

# Best Practices for Painting Ceilings

Back in the day, ceilings were often finished with spray textured surfaces consisting of polymeric binders or modified plaster and aggregate to create a “spatter” effect. This helps hide flaws in the finish that otherwise might be quite visible. But nowadays, especially in medium to high-end construction, many owners and architects prefer a flat, smooth drywall ceiling surface.

We’ve discussed the challenges of obtaining a satisfactory finish with new drywall on a few occasions, so it is probably no surprise that achieving a smooth, defect-free finish on a ceiling can be even more difficult. These defects are caused by a variation in texture and porosity between the paper coating and the drywall filling compound (paper absorbs the applied coating at different rate than the filling compound, creating an uneven surface).



Mall ceiling being prepared for painting

Generally, defects in a ceiling’s finish are only visible when viewed at an angle. Lower ceilings tend to make ceiling defects more visible as the viewing angle becomes more acute.

## 1 Backroll Sprayed Finish

- Even if the initial finish was sprayed, the specification should require backrolling the ceiling finish. The stipple pattern of the roller can help to hide the underlying texture variations in the drywall. A ½ inch (15 mm) nap roller may offer the best and most efficient results.

## 2 “Blend Back” When Painting a New Section

- Very large ceilings are finished in phases, and it is not reasonable to get all the paint from a single batch as is generally advocated for wall coating work. Consequently, the specification should require the painter to “blend back” the finish of each new section by shading the new topcoat back over the previous section with a spray gun.
- With a flat finish, this can effectively prevent a noticeable difference between sections finished at different dates with material from different batches.

## 3 Perform Final Inspection After Permanent Lighting Conditions are Set up

- Critical lighting conditions caused by either natural light from windows or from ceiling-mounted fixtures can accentuate surfaces defects. It is important to perform the final inspection after setting up the permanent lighting conditions for the space to determine which defects will be visible once the project is completed.
- If inspection occurs when lighting is lower than the permanent conditions of the space, “new” surface defects will become visible once brighter lighting is installed. If inspection work occurs with when lighting is brighter than the permanent conditions of the space, time and money could be wasted repairing defects that will be invisible upon completion of the project.

## 4 Specify an ASTM Level 5 Drywall Finish

- Optimal results are more likely to be achieved if the specification requires an ASTM Level 5 drywall finish (application of a skim-coat of drywall compound across the entire drywall surface).