



The Art of Soldering

Soldering is used in nearly every phase of electronic construction. A soldering tool must be hot enough to do the job and lightweight enough for agility and comfort. A 100-W soldering gun is overkill for printed-circuit work, for example. A temperature-controlled iron works well, although the cost is not justified for occasional projects. Get an iron with a small conical or chisel tip.

You may need an assortment of soldering irons to do a wide variety of soldering tasks. They range in size from a small 25-W iron for delicate printed-circuit work to larger 100 to 300-W sizes used to solder large surfaces. Several manufacturers also sell soldering guns. Small “pencil” butane torches are also available, with optional soldering-iron tips.

Keep soldering tools in good condition by keeping the tips well tinned with solder. Do not run them at full temperature for long periods when not in use. After each period of use, remove the tip and clean off any scale that may have accumulated. Clean an oxidized tip by dipping the hot tip in sal ammoniac (ammonium chloride) and then wiping it clean with a rag. Sal ammoniac is somewhat corrosive, so if you don’t wipe the tip thoroughly, it can contaminate electronic soldering.

If a copper tip becomes pitted, file it smooth and bright and then tin it immediately with solder. Modern soldering iron tips are nickel or iron clad and should not be filed.

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Solders have different melting points, depending on the ratio of tin to lead. Tin melts at 450°F and lead at 621°F. Solder made from 63% tin and 37% lead melts at 361°F, the lowest melting point for a tin and lead mixture. Called 63-37 (or eutectic), this type of solder also provides the most rapid solid-to-liquid transition and the best stress resistance.

Solders made with different lead/tin ratios have a plastic state at some temperatures. If the solder is deformed while it is in the plastic state, the deformation remains when the solder freezes into the solid state. Any stress or motion applied to “plastic solder” causes a poor solder joint.

Never use acid-core solder for electrical work. It should be used only for plumbing or chassis work. For circuit construction, only use fluxes or solder-flux combinations that are labeled for electronic soldering.

The resin or the acid is a *flux*. Flux removes oxide by suspending it in solution and floating it to the top. Flux is not a cleaning agent! Always clean the work before soldering. Flux is not a part of a soldered connection—it merely aids the soldering process. After soldering, remove any remaining flux. Resin flux can be removed with isopropyl or denatured alcohol. A cotton swab is a good tool for applying the alcohol and scrubbing the excess flux away. Commercial flux-removal sprays are available at most electronic-part distributors.

The two key factors in quality soldering are time and temperature. Generally, rapid heating is desired, although most unsuccessful solder jobs fail because insufficient heat has been applied. Be careful; if heat is applied too long, the components or PC board can be damaged, the flux may be used up and surface oxidation can become a problem. The soldering-iron tip should be hot enough to readily melt the solder without burning, charring or discoloring components, PC boards or wires. Usually, a tip temperature about 100°F above the solder melting point is about right for mounting components on PC boards. Also, use solder that is sized appropriately for the job. As the cross section of the solder decreases, so does the amount of heat required to melt it. Diameters from 0.025 to 0.040 inches are good for nearly all circuit wiring.

Here’s how to make a good solder joint. This description assumes that solder with a flux core is used to solder a typical PC board connection such as an IC pin.

✓ Prepare the joint. Clean all conductors thoroughly with fine steel wool or a plastic scrubbing pad. Do the circuit board at the beginning of assembly and individual parts such as resistors and capacitors immediately before soldering. Some parts (such as ICs and surface-mount components) cannot be easily cleaned; don’t worry unless they’re exceptionally dirty.

✓ Prepare the tool. It should be hot enough to melt solder applied to its tip quickly (half a second when dry, instantly when wet with solder). Apply a little solder directly to the tip so that the surface is shiny. This process is called “tinning” the tool. The solder coating helps conduct heat from the tip to the joint.

✓ Place the tip in contact with one side of the joint. If you can place the tip on the underside of the joint, do so. With the tool below the joint, convection helps transfer heat to the joint.

✓ Place the solder against the joint directly opposite the soldering tool. It should melt within a second for normal PC connections, within two seconds for most other connections. If it takes longer to melt, there is not enough heat for the job at hand.

✓ Keep the tool against the joint until the solder flows freely throughout the joint. When it flows freely, solder tends to form concave shapes between the conductors. With insufficient heat solder does not flow freely; it forms convex shapes—blobs. Once solder shape changes from convex to concave, remove the tool from the joint.

✓ Let the joint cool without movement at room temperature. It usually takes no more than a few seconds. If the joint is moved before it is cool, it may take on a dull, satin look that is characteristic of a “cold” solder joint. Reheat cold joints until the solder flows freely and hold them still until cool.

✓ When the iron is set aside, or if it loses its shiny appearance, wipe away any dirt with a wet cloth or sponge. If it remains dull after cleaning, tin it again.

✓ Soldering equipment gets *hot!* Be careful. Treat a soldering burn as you would any other. Handling lead or breathing soldering fumes is also hazardous. Observe these precautions to protect yourself and others:

✓ Properly ventilate the work area. If you can smell fumes, you are breathing them.

✓ Wash your hands after soldering, especially before handling food.

✓ Minimize direct contact with flux and flux solvents.