

THE HOME YOU OWN

12 things to know about wallpaper before you try it in your home

Insights from design pros, including the problem with darker colors, why you shouldn't fear paste and why peel-and-stick isn't always easier

By Jennifer Barger

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An accent wall in a pattern by D.C. wallpaper designer Kate Zaremba. (Courtesy Kate Zaremba)

Paint might be the fastest and [cheapest way to refresh a room](#). But adding wallpaper can have an even more transformative effect, turning an otherwise plain space into an art installation. “It has the power to make a room feel bigger — even taller — and finished, without having to add framed art or photographs all over the place,” says [Kate Zaremba](#), a Washington, D.C. wallpaper designer.

It's no wonder, then, that wallpaper has been en vogue for centuries — and maybe longer. Some histories suggest it was invented in China as early as the 3rd century B.C., though scholars at Britain's Victoria & Albert Museum date the [first wallpapers to the 16th century](#). Though it lost some of its popularity in the 1990s and early 2000s, interior designers never abandoned it. And in the last decade or so, it's experienced a renaissance thanks in part to papers that are easier to hang without professional help.

If you're ready to try it in your own home, here's what else you should know before you get unrolling.



A powder room designed by Nicole Lanteri, with two types of black-and-white patterned wallpaper. (Kimberly Frost/Nicole Lanteri Design)

1 Wallpaper is expensive

Wallpaper is generally sold by the roll — often 27 inches wide by 4.5 yards long — which will cover about 30 square feet. Expect to pay \$25 to \$50 per roll on the low end, and up to thousands of dollars for a roll of silk-coated or hand-painted paper. Plus, professional installation can cost as much as the wallpaper. “No matter the paper you choose, it’s a bit of an investment,” says Zaremba.

2 Choose wallpaper the same way you’d choose paint

Order samples (or pick them up at a paint and wallpaper store) then hang them on the wall you plan to cover. Pay attention to how the swatches look at different times of day, and [how different lighting affects](#) the patterns and colors.

“You can start your search online, but I really like to get my paws on the stuff at a store,” says Jeff Ross, a Virginia wallpaper installer. “Look at the texture, the thickness.”



A bold wallpaper in a game room designed by Nicole Lanteri. (Stacy Zarin Goldberg/Nicole Lanteri Design)

3 Dark colors can be tricky

If you're going for a moodier vibe – such as [muted florals on a field of black](#) – know that wallpaper paste tends to more easily show through dark patterns, sometimes leading to white streaks. The seams where the panels of wallpaper meet may also be more visible with darker papers.



A living room covered in balloon-printed wallpaper, designed by Nicole Lanteri. (Reema Desai/Nicole Lanteri Design)

4 The size of the pattern matters

An oversized pattern can have the [effect of expanding your space](#). “A bigger pattern makes the room feel more impactful,” says Arlington, Va. interior designer [Nicole Lanteri](#).

Tiny patterns, on the other hand, might make you motion sick. Many people who dislike wallpaper have been scarred by “ditzzy” prints from the 1970s and '80s: teeny polka dots, fields of wee flowers. “If a pattern is too small, you can literally get dizzy looking at it,” says Lanteri. If you're considering a small print, hang up a large sample before committing, and remember that tiny patterns can feel less overwhelming in a tight space, such as a walk-in closet or pantry.



D.C. wallpaper designer Kate Zaremba installing one of her own papers. (Courtesy Kate Zaremba)

5 Learn about “repeat”

A wallpaper’s “repeat” refers to how far the pattern extends vertically down each panel before it repeats again. In tighter patterns, the repeat could be as little as three inches; others will repeat every two feet, and some won’t repeat at all. The repeat impacts how much paper you’ll need to buy and how difficult it will be to match up the panels as you hang them.

6 Don’t wallpaper over wallpaper

You technically can paste new wallpaper over old, but you probably don’t want to. The new stuff could fail to adhere properly, leading to peeling. And you may also be creating a huge hassle for your future self — removing layers of wallpaper is a pain.

