NO PREP

# Knife Skills and the Basic Cuts

**Includes:** Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

## Knife Skills and the Basic Cuts

### Two Hands, Two Different Jobs

Knife work is a two-handed skill, and each hand has a job that has nothing to do with the other. The cutting hand holds the knife in what professionals call the pinch grip. Instead of wrapping your whole fist around the handle like a hammer, you pinch the blade itself between your thumb and the side of your bent index finger, right where the blade meets the handle, and let the remaining three fingers curl around the handle behind them. It feels strange for about a day. The reason it is worth learning is control: gripping the blade rather than the handle moves your hand closer to the cutting edge and lets your wrist steer the knife instead of your whole arm. A handle-only grip turns a precise tool into a club. The guiding hand does something

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### The Blade Rocks, It Does Not Chop

The most common beginner habit is lifting the knife completely off the board and bringing it down like an axe. It is slow, it is loud, it scatters food, and it is far less accurate than the alternative. A chef's knife has a curved belly for a reason. The tip stays in contact with the board while the heel of the blade lifts and falls, so the knife rocks forward through the food in an arc rather than dropping onto it. The blade is always touching the board, which means the knife never has to be re-aimed

between cuts. For long vegetables there is a second motion worth learning, a forward slicing push where the blade moves down and away from you at the same time, which shears cleanly through fibrous items instead of crushing them. Speed is not the goal and never should be at first. Uniformity is the goal, and speed arrives on its own once the motion stops requiring thought. There is also housekeeping that makes the work possible: the board is stabilized with a damp towel underneath, the food is given a flat side to sit on before anything else happens, and cut pieces are cleared into a bowl rather than allowed to pile up under the blade. A crowded board forces bad angles. Board height belongs with the rest of the setup. A counter that is too high forces the elbow up and the wrist to bend, which costs both accuracy and endurance over a long prep session. Professional cooks compensate by standing differently, and students in a lab can usually find a lower surface to work on.

**Why Every Piece Should Be the Same Size**

The reason chefs obsess over uniform cuts is not that a plate of identical cubes looks impressive, although it does. It is that food cooks from the outside in, and the time it takes to cook through is set by the thickness of the piece. Put a half-inch cube of potato and a quarter-inch cube in the same pan and they finish at different moments. There is no heat setting that fixes that. By the time the large ones are tender, the small ones have gone to mush or burned, and the dish contains both problems at once. Every uneven pan of roasted vegetables that came out simultaneously raw and scorched is a knife problem being blamed on an oven. Uniformity also controls texture in the mouth and speed on the line. A soup where every dice is the same size gives the same bite each time. A mirepoix, the standard mix of onion, carrot, and celery that starts an enormous number of soups and sauces, is cut to a size chosen to match how long the dish will cook: large rough cuts for a stock that simmers for hours, fine dice for a sauce that has twenty minutes. The cut is not decoration. It is a cooking-time decision made in advance with a blade. Uniformity also makes a cook faster in a way that is easy to miss. When every piece is the same, you stop making a separate decision about each one and the hand settles into a rhythm. Most of the speed that looks impressive in a professional kitchen is the absence of hesitation rather than raw hand quickness.

**The Cuts Worth Knowing by Name**

Classical knife cuts are standardized so that a recipe or a chef can name a size and be understood without measuring. The stick cuts come first because the dice cuts are made from them. Julienne is a matchstick roughly one eighth of an inch square and two inches long. Batonnet is thicker, about a quarter inch square, the size of a steak fry. The dice cuts are simply those sticks lined up and cut crosswise. Brunoise is the eighth-inch cube you get from julienne. Small dice, about a quarter inch, comes from batonnet. Medium and large dice run about half an inch and three quarters. Chop means to cut into rough, roughly equal pieces where precision does not matter because the food will be pureed or strained out. Mince is the finest cut, used for garlic, shallots, and herbs, where you want the ingredient to disappear into the dish and release flavor everywhere. Chiffonade is different in kind: leafy herbs or greens are stacked, rolled into a tight cigar, and sliced crosswise into thin ribbons. The path to almost all of them is the same. Square off the vegetable into a rectangle first, slice it into planks, stack the planks and cut sticks, then turn the sticks and cut cubes. Squaring off a vegetable produces trim, and that trim is not garbage. The rounded scraps left from squaring a carrot or a potato go into stock, soup, or a puree, where shape does not matter at all. Throwing away a third of every vegetable to make the cubes look right is how a kitchen loses money without noticing.

