

Polycrylic vs Polyurethane: Which Finish Is Best For Your Project?

Preserving the beauty of wood requires regular applications of sealers and finishes. Two of the most popular products are polycrylic and polyurethane. Both products provide tough finishes and superior protection on wood, floors, concrete, and metal—inside and when exposed to outside elements. The names are similar but application, finish, cleanup, and longevity can differ.

What Is Polycrylic?



Polycrylic is a water-based product used to finish wood, metal, and concrete. Available as a liquid or aerosol spray, it is less toxic than oil-based polyurethane. It dries faster, cleans up easier with water, and has a lower odor because it contains fewer Volatile Organic Compounds (VOC).

When dry, polycrylic provides durable rich satin or glossy finishes. Minwax is the only company that manufactures polycrylic.

What Is Polyurethane?



Polyurethane is made from synthetic resins. Originally developed as a protective finish for wood, it can be used over painted surfaces, concrete, and metal. It is highly flammable and should only be applied in well-ventilated areas while wearing a respirator.

The best-known manufacturers of polyurethane finishes include Varathane, Rust-Oleum, Minwax, and Behr.

Side By Side Comparison

	Polycrylic	Polyurethane
Appearance	Clear (Possible milky white appearance).	Clear (Often turns amber over time, enhancing the look).
Application	Brush or aerosol. Dries quickly. Often dries too quickly to allow for smooth even finish on large projects. Runny. Difficult to apply on vertical surfaces.	Brush or aerosol. Easy to apply on most surfaces. Slow drying time allows smooth clean level finishes.
Availability	Home building centers, paint stores, online.	Home building centers, paint stores, online.
Clean Up	Warm water and soap.	Water-based. Clean with warm water and soap. Oil-based. Clean with mineral spirits
Coats	2 -3 coats.	2 - 3 coats. Oil-based product requires fewer coats.
Color	Available in multiple colors or can be custom-tinted.	Available in multiple colors. Can be custom-tinted but it may take some trial and error to achieve a perfect match.
Cost	\$20.00 - \$30.00 per quart.	\$20.00 - \$50.00 per quart.
Durability	Moderate resistance to damage.	High resistance to damage.
Health Risk	Low health risk.	High personal risk due to VOC off-gassing during application. Wear PPE.
Time To Recoat	Approximately 3 years.	Approximately 3 years.
Uses	Light-colored furniture. Interior trim. Interior items. Light-colored wood. Anything painted white.	Outside. High-traffic areas like floors. Heavy use items like chairs. Any surface (May turn milky, amber, or cloudy over time.)

Which Product Should You Use?

There is some usage overlap between the two products but it is fairly obvious they each perform better in different circumstances. Both protect the items they are used for from water, heat, and physical damage. Polyurethane produces a tougher finish. Choose it for high-traffic and heavy-use areas or items. Polycrylic is safer to use and easier to clean with very little after-odor. Choose it for indoor use.

- **Polycrylic.** Best for smaller indoor projects—wood or previously painted—that do not get much use or wear and tear. Cabinets, trims, or furniture that is seldom used. Not a good choice for larger vertical surfaces.
- **Water-Based Polyurethane.** Best used on indoor surfaces that receive moderately heavy use like floors, furniture, and wooden objects that are handled regularly.
- **Oil-Based Polyurethane.** Best for high-traffic wood floors, heavily-use furniture, and outdoor projects—decks, railings, patio furniture, etc. Can also use water-based polyurethane outside but not polycrylic.