

How I Dremel Dog Nails

By,
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Along those same lines, here's the answer to another common question: If you would like to print out this article for your own personal reference, please feel free. If, however, you want to reprint it or hand it out, then I ask for you to make a donation to Doberman Education and Rescue, Inc. aka DEAR c/o its treasurer, Fred Sortwell, 27638 Whirlaway Trail, Evergreen, CO 80439. DEAR is a 501(c)(3) charitable corporation. Eventually, DEAR may actually be printing and selling for a nominal, fund-raising fee, distribution copies of the materials on this site. In the interim, I do ask for a donation to be made to DEAR if you distribute copies. The site is and will remain free, so please do feel free to refer people here.

Who am I?

Hi There! My name is Dawn and I am happily owned by three Dobes named Lestat, Brandy & Duke. They are all rescues and I've been grinding their nails for years. From time to time, I've had friends and family ask me how to grind nails and how to get started doing it. After repeating these instructions more than a few times, I decided to put this page up to share my tricks, techniques and experiences with you, in case they might be of use to you. I was fortunate enough to have experienced friends show me how to Dremel and share their tips with me. It does help to watch someone do it, to get a feel for the technique. If you're just starting out, perhaps your vet or a groomer would show you. My vet did give me some pointers once upon a time, too. Over the years, I've incorporated all of that information into my current techniques and have been pleased with my ability to get nails short (even when very overgrown) and keep them nice and short while almost never nicking a quick or causing any discomfort to the dog. Since others shared freely with me, I figured I would do the same.

However, I am not a Veterinarian, nor even a Vet Tech. I have no medical or veterinary training whatsoever.

Nothing on this web site is intended as, nor should it be taken as veterinary advice. You should consult with and follow the advice of your own vet who knows you and who has seen your dog. I assume no responsibility for any injury to you or your dog if you decide to try my methods. So, follow my tricks and tips at your own risk and after making your own evaluation of my methods. Sorry for all the doom and gloom writing there folks, but in this day and age, there are people who will try to "bite" you for doing a good deed and sharing your experiences. ::sigh::

Why I Dremel Instead of Clip?

The abridged summary answer to this question is that it is more comfortable for the dog and you can get the nails shorter and smoother (which is nicer for you). This is actually a much more comfortable method of maintaining nails than clipping them because it does not pinch or hurt the quick. The quick is sensitive living flesh inside your dog's nail. With our large dogs, in order to cut through the hard shell nail, you must squeeze the nail between the clipper's two surfaces. If you use a guillotine style, then the nail is pushed hard against the immovable blunt metal while the blade cuts in from one side. If you use the scissors-style, then two blades squeeze in from either side of the nail. If you must clip, IMHO, this is the better method than the guillotine since it cuts from both sides and therefor squeezes a little less. However, neither is very good because when you squeeze in on the nail, you invariably must pinch down on the quick inside the nail. The harder the nail, the more the pressure you must apply. Thus, it can be very uncomfortable for the dog. Also, when clipping on dark nails, you are effectively cutting blind. In order to get the nails back, you keep doing a series of small clips and try not to hit the quick. As a result, you often stop short of where you could go, if you were using a Dremel. When done properly, there is no squeezing or pressure on the quick with the Dremel. Further, you can see "inside" the nail as you gradually grind back to the quick. So, you can judge when you're getting close to nicking it and stop in time. With the Dremel, you can also grind off all around the quick so that it recedes faster and you can get even shorter nails. The closer you can get to the quick, the more you can force it to recede and the more quickly it will recede. Finally, you can grind off all the corners and rough edges leaving nice soft nails that don't gouge nearly so much when your Dobes paw you for affection.

The Equipment I Use:

I use the Dremel Multipro with the sliding variable adjustable speeds from 5,000 rpm to 30,000 rpm for full grown Dobermans. For small breeds (like a family member's toy poodle) or for puppies, I would use the smaller and more maneuverable cordless, rechargeable Mini-mite. The Multipro is shown below:



Although the Multipro can obviously go much faster, and this is handy for other craft and tool projects, I do not go above the "2" setting on it. It's usually on the "1" or between it and the "2" setting. I would estimate this is somewhere around 5,000 to 7,500 rpms. If you use it much faster, the friction will be too great and it will get too hot for the dog's nails. If this happens, it will hurt the dog. Please note: there are other brands of grinders and similar tools. But, since I've never used them, I write from the perspective of my experience with the Dremel and its accessories only.