**Honing, Sharpening, and Keeping the Edge**

A knife edge is a thin ribbon of metal, and ordinary use bends it. Microscopically the edge rolls over to one side, so a knife can feel dull while all of its metal is still there, just pointed the wrong direction. Honing fixes that. A honing steel, the long rod that comes with most knife sets, does not remove metal and does not sharpen anything. It pushes the rolled edge back into alignment, and it should be used briefly and often, ideally every time the knife comes out. Hold the steel with the tip down on the board and draw the blade down and across at roughly a fifteen to twenty degree angle, a few light strokes per side. Sharpening is the other operation and it is genuinely different: a whetstone or a sharpener grinds metal away to create a new edge, and it is needed only every few months for a home knife. The maintenance rules that follow from this are short. Cut on wood or plastic, never glass, stone, or a metal pan, because a hard surface rolls or chips an edge instantly. Wash and dry a

knife by hand right after use. Store it in a block, on a magnetic strip, or in a sheath, never loose in a drawer where the edge bangs against everything else. The last thing worth saying about knife skills is that they are built by repetition on cheap ingredients. A five-pound bag of potatoes or a case of onions is the standard practice material in culinary programs precisely because it is expendable. Nobody learns a rocking motion on an expensive protein, and nobody should try.

**Key Information: Knife Skills and the Basic Cuts**

| Detail | Information |
|---|---|
| Pinch Grip | Pinch the blade at the handle joint for wrist-level control |
| Guiding Hand | Claw with knuckles as a fence that sets each slice thickness |
| Rocking Motion | Tip stays on the board while the heel lifts and falls |
| Julienne | Matchstick about 1/8 inch square and 2 inches long |
| Brunoise | 1/8 inch cube, made by dicing julienne sticks crosswise |
| Mince | The finest cut, used for garlic, shallots, and herbs |
| Chiffonade | Leaves stacked, rolled tight, and sliced into thin ribbons |
| Hone vs Sharpen | Honing realigns the edge often; sharpening grinds new metal |

**Case Study: Tyler's Roasted Potatoes**

**Tyler is roasting potatoes for a family meal practical and he is behind, so he cuts fast and does not look closely at what is landing on the board. Some pieces come out near an inch across, others closer to a quarter inch, and a few are thin wedges. He spreads them on a sheet pan, sets a timer for the twenty-five minutes the recipe lists, and moves on to his sauce. When the pan comes out, the small pieces and thin wedges are dark brown at the edges and some have gone bitter, while the largest cubes are still firm enough to resist a fork. His partner asks whether the oven runs hot. Tyler puts three pieces side by side on a paper towel and looks at them. "The oven is fine," he says. "These are not the same potato anymore." He reroasts a second tray, squaring each potato off first and cutting a consistent half-inch dice.**

1. Explain why one oven temperature and one timer could not cook Tyler's first tray evenly.

_____

_____

2. Tyler blamed the oven before blaming the cut. Using the reading, explain why the knife was the actual cause.

_____

_____

**Multiple Choice**

1. What is the purpose of the pinch grip on a chef's knife?

    a) It keeps the hand farther from the blade for safety reasons

    b) It moves the hand onto the blade so the wrist can steer it

    c) It lets the cook apply more downward force per cut

    d) It is the only grip that works with a serrated edge

2. Why do chefs insist that pieces in one dish be cut to the same size?

a) It is a presentation standard with no effect on cooking

b) Uniform pieces are required by commercial kitchen code inspection

c) Uniform pieces absorb seasoning at a more even rate

d) Cooking time is set by thickness, so uneven pieces finish apart

3. What does a honing steel actually do to a knife?

a) It hardens the steel so the edge lasts longer between uses

b) It grinds away metal to create a brand new edge

c) It pushes a rolled-over edge back into straight alignment

d) It removes rust and food residue left from the last use

**Matching**

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

| Term | Definition |
|---|---|
| 1. ___ Pinch grip | A) A matchstick cut about one eighth inch square and two inches long |
| 2. ___ Julienne | B) An eighth-inch cube produced by dicing julienne sticks crosswise |
| 3. ___ Brunoise | C) Realigning a rolled edge with a steel without removing any metal |
| 4. ___ Chiffonade | D) Holding the blade itself between thumb and bent index finger |
| 5. ___ Honing | E) Stacking and rolling leaves, then slicing them into thin ribbons |

**Fill-in-the-Blank**

1. The knife _____ forward because the tip stays on the board.

2. The guiding hand curls into a _____ to set slice width.

3. The finest cut, used for garlic and herbs, is a _____.

**Short Answer**

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Explain how the guiding hand controls the thickness of every slice a cook makes.

2. Explain why uneven cuts produce a dish that is burned and undercooked at once.

3. Explain the difference between honing and sharpening, and how often each is needed.