

The first time you chase a dull edge down a rabbit hole of stones and opinions, grit can feel like a magic number. Buy the “right” progression, follow a few videos, and the knife should come back to life. In practice, grit is less like a switch and more like a dial. It controls how fast you remove metal, how stable the bevel becomes, and whether you end up chasing burrs and scratches for days.

If you want sharpening to feel predictable, you need to pick grit by stage, not by brand or by the highest number you can afford. I learned that the hard way with a kitchen knife that had been “sharpened” years earlier on a very aggressive wheel. The edge looked keen from a distance, but under light it was jagged, uneven, and weak. I spent too long bouncing between coarse grits trying to “clean it up” without ever deciding whether I was removing damage or refining the bevel. The fix was simple, but I didn’t try it soon enough. I treated grit like job steps: repair first, establish geometry next, then refine and polish.

What grit really changes

A stone’s grit number is a measure of abrasive particle size, but the practical effects matter more than the number itself. Coarser grits cut faster and leave deeper scratch patterns. Finer grits remove less material per pass, which makes them ideal once the edge shape is already correct and you are mostly improving surface finish.

Here is the key point that saves people weeks: **you cannot use a fine grit to fix a badly damaged edge quickly**. You can eventually grind away the damage, but you will pay for it in time, unevenness, and heat buildup. Conversely, using a coarse grit for “finishing” tends to leave toothy scars that won’t support smooth cutting for long.

Grit also interacts with how your stone behaves. Some stones feel “faster” at the same grit rating, especially if they dish more easily or release abrasive differently. Water stones, oil stones, and diamond plates all act differently even when they share a nominal grit. The numbers are a guide, not a law.

A useful mental model is to separate two goals:

1. **Shape and alignment:** getting the bevel and edge geometry right.
2. **Surface and polish:** improving sharpness feel, bite consistency, and corrosion resistance for certain steels and grinds.

Coarse grits serve shape and alignment. Mid to fine grits serve surface refinement. Very fine grits mostly serve polish and consistency.

The stages most people need (even if they don’t call them that)

Most “good” sharpening is a sequence of stages. Your exact progression depends on the knife, the steel, how dull it is, and whether there is edge damage. But the logic stays consistent.

When I decide what grits to use, I ask three questions in my head:

- How much metal damage or deformation do I need to remove?
- Is the bevel already established, or am I redoing the whole angle and width?
- Do I care more about ultimate keenness or about a more durable working edge that stays stable?

You can sharpen any edge with just a coarse-to-fine progression, but people often jump to the wrong end because they want the fastest path. If the edge is heavily rolled or chipped, starting too fine means you will grind

away forever and still feel a stubborn dull spot because the underlying damage is still there.

Stage 1: Repair and geometry (coarse to medium)

This is where grit matters most. If the edge is rounded from wear, you might only need a coarse pass to bring the apex back. If the edge is chipped, you need enough abrasive to remove the chip and re-form the apex cleanly.

Typical “repair” work lives in the coarse and medium range. Think of it as making the edge honest again. You should be able to feel progress as the bevel widens and the micro-carved burr forms along the edge. If you are doing this on a whetstone, you should see a continuous scratch pattern and consistent bevel contact.

One thing I watch for is whether the scratch pattern from your coarse grit is even. Uneven scratches usually mean uneven bevel contact, not just an edge issue. That can be your technique, your stone flatness, or the knife’s existing grind. If the bevel isn’t contacting the stone consistently, switching grits won’t fully solve the problem. It will only hide it for a moment.

Stage 2: Burr management and bevel refinement (medium to fine)

Once the apex is re-established, you move into the refinement stage. This is where the edge starts to feel more “sharp” instead of merely “pointy.” The scratches from the previous grit become smaller, the edge becomes more uniform, and cutting performance improves.

