

Matting and Framing for Lazy-Ass Dummies

I originally wrote this article for Photosig [<http://www3.photosig.com/viewarticle.php?id=814>], but decided to include it on this site, as it fits rather well, even if the style is a bit different from my usual dpreview stuff...

Pictures look so much better when they're framed nicely. Having them framed professionally takes time and costs annoying amounts of money. Doing it yourself is faster and cheaper, and the results can be every bit as good. Here's a quick-and-dirty approach to matting and framing: nobody can tell your picture wasn't professionally framed, although you're more restricted in your choice of materials and shapes than the pros.

Before you begin...

The tricky bit about framing is the mat, or *passepartout* as the French have it. If you want to use anything else than standard sizes or formats (4 x 6, 5 x 7, 8 x 10 etc.) you need to cut your own. You need to get your tools together for this. Here's what you need:

- A mat cutter
- A "carpet cutter" or X-Acto knife
- Spare blades for both
- A clean, smooth support
- A big ruler, preferably metal

For materials, you need:

- Matting
- Frames

Matting comes in all colors and thicknesses. The mass is generally white, but it might be covered by a colored paper. Prices vary a great deal. When you're starting out, it's best to go with basic, plain white acid-free matting that doesn't cost that much, because you're bound to screw up a few until you get your technique straight.

You can get the matting, mat cutter, and spare blades from art supply stores. The basic versions don't cost much. The rest you can get at hobby stores.

Frames

The most important thing about framing is choosing the frame. Since this is a tutorial for the lazy-ass dummy, we'll use ready-made ones. There's an amazing variety of shapes and sizes available: browse

around poster stores, hobby stores, bookstores, or even bigger supermarkets. IKEA for one has a huge variety in all styles at very inexpensive prices. (They even come with a pre-cut mat, which you might want to throw out if your picture doesn't suit the format.) Keep your eyes open, and keep a supply around. I avoid very "loud" frames: of the pictures on my walls, five have black frames (two narrow plastic, three thicker wood), three have metal (two shiny, narrow, one broad, "cast-iron" look), and two cobalt blue, broad, wooden ones. If you pick a frame with color in it, choose one that goes well with the picture: either an opposite color or one found within it; in the latter case, prefer ones found in accents, not the main color.

Then on to work: let's cut a piece of matting and draw some lines.

Chop and draw!

First, we'll cut a piece of matting the right size for the frame. Then we'll draw some lines on it to help us position the picture where we want. Then we'll draw the guide lines for the actual hole. That will make us ready to do the risky bit: cutting. Here's how we'll proceed:

1. Remove the hardboard backing from the frame.
2. Put our work surface on the floor, put the matting on that, **front facing down**, and the backing on top of the matting.
3. Align the backing carefully at a corner of the matting, so that two edges of the backing are perfectly on top of the corner of the sheet.
4. Put a knee on the backing, to hold it in place.
5. Cut off a piece of the matting with a carpet cutter, following the edges of the backing.

Voila, a piece of matting the right shape and size. Never mind if it's a bit dented at the edges or if the cuts aren't perfect: they'll be hidden behind the edge of the frame.

Finding the Center

Next, we'll find the center of the matting and draw two guides.

1. Make sure again that the front of the matting is facing down. All work is on the *back* of the matting!
2. Put your ruler near the top of the matting, and measure to find the midpoint. If the mat isn't exactly a round number wide, round to the nearest cm and move the ruler so the "slop" is equally divided between both ends. Make a mark.
3. Repeat near the bottom, and connect the dots with a thin line.
4. Repeat previous two steps for the other dimension of the mat.

Great. Now you've got a mat with a cross drawn on the back. The lines divide the mat into four equal rectangular areas, and intersect at the center of the mat. Now what?

Here's what.

1. Measure the width and height of the photo you're framing.
2. Pick a number between 1/2 and 1 cm less, rounding to the nearest cm, for each dimension.

3. Put the ruler near the edge of the mat. Pick a round number near the middle of the ruler, and align that with the guideline you just drew.
4. If this is the horizontal, nudge the ruler "up" a bit: about 1/2 cm feels right to me for a 5 x 7 photo. Make sure you know how much you nudged it, though.
5. Draw a dot on the mat exactly half the rounded-down dimension of the photo at either side of the adjusted midpoint.
6. Repeat at the other edge.
7. Connect each of the dot-pairs with a line.
8. Repeat the previous 7 steps for the other dimension of the photo.
9. Step back and admire your handiwork. If the rectangle you drew looks horizontally centered and level, it probably is.
10. Compare each of the dimensions of the hole you're going to draw with the dimensions of the photo. Make sure they're a little less. If you screwed up, being the lazy-ass dummy that you are, erase the lines and start over.

OK, now you should have a neat rectangle on the back of the matting showing where the hole should be. Now all that's left is cutting it. Yay! Out with the blades, then, and on to the penultimate step: cutting.

Hack and slash!

