

The Repointing Crew

by Travis Nech

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THE REPOINTING CREW

A Professional Mason's Guide to Running Clean, Profitable, Repeatable Repointing Jobs — Estimating, Crew Systems, Quality Control, and Mortar That Matches at Scale

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This book is educational information based on 50 years of hands-on field experience in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. It is not a substitute for an on-site evaluation of your specific building or wall, and it is not safety, legal, or business advice for your particular situation. Follow current OSHA guidance, the material manufacturer's instructions, and the requirements that apply where you work, and bring in qualified safety and business professionals where a question calls for them. Where a question involves the structure of a building itself, hiring a structural engineer for an independent opinion is money well spent.

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Introduction: One Good Wall Is Luck. A Hundred Good Walls Is a Crew.

Every experienced mason has a wall he is proud of. The joints are full, the tooling is crisp, the color sits so close to the old work that a visitor cannot find the repair. That wall proves he has the hands for this trade. It does not prove he has a business.

A business is what happens on the fortieth wall, in August, with a new man on the mixer, a sand load that came in a shade darker than the last one, a customer who needs the scaffold down by Friday, and a second crew working across town where you cannot stand and watch. If the repair still disappears on that wall, you do not have luck. You have a system — and a crew trained to run it when you are not there.

That is the gap this book fills. The earlier Mortar Magic books taught the craft itself: how mortar gets its color, how to match it with the Mortar Bucket method, how to keep every batch true, and why the joint is meant to protect the brick by wearing first. This book takes the next step out — from the craft in one man's hands to the craft running at crew scale, job after job, without drifting.

You will learn to read a wall before you price it, in zones, so the estimate is built on what the building actually needs. You will learn estimating that protects both sides of the contract: the crew, who cannot do honest work on a dishonest number, and the customer, who deserves allowances stated plainly

instead of surprises stated later. You will learn mix design and color control at production scale, joint preparation that is fast without scarring brick, and tooling and curing discipline that holds up in Texas heat, wind, and sudden cold.

Then the book turns to the part of the trade nobody teaches at the mixer: running the job as a welcome guest on somebody's street. Clean sites, honest dust control, care with access and landscaping, and neighbors who are glad you came. Crew roles and daily rhythms that catch mistakes while they are still cheap. Documentation and photographs that make warranties honest and payment a non-event. And finally, growing the business the only way that lasts — referrals and reviews earned by work that holds up, never bought, never invented.

A note on honesty, because it runs through every chapter: every job story in this book is labeled a hypothetical or composite example. They are teaching patterns drawn from fifty years of work, not claims about named customers, and that is deliberate. A professional's reputation does not need decoration. It needs walls.

This is an advanced book for working masons, crew leaders, and masonry contractors — and for the serious homeowner who wants to know what a professional repointing operation actually looks like before hiring one. If you run the crew, or you are the crew, welcome. Let us build the system that makes your hundredth wall as good as your best one.

Chapter 1: The Professional Difference — Why Repointing Is a System, Not a Day's Labor

A homeowner watching a repointing crew for the first time often sees only the simplest part of the work: old mortar coming out, new mortar going in. That view is understandable, and it is also the reason so many repointing jobs fail early, cost more than they should, or leave a good wall looking worse than when the crew arrived. Professional repointing is not a day's labor sold by the hour. It is a system, with a beginning that starts before a grinder ever touches the wall and an end that continues after the last joint is tooled.

The distinction matters because mortar is not decoration. In a brick or stone wall, the mortar joint is the working part of the system. It sheds water, accommodates small movements, holds units in alignment, and — most importantly — it is supposed to be the sacrificial element. Brick and stone should outlive the mortar between them. When the mortar begins to

crack, powder, recede, or separate from the units, it is telling you that its service life in that location is ending. Repointing, done correctly, renews that sacrificial layer without damaging the permanent material around it. Done carelessly, it does the opposite: hard new mortar traps moisture, forces stress into the brick, and turns a maintenance job into a repair job.

That single idea — protect the unit, renew the joint — drives every professional decision that follows.

A professional crew works from a sequence, and the sequence does not change to fit a busy schedule. First comes assessment: what is the wall made of, how old is it, what mortar is in it now, and why did that mortar fail where it failed? Second comes preparation: access, protection for landscaping and openings, dust control, and a plan for where removed material will go. Third comes removal, to a proper depth and profile, without cutting the edges of the brick. Fourth comes mortar selection and mixing, matched to the wall rather than picked from habit. Fifth comes placement, in lifts where depth requires it, packed firmly so there are no voids behind the face. Sixth comes tooling, at the right stage of firmness, to the profile the wall needs for weather and appearance. Seventh comes curing and cleanup, handled patiently rather than rushed at the end of the day. Eighth comes documentation: photographs, notes on what was found, and a clear record of what was and was not done.

Skip any one of those steps and the job still looks finished on the day you leave. The failure shows up later, usually after the crew is working somewhere else.

Consider removal. An inexperienced hand treats grinding as demolition and measures success by speed. A professional treats removal as surgery. The joint needs to be opened to a depth generally at least two to two-and-a-half times its width, and back to sound mortar, with the back of the cut kept as square as practical. Feather edges are not acceptable, because a thin edge of new mortar has no strength and will curl and fail. At the same time, every pass of a blade that widens the joint or rounds the arris of a brick is permanent damage. The brick does not grow back. A system therefore specifies the blade, the tool, the depth check, and who inspects the opened joints before any new mortar is mixed. That inspection step alone separates a crew from a group of laborers.

Mortar selection is another place where a system pays for itself. The most common professional error in the field is reaching for a mortar that is too hard for the wall. Modern, high-strength mixes have their place in modern construction, but many existing walls — especially older brick laid in softer, lime-rich mortar — need a compatible, more forgiving mix.

Compatibility is about more than strength on a bag label. It involves compressive strength, vapor permeability, bond, color, sand grading, and texture. A mortar that is stronger and less permeable than the brick will push moisture and movement stress into the brick faces, and the result is spalling that cannot be undone with another round of pointing. A professional does not guess at this from the truck. The crew examines the existing mortar, notes how it behaves under a scratch tool and in the hand, looks at the sand that falls from the joint, and chooses — or trials — a mix accordingly. When the condition of a structure raises questions beyond masonry maintenance, the professional says so plainly and recommends the owner hire a structural engineer for that separate evaluation. Repointing expertise, built here on 50 years of hands-on field experience, does not pretend to be something else.

Color and texture belong in the same conversation, not as an afterthought on the last day. A joint can be structurally sound and still be a visual failure if the sand is wrong, the pigment is heavy-handed, or the tooling is done too wet or too dry. Professionals make sample panels, in an inconspicuous area, and let them cure long enough to show their real color — which is almost never the color of wet mortar in a bucket. They photograph the sample in sun and shade. They get the owner's agreement before the whole elevation proceeds. That takes half a day on paper, and it saves the far greater cost of a wall that functions but embarrasses everyone who paid for it.

