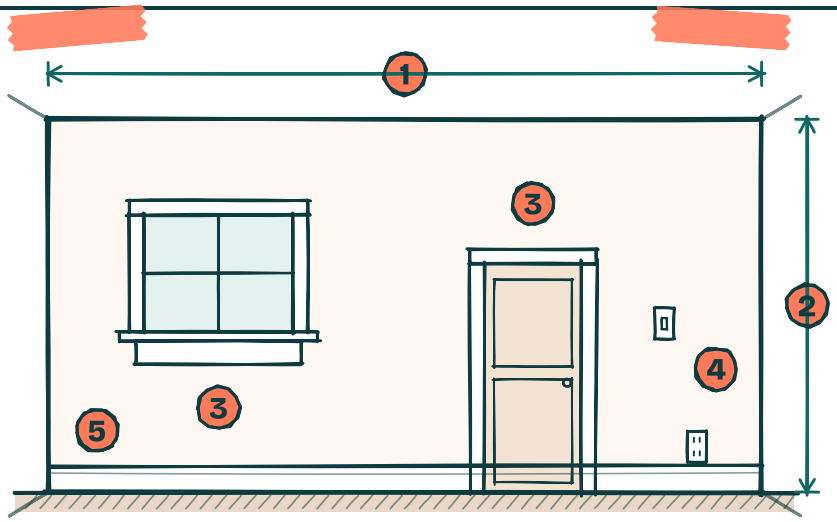
How to measure your wall for trim

Good molding starts with good numbers. This guide shows how to measure a wall, its doors and windows, and its outlets and switches before you plan wainscoting, board and batten, shiplap or picture frame boxes. It takes about 15 minutes a wall, and all you need is a tape measure, a pencil and a level.



The order to measure in. It's the same order the free planner asks for the numbers.

Before you start

What you need

- [ ] **A tape measure** with a metal hook, at least 25 ft long, so it reaches across the wall.
- [ ] **A pencil and paper**, or a photo of the wall on your phone to write the numbers on.
- [ ] **A level**, 2 or 4 ft long. A long straight board works for checking the wall too.
- [ ] **A stud finder**, for marking where to nail.
- [ ] **Painter's tape**, to mark studs and test where the molding goes.
- [ ] **A step stool**, and a helper if you have one: long measurements are easier with someone holding the other end.

For our picks of these, and everything else the build needs, see planmytrim.com/tools-and-supplies.

A few rules for every number

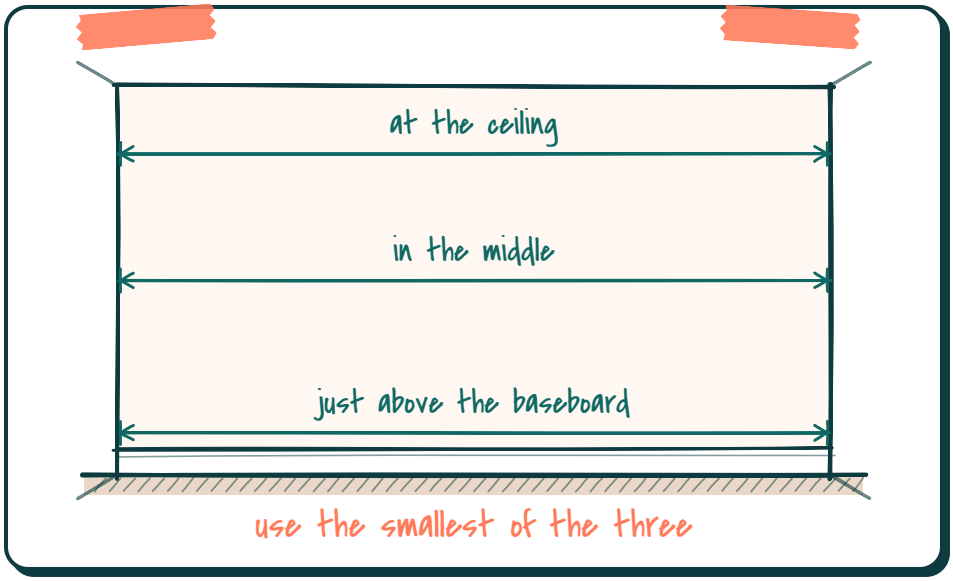
- **Stand facing the wall.** Everything across the wall is measured from the **left corner**, and everything up the wall is measured from the **floor**.
- **Measure to the nearest 1/8 in.** Small errors add up across a row of boxes.
- **Write it the way the planner takes it.** In inches, type numbers like *34 1/2*, or feet and inches like *12' 4"*.
- **Measure twice.** If the two don't match, measure a third time.

