

A skew chisel looks simple at first glance: one straight handle, a blade ground at an angle, and a cutting edge that seems like it should take honing the same way as a standard bench chisel. Then you actually try to sharpen one, and you realize the blade geometry is working against you. The cutting edge is not a single, flat plane. It sweeps across the width and it lives at a compound angle to the stone. If you hone the bevel like you would a square chisel, you can end up with an edge that looks sharp but cuts poorly, chatters in the first half inch, or leaves a washboard surface.

The good news is that skew chisels hone predictably once you start thinking in terms of edge geometry and contact points rather than “keep the bevel flat on the stone.” This is honing, not just sharpening, and it is more about controlling where the abrasive touches the steel.

Why skew chisels fight you on the stone

With a conventional chisel, the bevel is broad enough that you can maintain consistent contact while keeping your wrist steady. With a skew, the bevel is often longer in one direction and the cutting edge intersects it at an angle. As a result:

- The “bevel face” you are trying to clean up is not parallel to the stone for most of your stroke.
- The edge itself has an arcing relationship to the wheel or the hone.
- Any tiny wobble changes which portion of the bevel you’re actually refreshing.

I learned this the hard way the first time I tried to tune a skew for spoon carving. I had been getting away with pretty relaxed honing on my bench chisels, so I approached the skew the same way: same holder, same pressure, same cadence. The stone made metal sound, so I assumed I was doing something useful. The next cut into softwood looked promising, then quickly turned ragged, as if the edge had micro chips. It wasn’t the steel failing. It was the edge line I had built. I had polished the bevel where I could reach it, while the true cutting edge had not been properly aligned.

When a skew is honed well, the bevel’s contact is even right up to the very apex of the edge. When it is honed poorly, you tend to get a thin, shiny strip somewhere along the edge that is not the same as having a uniformly apexed, supported edge line.

Know what you’re trying to build: bevel, edge line, and burr

Most sharpening tasks are a matter of removing dull metal until you hit a clean, continuous edge. Skews add one more step: you need to maintain an edge line that stays straight in the direction the tool cuts.

In practice, you are managing three things:

1. The bevel surface you’re refreshing, which may be a wide plane on the inside face.
2. The apex line of the cutting edge, which is where the bevel meets the bevel on the other side.
3. The burr, which tells you you have reached the apex instead of just abrading the outer part of a bevel.

A skew can produce a burr that is easy to chase, because one side of the bevel may be more accessible than the other. If you rely only on “I felt a burr somewhere,” you can end up with a burr that rolls over or disappears without you ever fully contacting the apex across the width. A better approach is to create a consistent burr at least along a meaningful section of the edge, then flip and refine. You do not need an aggressive burr, but you need evidence that the hone has reached the steel that matters.

Set up before you touch the stone

A lot of honing problems that people blame on technique are actually setup problems: blade position, stone angle, and how the workpiece sits against your body.

For a skew chisel, the simplest improvement is to treat the tool like it has an “orientation” that you preserve, not a position you re-decide every pass. When you pick up the chisel, notice how your fingers naturally hold it. Use that same grip each time you hone. If the tool keeps rotating slightly in your hand, your edge line will wander across the stone and you will chase uneven contact.

Also, make sure the stone surface stays clean. Skews are sensitive to grit loading, because the steel is often rubbing at a slightly skewed angle and any slurry or swarf can smear. I keep a dedicated small brush and I wipe the stone frequently during the coarser stages. It makes the difference between “stable abrasion” and “random polishing.”

A small but real tip: manage your wrist, not just your hand

If you rotate your wrist while honing, you’re likely changing the angle of attack. Instead, aim for controlled movement at the elbow and forearm where possible, while keeping the wrist angle more stable. Think of the skew as a blade that must “track” along the stone surface at a consistent relationship.

Choosing your honing method: freehand, guide, or jig

There are three honest ways to hone a skew: freehand, a dedicated skew jig, or a custom guide that mimics the bevel angle. All work, but they reward different kinds of patience.