Burr management is part of this stage even when you do not explicitly chase it. A burr is easier to create than to control, and it varies by steel. Some steels make a thin, stubborn burr that seems to appear and then vanish. Others create a heavier burr that resists refinement. The practical approach is to keep your stroke consistent and do enough work that the opposite side reacts as expected. When you move to finer grits too early, you can end up refining the burr instead of removing it cleanly, which can cause inconsistent sharpness.

Stage 3: Polishing and honing (fine to very fine)

When people say they are honing, what they often mean is the final refinement passes that reduce scratch depth and improve edge feel. “Honing” is not a separate magic process. On a stone, honing is just sharpening’s gentler, later-stage version.

At very fine grits, material removal slows dramatically. The goal shifts from changing the edge shape to improving the surface. That can mean a smoother draw through paper, less micro snagging, and sometimes better performance in tasks that rely on clean shearing. But very fine grits are also more sensitive to how your technique holds the angle. If your angle drifts even slightly, you may not refine the apex consistently. You might polish the bevel without fully strengthening the edge.

For many everyday kitchen uses, “fine enough” is plenty. The edge will still perform great. Going to the absolute finest grit can improve smoothness, but it might also reduce bite or shorten the time before the edge starts to feel dull again depending on the steel and how the knife is used.

Choosing grits based on what the edge looks like

The best grit progression is the one that matches the edge condition. A “one-size” progression often disappoints because the edge is different every time.

If your knife has only dulled through normal use, you might start at a medium grit, work until you raise and manage a burr, then move to fine for refinement. If your knife has been abused, you’ll need a coarser start.

If you routinely cut on boards that wear edges quickly, you might spend more time on mid grits to keep the edge geometry stable. If your work involves precise slicing, you may prefer a finer polish.

A quick, practical way to decide

Look closely under good light. I usually do this:

- Inspect the edge for chips, cracks, or unevenness.
- Feel the edge gently with a thumbnail or by careful “edge sweep” on scrap material, not by testing on your fingers.
- Check whether the bevel seems uneven or if the edge line looks inconsistent.

When chips are visible, I choose a coarse grit that can remove the chip and re-form the apex efficiently. When there is no obvious damage but the edge is dull, a medium grit does most of the work.

The scratch pattern is your report card. After a coarse step, the bevel should show fresh, uniform lines across the area you intend to sharpen. If your scratches are only on the center or only on one side, the angle or pressure needs correction before you waste time on finer grits.

A common progression that works, with real choices

Most people do well with a simple three-step progression: repair, refine, and hone. You can build that with stones, diamond plates, or abrasive belts, but the concept is the same.

Here’s the kind of progression I reach for most often when I am not dealing with severe chips. The exact numbers vary by stone type, but this range logic holds:

- **Coarse repair:** start around 200 to 400 grit if the edge is significantly dull, rolled, or has minor edge damage.
- **Establish and refine bevel:** move to 600 to 800 grit for consistent bevel contact and apex formation.
- **Honing and edge finishing:** go to 1000 to 3000 grit for a stable working edge and improved smoothness.

If the knife is used for very fine food prep, or if you are chasing a noticeably slick feel, you can push higher into the 4000 to 8000 region for finer finishing. Beyond that, it becomes about personal preference and how your steel responds. Some steels take polish beautifully. Others do not benefit as much because their microstructure and carbide distribution affect how the apex behaves once it is sharp.

Two real-world examples

I once restored a pair of shears that had a dull edge caused by years of minor neglect. The blades were not chipped, but [best sharpening tools manual](#) the edge had lost its bite. A coarse grit would have been overkill because there was no obvious damage. Starting at a medium grit and working until the bevel was consistent on both blades gave a much faster result, and finishing at a fine grit made the cut feel clean without making the edge feel fragile.

On another job, a chef’s knife had a small chip near the heel. If I had started at a fine stone, the chip would have been there for a long time, and the rest of the edge would have been overworked while the damaged area refused to disappear. Starting coarse was the right call. Once the chip was gone and the apex re-formed, the rest of the progression felt straightforward.