> Tip: Have a photo of the wall? The planner's **Suggest looks from my photo** gives rough sizes so you can start designing right away. They can be off by several inches, so measure with a tape before you buy a plan.

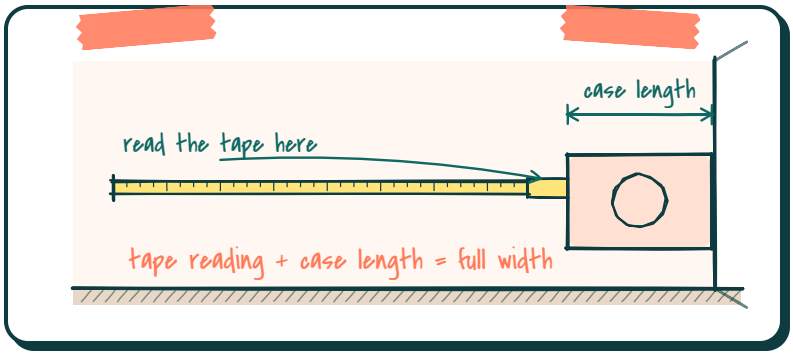
Step 1

Measure the wall's width

Measure from corner to corner three times: up near the ceiling, in the middle, and just above the baseboard. Walls are rarely perfectly square, so the three numbers often differ a little. **Use the smallest one**, so nothing you build is too long for the tightest spot.



A tape measure can't bend into a corner. Push the back of the tape's case into the far corner, read the tape at the case, then add the case length. It's usually printed on the case.



In the planner

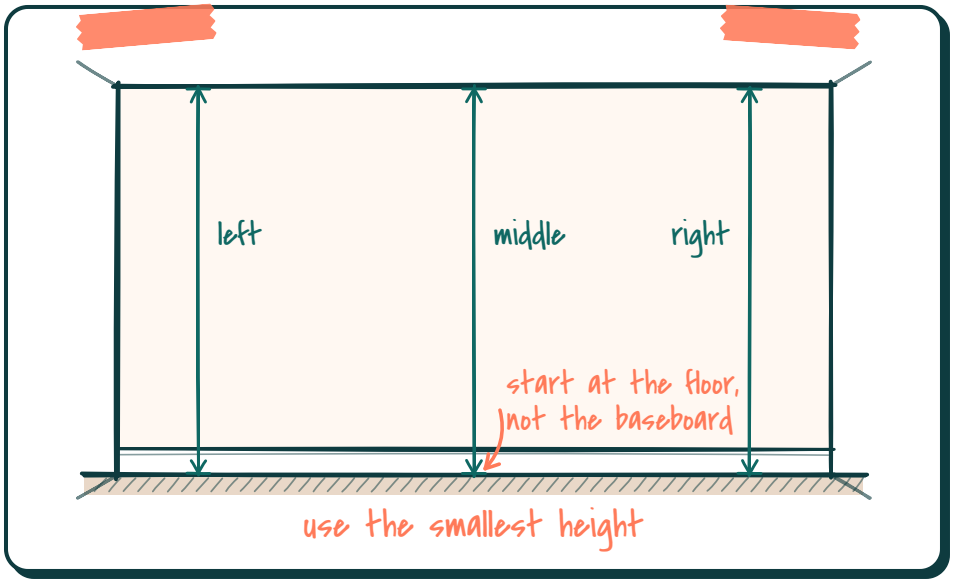
Wall width

Step 2

Measure the wall's height

Measure from the floor to the ceiling at the left, in the middle and at the right. Start at the floor itself, not at the top of the baseboard. **Use the smallest height.**

Ceilings sold as 8 ft are often a little more or less than that. The planner has quick picks for standard heights, but measure anyway: a small difference changes the size of every box.



If the heights differ by more than 1/2 in, your floor or ceiling isn't level. That's common, and Check the wall itself explains what to do about it.