Here we come to the slightly tricky bit: cutting. Prepare yourself mentally for screwing up a mat or two before you get the hang of it. Use cheap matting to start with, so you won't be too mad at yourself: it'll still be way cheaper than having some industrious, smart professional do it for you. Lazy-ass dummies have to live with this sort of thing. Don't get discouraged, though: once you get the hang of it, it's easy.

The tricky bit is having everything stay in place while you're cutting. If things move around, you'll get very weird-looking holes. And they will, in the beginning... but will do that less, if you're well-prepared. So, first let's adjust the depth of the cut:

1. Leave the screws that hold the blade in place a bit loose. (Lazy-ass dummies know all about loose screws, right?)
2. Put the cutter at the edge of the mat, and push the blade down so it just presses into the work surface.
3. Tighten the screws.
4. Using a piece of scrap matting (or, failing that, the center of the mat you're going to cut -- that'll *become* scrap matting, unless you've started really ambitiously and are cutting a mondo piece of matting for your first job, which I don't recommend, but hey, it's your matting), make a test cut: press the cutter down against the matting, hold the matting in place with your hand, and push the cutter firmly forward.
5. Turn the scrap matting around. Did it cut completely through and leave a little scratch on the work surface? Didn't think so: nudge the blade down ever so slightly.
6. Repeat until you get a cut nicely through, but no more than a little scratch on the surface.

All set? OK: here's the slightly tricky bit. Reverse all left-right instructions if you're a leftie.

1. Turn the matting (still face down) so that the cut you're going to make goes away from you, the hole is to the right, and the edge is to your left.
2. Sink the cutter blade into the matting about 1/2 cm outside the hole-to-be, exactly on the line you drew on it. The blade faces to the left, towards the outside edge of the mat.
3. Take the ruler, and gently press it to the edge of the cutter. Then turn it so that it's perfectly parallel to the line you drew.
4. Clamp it tightly down on the mat with your left hand, near the end of the cut-to-be.
5. Clamp the near end of the ruler tightly down on the mat with your knee. Put a lot of your weight on it.
6. Since you probably shuffled everything around when you plunked your clumsy-ass knee on the ruler, start over and repeat until you've got everything in place.

Now, take a deep breath and relax. You should have the cutter blade sunk in the matting just outside the hole, along the line you drew, with your left hand clamping down the far end of the ruler, and your knee clamping down the near end. You're all ready to make the cut. So...

1. Gently but firmly, pushing down and against the ruler, make the cut. Extend it about 1/2 cm beyond the edge of the hole.

Whew.

Assuming you didn't flail wildly and screw up the cut, repeat for the other three edges.

Lift the mat up and examine your handiwork. If you did everything correctly, the middle will drop out and you'll get a neatly cut mat with perfectly beveled edges. (It's important that you cut enough beyond the hole to get neat corners.) If you screwed up a little, don't worry: nobody's going to notice. If it went totally out of whack, well, try again. After a few mats you'll be able to do it right every time. Except, of course, that very special colored mat that's the last piece remaining for the picture you're going to present to your mother-in-law for her birthday, which is going to start in 1/2 hour.

So, that was the tricky bit. Now the only bit that's left is the fun one.

I Need More Space...

The rest is easy: just assemble the whole thing and hang it up on the wall. Here are some things this lazy-ass dummy has discovered through bitter experience:

Keeping the pic in place

The pic often goes out of whack just as I drop it in place. Here are the moves that (usually) prevent this from happening:

1. Put the frame face down on something soft. Put the glass in it. If the glass is dirty on the inside, wipe it off with a microfiber cloth. Make sure there's no dust, grits, navel lint, grease, or fingerprints on it.
2. If you have the choice, put the rough side of the backing up.
3. Assemble the pic on the backing.
4. Taking care that your hands are clean (put a band-aid on the cut you accidentally made on yourself), pick the picture firmly up by the edge.

5. Drop one edge of the picture onto the glass, and push it to the edge of the frame.
6. Lower carefully, and drop when there's no more room for your finger.
7. Close one or two of the clamps, and check that everything's still OK. If not, repeat.
8. Close the rest of the clamps.

Hanging

Ever been to a gallery? Noticed that the pics are almost always hung just out from the wall? Thought not. That's how it's often done, though, and in my opinion it gives the pictures that extra little something that makes them stand out subtly but effectively. So why not do it at home.

- Take a bit of brown corrugated cardboard from a cardboard box or something.
- Fold it up into a stick about 1 cm thick (more or less, depending on the size and depth of the frame).
- Wrap it up with masking tape.
- Stick it on the back of the frame, near the bottom.
- Use a long nail, or a pretty long wire, as applicable, to hang the picture.
- Hang it. It should be parallel to the wall, but just a little bit out from it.

There, all done. These pictures make interesting gifts, and will either make you admired and loved or despised and avoided by your family and friends, depending on your skills and your style. If all else fails, you can decorate your room with them. Now, go shoot some more. And get some spare blades: a cutter blade with a broken point will just make you angry and frustrated, which isn't what your hobby is supposed to do. And remember to have fun!

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