As for the accessories, I use the 1/2" by 1/2" sanding bands on the 1/2" sanding drum mandrel:



(If I were doing puppies or a small dog, I might be more inclined to use the 1/4" bands and the smaller mandrel.) I use what are considered Medium to Fine Grit bands. Some companies call their 150 grit bands medium and their 300 grit bands fine. Others, like Dremel, call their 120 grit fine. So, let me be more specific. I presently use the 120 grit 1/2" sanding bands either by Sears Craftsman or Dremel:



I've not really tried other brands. So, I can neither recommend nor discourage their use. I may be looking into alternate sanding band suppliers, however, since my supplier of the more bulk-like quantities of Sears bands has ceased to carry them in the 25 count bags. If you've had good luck with an off-brand or know of a place where quantities can be ordered of Dremel or Craftsman, please let me know. My email is at the bottom of this site.

I do not use the various grinding stones because they get too hot for the dog's nails and can hurt the dog! Please do not use any of these:



If you find it to be a hassle to change bands and for your convenience you decide to try the grinding stones, please let me make a suggestion. Get two drums so you always have one ready to switch to that already has a fresh band on it. They are cheap enough. But, please, for the sake of your dog, don't use the grinding stones. If you have any doubt about how hot they get, try using them on some wood and see how long it takes to burn the wood. Then, imagine that feeling near your own nerve endings if it were being used near your quick.

If you have a dog that is particularly sensitive to the noise, you may prefer either to use the Minimate rechargeable-style Dremel that is a bit more quiet or else use the flexible shaft adapter so that the noisy motor is further away from the dog.

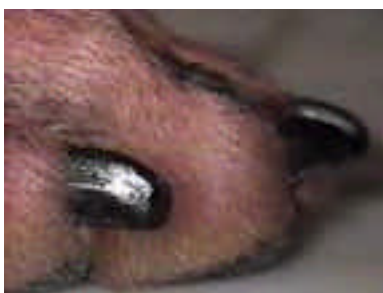
Safety Tips and Additional Supplies:

If you are working on a dog with a longer coat, there is a chance the dog's fur will get caught in the spinning Dremel head and be yanked out painfully. You can keep the dog's fur from getting in the way and getting caught in the Dremel by using an old pair of pantyhose over the paw. Then, you just push the nail through the hose to work on it. The hose will hold the fur back out of the way. Some folks say that the hose run too easily. They prefer using trouser socks or surgical hose. I have tried this technique on my parents' toy poodle, and I was pleased with it. Though, I agree that the more durable sock is probably better than the pantyhose. I will have to try that next.

If you have long hair, you may want to pull it up and out of the way for the same reason. ::grin:: Also, please be warned that little bits of debris and nail can fly off while you are grinding. If they go in your eye, it can hurt. It is a good idea (though admittedly not one I always follow ::sheepish grin::) to wear protective eye

covering while grinding. In addition, if you are sensitive to dust, you may want to wear a mask because there will be a good bit of dust when you grind and your face will be close to it.

Finally, I always keep some quick-stop styptic powder handy and some Vaseline when doing nails. The powder can be used to stop bleeding if you do nick the quick. In my experience, usually just applying pressure to the end of the nail is enough without the powder. Unlike clipping nails, if you do get close enough to hit the quick when grinding, it is so slight that it does not bleed very much and the dogs do not seem to hurt as much as when you "clip" the quick. But, I still keep it on hand. The Vaseline is just for vanity. When you grind, there is a lot of dust and the nails get rather dusty and grimy looking. If you put some Vaseline on when done, they look all nice and shiny black again:



How I Introduce the Dremel:

A proper introduction to the Dremel is the most important step to grinding your dog's nails. If the dog's first experience is negative, then you will have a long way to go to having a dog that will permit you to grind the nails. If done right, then your dogs will just relax and enjoy the pedicure. Two of mine actually have fallen asleep while I was doing their nails. Keep in mind, you can introduce a Dremel to a dog at any age! Mine are all rescues and all have adapted to the use of a Dremel. (By the way, if the dog is new to you or to having its nails done, you should also "introduce" the dog to having its paws handled by you and then make a point to handling them daily. You can use the same methods I describe here and just adapt them to paw handling generally.)