In the planner

Wall height (floor to ceiling)

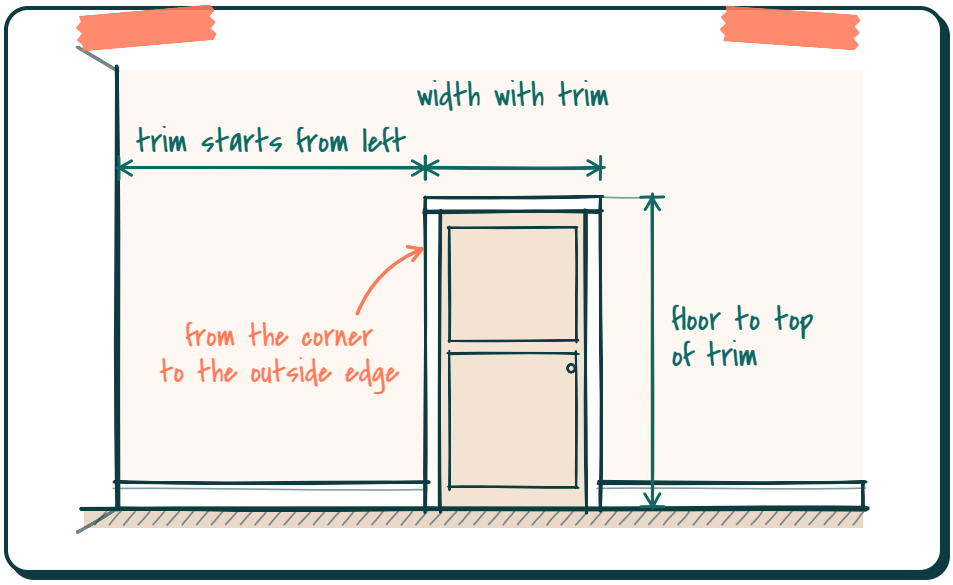
Step 3

Measure doors, windows and openings

Molding works around doors and windows, so the planner needs to know where their **trim** starts and stops. Always measure to the **outside edges of the trim** (the casing), not to the door or glass inside it.

Doors and open doorways

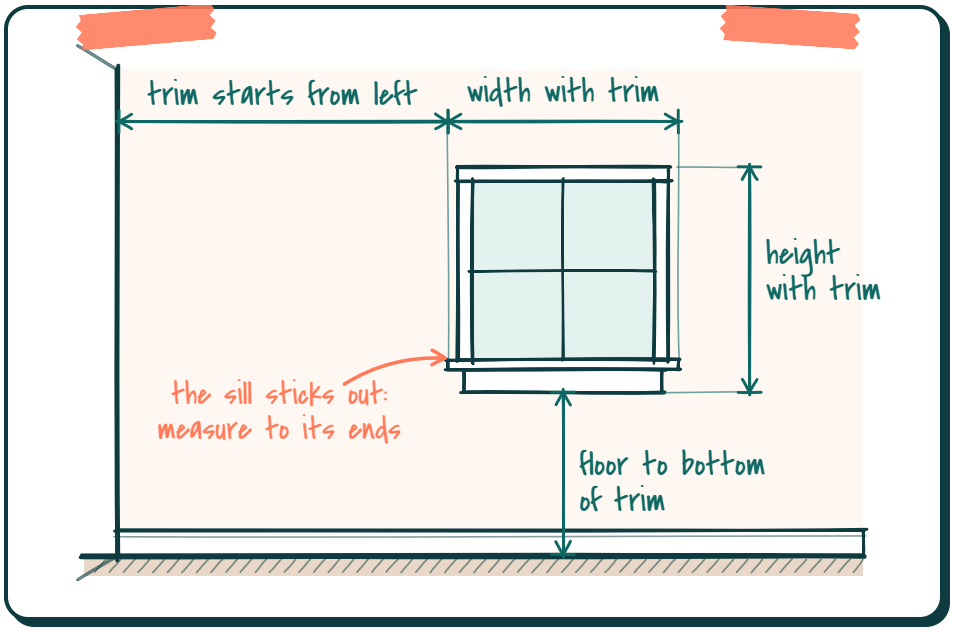
1. **Trim starts from left:** from the wall's left corner to the outside edge of the trim on the door's left side.
2. **Width with trim:** from the outside edge of the trim on the left to the outside edge on the right.
3. **Floor to top of trim:** from the floor to the top edge of the trim above the door. For an arched door, measure to the top of the arch.



Windows

A window usually has a sill (also called a stool) that sticks out past the trim on each side, and a board under the sill called the apron. Include both.

1. **Trim starts from left:** from the left corner to the left end of the sill, where the window is widest.
2. **Width with trim:** from one end of the sill to the other.
3. **Height with trim:** from the bottom of the apron to the top of the trim above the window.
4. **Floor to bottom of trim:** from the floor to the bottom of the apron.



