

BUYING GUIDES / ARTICLE 001

Dovetail Drawer Boxes: An Unnecessarily Thorough Explanation

A dovetail drawer box uses interlocking, fan-shaped joints to connect its sides to its front and back. Those joints help resist being pulled apart, which is useful in an object whose main responsibility is being pulled.

That is the short explanation.

You may now return to whatever you were doing. For everyone still here, we have concerns, but also more information.

What exactly is a dovetail?

Look at the corner of an open wooden drawer. If you see a repeating pattern of flared wooden shapes fitted into matching spaces, you are looking at dovetail joinery.

The wider pieces are called tails. The mating pieces are called pins. Assembled in the appropriate orientation, their shape mechanically resists separation when the drawer front is pulled.

Glue secures the joint, but the geometry contributes something of its own. In WOOD magazine's drawer-joint tests, dovetail specimens remained mechanically connected after their glue bonds had cracked. That does not make them indestructible. It does explain why the shape is doing more than looking respectable. [1]

Imagine two pieces of wood agreeing to stay together, then getting the agreement in writing.

Why put this much thought into a drawer?

Because drawers get used.

They get opened while somebody is cooking, closed with a hip, and loaded with objects that apparently became heavier after purchase.

Eventually, someone puts the cast-iron cookware in one.

The drawer receives no advance notice.

A well-made drawer needs sound corner joints, a suitable bottom, accurate dimensions, and compatible hardware. Dovetails address the corner-joint part of that job. The rest still needs attention.

This is inconvenient for anyone hoping one attractive detail would answer every question.

Are dovetails always the strongest choice?

No.

Strength depends on the material, joint dimensions, fit, glue, and direction of the force. In WOOD magazine's comparison, other joint types outperformed dovetails in particular tests. "Dovetail" is a description of construction, not a universal strength rating. [1]

Good reasons to choose dovetails include their mechanical interlock and the visible craftsmanship of a neatly fitted corner.

"Nothing else could possibly work" is a less good reason.

Other properly designed drawer constructions deserve to exist. We are trying to sell drawers, not start a religious movement.

The bottom deserves some attention

The corners get photographed. The bottom holds the stuff.

It is an arrangement familiar to anyone who has worked in a group project.

Plywood is a common drawer-bottom material because it moves relatively little with seasonal humidity changes. Its thickness and support should suit the drawer's size and intended contents. How the panel is captured and supported matters too. [2]

A shallow cutlery drawer and a wide drawer full of cookware present different demands. Admiring the dovetails will not resolve those differences.

Before ordering, consider what the drawer will actually hold.

Include the things you intend to organize later. They will be there for years.

Dovetails and soft-close are different things

Dovetails describe the wooden joints.

Soft-close describes a function of the hardware.

A dovetail box does not automatically close softly, and choosing undermount slides introduces specific construction requirements. Blum's MOVENTO guidance, for example, covers drawer dimensions, side thickness, underside clearance, hook holes, and locking devices. Those details must match the selected runner system. [3]

This is why we care which slides you are using.

"The metal ones" narrows it down less than you might hope.

Three measurements. Several opportunities for confusion.

When ordering a custom drawer box, distinguish between:

- Cabinet opening: the space the drawer and its hardware must fit into.
- Finished drawer box: the outside dimensions of the wooden box.

- Decorative drawer front: the visible face, which may extend beyond the box.

An attached decorative front can be wider and taller than the drawer box behind it. Measuring that face and calling it the box size can therefore send the order in the wrong direction. [2]

For a replacement, record the existing box dimensions and identify its hardware. If you are starting with an empty opening, the selected slide system helps determine the required box dimensions.

We grew up setting VCR clocks by pressing buttons until something happened.

Drawer measurements benefit from a more deliberate approach.

So, is a dovetail drawer worth it?

It is a good choice when you want visible wood joinery and a box built around your project's dimensions and hardware.

Look at the complete specification: the joints, material, bottom, finish, dimensions, and slide compatibility. A drawer should make sense as a working object before it becomes a close-up photograph.

At The Boring Drawer Company, we think that is worth explaining.

Possibly at excessive length.

Planning a drawer order? Start with your measurements and slide selection. We can take an entirely reasonable interest in the details.

Your mystery cables deserve a properly specified home.

Sources and further reading

[1] WOOD magazine: [Wood Joint Torture Test 2](#)

[2] WOOD magazine: [Drawers 101](#)

[3] Blum: [Building a MOVENTO drawer](#)

Sources checked 7 October 2026. Humour and editorial interpretation are original to The Boring Drawer Company.