Placement and tooling are where repeatability becomes visible. Packing a joint is not smearing a surface. Deep joints are filled in layers, each layer compacted and allowed to firm before the next, so shrinkage does not open a crack down the middle of the finished work. Tooling is timed to the mortar's set, not to the clock or to quitting time. Tool too early and you pull color and cement to the face, leave a weak, light joint, and stain the surrounding brick. Tool too late and you cannot close the surface properly, and the profile tears instead of compressing. A professional foreman checks firmness by thumbprint throughout the day, because temperature, wind, and sun on one elevation can make the same batch behave like three different materials.

Protection and cleanup are also part of the system, not courtesies. Silica dust from cutting is a real health hazard for the crew and a real nuisance — and potential harm — for the property. Professionals use tool shrouds and vacuum capture where practical, wet methods where appropriate, respirators fitted to the task, and eye and hearing protection without argument. Openings are masked, plantings are covered or wetted and rinsed as the method requires, and walkways are kept in a condition that does not track grit through a

customer's home. At the end, brick faces are cleaned with the gentlest effective method, tested first, because an aggressive wash can burn a wall that the pointing itself left perfect.

Hypothetical example: imagine two crews price the same 400 square feet of failing joints on a two-story brick home. The first crew counts two men, two days, and a few bags of mix. The second crew counts the same pointing work, plus a half day of assessment and samples, scaffold time, dust control, staged removal inspection, deep joints filled in two lifts, and a return visit to check curing and wash down. The second price is higher, and it should be. Five years later, the first wall has cracked joints, widened arrises, and hard mortar popping brick faces on the weather side. The second wall has simply gotten on with its job, quietly, which is exactly what a wall is supposed to do. The cheaper job was not cheaper. It was unfinished work sold as finished.

Profit, in a professional operation, comes from that repeatability. A system lets a foreman train a new hand to a standard instead of to a personality. It lets an estimator price from known production rates instead of optimism. It lets a company schedule the next job with confidence because the current job has checkpoints instead of surprises. Most of all, it produces work that does not call you back for the wrong reasons. Callbacks in repointing are rarely about a single missed joint. They are about a step that was never in the process at all.

That is the professional difference. Anyone can put mortar in a joint for a day. A repointing crew builds a process that protects the brick, respects the mortar's job, keeps its own people safe, and leaves the same quality on the last ten feet of wall as on the first. The chapters that follow take that system apart piece by piece, starting where every honest job starts: reading the wall in front of you before you put a number on it.

Chapter 2: Reading a Wall Before You Price It — Zones, Mortar Analysis, and Access

No estimate is better than the reading that produced it. A wall will tell you, in plain sight, most of what a repointing job will cost and most of where it will go wrong — if you walk it slowly, divide it into zones, study the mortar instead of just noting that it has failed, and price the access with the same honesty you price the joints. The professional habit is simple: never price an elevation you have not read, and never treat a whole building as one condition when it is plainly several.

Start with zones. A building does not weather evenly, and its

mortar does not fail evenly. Break every structure, on paper and in photographs, into zones defined by exposure, height, and water behavior. The weather elevation — in much of North Texas, the side that takes driving rain and hard afternoon sun — ages differently from a sheltered north wall. A chimney ages differently from everything below it: it stands in wind and rain on all sides, endures the largest temperature swings, and often shows the deepest joint loss on a property whose lower walls look sound. Parapets and coping joints take water from above. The band of wall at grade takes splashback, soil contact, irrigation spray, and the occasional string trimmer. Wall areas below leaking gutters, failed flashing, or a cracked sill live in a permanent drip line and will show it. Porches and additions create sheltered zones where original mortar may be in far better condition than the exposed field ten feet away.

Each zone gets its own notes: approximate area, percentage of joints failed, typical depth of loss, and any unit damage. That zoning does three things for the estimator. It prevents the classic error of sampling the worst corner and pricing the whole building as a full repoint, and it prevents the opposite error of sampling the sheltered wall and missing the chimney entirely. It also lets you write a scope the customer can understand — this elevation in full, that elevation in part, the chimney as its own line — and it gives the crew a map when they arrive, instead of a fresh argument about what was included.

Within each zone, read the failure pattern before you read the price book. Mortar receding evenly to a shallow depth across a wide area usually points to age and weathering, and it points you toward a broad repoint at a consistent depth. Cracking concentrated in a stair-step pattern, joints opening on one side of a window and not the other, or displacement you can feel with the palm of your hand is a different conversation: movement may still be active, and pointing over active movement without addressing its cause is decoration, not repair. In those cases the professional documents what he sees, explains the limit of what repointing can do, and where the question is structural, recommends the owner hire a structural engineer to evaluate it separately. Water patterns deserve the same respect. Staining, efflorescence, and joint loss that maps neatly below a joint in the coping or a failed sealant line is telling you the water source, and repointing below an unrepaired source buys a short life for good work. Note the source, price its correction or exclude it in writing, but never pretend you did not see it.

Next, analyze the mortar itself, in the field, with your hands. Field analysis is not laboratory work, and a professional does not claim that it is. It is a disciplined set of observations that, taken together, point to a compatible repair mix and flag the

walls that need a closer look. Begin with hardness. A knife point or scratch tool drawn across an existing joint — in a sound area, not the powder at the surface — tells you a great deal. Mortar that scratches readily, sands off in grains, and can be dug with hand tools behaves very differently from mortar that rings hard, resists the tool, and comes out only in sharp fragments. Compare several locations, because a wall can hold more than one generation of repair. Then look at what comes out. Break a small sample and study the sand: its color, its range of particle sizes, and whether the grains are rounded or sharp. Sand is the largest part of what a finished joint looks like, and matching the sand, more than chasing pigment, is what makes new work sit quietly beside old. Note the color of the mortar matrix itself, deep in the joint, not the weathered face. Note texture and tooling profile as well — flat, concave, weathered, or struck — because the replacement should generally follow the original profile that sheds water correctly for that wall.

Look just as hard for previous repairs, because they set your real scope. Hard, gray, cement-rich pointing smeared over softer original mortar is common, and it often has to come out more carefully and more slowly than original joints do. Look for mortar smeared across brick faces, for joints that were widened by sloppy grinding in an earlier campaign, for caulk or sealant packed into joints where it never belonged, and for paint or coatings that change how the wall handles moisture. Each of those conditions changes production time, changes risk to the units, and belongs in the estimate or in the written exclusions — not in a surprise conversation on the second day.

Read the units while you are there. Brick hardness varies enormously, from soft, handmade or early machine-made brick that a careless blade will scar in a second, to dense modern units that tolerate more aggressive removal. Note spalled faces, cracked units, and units that have already lost their fired skin, and count them zone by zone. A repointing price that carries no count of brick to be replaced — or turned, where appropriate and agreed — is a price built to be argued about later. Stone work calls for the same discipline, with extra attention to delamination and to beds that are opening along their natural layers.