In the planner

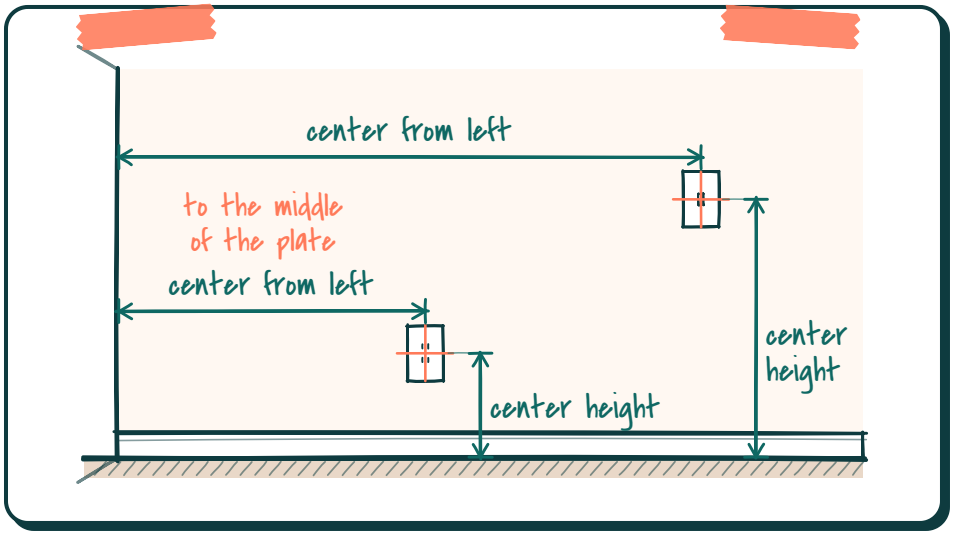
+ Door, + Window or + Opening, then: Trim starts from left · Width with trim · Floor to top of trim (doors) · Height with trim and Floor to bottom of trim (windows)

Step 4

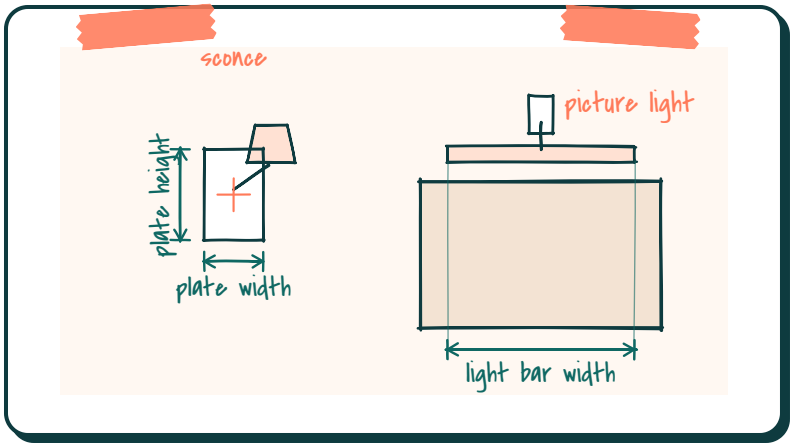
Measure outlets, switches, lights and vents

The planner works the molding around anything on the wall, as long as it knows where things are. For each outlet and switch, measure to the **center of the cover plate**, not to its edge.

1. **Center from left:** from the wall's left corner to the middle of the plate.
2. **Center height:** from the floor to the middle of the plate.



For a **sconce** or **picture light**, measure to the center of its mounting plate the same way, then add the plate's width and height. For a picture light, also measure the width of the light bar.



Vents, thermostats and alarm panels: the planner can't add these yet. Measure them the same way (center from left, center height, width and height), note them on your sketch, and check that your design keeps the molding clear of them.

In the planner

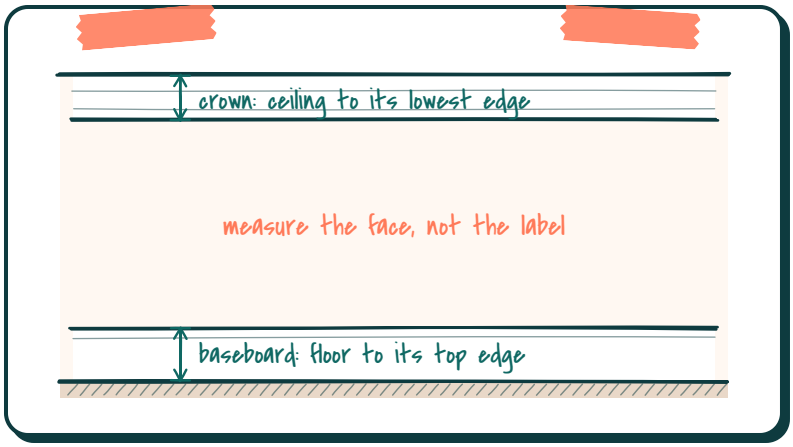
+ Outlet or + Switch: Center from left · Center height. + Sconce or + Picture light: Plate center from left · Plate center height · Plate width · Plate height · Light bar width

Step 5

Measure baseboard, crown and trim you already have

Boxes, battens and shiplap are spaced from the baseboard and the crown molding, so measure those too.