How pressure and stroke change the “effective grit”

Even if you choose perfect grits, technique can turn a good plan into confusion.

With coarse grits, pressure matters because you are cutting. Too much pressure on a fine stone can create “deep scratches” that you thought you were avoiding. Too little pressure on coarse stones can make it seem like your stone is not working, leading you to extend time and still not remove enough metal.

Stroke consistency matters too. If you use a sweeping motion on one side and shorter controlled strokes on the other, the bevel will develop unevenly. Then when you switch grits, you will keep refining the wrong geometry.

I have found that a light, controlled pressure at the early stages helps prevent digging and gouging, but you still need enough contact to maintain consistent bevel coverage. On softer stones, aggressive pressure can make the stone dish faster, and then your “fine” step becomes an unflat mess.

Stone type changes the grit experience

You can get very different results from different abrasive media even at similar grit ratings.

- Diamond plates often cut quickly and stay flat longer, which makes them forgiving for some repairs.
- Water stones can produce a refined finish, but they require flattening and can wear down quickly depending on the stone.
- Oil stones can feel smooth and controllable, but the slurry behavior changes with stone type and technique.

Because the abrasive behaves differently, the “best” grit sequence might shift. For example, a diamond plate might skip one mid grit step because it removes metal efficiently. A slower stone might reward a more gradual progression for better refinement.

The practical takeaway is to judge by bevel contact and scratch pattern rather than by relying on the grit numbers alone. If the coarse step created an even bevel, the finer steps will go smoothly. If the coarse step left patches or uneven scratches, you will keep chasing those problems at every stage.

A simple grit guide by edge condition

If you want one decision framework you can use at the bench, it looks like this. Keep in mind these are starting points, not rigid rules, and you should adjust based on what you see.

1. If the edge is dull but unchipped, start around 600 grit, refine to 1000 to 3000, then hone at 3000 to 8000 if you want extra smoothness.
2. If the edge is rolled, start around 400 grit, then go to 600 to 800, finish at 1000 to 3000.
3. If the edge has visible chips, drop to 200 to 300 grit for repair, then rebuild at 600 to 800, and hone at 1000 to 3000.
4. If the knife spends most of its life on softer boards and you want durability over ultimate slickness, lean toward finishing around 1000 to 2000 rather than pushing extremely fine.
5. If you care about a polished, easy-to-slice feel and you sharpen with good angle control, finish at 4000 to 8000, but do not skip the repair step.

That progression is the “why” behind the numbers. It aligns with the job the abrasive is doing at each stage.

Where honing fits, and why it can disappoint

People love honing because it sounds like maintenance. It is maintenance, but it is not a shortcut that bypasses damage.

If you hone a knife that has chips or a deeply rounded apex, you might get it sharp for a short window, then it dulls quickly because the underlying geometry is still wrong. Honing is best when the edge is already mostly correct and you are just restoring sharpness and smoothing the surface.

In my shop, “honing” usually means shorter sessions on fine grits. The time savings come from not having to re-establish the bevel. When I see a knife that keeps “going dull fast,” I don’t immediately assume the steel is bad. More often, the knife was never rebuilt properly after it got damaged, and honing only temporarily masks the real issue.

A good honing session should do two things:

- improve edge uniformity
- strengthen the apex enough that it lasts through normal cutting

If you do not get either, you likely need a more coarse rebuild step.

Common mistakes when choosing grits

A lot of sharpening frustration comes from treating grit like a ladder you always climb in order.

Mistake 1: Starting too fine

This is the most common. If the edge has lost its shape, starting at 1000 or higher feels gentle, but it can also be ineffective. You end up polishing the bevel without re-forming a strong apex. The knife may shave for a minute, then it fails quickly because it was never rebuilt.