Access is the third leg of the reading, and it is the one most often priced from the driveway. Walk the actual working positions. Upper elevations may need scaffold, a lift, or ladder work, and each choice carries a different setup time, footprint, and safety requirement. Note grade changes, slopes, fences and gates that govern how equipment gets in, and plantings or beds that will need protection or temporary removal by arrangement. Note overhead lines, meters, condensers, and anything else that narrows where a scaffold

can stand. Note the customer's daily life: which doors must stay usable, where children and pets are, where vehicles park, and where your crew can stage material, mix, and park a trailer without blocking a neighbor. Note interior implications where work touches openings or where vibration and dust are a concern. Composite example: a modest one-story wall and a taller wall with the same joint area are not the same job if the taller wall stands over a sloped, planted bed, behind a locked side gate too narrow for scaffold frames, under a service drop. The pointing is identical. The job is not.

Photograph everything as you read it, in a system the office and the crew can use later. Take elevations whole, then zone details, then close work: a coin or tape in frame for joint width and depth, the scratch test location, the sample of original sand, the units you counted for replacement. Photographs are not marketing material. They are the memory of the estimate, and they settle honest disagreements about pre-existing damage faster than any contract language.

One more reading habit deserves emphasis: check the wall at different times and in different light when the schedule allows it. Raking morning light reveals shallow tooling defects, hollow-sounding areas, and hairline cracking that flat midday light hides completely. A wall read after rain shows you where joints stay wet longest, where water tracks behind a face, and where staining is active rather than historical. Even a brief second look, noted in a single line, often changes a zone grade — and changing it at the reading stage costs nothing, while changing it after the scaffold is up costs everyone.

Finally, assign each zone a condition grade in your notes — sound, spot repoint, full repoint, or beyond repointing — and write one plain sentence for each about why. That discipline forces the reading to become a judgment before it becomes a number. In the next chapter, those zones, counts, depths, and access notes turn into measurements, units, and allowances. Pricing is not a separate talent from reading a wall. Pricing is reading a wall, written down in dollars.

Chapter 3: Estimating That Protects the Crew and the Customer — Measuring, Units, and Honest Allowances

An estimate has two jobs at once, and it fails if it does only one of them. It must protect the crew — covering the real labor, access, material, and risk of doing the work properly, so no one is pressured mid-job to cut a corner the price

cannot afford. And it must protect the customer — stating plainly what is included, what is not, and what will happen if the wall turns out to hold more damage than anyone could see from the surface. Honest estimating is not a sales technique. It is the written form of the professional system described in Chapter 1, built from the zoned reading described in Chapter 2.

Measure first, and measure the right thing. The most common measuring error in repointing is quoting the wall area when the work is really a percentage of the wall. Work from your zone notes. For a full repoint of an elevation, the wall area in square feet is a fair base measure: length times height, minus large openings, recorded zone by zone so the office can check it against photographs. For partial work, estimate the affected percentage honestly, zone by zone, and show your math — a wall that is 600 square feet at roughly 40 percent joint failure is a different scope from the same wall at 90 percent, and the customer deserves to see which one he is buying. For work that runs by the joint rather than the field — a cracked chimney chase, joints under a sill, a run of bed joints at a flashing line — measure in linear feet of joint to be cut and pointed. For spot work, count it: individual joints, individual bricks to replace, individual locations, each tied to a photograph. Mixed jobs carry mixed measures, and that is normal. What is not acceptable is a single lump number with no visible relationship to anything you measured. If you cannot show how you got the quantity, the customer cannot trust the quantity, and your own crew cannot plan from it.

Tie each measure to a unit price that reflects real production. A unit price is not a guess at what the market will bear. It is built, over jobs, from your own recorded rates: how many square feet of full repoint a two-person crew completes in a day on scaffold versus from ladders, how much slower deep joints run than standard depth, how production changes on soft brick where removal is by hand or with extra care, and how hard previous repairs change the cutting day. Keep those records, even in a simple notebook or spreadsheet, because an estimator without production history is just an optimist with a calculator. Prices vary widely by region, season, access, and material, and every figure in this chapter is a general ballpark for discussion only — your own market and your own recorded rates govern any real quote. As a broad illustration, full repointing of an accessible residential elevation is often discussed in a range per square foot of wall area, spot pointing is often priced per location or per linear foot, and chimney work is often priced as its own item because access dominates it. Use ranges like those to sanity-check your arithmetic, never as a substitute for it.

Build the price in visible layers. Begin with direct labor for each phase, not a single blended figure: assessment and

samples, setup and protection, cutting and removal, inspection of opened joints, mixing and placement, tooling, curing checks, cleaning, and teardown. Crews do not fall behind on pointing. They fall behind on everything around the pointing that nobody priced. Add access as its own layer — scaffold rental or ownership cost, lift time, setup and moving between elevations — because access is real money whether you rent the equipment or already own it. Add materials honestly: repair mortar components or bagged goods, sand, pigment where needed, replacement brick matched as closely as supply allows, blades and bits consumed by the job, masking, sheeting, and cleaning supplies. Add disposal, water, and fuel. Then add overhead in the way your business actually carries it — insurance, vehicles, office time, warranty reserve — and a profit margin you can say out loud without embarrassment. A company that hides its margin inside inflated quantities teaches its estimators to lie about measurements. A company that shows its quantities honestly and prices its margin openly can defend every line.

Allowances are where honesty is tested, because allowances deal with what nobody can fully see. A joint that reads at standard depth on the face may run deeper behind a previous repair. A brick that looks cracked may come out in pieces and reveal a second damaged unit behind it. A wall opened for spot work may show a run of failed mortar extending well past the visible pattern. The professional response is not to bury a large, silent cushion in the base price — that charges every customer for the worst wall you have ever seen. Nor is it to price the best case and argue later. The professional response is a written allowance: a stated quantity, at a stated unit price, for a stated condition, drawn only if the condition is found, with the customer's agreement on how he will be notified. Write it in plain form: for example, an allowance for up to a stated number of additional brick replacements at the agreed per-unit price, or for additional linear feet of deep-joint filling beyond the base depth, documented with photographs of the opened work before it is covered. Hypothetical example: an estimate for a chimney carries a base scope for full repointing of all four faces, plus an allowance for replacing up to ten spalled brick at a named unit price, with a note that any count beyond ten pauses for the owner's decision. When the crew opens the chimney and finds six, the customer pays for six, sees the photographs, and the job never becomes a dispute. When it finds fourteen, the conversation is short, because the mechanism for it was agreed before anyone was standing on a roof.

Exclusions deserve the same plain treatment, stated early and kindly. Work on the water source above a wall — roofing, flashing by others, gutters, coping by others — may be excluded, but if you saw it failing, say so in writing and say that repointing below it will have a shortened life until it is

corrected. Structural evaluation is excluded, and where movement raises the question, the estimate should recommend the owner hire a structural engineer for that separate question rather than letting pointing be mistaken for a structural repair. Interior finishes, landscaping replacement beyond agreed protection, and matching of replacement brick to a discontinued product should each be addressed in a sentence the customer actually reads. An exclusion discovered at signing is professionalism. The same exclusion discovered at invoicing is a grievance.

