

# LEVELS OF DRYWALL FINISHES

## Understanding Gypsum Board Finish Levels

Gypsum board finish level is a critical factor in determining the quality of painted surfaces. These levels, standardized from level 0 to Level 5 by the Gypsum Association, provide essential guidance for achieving specific functional and aesthetic outcomes in commercial and residential construction. GA-214-2021 provides a universal language, ensuring aligned expectations for specification, bidding, and final appearance.

*Note that various terms describe the same fundamental building material. "Gypsum board," "gypsum wallboard," and "gypsum panels" all refer to the engineered panels consisting of a gypsum core encased in paper facings. While "drywall" is a widely used conversational term in the field, this document uses the more precise term "gypsum board" to maintain consistency with industry standards and specifications.*

### Level 0

No finishing or preparation is done. This is usually used in temporary construction.



### Level 1

Also referred to as "fire taping," joints have tape set in compound. This is usually found in attics or crawl spaces.



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## Level 2

At this level, tape is embedded in joint compound and are not visible. Accessories and fasteners receive a coat of joint compound. This is common in warehouses and garages.



## Level 3

Surfaces at this level are suitable for painting. Another coat of joint compound is applied, including onto flats and interior angles. This is typically used when heavier or medium-textured finishes are planned, or when thick wallcoverings will be applied.



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## Level 4

This is a high-quality finish, suitable for light textured walls with flat, light-colored paint or thin wallcoverings. Joints and fasteners are finished smoothly but some minor imperfections may still be visible under critical lighting conditions.



## Level 5

The highest standard of drywall finish, Level 5 is achieved with one or more all-over skim coats and sanding until ultra-smooth. This equalizes the porosity differences between the face paper of the gypsum board and the joint compound, minimizing the likelihood of flashing or joint banding. Level 5 finishes are typically used in areas where critical lighting conditions are present or where dark-colored, non-flat topcoats are applied, as these can emphasize any surface imperfections.

A primer-surfacer can be used as an effective skim coat and primer. The higher the build, the better it smooths over subtle imperfections, helping to create an even, uniform surface.



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## GYPSUM BOARD FINISH LEVELS

	0	1	2	3	4	5
Suitable for Painting (primer required)				Yes heavy/medium texture or thick wallcovering	Yes light textures, flat, light-colored paints or light wallcovering	Yes smooth, non-flat dark paints, critical lighting
Tools Marks & Ridges		Acceptable	Acceptable	Not visible	Not visible	Not visible
Taping		Tape set in joint compound	Tape embedded in joint compound, wiped with a knife, leaving a thin coat of joint compound over tape. Should not be visible.			
Accessories & Fasteners e.g. control joints, corner bead, screws			1 coat	2 coats	3 coats	3 coats
Flat Joints panels that meet on the same plane				1 coat	2 coats	2 coats
Interior Angles panels that meet at an angle				1 coat	1 coat	1 coat
All-Over Skim Coat						1 + coats

For Level 3 and higher finishes, a properly executed mockup serves as the project’s benchmark for quality. By applying the complete specified system, all stakeholders can align on expectations before work begins, reducing the risk of costly rework and disputes over the final appearance.

Success on gypsum board finishing hinges upon correct identification and preparation. When surface levels are not properly identified and achieved before painting, issues can arise: joint photographing through topcoats, surface texture variations between gypsum board and joint compound, porosity differences leading to inconsistent sheen levels, and inadequate hide over fasteners. Early verification of specified finish levels coupled with thorough surface assessment is fundamental to achieving specification compliance and long-term coating performance.

From utilitarian spaces to premium surfaces requiring the highest level of finish, proper identification and execution of specified levels ensures the final appearance meets project requirements and stakeholder expectations.

