Flip the matte board 180 degrees to make the opposite cut.
8. Reposition the matte board, and the cutter stops in the matte cutter to make the remaining two cuts.
9. If all has gone well the "matte hole", similar to a donut hole, should fall right out of the matte board leaving a clean rectangular cut matte.

Now we move onto marking the foam-core back board for the placement of the print. When I print my 10x15" prints, I print them on 11x17" paper.

1. To figure out the margins on the backboard, you use the same matte as determining the margins for the matte hole.
   a. 11x17 on 16x20
   b. $16 - 11 = 5$, $5/2 = 2.5$" margin
   c. $20 - 17 = 3$, $3 / 2 = 1.5$" margin

2. Therefore, you need to mark a 1.5" margin along the 16" side s of the backboard and a 2.5" margin along the 20" side of the backboard.

3. This should give you an 11x17" rectangle marked out.

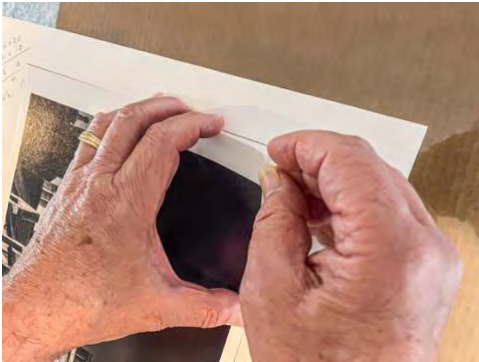Now to place the print onto the back board.

1. Place the print with its corners lining up to the corners of the rectangle on the backboard.

2. Carefully place the matte down on the backboard. The print should show through the matte. If not, carefully move the print in the direction needed to align the print with the matte.

3. Once aligned, carefully lift the matte off of the print as to not move the print.
4. Take one 1.25" Lineco Archival Mounting Corners and gently lift one corner of the print, without moving the print. Place the print in the corner and carefully press it down on the back board.

5. Follow this same procedure for the remaining three corners. The print is now mounted on the back board.
6. Place the matte over the print. All the corners of the matte and the back board should line up.
7. If so, take an ~ 3" piece of the Lineco Linen Hinging Tape, fold it lengthwise in half so the sticky side is out. Place it on the back board on the edge in the middle of the side that is the top of the print. If the print is a horizontal, the tape would go on the 20" side. If a Vertical it would be on the 16" side.
8. With the tape still folded in half, carefully place the matte back down over the print so it adheres to the Hinging tape.
9. All that is left now is to put a couple of small sections, less than 1", of Scotch ATG Adhesive Transfer Tape on back board. One piece in the middle of each 16" side and two pieces along the 20" piece opposite the hinge.
10. You are now finished and ready to put a print label on the back.

If you want to reuse the matte, all you need to do is to carefully lift the matte board from the back board, take the print out and replace it with another one of the same size print and paper.

Other useful references:

This is from an article 5 Practical tips for cutting your own mattes by John Watson on Photodoto.com

https://photodoto.com/5-practical-tips-for-cutting-your-own-mattes/

Use sharp knives

You'll need two knives: a matte cutter, which is a specialty tool that cuts those beautiful 45-degree angles for you, and a straight knife for cutting the outside edges. There are a lot of different styles of knives (I use a simple freehand cutter and a set of Exactos) but the single most important factor, the one thing that will

make the difference between sweet success and miserable failure, will be their sharpness. I'm talking crazy, dangerously sharp here. You want knives so sharp that you're actually afraid of handling them. "On the edge of death" sharp.

The knives should sail through the matte board. If you find that cutting is difficult or you aren't getting smooth edges or you're just generally having a hard time, I'd bet good money that the cause of your problem is a dull knife.

Use a large, sturdy straight edge

I use a two-foot aluminum square for my straight edge. You really want something large and strong because you'll be working with large pieces of matte board and very sharp knives. It's also a lot easier to hold in place and safer if you can use your entire hand, so the wider the better. Mine is marked in 16ths but you won't need that level of precision. 1/8" markings are fine. Using a square makes it easier to draw lines that are perpendicular to the edges of the matte without a lot of fussing around.

Use your frame backing as a template

Your matte should be the same size as the frame backing. Pop that out of the frame, line it up in a corner of your matte board and trace around the sides. Cut that out and you've got your work piece and you haven't even measured anything yet. There are a couple of approaches you can take for measuring the window but the simplest is to just put your photo onto it, measure the distance to each edge so you're sure you're centered, then trace around it. I like about a 2" border all the way around, sometimes slightly larger on the bottom edge. Your window needs to be about 1/4" smaller than the photo all the way around so now you just have to measure 1/4" marks around the inside of that first rectangle and draw the new, slightly smaller rectangle. Remember, you're making *all* of your marks on the *back* of the matte.

Use the same template for every matte

Once you've finished your first matte, you can now use that as a template for creating more. Put it in a corner of your matte board and trace the outside edge and the window. Then cut. Simple. If you're cutting a lot of mattes this way, make sure you always use the same template for each one. If you keep using each newly cut matte as a template for the next one you may find that your mattes are getting slightly larger with each generation.

Practice

If it's your first time, you're going to screw up. That's okay. Practice with the matte cutter on some scrap board until you can make clean straight cuts in a single pass. Once you're starting to feel like a samurai, move on to the real thing.

Use sharp knives

Have I mentioned that one already? Seriously, this is more important than anything else. If you don't have a sharp knife, don't bother. Even if you don't get so frustrated you want to take your own life, you'll never get decent results with a dull knife.