Protect the crew inside the paperwork as well. The estimate should carry the conditions the price assumes: working hours and access to the property, water and power availability, a weather standard that pauses exterior mortar work in unsuitable temperatures or driving rain rather than forcing bad curing, and a payment schedule tied to stages — a deposit, progress at a defined point, and balance on completion — stated as your company's terms, plainly, before work begins. Costs for these items, like all costs in this book, are general ballparks that vary by market and by job; what must not vary is that the terms are written before they are needed. Build in your safety requirements as non-negotiable line items, not favors: dust control, fall protection, and proper curing time are part of the price of a correct job, and an estimate that can only win by removing them has already lost something worth more than the contract.

Finally, read the finished estimate the way the customer will. Does it name the zones and match the photographs? Can he find the quantity, the unit, and the total without help? Does he know what happens if the wall holds a surprise, and what is not included, and when you will be there and how long it should take under normal weather? Would your foreman, handed only this document and the zone notes, set up the same job you priced? If any answer is no, the estimate is not finished, however attractive the number looks. The best estimates in this trade are rarely the lowest. They are the ones that make the job boring — measured honestly, priced in layers, allowances agreed in advance — so the crew can give its full attention to the only interesting part: the wall itself, and the work that will still be standing behind your name in twenty years.

Chapter 4: Mix Design at Scale — Recipes, Sand Control, and the Mortar Bucket Method for Crews

A repointing job lives or dies on the mix. The pointing itself can be neat, the joints can be raked to the right depth, and the wall can be cleaned perfectly, and the work will still fail if

the mortar is too hard, too soft, too lean, or different from batch to batch. At scale — a whole elevation, a whole building, a crew working for weeks — small errors multiply. One helper adding a little extra water, one loader using a different sand pile, one batch mixed a minute longer than the last, and by Friday the wall tells the story in bands of color and in joints that dust, crack, or stand out like stripes.

This chapter is about taking the mix out of guesswork. It is written from 50 years of hands-on field experience, not from a laboratory. When a building is historic, structural, or in question, hiring a qualified structural engineer or a mortar testing service is the right call. On daily work, though, the foreman needs a system the crew can repeat on a cold Monday and a hot Thursday and get the same mortar.

Start with the first rule: the new mortar must never be stronger than what it is joining, and it must never be stronger than the brick it touches. Brick and old mortar were made to move a little, breathe a little, and give a little. When a hard, dense modern mix is packed against soft or older brick, the wall stops giving at the joint and starts giving at the brick face. That is when faces spall, edges pop, and moisture gets trapped behind a joint that will not let it out. The joint is supposed to be the sacrificial part of the wall. It is cheaper and kinder to replace a joint in thirty years than to replace brick.

That rule drives recipe selection. For most residential and light commercial repointing on older work, a softer lime-rich mix is the safer starting point. Crews talk in shorthand — Type O and Type N are familiar names in the trade — but the name on a bag is not a recipe for every wall. What matters is the proportion of cement, lime, and sand, and how that proportion behaves with the brick on that specific building. A mix with more lime works easier, holds water better, bonds gently, and forgives small movement. A mix heavy on Portland cement sets faster and tests stronger, but it also shrinks more, shows color differently, and carries the risks described above. When in doubt on older brick, go softer, not harder. If the original mortar crumbles easily, powders between your fingers, or can be scratched out with a fingernail or a key, it is telling you it was a soft mix. Match that character. Do not upgrade it into something hard because hard feels like quality. On a repointing job, hard is often damage waiting for winter.

Write the recipe down and post it where the mixer man works. A recipe is not "one bag and some lime." A recipe is parts by volume, measured the same way every time: for example, a stated number of level shovels or, far better, a stated number of filled buckets of sand to a stated amount of cement and lime. Buckets beat shovels. A shovel load changes

with the man, the hour, and how tired he is. A five-gallon bucket filled level and struck off is a bucket in the morning and a bucket at four in the afternoon. Use the same buckets, mark them, and keep them with the mixer. If the crew changes mid-job, the recipe survives the change because it is written and measured, not remembered.

Sand is half the mortar and most of the color, yet crews control it least. Sand controls texture, workability, water demand, and final tone more than any pigment will. Two sands that both look "tan" from the truck can dry a full shade apart and rake differently under the jointer. Lock your sand source before the job starts. Visit the yard, look at the pile wet and dry, take a sample, and make a test batch with that exact sand. Once the job starts, do not change piles, yards, or suppliers mid-wall unless you have no choice. If you must change, stop at a natural break — a corner, a downspout line, a change in plane — and make a new trial batch before you point another foot.

Sand control also means grading and cleanliness. You want a well-graded sharp sand with a range of particle sizes, not a single-size beach sand and not a dirty fill full of clay and fines. Clay makes mortar sticky, weak, and prone to shrinkage cracks, and it smears color. Wash a handful in a jar of water on the first morning: if the water stays heavily clouded and a thick layer of silt settles on top, talk to the yard before that load goes in the mixer. Keep the stockpile clean on site, too. Set it on boards or a tarp, not on bare soil, cover it when rain threatens, and keep other materials out of it. A few shovels of soil or base material scooped up with the sand will change every batch that follows.

Water is the third silent variable. Add it by measure, not by hose feel. Keep a marked bucket for water as well, add most of it up front, mix, then trim to working consistency in small amounts. Mortar for repointing should be drier and stiffer than mortar for laying brick. It needs to stay where the gun or the hawk and tuck pointer put it, hold its shape in the joint, and pack tight without slumping or smearing the brick face. A mix that is pleasant to squeeze through a grout bag because it is soupy is too wet for good pointing. It will shrink, lighten in color, and stain. Teach the crew the squeeze test and the ball test, use them on every batch, and have the foreman — one person only — approve consistency before a batch leaves the mixer area.

That is where the Mortar Bucket method earns its keep on crews. Mortar Bucket, in the MortarMagic way of working, is the on-wall small-batch mixing method behind the color matching. Instead of relying only on one large mixer batch that sits, stiffens, gets retempered, and slowly drifts in color and consistency over an hour, the crew works with small,

controlled batches mixed close to where the pointing is happening — at the scaffold, at the wall section, in buckets whose proportions are pre-measured for that zone of the job.

The method works like this in practice. The main mixer still does the heavy base work and keeps a steady supply of the approved dry proportions or a carefully timed base batch, depending on how the foreman sets the job. But the final color-critical batches are finished and adjusted in small bucket lots, each one made to the written recipe, each one checked against the dried trial patch for that wall, and each one used promptly while it is in its best working window. A small batch that is slightly off can be caught, corrected, or discarded without losing a yard of mortar or pointing half an elevation wrong. A large batch that is off tempts everyone to use it anyway because it is already made. That temptation has ruined more walls than bad weather ever did.

Small batches also solve the retempering problem. Mortar has a working life. Once it begins to stiffen, adding water and remixing — retempering — restores apparent workability but weakens the final result and lightens color if it is done late or repeatedly. Crew rules should be plain: use a batch within its window, discard what has gone off, and never retemper to stretch a batch across a lunch break. With bucket-size batches, discarding hurts less, the rhythm stays honest, and the color stays even because no batch on the wall is three ages at once.

