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Why Specify a Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish?

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by Liz O'Sullivan

Many design and construction professionals believe that a Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish is required only in special circumstances, such as when gypsum board is to be coated with a high gloss paint. This practice actually falls far short of the industry standard.

The industry standard is to specify a Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish for ALL gypsum board substrates to be painted, except when the specified paint is a flat paint, or when a texture finish is to be applied prior to painting. A Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish should always be specified if the gypsum board surface is to be coated with a paint with a sheen higher than flat, or if critical lighting conditions are present. (Critical lighting conditions include high light levels and lighting from the side of a surface.)

This standard is included in a publication called *Recommended Levels of Gypsum Board Finish* (GA-214). This publication is issued by the Gypsum Association, and is the result of collaboration among industry trade organizations including the Association of the Wall and Ceiling Industry (AWCI), the Ceiling & Interior Systems Construction Association (CISCA), the Drywall Finishing Council (DWFC), Painting and Decorating Contractors of America (PDCA), and the Gypsum Association (GA). All the major U.S. manufacturers of gypsum board belong to the Gypsum Association, and advocate this standard.

The Master Painters Institute (MPI) and the Master Painters and Decorators Association (MPDA) also recommend Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish for paints with sheens with an MPI Gloss Level 3 (most "eggshell," "satin," and "pearl" finishes) and higher (semi-gloss, gloss).

This *Recommended Levels of Gypsum Board Finish* publication is not new; it was first published in 1990. Painting subcontractors and drywall subcontractors are acutely aware of these requirements. However, finishing and painting problems frequently surface during construction.

Coordination is essential to avoid finishing and painting problems on construction projects. The specifier must coordinate the Painting specification section with the Gypsum Board specification section, and should specify a Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish for the appropriate substrates. The general contractor should ensure that the work of the drywall subcontractor is completed per the specifications, so that the gypsum board substrates are properly prepared and ready for the work of the painting subcontractor.

A closely related issue is the matter of specifying an appropriate drywall primer. A drywall primer recommended by the manufacturer of the topcoat should always be applied to the prepared gypsum board surface prior to application of the intermediate and top coats. Because of how crucial the substrate preparation is for higher sheen paints, some painters always use high build drywall primers for higher sheen paints,

even with a Level 5 Gypsum Board Finish. High build primers have filling and surfacing qualities and can create a more uniform surface for the application of the finish coats of paint. This practice further illustrates how important a proper gypsum board finish is to the process of achieving an acceptable paint finish.

The Standard Specification for Application and Finishing of Gypsum Board (ASTM C 840) describes the levels of gypsum board finish. Recommended Levels of Gypsum Board Finish (GA-214) summarizes them, and is available free online, at <http://gypsum.org/pdf/GA-214-10e-webversion.pdf>. MPI and MPDA recommendations are at www.paintinfo.com. For more information, contact a paint manufacturer's representative, or a gypsum board manufacturer's representative. Many thanks to Denver CSI members Ryan Brown of The Sherwin-Williams Company, Dean Leschak of Kwal Paint, and Mitch Denman of National Gypsum Company, who got me going in the right direction on this article.

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For the basics on gypsum board finish levels, and a counterpoint to the point of this article, take a look at my latest blog post. Copy and paste this link into your browser: <http://lizosullivania.wordpress.com/2011/06/08/gypsum-board-finish-levels/>.

June 8, 2011 |  [Liz O'Sullivan](#)

Great article Liz. Lighting is often a problem for viewing gypsum board walls, both during and after construction. During construction the designed lighting is not in place, so sunlight can cast shadows that might otherwise be washed out. This can make the perception worse than the reality.

July 4, 2011 |  [David Stutzman](#)

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