

Concours d' Elegance – The Process Revealed

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My affection for finely detailed cars goes back to teenage years and is rooted in the basic philosophy that clean cars always run better. Participating in 14 Chesapeake Challenges and 2 Parades over the years has only served to advance my own detailing skills to the point where I am confident I can get the car to look as good as it possibly can. Philosophically, I do (1) consider concours prep to be an important part of vehicle maintenance, (2) take the least aggressive path forward in correcting cosmetic problems, and (3) always assess whether the proposed cure will be worse than the disease.

I'll begin with a basic observation, and that is, that the street prepared class at this year's CC45 included some very well prepared and presented cars. What may not be apparent is that in preparing an entry for street class, the participant is completing 85% of the work needed for concours. Hopefully, as you read on, you will recognize that my approach is not all that much different than your own and for CC46 you will choose to compete at the concours level.

The Work Environment

Janice says, "You Can't Make Clean Working in Filth!" We begin by emptying the garage, spraying down the floor with Simple Green, scrubbing, washing it out, and using a squeegee to dry the floor. Grass, pollen, mud, and dirt all need to be gone. Good lighting, especially the natural kind, is also essential.

The Wash (20 minutes)

All things begin with the car wash. Work from top to bottom. Use this opportunity to remove bug splats and tar (1Z Anti-Insekt) and rinse with plenty of water, flush the

wheel wells, and the radiator intake vents. For drying, I use old, but clean, bath towels to blot water from the surface of the car. Blotting, and not drawing the towel across the car, minimizes the likelihood of putting fine scratches in the paint. Once thoroughly dry, the car is kept covered except when being worked on and it is off the road until the event.

The Wheels and Fenders (30 minutes per wheel)

The wheels come off one at a time for cleaning with wheel cleaner, a soft wheel brush, or a sponge. Remove tar as needed. Use a stiff bristle fender brush to clean the tire sidewall removing brake dust, grime, and old tire shine. Take the opportunity to inspect the wheel for missing wheel weights, tire wear, cracks, and embedded objects. I apply touch up paint (Dupli-Color silver) to any chips on the spokes and scratches around the mounting bolts using a fine artist's brush.

The painted wheels are polished and waxed. I use Meguiar's hand polish and a Mothers Power Ball to polish the wheel and then hand apply a coat of Rejex sealant to protect the wheel paint. Use a heavy toothpick and a micro fiber cloth with detailing spray to remove dirt and polish residue from wheel joints and around the screws (I have 3-piece wheels and this is when I don't like them very much!)

Detailing steps at each of the fenders include the following (behind the wheel is also important):

- Scrub down the inner fender with a brush, rinse, and then dress with Armorall.
- Wipe down the caliper with detailing spray; touch up any paint chips (gloss black in my case).

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- Remove tar from the fender lip and painted parts of wheel well.
- Repair any stone chips on the fender lip with touch up paint (Dr.ColorChip is easy to work with).
- Inspect the suspension bushings, brake pads and rotors for wear.
- Stainless steel muffler? Hit it with metal polish. When the judges look at the wheel, everything around it should look just as good too!

The Engine Compartment (60 minutes)

Street class guys take note; once the engine compartment is detailed it stays pretty clean from year to year. Don't let this area keep you out of the concours class. This year I did spend extra time cleaning up after the service tech that got coolant splashes all over the place. Some level of disassembly can make cleaning and inspection easier.

Wipe down as much of the wiring, engine, hoses, inner fenders and plastic surfaces as you can physically reach. I use a microfiber cloth with interior detail spray (Griott's or Meguiar's) because it is not greasy and will not attract and hold dirt. Griott's makes an extendable detailing tool that allows you to push the cloth into the hard to reach places. Large hemostats will allow you to do the same (photo). As you wipe things down, check the condition of hoses, belts, connectors, and wiring looking for loose, frayed, and chaffed parts. Check the coolant and power steering fluid levels while you are in here. Remove any coolant splashes around the expansion tank and from the reservoir cap.

Wipe down the underside of the lid (painted surfaces) with exterior detailing spray. Use polish to remove any water

spots. Work the cloth in and around the hinges and latch, a favorite place for judges to look.