Hypothetical example: A crew is repointing the south elevation of a two-story brick home, working left to right in scaffold lifts. On Monday the first large batch is a touch dark because the sand pile was damp. On Tuesday the pile has dried in the sun and the same recipe now points a shade lighter. By Wednesday the wall shows a soft checker of lifts. With the Mortar Bucket method, the foreman catches the moisture shift at the first bucket on Tuesday, holds the sand measure steady, trims the water down by the written wet-sand adjustment noted on the batch card, and the lift matches. Nothing heroic happened. The system simply made the change visible while it was still small.

Batch cards make the system stick. Keep a card at the mixer: date, wall or zone, recipe in bucket measures, sand source, water notes, pigment amount if any — measured, never eyeballed — weather, and the initials of mixer and foreman. When a color question comes up weeks later, or the crew returns for phase two next spring, the card answers it. Without a card, phase two starts from memory, and memory is where color matches go to die.

A word on pigments: use them sparingly, measure them exactly, and never use pigment to rescue the wrong sand or

base recipe. Get the base close with cement, lime, and sand first. A small dose in a consistent base is controllable; a large dose chasing a bad base will fade and streak. Mix pigment into the dry materials before water, and record the dose per bucket batch.

Close with the habit that ties it together: one foreman owns the mix. Many hands can load and point, but one person approves the recipe, sand, water trim, and discard call. Post the recipe, measure with buckets, lock the sand, finish color-critical work in small Mortar Bucket batches, write it on the card, and throw away dead mortar without argument. Then the mix becomes repeatable.

Chapter 5: Color Control Across a Whole Wall — and a Whole Project

Color is what the customer sees first and what they remember last. A joint can be sound, well packed, and correctly tooled, and the homeowner will still stand in the yard and say it does not look right if the color jumps from panel to panel. They are not wrong to care. A brick wall is a large, flat picture. The eye reads differences across it instantly, especially in raking light, and once a band or patch is seen it cannot be unseen. Professional color control is therefore not about making one perfect sample. It is about making ten thousand joints, over days or weeks, in changing weather, with a changing crew rhythm, read as one continuous wall.

Begin where every honest color job begins: with trial patches, and with patience. Before production pointing starts, make several trial patches in an inconspicuous but representative area of the actual wall — not on a board in the shop, not on a loose brick on the tailgate. A board dries differently, a loose brick has no suction from the surrounding wall, and neither tells you how the joint will look shoulder to shoulder with the existing mortar that stays. Each trial should be at least a couple of feet in each direction, raked, pointed, tooled, and finished exactly as the production work will be finished, with the exact recipe, sand, and tooling timing you intend to use. Label each patch discreetly on your job notes and a photo map, not with marker on the customer's brick.

Then wait. This is the step that separates professionals from hopefuls: never judge color until the patch has fully cured and dried. Wet mortar lies. Mortar fresh from the jointer can look two or three shades darker than it will look dry, and mortar at three days can still be noticeably darker and richer than mortar at twenty-eight days. Lime-rich mixes are especially patient — they lighten considerably as they cure and carbonate. If you adjust the recipe on day one because the patch looks dark, you will almost certainly overcorrect and

point the whole wall too light. Give trial patches a minimum of seven days before a serious judgment and, when the schedule allows, a full cure approaching twenty-eight days before the final call on a color-critical building. If the customer must choose sooner, show them patches at different ages, explain in plain words that the youngest will lighten further, and get the chosen recipe in writing with that understanding noted. A rushed color approval is a future dispute with a date on it.

Photograph the patches properly. Take the same shot, from the same distance, at the same time of day, in dry conditions, with no flash. Stand back far enough to include surrounding original joints — color is always relative. A patch judged inches away with a hand shading it tells you almost nothing about how the wall will read from the street. Step back ten or fifteen feet. That is the customer's view, and it is the view that counts.

Light and weather will test your control for the entire project. The same wall looks warm and dark under a low evening sun, cool and light at noon under cloud, and blotchy for an hour after rain when some joints have dried and others have not. Teach customers — and younger crew members — to judge color only on a dry wall, in even daylight, ideally on an overcast day or in open shade where contrast is honest. Never make a recipe change at sunset because the wall looked red, and never panic after a shower because the new work looked black. Mark the date of any rain on the batch card, wait for a full dry-out, then look again.

On a whole project, think in zones. A large building is not one wall. The north elevation lives in shade and stays damp longer. The south elevation bakes and dries fast. Brick from different original firings may change subtly around a corner, and the original mortar often changed with it when the building went up a century ago. A single recipe forced blindly around all four sides can match the front and miss the back. Zone blending is the professional answer: divide the project into zones at natural breaks — corners, quoins, string courses, expansion lines, changes in brick, downspouts, and additions — and give each zone its own trial patch and, if needed, its own slight recipe adjustment. Within a zone, the recipe does not change. Between zones, a small, deliberate step at a corner is nearly invisible, because the eye expects a change in light at a corner anyway. A change in the middle of a flat wall, by contrast, shows as a hard vertical line that no explanation will soften.

Composite example: On a long garden wall and house front sharing one elevation, the crew matched the house perfectly with the approved recipe. Halfway along the garden wall the tone began to drift light — not because the mixing changed, but because that stretch of wall had been rebuilt decades

earlier with a paler sand. Rather than chase the drift foot by foot, the foreman finished to the pier that divided the wall, made a new trial patch beyond the pier with a slightly deeper sand blend, let it cure, and restarted from the pier with the adjusted recipe. From the street the pier reads as a natural division and the step is invisible. Had the change been made mid-panel, there would be a visible line there today.

Transitions inside a zone still need care when work stops and starts. End each day at a natural stopping point when you can — the end of a lift, a corner, a joint line that will hide a day joint — and tool the last work to the same finish and at the same stage of set as the work before it. Tooling timing is a color variable in its own right. A joint tooled early, while wet, will be smoother, darker, and more closed. The same mortar tooled late, when stiff, will be lighter, rougher, and more open in texture. If one man tools at twenty minutes and the next man tools the adjoining panel at an hour, the color and shadow line will differ even though the recipe never changed. Set a house standard: tool when the mortar is thumbprint hard — firm enough to hold the profile, soft enough to close cleanly — and have the foreman check timing across the crew until it becomes habit.

Keep every other variable locked while color is in play. Changing sand source mid-zone, switching cement brands, using water from a different source with different mineral content, or cleaning the wall with a strong wash in one area and only water in another will all move color after the pointing itself is done. Plan cleaning as part of color control, not as an afterthought. Test the cleaning method on the trial area after cure, use the mildest method that works, keep its strength and dwell time the same across the project, and never spot-clean aggressively in one patch, because a cleaned patch beside an uncleaned wall will be judged as a mortar mismatch when it is actually a cleanliness mismatch. Ballpark costs for extra trial work and a second cleaning test are modest compared with repointing an elevation twice — as a general range, crews often find testing adds a few hundred dollars on a residential job, and prices vary widely by market and access — but the dispute it prevents can cost many times that.