To give you an idea of how relaxed my dogs are about being Dremeled, here's a picture my bitch, Brandy, being done:



Here's a later scene when Duke decided to wander in and settle down for a nap next to us while we worked. He was waiting his turn to be done:

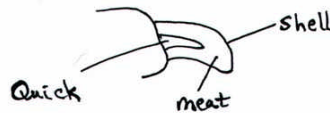


Here's how I introduce the Dremel - I do it in a process over a period of days or even a couple of weeks depending on the dog's sensitivity and temperament. First, all I do is just get the Dremel out and let the dog sniff it and explore it. For such curiosity and investigation, I give treats. In fact, I've been known to put the treats on the Dremel just to get the dog to touch it (while turned off). Then, I turn it on and off in the room with the dog and give the dog a treat for examining and exploring it (while off or "disarmed") and for not being afraid of its noise when on. After this is going well, (and, coincidentally, the dog is starting to associate the Dremel being taken out with getting a goodie) I have the dog lay down and I just touch the Dremel to A, SINGULAR, SOLITARY, SOLO, AS IN "ONE" AND ONLY ONE nail and give the dog a treat with lots of praise. Please note, I just "touch" it. I do not actually grind the nail down. Then, gradually I touch 2 nails and then a whole foot of nails... followed by a treat. I build up with a treat after each nail then wean down to a treat after each paw. Finally, I work up to doing all the nails on all the paws and the dog gets a BIG treat and praise when all done. Again, this is just "touching" the nails, no lengthy grinding.

Once I do start grinding the nails, it "feels" very similar to the dog because I only spend a few seconds on each nail before doing the next anyway (this is explained more below in the Technique section). And, when I first start grinding the nails, I do not try to do them down short completely nor do I do all the paws. I grind the nails on one paw only, and then just "touch" the nails on the others. And, I do not try to get that one paw down to the maximum shortness. I want the experience to be positive and to build up the grinding "time" gradually for the dog. You don't train a sit-stay by having your dog hold it for 3 seconds the first time and 3 minutes the second time. The same goes for grinding. Build up slowly and with all positive experiences. If you are a newbie to grinding and you try to go too short early on, you may nick a quick and that will not be a "positive" experience. So, building up slowly is better for both of you. By using this method of introduction and gradual build-up, my dogs actually bully one another and jockey-jostle to try to be first in line when the Dremel comes out. I assure you, that beats chasing unwilling dogs through the house and dragging them to the chopping block.

The Techniques I Use to Dremel Nails:

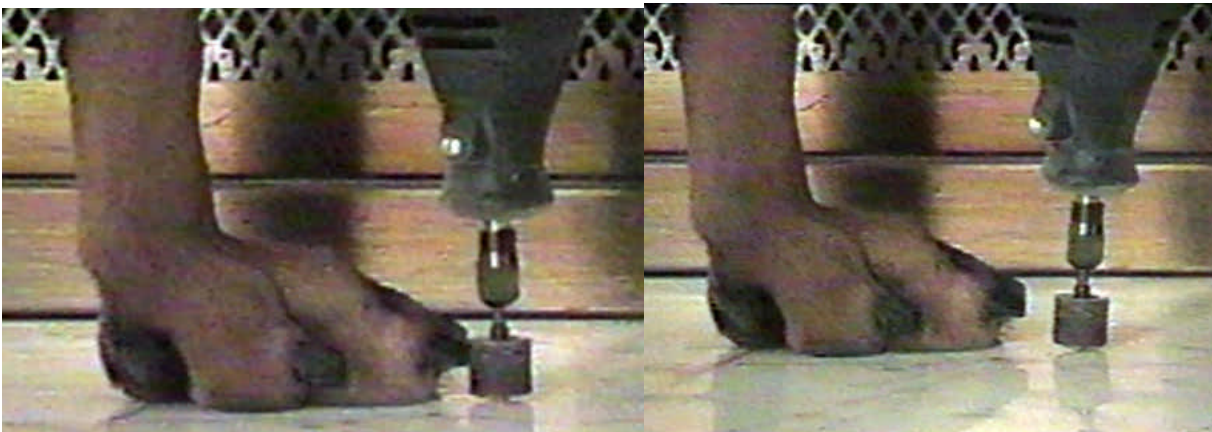
In order to grind nails effectively, it is important to understand how the nail grows and what it looks like inside there. The nail grows out from the base (closest to the paw). For my purposes, the nail consists of three main areas: the hard outer shell ("shell"), the meaty area between the shell and the quick ("meat"), and the quick area of the nail that will bleed if you nick it ("quick"). The shell is the old growth. It is essentially dead material like the white tips of your own fingernails and toenails. The dog has no feeling there (to my knowledge). The meat (that's my term for it) is the new growth area that is in transition from quick to shell. It is not as hard as the shell, but it is not sensitive living flesh like the quick. Then, there is the quick. That is the portion of the nail that still is alive and growing with nerve endings in it and a steady blood flow. If you nick it or pinch it, it will hurt the dog and it will bleed. The quick grows out from the base and narrows as it extends out into and ends in the meat and "dead areas" of the nail. It also has a tendency to curve down inside the nail towards the ground. If you've ever seen overgrown nails, they usually curve down in a similar arc. This is rather hard for me to describe, so I drew a picture:



When you grind or clip nails, you bring the outer protective edge and covering of nail (the meat and shell) back closer to the quick. The natural reaction to having less protection out there is that the sensitive quick recedes. Thus, when you grind the nail, the closer you can come to the quick without nicking it, the further back you can force it to recede and the shorter you can eventually get the nail to be. Where the quick is, there is living flesh and you cannot grind it. Where the quick no longer is, there is meat or dead shell and you can grind it. So, the goal, when trying to get nails shorter, is to get the quick to recede back from the tip of the nail: the faster and the further, the better. In order to do this, you want to come as close as you can without hitting it. This is where the angle on the tip you grind is important.

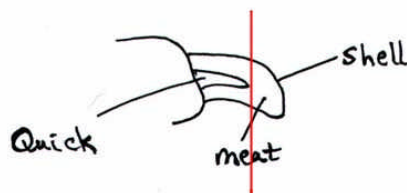
A. The Key Angle:

Many folks grind nails coming out at a diagonal from under the nail towards the tip. A friend of mine who is both my agility coach and a Vet tech in her "real world" job taught me this trick. If you grind the nail tip perpendicular to the floor (i.e., straight up and down), you can get more of the nail off close to the quick without actually nicking the quick. This has always been hard for me to describe to folks, so I took some pictures to illustrate what I mean. Here are two photos of a nail that has been ground back as close to the quick as possible without nicking it and showing the Dremel at the perpendicular angle I was just describing (the one I use):



And, here is a diagram of the correct angle showing its relationship to the quick:

The correct angle:

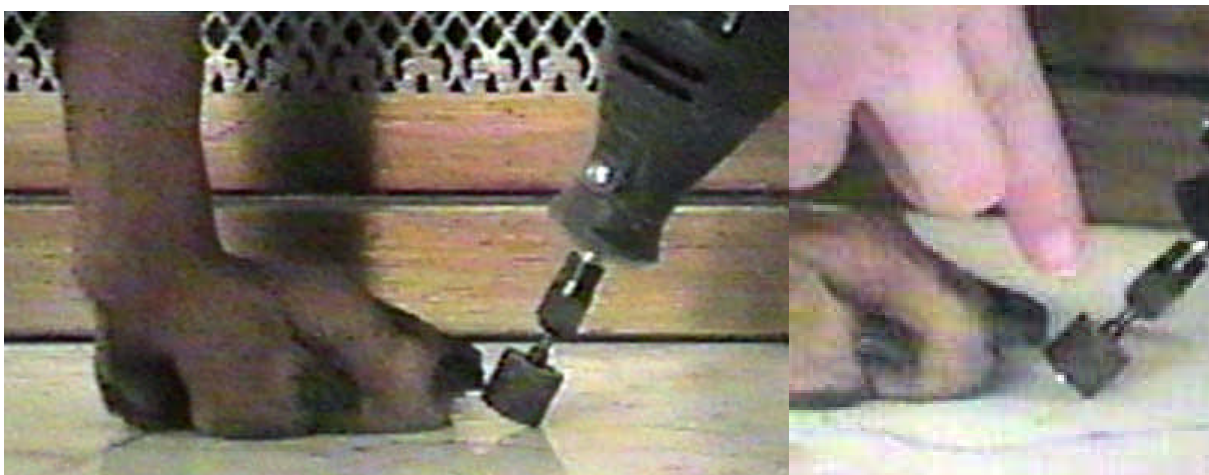


That is actually a bit too close to the quick, but you get the idea.

Obviously, when I'm grinding, I don't actually hold the Dremel like it is in the photos above. I hold the paw when I grind and I usually have the Dremel facing with the grinding band upright while I work. However, I positioned it like that to illustrate the angle to the ground that you want on the tip of the nail. Also, I later grind off the sides and corners so that they are not so rough and square. But, for purposes of this illustration, they are more effectively left blunt to show the angle. Here's a picture of me actually grinding the nails:



Now for a comparison on the correct angle. Below on the left is the same nail that was photographed above, but I am holding the Dremel at an angle. If I had ground the nail at the diagonal angle shown (which folks commonly use), I would have left all that excess nail in the white "V" area that you see between the straight front vertical edge of the nail and the slanting off side of the Dremel sanding band head. On the right is a picture of another of my dogs' nails and I am pointing to the V area:



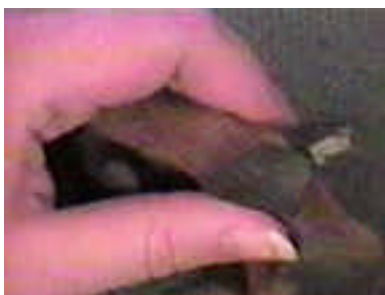
Keeping in mind the goal is to get in as close to the quick as possible, obviously this method fails. By taking out all that excess area, you get closer to the quick and force it to recede more. This enables you to get the nail shorter. Yet, you are no closer to nicking the quick than you were with the slant.

Now, that's an explanation of the angle I use to get the nails shorter faster. But, that's not exactly where you begin, nor where you end. So, here's the process that I use to Dremel nails from beginning to end.
::smile::

B. The Ground Rules:

There are some ground rules (pardon the pun!) BEFORE you start:

1. You never, ever apply pressure to the nail with grinding head. Allow the speed of the spinning drum and the friction of the sand to do the grinding. If you apply pressure, it will press on the quick and it will get too hot. Both mean that your dog will be uncomfortable and unhappy.
2. Never keep the Dremel in one spot longer than three seconds and never do the same nail for more than three seconds continuously. Once again, this will cause the head and the nail to get too hot. You will burn and hurt your baby. I alternate around nails and then come back to allow cooling time. I usually do two paws at a time. So, I do one nail for 3 seconds, the next, the next and the last. Switch paws and repeat on other paw. Return to first paw and repeat whole sequence.
3. Always support the toe and nail you are currently working on. There will be some vibration from the grinding and your dog will be more comfortable if you lessen the effect of this by holding the toe in question. Also, this enables you to have better control in case your dog moves the paw so you don't accidentally grind fur or pads instead. Incidentally, if you push slightly on the underside of the pad, it will extend the nail out a bit further for easier grinding:



4. Nails are easier to maintain short than they are to restore to short. In some nails, the quick will never recede back to as short as it once was, and you will never get the nails back without "quicking" them (i.e., cutting the quick short). I believe it is cruel to quick your dog's nail intentionally and will not do so myself. If you have a rescue that has really long nails, you might want to consider having them taken back while the dog is under anesthesia for spaying or neutering. In any event, the timetable I use to maintain nail length, is to grind between once a week and once every other week. To force receding and to get the nails shorter, I do them every 4 days.
5. Before you begin grinding each time, examine your dog's nails. This is both a benefit of and an important part of nail care that only takes a few seconds. The condition of your dog's nails can give you an early heads up about an unknown medical problem. If there are chew marks on the nails, this can be a sign of fleas or food allergies or just boredom. If there are areas of uneven wear, it can be a sign that your dog is dragging or sweeping that paw. This can be a sign of lameness, a muscle injury, a foot or pad injury, or the like. This is not a guide for diagnosis, by the way, just some suggested common causes of uneven wear or chewing based upon my experience. ***Once again, I am not a vet, and this is not to be taken as veterinary advice.*** It is just common sense. Over time, you will become accustomed to the normal wear patterns of your dogs' paws and they should be consistent. If they are not, ask your vet! For example, when my oldest male was first developing symptoms of CVI or Wobblers, the nails on his hind feet started to be affected. They were getting worn

diagonally on the inner side edge, and a couple were also starting to get wear on the top. This was because he was dragging them under him ever so slightly that you probably would not notice it just casually watching him. Also, because he had trouble fully picking them up, he'd taken to slightly sweeping out with the paws thus causing the diagonal inner side wear. By doing his nails regularly, this was an immediate sign of something wrong or different. Please Note: A friend of mine, who I respect, did point out that grinding every week may mask uneven wear of nails. So, less often, especially for older dogs, may be better for this purpose. I leave that decision up to you counterbalancing time, length and ability to judge wear.

C. The Grinding Process:

Okay now, let's get started. Obviously, there are some differences and variations in how folks approach grinding, but here is the method I use. When I grind the nails, I start off by going straight across the underside of the nail. I remove all the rough stuff and uneven edges. If the nails have been let go a long time, then to the best of my ability, I take off the curling down point of the nail tip and bring it up to flush with the bottom of the nail. Here are some pics to illustrate what I mean:

Before:



After:



Then, I take off the top front edge or angle of the nail somewhat at a slant from the tip to the top of the nail:



After that, I begin my straight vertical edge across the tip of the nail, coming back gradually to the quick. As you take back the tip, it will be solid then you will start to see a two-textured arch. You will see the hard outer shell on top and the meat under it in an upside down "U":



As you grind back further, the nail shell will get thinner and the middle section will get "meatier" and larger. The meat section is actually a bit softer feeling than the shell if you put your finger on it. Eventually, the meaty area will have more of a circular (or if very near the bottom then an arched) center area becoming visible in it. I usually see either a darker circle/arch area in the meat or a dark inner area with a white pinpoint. This is the quick that you are approaching. That is the point at which I stop grinding back on the nail. Here are some illustrations since they say a picture is worth a thousand words:



At this point, I proceed to take off all the corners, the sides and all the rough edges around the tip and the quick to make a smooth nail and apply some vaseline:



The finished product is a nail that is rounded and attractive. I do not take my dogs' nails back as far as some conformation folks do and you won't find instructions here on how to do that. I want my dogs to have some traction with their nails, especially my bitch, Brandy, who runs in agility. What I look for in a nail is one that doesn't click on the floor, is not sharp, doesn't scratch and gouge when my dogs invariably paw at me, and that's it! As a nice finishing touch, a little Vaseline adds a nice black gloss to the nails. Here is a finished paw:



Voila!

Well, that's all I have to say about this topic. I hope I've helped. At least I know that I've tried. If you liked this site, please let me know. If not, feel free to tell me that, too (but tell me why). If you found my tricks or tips helpful, please tell me. If you have some to share, I'd love to hear them. If you disagree with something I've said here, I'm open to learning and improving. So, here I am ... just click and write me:



To go back to our main home page with links to other sites on me and my dogs,

on Biking With Your Dog, and more, click here:

[Dawn, the Dobertrio & Tiki's Home Page](#)

Thanks for visiting!!!!!!

Dawn, Lestat, & Brandy

Plus Tiki the Tyrant Parrot, too!

Previous NBCi Counter final total at 14,936 on 7-31-01.