Freehand honing is the most flexible and, once you learn it, the most reliable for getting uniform contact right to the apex. The drawback is that it can be slow at first. If you have ever spent an hour getting “most of the bevel” shiny and still not satisfied with the edge performance, you already know what early freehand learning feels like.

Jigs help beginners because they remove one variable. But skew chisels can vary in geometry, and many jigs assume a predictable bevel width and tool orientation. If the jig forces a relationship that doesn’t match your blade, you might get repeatable sharpening that still doesn’t cut right. It’s not that jigs are bad. It’s that skew chisel geometry can be personal to the maker or the grinder.

If you want a practical middle ground, use a guide only during the heavy “bevel cleanup” stage, then finish freehand for apex refinement. That’s how I do it when I’m dealing with a skew that has been re-ground and needs correction, not just touch-ups.

The core technique: how to keep contact on the apex

Here is the part that makes skew honing feel different from standard bench chisels.

When you hone a square chisel, you can keep the bevel face flat relative to the stone. With a skew, one end of the bevel may lift away if you keep the tool “level.” The blade has to be angled so that the cutting edge line meets the stone correctly.

The best mental model is to treat the hone as defining a plane, and you are aiming for the edge line to intersect that plane consistently. That means you should start by finding the “true contact” position and then maintain that relationship while you move along the edge.

How to find true contact on the stone

Place the skew on the stone without pressure. Slowly rock the blade until you feel that the bevel is meeting the abrasive rather than hovering. You will usually hear a sharper, more consistent feedback when you hit the correct relationship. Then add pressure very lightly and do a few short strokes.

Now check two things:

- Where the abrasive is polishing the bevel
- Whether a burr forms along the edge that you can detect by gentle finger or thumbnail drag

If you are only polishing a portion of the bevel and there is no meaningful burr, your angle relationship is off. Adjust in tiny increments and repeat. Tiny adjustments matter more with skews than with many other edge tools.

Use short strokes and keep them consistent

Once you have found contact, do short, repeatable strokes rather than long sweeping passes. Long strokes tempt you to vary pressure and angle because you start “finishing the task” instead of monitoring contact.

A good rule is to work in sections. Hone a short section of the edge line, then move to the next section, keeping the tool orientation identical. This reduces the chance that your hand drifts halfway through the bevel.

Pressure, grit progression, and how not to burnish the wrong thing

People often treat honing as a sequence of grit changes: coarse to medium to fine. That is reasonable, but with skew chisels you must also consider what stage you are at in terms of edge geometry.

If your bevel is uneven or the apex is not clean, you need coarse abrasion to re-establish the edge line. But once you are close, aggressive pressure on fine stones can cause burnishing or a “glassy” feel at the surface while the apex remains slightly ragged.

What I look for at each stage is not just polish. I look for uniformity of contact. If the steel is shiny on one area and dull on another, that stage did not reach everywhere it needs to.

A practical grit progression is usually something like: start with a stone that can cut the steel reliably, then move to a medium stone for refinement, and finish with a finer stone for apex sharpening. If your shop already has a progression you trust for chisels, you can adapt it. The main difference is the patience required to ensure the bevel meets the abrasive in the same way across the width.

Avoid chasing a mirror that hides problems

A fully polished bevel is tempting. The problem is that a mirror can be deceptive if the apex line is not actually clean. You can polish the bevel while leaving a tiny wire edge that will fold or break in the first few cuts.

This is where the burr test and edge feel come together. Burr formation across the true apex is a better indicator than shine alone. Also, if the edge seems to “grab” unexpectedly, that can be a sign of a weak apex or a partially formed burr that’s rolling rather than forming a clean cutting edge.

Burr control: flip, refine, and don’t overwork

Skews can generate a burr that behaves oddly due to the sweeping geometry. Sometimes the burr feels sharp and aggressive along one part of the edge, but it’s faint or missing elsewhere. That is a warning not to keep going on one side endlessly.

What works for me is a predictable rhythm:

- Establish a burr with the main bevel passes.
- Flip to the other side and remove the burr with controlled, lighter strokes.
- Then return to the main side for a brief touch to ensure the apex is clean.