Sun, heat, wind, and cold also move color during curing, not just during mixing. Mortar that dries too fast on a hot, windy afternoon can cure lighter, dustier, and weaker at the surface than mortar on the shaded side that dried slowly. Mortar soaked by rain in its first hours can streak and darken. Professional crews protect fresh work as a color measure as much as a strength measure: shade or screen where practical, mist or cover in hot drying weather according to the mix, hang protection before a forecast storm, and do not point at all when a freeze is expected before the mortar has gained

strength. If conditions force a stop, record it. When a customer later asks why one shaded panel cured a touch deeper than the sunny panel, a crew that understands curing can explain it calmly — and, more importantly, a crew that protected both panels will rarely need to.

Finally, set expectations like a professional from the first conversation. New mortar, even a very good match, will rarely be invisible on day one next to mortar that has collected a hundred years of weather, soot, and life. A good match reads as harmonious at a normal viewing distance after full cure, and it continues to settle visually as the new joints weather in over the first seasons. Say that plainly before work starts, show cured trial patches rather than fresh ones, and put the chosen recipe and patch location in the job file. Customers accept an honest, well-explained near-match that improves with time. What they do not accept — and should not — is a surprise.

Color control, in the end, is discipline repeated: trial on the real wall, judge only after cure, judge dry and at distance in even light, hold the recipe inside each zone, step changes only at natural breaks, tool at the same timing, clean the same way, protect the cure, and write everything down. Do that across a whole project and the wall reads as one wall again. That is the standard.

Chapter 6: Joint Preparation at Production Speed Without Scarring Brick

Good pointing is mostly preparation. By the time mortar goes in, the job has already been won or lost in the raking — how deep the old joint was taken out, how square and clean the joint was left, and how much damage was done to the brick getting there. Poor preparation cannot be rescued by a good mix. Mortar packed into a shallow, dusty, rounded joint will look acceptable for a season, then shell out in sheets. And preparation done carelessly at speed can scar more brick in a day than weather damaged in fifty years. The professional standard is both things at once: production speed, and brick that looks untouched when the dust settles.

Start with depth. The working rule every repointing mason should know is to rake out to a depth of at least two to two and a half times the width of the joint, with a practical minimum of about three-quarters of an inch on typical work, and always back to sound mortar. Each part of that rule matters. The ratio gives the new mortar enough depth to bond, pack, and resist being pushed out by movement and weather. The minimum protects narrow joints, where two

times the width alone would leave too shallow a pocket. And "back to sound mortar" overrides both numbers: if the mortar at three-quarters of an inch is still soft, cracked, or hollow, keep going until what remains is firm and will hold. Pointing over unsound material is decorating a failure. Equally, do not chase depth for its own sake into solid, sound historic mortar that is performing well — judgment lives here. Test as you go with a pick and by sound: unsound mortar feels soft and rakes easily, sound mortar resists and rings differently. When you reach it, you can feel the change through the tool.

Before production starts, prove the method on a test area, just as you do for color. Rake a few feet with the intended tools, inspect the brick edges under good light, and have the foreman approve the result. That test sets the pace honestly, because the right speed on a wall of hard brick with wide joints is reckless speed on a wall of soft brick with thin joints. Soft, handmade, or older brick, thin joints under about three-eighths of an inch, glazed or delicate faces, and any wall already showing edge damage all push the job toward hand work and slower going. Price and schedule should reflect that from the estimate, not be discovered as an argument on the second day. As a general ballpark, careful hand raking costs more in labor per foot than open power work on suitable walls, and prices vary by region, height, and access — saying so early protects both the crew and the customer.

Hand tools remain the safest hands a joint can be in. A plugging chisel or joint chisel of the correct width, a club hammer under control, and a mason's patience will clear a joint without touching a brick edge. Choose a chisel slightly narrower than the joint so it works in the mortar, not against the brick. Work the center of the joint first, angle cuts toward the middle, and let the mortar break out in pieces rather than prying against one side. Never lever a chisel against a brick arris — the sharp edge of the brick — to pop mortar free. That is exactly how corners chip. Keep chisels dressed and sharp; a dull, mushroomed tool wanders, needs heavier blows, and does more damage per foot than a sharp one. For very hard mortar in soft brick, a sequence of light, controlled blows beats a few heavy ones every time.

Power tools have a legitimate place on production work, but only with the right tool, the right blade, and the right operator. Where power raking is appropriate, the common method is a small angle grinder fitted with a diamond mortar-raking blade matched to the joint width — never wider than the joint itself. The technique that protects brick is the center-cut method: make one careful pass down the center of the joint to the required depth, keeping the blade in the mortar and off both brick edges, then a second pass if the joint width requires it, and finish by hand with a chisel, breaking the remaining mortar shoulders out toward the

center cut. The blade never does the finishing. The hand tool does. That last step is what keeps a power-assisted job from looking machined and scarred.

The risks of power work deserve plain words. A grinder that touches a brick edge cuts a scar in a fraction of a second, and scars cannot be uncut. Blade wander on an uneven wall, a tool that kicks at a hard inclusion, or an operator working tired, rushed, or off-balance on a scaffold will mark faces and shave edges in a repeating pattern the eye can spot from the ground. For that reason, power raking belongs only to experienced operators, never to the newest man because the work is "just grinding," and never on joints too thin for the blade to run with clearance on both sides. Set guards and depth control where the tool allows it, keep both hands on the tool, work in good light, stop often to inspect, and keep the test-area standard in sight. If the wall, the brick, or the operator is not right for power on that day, go to hand tools. Losing an hour is cheap. Replacing a scarred elevation is not — and in many cases it cannot truly be done at all.

Protecting brick goes beyond tool choice. Before raking, look at the wall as a whole. Note soft or spalled units, loose brick, previous hard repairs, and areas where a structural concern — stepped cracking, bowing, displacement, lintel failure — suggests the wall needs more than repointing. Repointing is joint maintenance, not a cure for movement. If you see active structural movement, stop and recommend the owner hire a qualified structural engineer to assess it before cosmetic work covers the evidence.

During raking, protect what surrounds the joint as well. Work where you can see the joint, not by feel from above or below. Keep drop sheets where debris could damage sills, roofs below, plantings, or paving. Near window and door frames, sills, and decorative work, slow down, shield as needed, and finish those feet entirely by hand. Most scarring complaints are about the careless foot beside a frame everybody looks at daily.

