When it comes to fast and accurate layouts, this traditional tool will more than earn its keep in the woodworking shop.

If I were to make a list of the most-used tools in my shop, the marking gauge would be near the top. Even with the myriad of rulers, calipers, and digital measuring devices that are available today, it’s hard to beat this simple tool for accuracy and ease of use.

If you take a look at the various marking gauges being sold today, you’ll notice two distinct types. Some use a steel pin to scribe a line while others use a flat blade. This second type is often called a “cutting gauge” because the blade slices the wood fibers rather than tearing them, like the pin-style marking gauges (see photos at right). Of the two, I prefer the blade-style gauge. It scores a cleaner, crisper line.

**DESIGN.** A marking gauge is one of those simple tools whose basic design hasn’t changed much over the years. It has a beam and an adjustable fence (or stock) that is held in place with a thumb screw, or sometimes, a wedge.

The only other differences you’re likely to find between the various gauges on the market have to do with the level of fit and finish and the amount of brass details used in the construction. The more expensive gauges have brass thumb screws.
screws as well as brass wear strips inlaid into the fence and beam.

**THE BLADE.** One thing you’ll notice when looking at new marking gauges is that the blades on most of them are only roughly ground, as shown in the drawing below. Some of these gauges feature a blade with a single bevel, while others have a blade with a double bevel. The double bevel allows you to either push or pull the gauge.

**ROUND-NOSE PROFILE.** But for the best results, I like to re-grind the end of the blade to a round-nose profile. It’s a little bit trickier to hone this profile, but it makes the marking gauge a lot easier to control.

There’s one other thing to mention in regards to the blade. I like to insert the blade in the beam so that the bevel is facing the fence. This makes it easier to measure the distance from the fence to the outside of the blade. And it also helps to draw the fence tight against the edge of the workpiece.

To make minor adjustments to the fence, tighten the thumb screw down just enough to lightly hold the fence in place. Then gently tap either end of the beam straight down on the top of your workbench to nudge the fence down a hair and tighten the thumb screw.

Once the gauge is adjusted, simply hold the fence against the edge of the workpiece and draw the blade across the surface to create a score line. For crisp layout lines, try to scribe the line in one single pass, rather than going over it again and again.

**USES.** One of the main advantages of using a marking gauge over a pencil and ruler is that you can repeat the settings on every workpiece that you mark out. So I use a marking gauge for quickly laying out all kinds of woodworking joints — tenons, mortises, dovetails, and rabbets. You just measure once and you’re guaranteed that all your lines will be located identically.

**CLEAN UP.** Another advantage is the score line of the blade creates a perfect starting point for your chisel when it comes to paring away the waste. For example, I use a marking gauge to mark out the shoulders of a tenon. Then I’ll take the workpiece over to the table saw and cut away most of the waste, stopping just shy of the layout line.

Finally, I come back in with a sharp chisel and pare away the remaining waste for a perfect fit. The scribed score line helps you to register your chisel while cleaning up the waste, as you can see in the drawings above.

Once you start using a marking gauge, you’ll find yourself reaching for it more and more. Eventually, you’ll wonder how you ever got along without one.

**Veritas Marking Gauge**

Unlike traditional, straight-blade marking gauges, this gauge from *Veritas* uses a hardened steel wheel cutter to mark layout lines (inset photo at right). *Veritas* offers this tool with a couple of options — a graduated rod (below) and a micro-adjust feature to make fine adjustments. For sources, turn to page 51.