As much as I like to work with solid wood, I find plenty of uses for plywood, MDF, and other sheet goods in my projects. Relative to solid wood, sheet goods are less expensive and more stable. They’re also big (typically 4 × 8’), eliminating a lot of the work involved in making large cabinet sides and door panels. However, that size has its disadvantages, too, especially if you’re working solo. Sheet goods can be a challenge to hoist and move around in the shop, especially the thicker, weightier material. In fact, having reached a certain age, it seems to me that they’re making this stuff heavier every year.

Fortunately, there are lots of strategies for wrangling sheet goods alone with efficiency and minimum muscle. Of course, handling these big panels isn’t just about transporting them. It’s also about maneuvering them to produce efficient, accurate cuts. Here, I’ll show you some low-tech tricks for moving sheet goods while ensuring a smooth workflow. I’ll also introduce you to some helpers to assist you when you’re working solo.

Note: For our purposes here, “crosscutting” refers to sawing across the grain on the face veneer of plywood or across the narrower dimension of a sheet of MDF or other composite board. Vise-versa for “ripping.”
Transport tips

The Gorilla Gripper allows you to carry full sheets of plywood by yourself with one hand.

If you lack a vehicle for carrying full-sized sheets, most lumberyards and home supply centers will “cut to haul” for you at little or no cost. Keep in mind that these are not likely to be clean, precise cuts, so make sure the resulting sections are oversized enough to recut at your shop. If you plan to have pieces downsized at the store, bring a cutting diagram and tape rule with you.

Option 1

Crosscutting a full sheet

When working with full-sized sheets, the first order of business is to break them down into more easily manageable pieces. If you didn’t already make a cutting diagram as part of your project plan, make one before you begin sawing, and plan a sensible cut sequence, like the one shown in Figure 1.

For example, if your layout includes a wide section such as a cabinet back, lay it out at one end of the sheet. Your first move, then, will be to crosscut that section from the panel, allowing you to halve the remainder of the sheet into two easily manageable pieces that can then be cut up as necessary. The aim here is to do as much of the cutting as possible on the tablesaw, rather than wrangling a portable circular saw guide, which is more time-consuming and often more error-prone. Just remember to lay out the pieces oversized when they include factory edges that will need to be trimmed.

Crosscutting a 4 × 8’ panel on a typical tablesaw is about as smooth an operation as bicycling on a narrow curb. It can be done, but it requires delicate balance and nuanced control. It’s generally better to crosscut a full-sized sheet using a portable circular saw guided by a straightedge. A straightedge can be as simple as a board clamped in place the one shown in Figure 1. You can reduce tear-out by first scoring your cutline with a utility knife, but the panel edge will probably still be rough. Because of this, I almost always trim the cut afterward on the tablesaw, guiding the factory edge against the rip fence. (The factory edge will be removed when cutting the piece to final width later.)

Option 2

When cutting atop sawhorses, support the rigid insulation with plywood that’s at least ½” thick. For efficiency, use spacers to offset the guide from the cutline.

Tip Alert

Avoid getting dirt or grit between sheets of plywood when sliding them into your vehicle. Even a small particle can cause deep scratches in a veneered surface.

The downside of downsizing at the store

Having hardwood plywood sheets precut at the store limits opportunities to lay out parts for attractive grain composition when making door panels and other prominent parts. When having plywood “cut to haul,” minimize the number of cuts to yield the largest possible sections.

Option 3

Pulling a freestanding outfeed table away from the tablesaw creates a platform with a channel for the saw blade.
Ripping a full sheet

A tablesaw sled is the safest, most accurate tool for crosscutting.

After the sheets are cut into manageable sizes, you can easily saw them into smaller finished parts. Again, plan your cut sequence to result in squarely sawn pieces with all factory edges removed. Keep in mind that—just as with solid lumber—accuracy demands that pieces be ripped to final width before crosscutting them to length. Begin by trimming any rough edges left by the portable circular saw.

Situate the sheet against the fence, with its leading edge an inch or so in front of the blade. Rock the sheet side to side a bit until you can see that it’s in intimate contact with the fence. Turn the saw on, and position yourself at the left rear corner of the panel, with your right hand grasping the trailing edge and your left hand as far forward on the adjacent edge as is comfortably possible (top left). Maintain a wide stance for strength and balance.

Monitoring the contact between workpiece and fence, push the panel straight forward with your right hand, and apply enough sideways pressure with your left hand to keep the panel against the fence. Keep pushing in this fashion (center left) until the trailing edge of the sheet nearly reaches the front of the saw. Letting the panel sit for just a moment, move around to its rear edge and place the Leg Up panel lifter (2) against the rip fence. Then rock the sheet side to side, orienting the factory edge against the fence. Then work with the newly sawn edge against the fence to rip any long groupings of parts that share a common width.

After ripping all the pieces to final width, use a crosscut sled to saw them to length (above). Again, make sure that the final pieces are free of any factory edges or rough cuts left from the portable circular saw.

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BUYING GUIDE

1. Clamp Guide, 50” $42.99
2. Gorilla Gripper $49.99
3. Leg Up Table Saw Panel-Lifting Accessory $39.95
4. Ridgid Flip Top Work Support, Model #AC9934 $29.97

Above item available at Woodcraft stores, gorillagripper.com or by calling (800) 225-1153.
Prices subject to change without notice.

Wrestling Aids

For help muscling sheet goods around the shop and onto the saw, consider enlisting these accessories for the job. The Gorilla Gripper (1) grabs a panel as you lift or pull it, the Leg Up panel lifter (2) helps you hoist a full-sized sheet onto the tablesaw, and the Ridgid Flip Top Portable Work Support (3) aids in infeed or outfeed support.

Tip Alert

Avoid using freestanding outfeed rollers, as the round bars can steer the work away from the fence if they’re not oriented perfectly perpendicular to the cutting path.

Spreading and feet wide, and begin the cut by maintaining intimate contact between fence and panel.

Continue feeding from the side, pushing straight forward while monitoring contact along the length of the fence.

Near the end of the cut, move around to the front of the saw, centering each hand between the blade and panel edge.
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