Mistake 2: Skipping too far between steps

Jumping from coarse to very fine can leave deep scratches that you cannot fully remove without going back. Sometimes it works. Often it does not. The safe approach is to make sure the scratch pattern from the previous grit is gone before stepping up further. That way the edge improves in a predictable way.

Mistake 3: Over-polishing and under-shaping

If you spend too long on the finest grit, you can end up rounding the apex slightly due to angle drift, especially if your pressure is uneven. Fine stones reveal technique problems. A quick check helps: after finishing, inspect the edge line. It should look crisp, not rounded.

Mistake 4: Forgetting flattening

This is not glamorous, but a warped stone ruins the entire grit progression. If your stone is not flat, your “finer” stages may simply polish an uneven bevel and create a weak edge profile. Coarse grits can sometimes hide this by creating a broader contact zone, but fine grits will show the truth.

How many grits do you need?

You do not need five or six stones. Many good sharpening routines use three stones. More stones can reduce time and help you hit a specific feel, but they also increase complexity. Complexity leads to skipping steps, which leads to inconsistent results.

If your goal is reliable performance, a practical setup is:

- one coarse or medium stone for repairs and bevel re-establishment
- one mid stone for consistent bevel refining
- one fine stone for honing and finishing

That approach covers most jobs without turning sharpening into a hobby that consumes the week.

The best number of grits is the number you will actually use consistently.

Matching grit to the steel and your use

Steel matters, and so does how the knife lives in your hands. Some steels respond well to finer polish, maintaining a keen edge longer when used for clean cuts. Others produce a sharp edge quickly but benefit less from extremely fine finishing because their carbide structure influences how the edge behaves.

Your cutting board also matters. Hard, abrasive boards can wear an edge fast. In that case, pushing to ultra-fine polish might be a luxury with limited payoff, because the edge wears down before the refined surface earns its reputation.

For kitchen knives used day to day, I often choose a finishing grit that balances smooth cutting with practicality. A fine honed edge at the right grit usually gives the best mix of bite and stability.

Getting consistent results: focus on the edge, not the stone

The most reliable sharpening habit I have is to watch the edge behavior as I move through grits. You are not just grinding. You are tracking geometry.

On the coarse stage, you should see bevel contact and burr behavior progress. On the refinement stage, the burr should become more controllable and the scratch pattern should narrow. On the honing stage, the edge should feel consistent along its length, not sharp in one area and dead in another.

If you get dead spots, it is usually not a grit problem. It is typically a contact problem. Fix the bevel contact first, then refine. Swapping to a different grit without correcting technique is like repainting over a cracked surface. You will still see the crack.

A bench-friendly way to plan your session

Before you start, think about what the knife needs today. That includes whether it needs a full rebuild or just maintenance. You can keep the plan in your head with a short decision approach:

- identify damage vs wear
- pick a repair starting grit
- choose a mid step to stabilize bevel geometry
- finish with a hone grit based on how you want the edge to feel

Here is the only checklist I still use, because it keeps sessions sane:

- Check for chips or cracks before you choose a fine-start routine
- Ensure the coarse step produces an even scratch pattern on the bevel
- Move to the next grit only after the previous scratch pattern is mostly removed

- Use lighter pressure as grits get finer
- Flatten or clean your stone when contact feels inconsistent

If you follow that logic, grit selection becomes less guesswork and more engineering.

Final thoughts on sharpening and honing grit choices

Choosing the right grit for each stage is really about respecting the sequence of work the abrasive is doing. Coarse grits rebuild and repair. Medium grits establish stable geometry. Fine grits hone and improve the edge feel.

When you align grit to job steps, sharpening stops feeling **best sharpening tools** like random experimentation. You get edges that are consistent along the bevel, with fewer “mystery dull” moments after the knife leaves the stone. And honing becomes what it should be: a reliable, repeatable way to keep sharpness where you want it, without pretending it can replace repair.

Once you start thinking this way, the grit numbers stop being intimidating. They become tools with clear purposes, and your results reflect that.