7 Consider wallpapering your ceiling

Wallpaper isn't just for walls — it's also a terrific way to make a statement on the ceiling. A textured paper can make a high-ceilinged space feel cozier; a paler color or cloud print (such as Cole & Son's [Nuvolette](#)) can make lower ceilings seem higher. But before you proceed, consider what else is up there, says McLean, Va. interior designer [Tracy Morris](#). "On the ceiling, it looks best if you have one central [light] fixture, not a bunch of can lights," she says. Multiple fixtures — or air-conditioning vents or smoke alarms — can cause wallpaper to look busier (plus it's difficult to cut the paper to fit around them).



A wallpaper that mimics greenery helps enliven a basement designed by Nicole Lanteri. (Stacy Zarin Goldberg/Nicole Lanteri Design)

8 Don't fear wallpaper paste

Wallpaper paste has gotten something of a bad rap. Traditional, unpasted paper — which must be brushed or rolled with paste to adhere to the wall — used to be the only option. Then peel-and-stick became the “easier” choice. But today’s pastes and papers are generally better quality and easier to use than the stuff your grandparents had to work with. And there is one big advantage to paste: it’s slow-drying, which means it’s more forgiving. If you hang a pasted panel crookedly, you’ll have time to adjust it until it’s just right.



Moody wallpaper in a butler's pantry by Tracy Morris Design. (Greg Powers)

9 Peel-and-stick papers aren't always easy or temporary

Though peel-and-stick papers are marketed as easy to install and great for renters, they can be challenging. They adhere immediately to surfaces, making them difficult to adjust. And you shouldn't count on them being temporary. “It's popular with renters, because they feel like it won't damage the wall,” says Brittany Ellis, owner of the online wallpaper store [the Pattern Collective](#). “But you can literally take the drywall down when you remove it. It can be a nightmare.”

If you're determined to avoid paste, you might consider the type of self-adhering wallpaper that you activate with water. This wallpaper works more like an old-school postage stamp, rather than a sticker. You dip it into a large bucket or bathtub to activate the glue on the back. Similar to the pasted kind, it takes longer to dry, so you'll have more time to perfect the placement once it's on your wall. “You have more chances to peel it off and place it back on without it losing its stickiness,” says Zaremba, who exclusively makes this type of paper.



All of Kate Zaremba's wallpapers, including this pattern, are self-adhering; you dip them in water to activate the glue on the back. (Courtesy Kate Zaremba)

10 Prime your walls first

To ensure a smooth wallpaper application, apply a coat of primer to your walls first. This will help even out bumps and other imperfections, and create a protective barrier between the plaster or drywall and the paper. Get [a primer designed especially for wallpaper](#); it will have less “drag,” meaning the wallpaper will slide around more easily if you need to adjust it.



Wallpaper can be suitable for damp locations. Here, a Kate Zaremba design is shown in a bathroom. (Courtesy Kate Zaremba)

11 Yes, you can hang wallpaper in damp locations

[Kitchens and bathrooms](#) can be great candidates for wallpaper — as long as you get the right kind. Look for the words “commercial grade,” “vinyl” or “scrubbable,” all of which signal that a wallpaper can withstand moisture. “Vinyls have come such a long way,” says Morris. “They no longer smell like a pool float, and they can look like silk or grass cloth.”

Ellis recommends coating non-vinyl wallpaper hung in damp or high-traffic areas with a [protective varnish in a dead flat finish](#).



A primary bedroom with a soothing accent wall, by Tracy Morris Design. (Greg Powers)

12 You might want a pro for big jobs

DIY'ing any size wallpaper project requires plenty of advance prep (stripping old paper, smoothing and cleaning walls) to assure the new paper goes on without bubbles or bumps. You'll need to be precise when measuring and cutting — and be sure to buy extra paper in case you make mistakes. So if you want to cover a large space, such as an entire primary bedroom or living room, consider hiring a professional installer.

“A good installer is like an artist,” says Ellis. “They’ve honed their craft for years and years.” To find a wallpaper-hanging pro, use the search tool at the [Wallcovering Installers Association](#) or visit a local paint and design store that sells wallpaper — most have professionals they recommend.

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