This article comes from Frame Destination (a good source for frames and supplies. They are out of Texas and have sales often to watch for)

Using matte board when framing artwork will not only keep the art from directly touching the glass (which

is a faux pas in the professional art world), it is also a great way to draw someone's eye directly to the focus

point of your piece while adding some professional and personal pizazz.

Matte boards are offered in a wide variety of colors, styles and textures, allowing you to add your own creative elements to finished piece. Even though many frame suppliers (us included) offer matte board with the window opening already cut and ready to go in the frame. However, if you want to completely customize your framing project to your own exact specifications, it's not terribly difficult to cut your own matte board—and it's also inexpensive.

What Tools and Materials Do You Need?

Measuring and cutting your own matte board doesn't necessarily mean you will need to break the bank when purchasing all of the materials needed. Some of these materials you might already have on hand at home. The materials needed to frame artwork with your own matte board include:

- An uncut matte board in your choice of color and texture

- The piece of art you're planning to frame

- A picture frame

Pretty simple, right? As for the tools, you'll need:

- A pencil

- A straight-edge ruler

- A straight, sharp blade (a box cutter or "X-Acto" knife usually works best; you can find X-Acto knives at any office supply or craft store)

- A matte cutter

And because you don't want to cut lines into your dining room table, floors, or kitchen counters, some sort of protective cutting surface is needed. This can be just a piece of cardboard, a large cutting board or a fancy, specialized protective "cutting matte," which often feature gridlines to make tracing and cutting straight lines easier.

How to Measure Your Matte Board

Now that you have your tools and materials ready to go, it's time to get started! Measuring your matte board for the frame is pretty simple—no architecture or engineering degree required.

Step One: Place the matte board on top of the back of your frame backing and trace around it with a pencil. After tracing, cut out the section of matte board using your X-Acto knife or other sharp blade.

Step Two: Place your artwork in the center of the matte to measure the location of the opening. To measure for artwork that is perfectly centered on the matte, simply subtract the width of the artwork from

the width of the matte and divide that number in half. This number will tell you how much space will be left on each side of the piece. For pieces that are not perfectly centered, measure and calculate all sides.

Related Posts:

[Five Craft Projects You Can Do With Matte Board](#)
[Understanding Matte Board Types](#)

White or a colored matte?

From Imageframer.net

How To Choose A Perfect Matte For Your Digital Photo
Jun 19, 2017 | [Framing](#)
Every photograph deserves to be properly presented. An ordinary photo, surrounded by a matte in an elegant frame, creates a totally different perception than the image by itself.
Most people would agree that a frame is an essential enhancement to a classical oil painting, the more elaborate the better. The situation with a photo is slightly different though.
Pro tip: Although a photo also needs a frame, it should be modest and thin, no more than 1 or 2 centimeters wide, and only the addition of a matte can truly enhance the picture!
What is Photo Matte?

A matte can be described as a field of light or color around a picture. It creates a neutral zone between picture and its frame, helping the viewer to focus on the artwork itself. Mattes can be of [different shapes and kinds](#) – rectangular, oval, multilayered, with decorative insertions, etc.
Pro tip: Matte in width usually 1/2 to 1/3 of the image's narrowest side.
Classical books on photography and composition describe different approaches for finding the optical center of an image:

- More space should be left in the direction of a sight or a movement of the main subject.

- Larger and dark objects are usually located closer to the center of the composition, smaller and lighter – closer to the edge.

- To create volume and balance in the composition, the matte's lower side is usually slightly wider than the   upper   edge.

  Pro tip: One interesting technique to use is to create an asymmetrical arrangement of photographs within a single frame. This approach can give a further balance to a picture composition. Be careful when experimenting with photo allocation though, as it is very easy to ruin the whole composition with too many unusual elements.

Framed with [ImageFramer](#)

Tips for Choosing the Best Matte Color:

- Shades. The color of a light matte should be a tone darker than the lightest color of the image. If using a dark matte, its color must be one tone lighter than the darkest color on the photo.

- Bright accents. Using a colored matte is a good way to attract attention to important segments of a photograph. In this case, the surrounding color must be the same as the brightest segment of the image, but in more muted tones.

- The simple trick of a double matte will give a personality to an artwork. Two or even three mattes of different shades can be applied. The color of the inner matte is usually chosen from a particular tone in the image, which may be lighter or darker than the outside matte.

- Perfect match. It is important to remember that colors and shades of a matte must be chosen to complement the color of the frame and the main color of the picture.

- The most versatile colors are shades of white: café-au-lait, ivory, mouse gray etc. These colors do not distract the viewer's eye from the photo but help to visually separate the image from its frame and the background.

- Tones. Lighter colors add depth to a picture, visually pushing the artwork away from the viewer, while a dark matte pushes a photo forward. A matte of a neutral gray color keeps the image flat.

Framed with <u>ImageFramer</u>

Pro tip: There is a popular misconception that the most common color for mattes is white, but in fact, bright solid colors should be used very carefully. Instead of helping a viewer, they can become a bright area around a photograph, which distracts attention from the photo itself. This is the reason why pure white mattes are rarely used, except for black-and-white photos.

<u>ImageFramer</u> offers a huge selection of mattes, as well as frames that play the role of a matte, which is especially good for oil paintings. Besides the usual colors, which accompany photographs and watercolors, you can select the color of your matte, <u>using any color from your photo.</u>

Other useful links:

https://www.framedestination.com/info/picture-frame-info.html

https://www.matteboardcenter.com/selecting-matte-board-color/

https://www.frameiteasy.com/learn/choosing-colored-picture-frame-mattes/

https://www.framedestination.com/blog/matte-board/the-definitive-guide-to-matte-board