Dust control is part of preparation, not housekeeping added later, and it is a health matter as much as a courtesy. Dry cutting and raking of mortar creates fine dust that can contain silica, which is harmful to breathe over time. Professional crews plan for it before the first joint is opened. The basics are straightforward: use vacuum extraction attached to the tool where the system allows it, or use water suppression where the wall, the weather, and the method permit it and the runoff can be managed; wear properly fitted respiratory protection rated for the work, along with eye and hearing protection; position the crew so nobody works for hours directly downwind of dry cutting; and contain and clean dust with vacuum or wet methods rather than dry sweeping,

which simply puts it back in the air. Keep neighbors and the customer's household in mind as well — close windows near the work, warn the household before dusty operations, cover intake vents and vehicles nearby, and clean the site daily. Local rules and job requirements vary, so check what applies on your job and follow it. A crew that controls dust looks professional, works healthier, and gets invited back to the street. A crew that coats the block in grey dust does not, however good the pointing is.

Once a section is raked, finish the preparation properly before anyone reaches for mortar. Brush and blow or vacuum the joint clean, removing dust and loose crumbs that would break the bond. Check depth across the section with a simple gauge or a marked stick, not by eye alone, and re-rake the shallow spots now — after pointing starts is too late. Look along the joint in raking light for hidden scars or chipped edges and note them honestly; damage found early and discussed is a conversation, damage discovered by the customer later is a dispute. Just before pointing, dampen the joint as the mix and weather require — the brick and old mortar should not be so thirsty that they steal water from the new mortar on contact, nor so wet that the mortar slides and stains. Damp, not dripping, is the usual target, adjusted for hot, dry, absorbent conditions versus cool, shaded ones.

Hypothetical example: Two crews rake the same long elevation, one from each end. The first crew's foreman ran a test area, set depth checks every few feet, and kept power work to center cuts with hand finishing. The second crew, pressed for time, let the grinder do the whole joint and skipped depth checks. They met in the middle at nearly the same hour. The difference was visible from the pavement: one half had clean, square joints and crisp brick edges ready to point; the other half had wavy, widened joints, nicked edges, and shallow pockets that needed hours of hand correction before mortar could go in. The second crew was not faster. They had only moved their work from preparation into repair — and some of it could not be repaired.

Production speed does not come from swinging harder or grinding longer. It comes from a tested method, the right tool in trained hands, work staged in sections, constant inspection, and no rework. Set the test area, rake to ratio depth and sound mortar, cut the center and finish by hand, protect edges, control the dust, clean and check every section before pointing, and keep the pace the wall allows. A wall prepared that way holds mortar for decades and leaves the brick unscarred by the crew that came to save it.

Chapter 7: Tooling, Finish, and

the Final Ten Feet

Homeowners rarely watch the grinding, check the depth of a joint, or know whether mortar was packed tight or pushed in loose. What they see, every day for years, is the finish. The profile of the joint, the cleanliness of the brick face, and the way new work blends with old decide whether a job looks professional or patched. Tooling is where craft, durability, and appearance meet in a single pass.

Tooling is not decoration. A properly tooled joint is compressed, sealed, and shaped to shed water. When the jointer passes at the right moment, it presses the surface closed, pushes mortar tight against the upper and lower edges of the brick, and closes small voids that would otherwise collect water. A joint left rough, torn, or smeared may start with good mortar and good preparation and still fail early because the finish was rushed.

Know the Profiles Before You Start

Settle the profile before the first batch is mixed, not when the first wall is ready to strike. On most work you are matching what is already there. Study the original joint in good light, in several places, because weather and past repairs may have changed it from one elevation to another.

A concave joint is the workhorse for exterior work in Texas. Formed with a jointer slightly wider than the joint, it curves inward in a smooth half-round. It sheds water well, compresses the surface, and hides minor color variation better than most profiles. If a customer asks what will last longest on an exposed wall, concave is the honest answer in most cases.

A flush joint sits even with the brick face. It can be right for historic work or for matching an existing flush elevation, but struck too early it smears, and struck too late it tears and leaves a rough edge that holds dirt and water. It also shows every wobble, so assign it only to a steady hand. A weather-struck joint angles downward to throw water off the wall; done poorly, its top edge feathers thin and breaks down. A raked joint — mortar pulled back to a consistent depth and left flat — creates strong shadow lines some owners love. Be plain about the tradeoff: a deep rake exposes more brick edge and holds more water than concave, so it is a poor choice for a wall with water damage or soft brick.

Consistency is the standard. Pick the tool size for the joint, keep that tool in the same mason's hand all day, and check the profile every few feet. A wall tooled by three people with three different jointers reads like three different jobs, even from the same batch.

Striking Timing Is Everything

Reading the mortar is the skill that separates a clean crew from a frustrated one. Fresh mortar passes through a short window when it can be tooled cleanly. Before it, the mortar is too wet. After it, too stiff. Hitting that window wall after wall is a habit built by touch, not by the clock.

Use the thumbprint test. Press your thumb lightly into the joint. If mortar sticks heavily and the print fills with paste, it is too early: tooling now pulls mortar onto the brick face, lightens color, and leaves a smeared skin that is hard to clean. If your thumb leaves a clear print, the mortar holds its shape, and little sticks to your skin, you are in the window. If you must push hard to make a mark and the surface crumbles or tears, you are late. Late tooling does not compress a joint. It rips it.

That window moves. On a shaded north wall on a calm morning you may have an hour or more. On a west wall in direct sun with warm wind you may have twenty minutes. Work in sections sized to the conditions, not to ambition. Lay out only as much as the crew can fill, tool, and brush before the mortar passes its window. Smaller sections finished right beat a long run finished late.

Tool in a steady sequence — horizontals first, then verticals, keeping long lines unbroken. Run the jointer with firm, even pressure in one long stroke where you can, not short, choppy passes that leave stops and starts. Keep a consistent angle, and do not dig out intersections you just finished. If a joint needs added mortar for a low spot, add it before final tooling, pack it tight, then strike the whole section together so the fill disappears. Remember color: mortar struck at very different stages dries to different shades from the same mix, so uniform sections protect the match the customer cares about most.

Cleanup Without Creating a New Problem

Cleanup starts during the job. Keep mortar off the brick face as you fill: hold the hawk close, load the tuck pointer cleanly, and cut excess away rather than wiping it across the face. A wet wipe on a fresh smear usually spreads a thin film that dries to haze. In most cases let a light smear dry, then remove it by dry brushing once the joint has set enough not to be damaged.

After tooling, when the surface has firmed but not hardened, brush lightly at an angle across the joints to remove crumbs and clean the edges. Hold the brush flat enough that you do not rake out the joint you just compressed. Sweep debris as you go; crumbs ground under boots across a porch or stone

entry leave marks and make extra work.

Be cautious about washing. Never let a helper decide on the spot to use a strong cleaner or a pressure washer to look tidy faster. Some brick, stone, and older mortar can be damaged permanently by the wrong cleaner, the wrong strength, or water driven hard into the wall. Test any method in a small, less visible area, follow product directions exactly, protect glass, metal, painted surfaces, and plantings, and stop if the test area changes in a way the owner has not approved. On many jobs patient dry brushing and a gentle rinse, where appropriate for that masonry, are enough. If a stain resists gentle methods, tell the owner plainly and agree on the next step before escalating. While you clean, also protect thresholds, keep wash water out of weep holes and vents, and clear sills so water drains as designed. A beautiful joint above a blocked weep hole is not a finished job.