You do not need a thick burr. In fact, a thick burr can be harder to remove cleanly, especially if it forms along a wider area than you can deburr evenly.

If you consistently chase a stubborn burr without checking angle contact, you might polish the bevel while repeatedly dragging the burr back and forth, which can round the apex. Light, deliberate refinement beats brute force.

Diagnosing edge problems that look like honing mistakes

Not every bad cut is a honing problem. But many honing issues show up in recognizable symptoms. Here are a few I've actually run into, along with what I typically check next.

When a skew leaves a fuzzy surface, the edge is often not stable at the apex. That could mean insufficient refinement, a rolled burr, or an angle relationship that only partially contacts the apex.

When it chatters, the edge might be sharp but uneven along the length. Skews can be especially sensitive if the bevel contact is not uniform. You might also be pushing too hard, or the wood grain could be fighting the tool. Still, I've seen uneven honing make a skew "feel" like it is dull even when the bevel looks fine.

When the tool skates and won't take a bite, the most common culprit is that the edge is not actually apexed, or you are effectively using a higher angle than you think. That can happen if your wrist shifts during honing and you end up with a bevel that looks correct but doesn't intersect the stone the way it did when you first tested contact.

The fastest way to diagnose is to make a tiny test cut, then inspect the surface and listen to the sound. A proper skew sounds different. It makes a clean, steady cutting tone rather than a scratchy, intermittent one. The tone won't tell you everything, but it tells you the edge behavior is wrong.

A quick honing sanity check you can do in minutes

Before you commit to a long polishing session, run a short check that tells you whether your angle relationship is right.

Here's how I do it.

- Use your thumbnail to feel for a burr only after a few short strokes, not after many passes.
- Check that the polished area covers the bevel near the apex, not just the outer edge.
- Repeat on the opposite side of the bevel to confirm the edge line is forming consistently.
- If the burr is inconsistent, adjust your angle in tiny increments and repeat the short test.
- When in doubt, slow down and shorten the stroke length, because long strokes hide drift.

This is boring work the first couple times. After that, it becomes a fast compass that saves you from hours of honing the wrong contact pattern.

Handling compound angles: how to angle the blade on the stone

Skew chisels often have a standard bevel angle on the inside face, but your effective angle on the stone depends on how you hold the tool relative to its sweep. This is where people get frustrated because the number they hear

from someone else does not match their setup.

Instead of trying to chase an exact “degree,” use a relationship-based approach. Decide what you want the cutting behavior to feel like and build the bevel accordingly.

If you cut softer woods or you want smoother fine work, you can lean toward a slightly finer, more refined edge. If you cut tougher or you are doing rougher work, you may want more robustness at the apex. The honing process should support that decision.

If you do want concrete guidance, these are reasonable starting points to consider as targets, not rigid rules. Your chisel’s existing geometry and how it was ground matters.

| Wood / use case | Starting bevel approach (typical range) | Notes | |---|---|---| | general joinery or medium hardness | modest bevel, refined on fine stone | prioritize a stable apex | | softwoods, smoothing cuts | slightly keener edge refinement | watch for brittleness if it chips | | hardwoods or heavy use | slightly more robust finish | avoid over-thinning at the apex | | roughing or aggressive skew cuts | focus on apex stability | remove wire cleanly, don’t just polish |

Those ranges are meant to help you set expectations. The main thing is that your honing should create a consistent edge line that matches the geometry you already have.

Deburring without ruining the edge you just built

After honing, you must remove the burr. A burr is not always the enemy, but a loose, inconsistent burr on a skew can fold over during cutting and leave the surface torn.

The deburring method depends on what kind of steel and edge behavior you have. For many skew chisels, a few light passes on a fine stone edge can clean the burr without dulling the apex much. Another method is to use a controlled strop, but you need to keep the stroke consistent and light. If you strop too aggressively or at too steep an angle, you can round the apex.

