Guide to Choosing a Finish

Though you can spray, brush, or wipe any finish, faster-drying finishes lend themselves better to spraying, and slower drying finishes are easier to brush or wipe. You can make choosing a finish easier by first deciding whether or not you are going to use a spray gun. Doing this reduces the number of finishes you have to choose between.

TOOL YOU INTEND TO USE	BROAD FINISH CHOICES	CURING CATEGORY	SPECIFIC FINISH CHOICES	DESCRIPTION OF FINISH
Spray Gun	Shellac	Evaporative	Clear	Adds a slight yellow tint.
			Amber (orange)	Adds a significant orange coloring.
			With natural wax	Cloudy in the can but not on the wood.
			Dewaxed	Better if you are applying another finish over it.
			Pre-dissolved	More convenient.
			Dissolve your own from flakes	Will be fresher and perform better.
	Lacquer	Evaporative	Nitrocellulose	Almost any lacquer labeled just "lacquer." Adds a slight orange tint to wood.
			Acrylic-modified lacquer	Adds a slight yellow tint to wood.
			CAB-acrylic	Water white. Adds no coloring to wood.
	Two-part finish	Reactive	Pre-catalyzed lacquer	The catalyst is already added.
			Post-catalyzed lacquer	Have to add the catalyst yourself. More protective and durable than pre-catalyzed lacquer.
			Conversion varnish	Have to add the catalyst yourself. More protective and durable than post-catalyzed lacquer.
			Two-part Polyurethane	More durable and easier to work with than conversion varnish.
			Polyester	Very durable, but very difficult to use.
			Powder	Requires expensive special equipment.
			UV-cured	Requires expensive special equipment.
			(Epoxy resin)	A pour-on finish. Can build very thick.
	Water base	Coalescing	Acrylic	Almost any can of water-based finish not labeled "polyurethane." Adds no coloring to wood but does darken it a little.
			Acrylic/ polyurethane	More durable than acrylic. Adds a tiny bit of yellowing to the wood.

TOOL YOU INTEND TO USE	BROAD FINISH CHOICES	CURING CATEGORY	SPECIFIC FINISH CHOICES	DESCRIPTION OF FINISH
Brush or Rag	Oil	Penetrating: Doesn't cure hard	Boiled linseed oil	Yellows significantly. Takes overnight to cure when excess is wiped off.
			Tung oil	Slower curing, less yellowing, and more water resistant than linseed oil.
			Oil/varnish blend	More protective and durable than either boiled linseed oil or tung oil.
	Shellac	Evaporative	Clear	Adds a slight yellow tint.
			Amber (orange)	Adds a significant orange coloring.
			With natural wax	Cloudy in the can but not on the wood.
			Dewaxed	Better if you are applying another finish over it. Better for French polishing.
			Pre-dissolved	More convenient.
			Dissolve your own from flakes	Will be fresher and perform better.
	Brushing lacquer	Evaporative	Only one choice	Dries slowly enough to be brushed. Has a strong odor.
	Varnish	Reactive	Alkyd	Almost any can that is labeled just "Varnish."
			Polyurethane	More protective and durable than other varnishes.
			Spar	More flexible for outdoor use.
			Marine	Spar varnish with UV-resistant additives.
			Wiping	Any varnish thinned enough to be easily wiped.
			Gel	Varnish thickened for easy wiping.
	Water Base	Coalescing	Acrylic	Almost any water-based finish not labeled "polyurethane." Adds no coloring to wood but does darken it a little.
			Acrylic/ polyurethane	More durable than acrylic. Adds a tiny bit of yellowing to the wood.