- **Baseboard height:** from the floor to the baseboard's top edge. 3 1/2 to 5 in is common.
- **Crown height:** from the ceiling down to the crown's lowest edge on the wall.
- **Molding you'll buy:** measure the actual face width of a piece in the store. Labels are often rounded.



Adding or replacing baseboard, crown or flooring? Do that first and measure afterwards. Taking off an old chair rail? Measure the wall as if it's already gone.

In the planner

Baseboard height · Crown height · Panel molding width (side panel, after the guided setup)

On build day

Check the wall itself

These checks don't change what you type into the planner, but they decide how the molding goes up. Do them before you buy molding.

Is the floor level?

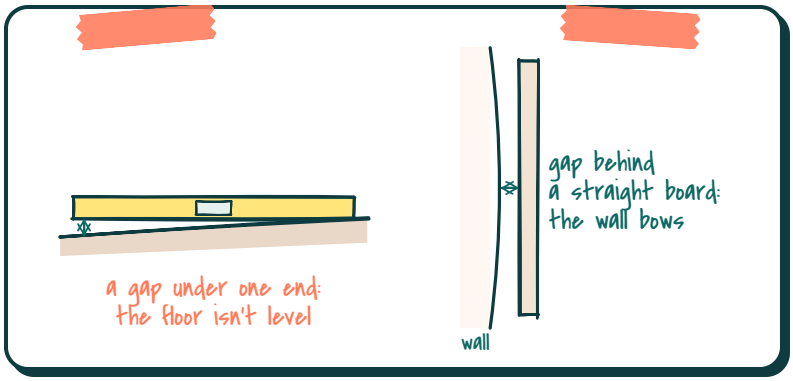
Lay your level on the floor along the wall. A gap under one end means the floor slopes. If your height measurements from Step 2 differ by more than 1/2 in, mark your heights from a level line instead of measuring up from the floor at each spot, so the molding runs straight even where the floor doesn't.

Are the corners straight up and down?

Hold the level upright in each corner. If your three width measurements from Step 1 differ by more than 1/4 in, a corner leans. Use the smallest width, and expect the space at the ends of the wall to change slightly from top to bottom.

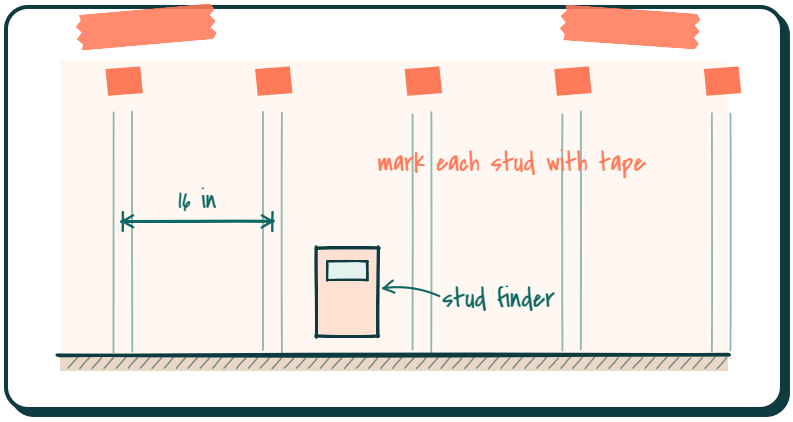
Is the wall flat?

Hold a long level or a straight board flat against the wall in a few places. Gaps up to about 1/8 in behind molding are filled with caulk. Bigger bumps or dips are worth sanding or patching before you start.



Where are the studs?