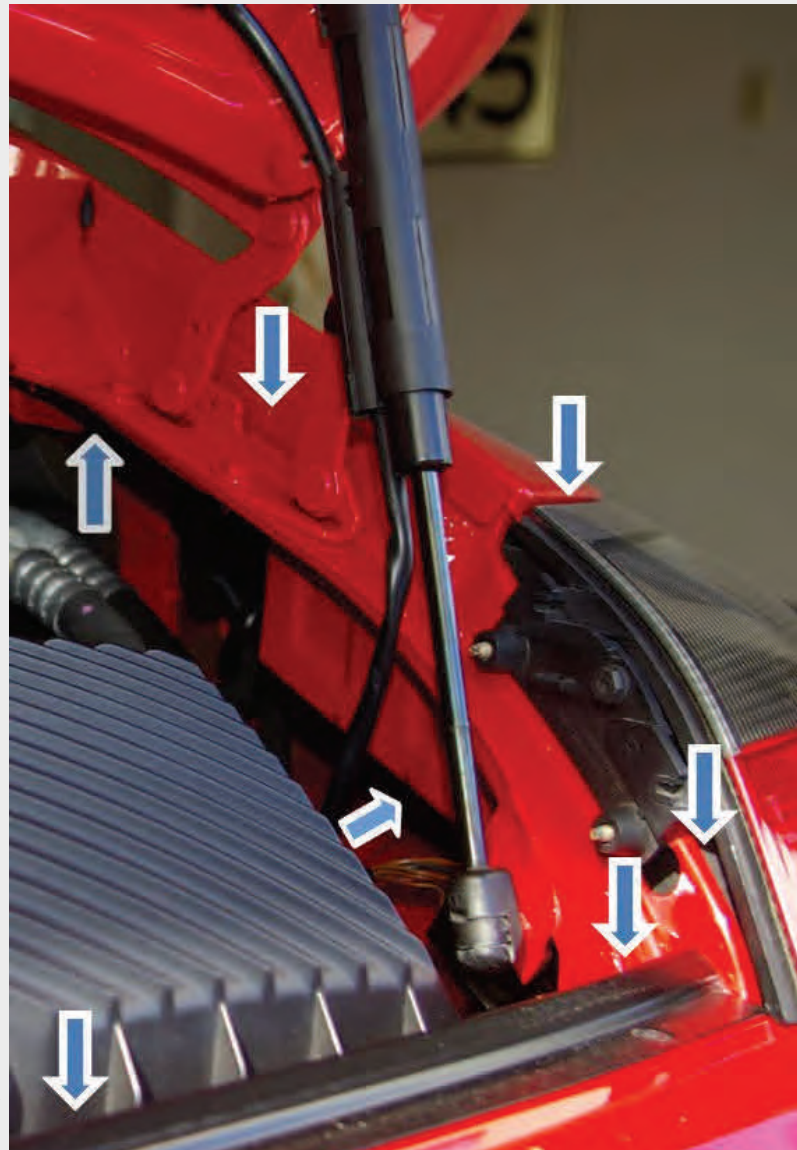


Photo Above: Arrows indicate typical inspection and cleaning points.

The Exterior Paint (3 to 4 Hours)

Go slow and work by hand. Thus far I have been able to leave the Porter Cable buffer in the box with this car and I also avoid the use of a clay bar (I'm sure there are differing opinions here). The point is that one bit

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of grit in the clay or on the pad will cause you a lot of extra work.

Polish goes on first. The intent is to obtain a perfectly smooth surface and replenish essential oils lost to oxidation and get that rich deep wet shine. Use the least abrasive polish possible to remove blemishes and apply with a terry cloth applicator in long strokes in the direction that air travels over the car. Remove the bulk of the product with a terry cloth towel; follow with a micro fiber cloth. Personal preference is Meguiar's #81 Hand Polish which goes on and off easily and has minimal cutting power. P21S Paint Cleanser is also good, although it leaves a

powdery residue that gets everywhere and requires extra clean up. Judges will nail you on it. Take care working around rubber trim and the sunroof seal and avoid getting polish and wax on them. Residue on trim and paint will also cost you points. Tape them off with painters tape if you want.

Meguiar's #7 Show Car Glaze is another fine product with high oil content. It actually fills paint pores to produce a mirror flat surface. It is more difficult to use and remove on the modern 2-step paint finishes, but produces great results on older cars with single stage paint. Work small areas at a time.

As I polish I look for paint chips that need repair. I simply mark them with painters tape and continue with the polishing job returning to repair them after all the polishing is complete. Take care of the serious stone marks with paint (Dr.ColorChip) and use the blending solution to remove the excess paint. Multiple applications may be necessary as well as spot polishing.