If you don’t know how your chisel responds, do a small experiment. Hone until sharp. Deburr gently. Then make a test cut. If the edge feels brittle or chatters, your deburring might be too harsh or the apex might be weak. If it leaves fuzz, your deburring might not have fully removed the wire.

Stropping and maintenance: when honing becomes seasoning

Some people think stropping is a shortcut, but on skews it can be a practical way to keep edges performing between full sessions. Stropping can also help remove micro burrs created by use.

The key is to strop as maintenance, not as a replacement for proper honing. If your bevel has lost contact with the apex due to long wear, a strop can only do so much. It will refine whatever edge geometry remains. It won’t correct a dull, rounded apex.

In my shop, I treat stropping as a finishing step after honing, or a quick touch after a day of carving. I keep it light, and I focus on consistent stroke direction so I’m not sanding away the cutting edge geometry.

A short field story: fixing a skew that “should” have been sharp

I once had a skew chisel that looked perfect. The bevel was shiny, the edge could shave hair, and yet the cuts in alder looked ragged. I suspected I had missed something in deburring or angle, but I also suspected my assumptions were wrong.

I went back to the stone and did a controlled reset. I used coarse honing only long enough to erase the existing bevel contact pattern, then I rebuilt contact carefully with short strokes, checking for burr formation after each small adjustment. Two minutes in, I found the problem: I was holding the tool at a relationship that touched part of the bevel but not the apex consistently across the sweep. The old edge polish was real, but it wasn't apexed.

Once the burr formed along the true cutting edge and I refined that apex, the difference was immediate. The next cuts were clean and the tool stopped trying to "skip." Nothing about <https://www.eatingwell.com/affiliate/7912388/best-sharpening-stones/> the steel changed. What changed was where the abrasive actually touched. That moment is why I emphasize contact geometry over shine.

Common mistakes and how to correct them

Skew honing has a few recurring traps. Most are not hard, they are just easy to repeat.

The first trap is assuming that "more time on the stone" will fix an angle error. If your contact point is wrong, more passes just create a polished bevel that still misses the apex.

The second trap is using the same stroke length and pressure as you would on a square chisel. With skews, long strokes often introduce drift. Short strokes and consistent tool orientation reduce drift.

The third trap is neglecting burr behavior. If you never confirm that the burr has reached the apex, you might think the edge is forming when it is only refining part of the bevel face.

The fourth trap is over-deburring in an attempt to eliminate wire. If you remove too much, you can create a micro rounded edge that cuts weakly, especially on harder woods. Gentle, controlled deburring wins.

And finally, the trap of polishing for appearance. If your bevel mirror is not backed up by performance, you're polishing the wrong thing.

Developing your "feel" for tricky angles

Skew honing is ultimately a sensory craft. The stone tells you when it is cutting versus skimming. Your fingers tell you when a burr is real versus incidental. Your eye tells you where the bevel is contacting. Your cut tells you whether you built an apex that actually does work.

Give yourself a few sessions to build that feel. The first time you hone a skew after relearning contact geometry, expect a learning curve. Your hands may be better than your assumptions. That's normal.

If you are trying to get consistent results, the biggest improvement you can make is to standardize how you hold the tool on the stone. Once your grip and blade orientation are consistent, your honing becomes repeatable.

And as you sharpen more tools, you will notice something interesting: you start to recognize the "shape of good contact" on the stone. That is the moment honing stops feeling mysterious and starts feeling like craftsmanship again.

One final checklist before you put the chisel away

If you want your skew ready for the next session without surprises, use a quick pre-save routine. It takes longer to write than to do.

- Verify the edge feels consistently sharp along the length with light fingertip checks.
- Confirm there is no persistent burr by gently testing the edge line (carefully).

- Wipe the blade clean so any remaining abrasive does not smear onto your wood.
- If you strop, keep it light and consistent, then re-check the edge feel.
- Make one test cut in scrap so you trust what the stone built.

Do that, and the next time you hone, you will know whether you are correcting the geometry or simply refreshing the edge. That feedback loop is what turns tricky skew chisels into reliable tools.