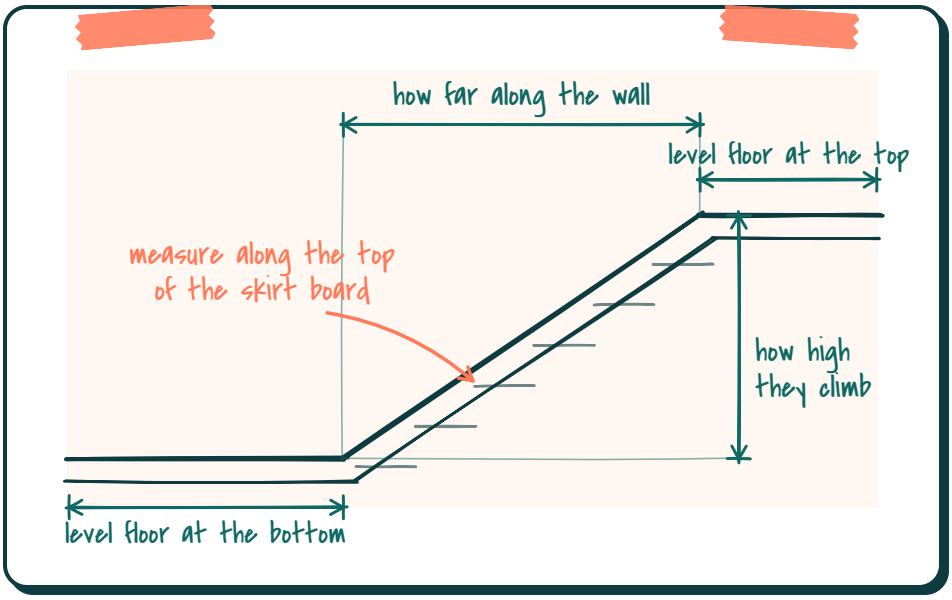
Run a stud finder along the wall and mark each stud with a strip of painter's tape near the ceiling, where marks won't show. Studs are usually 16 in apart. A chair rail, top rail and shiplap rows are nailed into studs. Battens and boxes rarely land on one, so they go up with construction adhesive and brad nails. Keep nails away from outlets and switches, because wires run above, below and beside them.



Staircase walls

A wall beside stairs is measured along the top edge of the **skirt board**, the board that runs up the stairs against the wall. You need four sizes, plus the ceiling height:

1. **Level floor at the bottom:** how far the wall runs along level floor before the skirt board starts to slope. Enter 0 if the wall starts at the first step.
2. **How far along the wall:** measured level, from where the skirt board starts to slope to where it levels off.
3. **How high they climb:** measured straight up, from where the slope starts to where it levels off. This is usually the height from one floor to the next.
4. **Level floor at the top:** how far the wall carries on along the upper floor or landing. Enter 0 if it ends at the top step.



In the planner

Staircase walls: Level floor at the bottom · Stairs: how far along the wall · Stairs: how high they climb · Level floor at the top

Common mistakes

- ✕ **Measuring the width in only one place.** Measure top, middle and bottom, and use the smallest.
- ✕ **Measuring heights from the top of the baseboard.** Every height starts at the floor.
- ✕ **Measuring to the inside of door and window trim.** Measure to the outside edges, and include a window's sill and apron.
- ✕ **Measuring outlets to the edge of the plate.** Measure to its center.
- ✕ **Switching corners.** Measure everything across the wall from the left corner, even when the right one is closer.
- ✕ **Rounding to the nearest inch.** Keep the eighths.
- ✕ **Bending the tape into a corner.** Butt the case into the corner and add its length.
- ✕ **Trusting the label.** A "1x4" board is 3 1/2 in wide, and molding sizes are often rounded. Measure the real thing.
- ✕ **Trusting the house plans or a photo.** They're a start, not a measurement.
- ✕ **Forgetting what's on the wall.** Thermostats, vents and the switch beside the door are easy to miss.

Got your numbers? Design your wall.

Type them into the free planner and try every look on your own wall: picture frame boxes, board and batten, shiplap and beadboard, or a staircase wall. No account needed.

Plan your wall for free at **planmytrim.com**

Then get the build plan

When you love the design, the build plan turns it into everything you need to build it, worked out for your wall's exact size:

- [ ] A measured drawing of your finished wall, with the exact size of every box or board to the nearest 1/16 in
- [ ] A shopping list of what to buy
- [ ] A cut list with miter lengths, and a cutting plan for each length of molding
- [ ] Where each piece goes on the wall, and install steps for your wall
- [ ] A printable PDF, with a shopping sheet for the store and a cut sheet for the saw

See a sample plan and today's price at **planmytrim.com/sample-plan**

Plan My Trim drawings and plans are a planning aid. Measure your own wall carefully and check the fit before you cut.