The oils in polishes and glazes will wash away, so the polishing step is immediately followed by the application of a wax. Over the years I have used Mothers Gold, Meguiar's Gold Class and #26, and P21S carnauba waxes, all with equally good results. I like the way P21S liquefies as it hits the paint surface resulting in a thin layer of wax; easy on and off. Use a foam applicator to apply a light coat and remove in the same manner as the polish. Applying with the finger tips is another option, but the coating is not even, is usually too heavy, and requires more work to remove. As a final step, Mothers Reflections Top Coat is applied over the wax for extra depth and gloss to the shine.

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Areas for additional attention on the exterior of the car with detailing spray include the following:

- Polish the door jams to remove scuffs and water spots.
- Wipe down the door edges and bottom with detailing spray; polish if needed.
- Where the fenders join the body, push a cloth into any openings and remove any dirt.
- Clean the inside of the gas filler door and the compartment.
- Use tape to remove lint and fuzz from the felt around the sunroof. Wax on it? Black Sharpie!
- Clean the underside of the luggage and engine compartment lids with detailing spray. Use polish to remove any water spots. Remove any waxy residue from the where the lids meet the fenders paying particular attention to the hinges.
- Use a Q-tip or foam pad to remove the waxy residue from all of the body seams around the car and the recesses around the lights.
- For small stone marks where the undercoat is intact, I use a red crayon to hide the stone mark. Remove the excess crayon except that which is filling the defect using detailing spray.
- Extra applications of polish are often required to clean the front bumper of bug splats.
- Clean out the radiator inlets and dress the plastic with Armorall. Wipe off the excess.

- No chrome exhaust pipes? Wet sand the plain steel tips with 400 grit paper followed by Mothers metal polish. Almost as good and they don't look forgotten.



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- A little silver paint applied to the wheel bolts make them look like they were not overlooked.
- Remove bug guts from the wipers (got dinged on that one year).
- Worth Rubber Car Gel Stick is applied to all of the rubber seals and bumpers.

The Interior (90 Minutes)

Detailing the interior is a 2 step process. The floor mats come out along with anything else the factory did not put into the car. The leather gets treated. The carpet gets vacuumed. The interior surfaces are wiped down with Griott's Interior Cleaner and microfiber to collect dirt and dust.

Janice is my "secret weapon". She is the queen of clean and makes the second pass through the car's interior working from back to front doing glass, seats, and carpet. Key areas to cover include:

- Seat belts, buckles, and retractors.
- Storage compartments in the doors and center console.
- Rear view mirror, visors and vanity mirrors – no dust or finger prints.
- Fresh air vents – no dust, leave them open and all pointed in the same direction.
- Steering wheel, turn signal stalks, controls, dashboard crevices – no dust or fingerprints.
- Under the seats clean and the tracks do not have foreign matter stuck in the grease.
- Pedals wiped down and area behind them cleaned of stones and grass. No scuffs on kick panels.

- Carpet, mats, and carpeted panels are cleaned, this time with tape. We love the vacuum and it will suck up steel ball bearings all day long, but it will leave lint and cat fur behind. Tape is the only way to get it, and we use plenty of it.
- Clean the luggage compartment (tape again), and while you are checking the tools, put some air in the spare tire.
- We also have "Concours Only" mats (they have no wear) and both sides get cleaned, with tape, before they go into the car.

Final Inspection (15Minutes)

When finished, pull the car out of the garage into bright sunlight. Do a complete wipe down of the car with Griott's Speed Shine or similar detailing spray. Slowly walk around the car and look for waxy residue, haze, and smudges and remove them. Get on your knees and look for wax left on the paint on the lower fender edges (ding!). Check the glass for streaks. Take your time. Look at it from different angles. It's okay to smile and admire your work.

At The Event (60 Minutes)

I allow about an hour to do final prep at the event. Once the luggage compartment is emptied (everything is in one tub), I do a final wipe down of the cowl and close the lid until inspection time. This is followed by a final wipe down with detailing spray and a micro fiber clothe of the entire exterior of the car and a quick look in the engine compartment. Lastly the wheels get a wipe down. While I am working the exterior, Janice is doing the same inside. We use bath towels to cover the floor mats on the drive over, and then they are used as "door mats" out-

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side the car to prevent anything from finding its way inside.

Once we are finished, the car stays closed up until the judges ask for it to be opened and they find and point out everything we have missed. Over the years we've taken that feedback and have steadily advanced from a 3rd place wash and shine finish, to a CC44 & 45 Best In Show Concours twice running as well as a 2nd and 4th at Parade. It ultimately all comes down to attention to detail.

Favorite judge's quote: "Good news! I found oil in the engine compartment. The bad news is, it's on the end of the dip stick."

Photo below showing the wide range of products used for detailing.