The Final Ten Feet

The last ten feet of a long wall, the last hour of a hot day, the last section before the truck is loaded — that is where quality slips. Hands are tired, the board is being scraped for the last of the batch, and the temptation is to fill shallower, tool faster, and brush less. Name that moment and build a rule against it: the final ten feet get the same depth, packing, tooling pressure, and cleanup as the first ten feet.

Rotate when you can. Put a fresher mason on the last section, or have the foreman tool it personally. Check the last batch as carefully as the first, and do not place bad mortar just to finish. Mixing one more small, correct batch costs a few dollars in general terms — material prices vary by market and supplier — and far less than fixing a section that dried a different color.

Hypothetical example: a crew finishes a front elevation with a tired, over-watered final batch to avoid mixing fresh material. That evening it looks fine. A week later that section dries noticeably lighter than the rest of the front of the house, where every visitor sees it first. The callback takes half a day. The lesson is not carelessness. It is that no system protected the final section.

The Close-Out Walk

Do not call a job done from the scaffold or the tailgate. Walk it — slowly, deliberately, ideally in different light than you worked in, because low sun reveals smears and uneven tooling that midday light hides.

Walk in order. First, step back to street distance and look for color bands and sections that read differently. Second, walk

close and check joints at, above, and below eye level for voids, tears, cracks, and low spots. Third, check intersections, corners, and transitions to original mortar, where mismatches show first. Fourth, check everything that is not mortar: brick faces, sills, windows, doors, fixtures, walks, and plantings. Fifth, check the ground, and the neighbor's side of any shared line, for debris.

Fix genuine defects properly. Do not smear fresh mortar over a hardened joint to hide a pinhole; that patch will stand out and fail. If a defect needs a correct cut-out and refill, note it, tell the owner the plan, and schedule it rather than disguising it. Take photos of each finished elevation from the same positions as your starting photos, so the match and the condition of surrounding surfaces are clear at handover.

Finally, walk it with the owner when they are available. Show the joint profile up close, show a transition to original work, and explain what to expect as mortar cures and color settles over the coming days. Tell them what not to do — no hard washing, no sealing, no drilling into fresh joints until you give a clear timeframe. Leave the site cleaner than you found it, gates closed, materials accounted for, no surprises in the yard.

The finish is the signature. A crew that tools at the right moment, cleans without harm, protects the final ten feet, and walks its own work before asking to be paid will be remembered — and called again — for the right reasons.

Chapter 8: Texas Weather — Heat, Wind, Cold Snaps, and Curing Discipline for Repointing Crews

Texas does not give a repointing crew one kind of weather. It gives you all of them, sometimes in the same week: a mild Monday, a hard north wind on Wednesday, a temperature drop on Thursday night, and full summer heat by the following Tuesday. Mortar does not care what the schedule says. It reacts to temperature, sun, wind, and humidity in real time, and a crew that ignores those reactions will produce joints that crack, powder, bleach out, or never gain proper strength. Curing discipline is not extra work for careful people. In Texas, it is the work.

This chapter is built on 50 years of hands-on field experience in this climate. It is practical guidance for planning and daily decisions, not a substitute for the mortar manufacturer's instructions, project specifications, or, where a job involves

structural concerns, the direction of a licensed structural engineer the owner hires for that purpose. When written instructions and field habit conflict, follow the written instructions and ask before you place mortar, not after.

Heat Changes Everything

Heat speeds the set, steals moisture, and shortens every window you depend on. Mortar on a hot, dry wall can lose water into the brick and the air so fast that it never cures properly. The surface may look hard while the body of the joint stays weak. Joints placed in extreme heat and left unprotected can dry pale, develop fine cracks, and dust off under a fingertip months later.

Plan the day around the sun. Start earlier in summer, and work elevations in an order that keeps you in shade as much as the site allows — often east and north sides in the morning, shaded areas for the worst of the afternoon, adjusted for the actual house and tree cover. Where shade is not available, create it when practical with canopies or shade cloth that does not rest against the wall or trap hot air against fresh work.

Manage materials too. Store bags off hot concrete and out of direct sun. Keep mixing water reasonably cool — not iced, just not drawn from a hose that has sat in the sun for an hour; run the hose until the temperature steadies. Mix smaller batches more often. A large batch that sits while the crew races to use it will stiffen, tempt someone to add water late, and produce uneven color and strength.

Do not retemper mortar endlessly to keep it alive. Mortar has a workable life. A small, timely adjustment within the manufacturer's limits is different from repeatedly watering a dying batch all afternoon. When a batch has passed its life, discard it. As a general ballpark, a wasted partial batch costs far less than a one-day callback, though material and labor prices vary widely by place and time.

Prepare the wall correctly in heat. Hot, dry masonry pulls water from fresh mortar on contact, so dampening the joint before placement matters even more: the joint should be damp, with no standing water, so new mortar can cure rather than have its water stolen. Check as you go. A wall correctly damp at eight may be bone dry again by ten.

Wind Is a Drying Machine

Wind is the factor crews underestimate most. A steady wind can dry a fresh wall as fast as direct sun, and a gusty day can take a section past its tooling window while the crew is still filling a few feet away. Wind also carries dust onto fresh joints

and makes consistent dampening harder.

On windy days, shorten your sections. Fill less, tool sooner, and use the thumbprint test more often than habit suggests. Put up a windbreak where you can do so safely — a secured screen on the windward side of a scaffold, for example — and reassess if gusts move materials, dry the surface instantly, or make access unsafe. Do not fight severe wind to keep a schedule. A section torn by late tooling or weakened by rapid drying costs more time than a short pause. Cover neighboring surfaces, vehicles, and plantings more carefully, too, because debris and dust travel.

Cold Snaps and Shoulder Seasons

Texas cold is deceptive. A clear afternoon in the fifties can be followed by a night below freezing, and fresh mortar caught by that drop can be damaged before it has gained enough strength to resist it. A joint that froze early may look acceptable in spring and still scale, crack, or soften sooner than it should.

Know the forecast for the night, not just the working day. If freezing or near-freezing temperatures are expected within the early curing period, plan protection before you place mortar, or postpone placement. Follow the manufacturer's cold-weather instructions for minimum temperatures, heating of materials, and protection periods. Those written limits govern the call.

When cold-weather work proceeds within those limits, the basics hold: do not place mortar on frozen surfaces or into frozen joints, do not use frozen materials, keep wall and materials within the recommended range, and protect finished work with insulating blankets or other approved coverings for the full required period. Never use methods or additives the manufacturer has not approved. A shortcut to make mortar set faster in the cold can change its color, strength, and compatibility with the brick.

Give the foreman clear authority to make the no-go call. Composite example: a crew is halfway through a two-day job when an overnight freeze is forecast a day early. The foreman stops new placement after lunch, tools and protects everything already placed, secures the site, and tells the owner plainly why the last wall will wait two days. The owner is briefly disappointed, then grateful, because the finished work holds. The alternative — a full afternoon of mortar that freezes that night — risks redoing the whole section. A short delay explained well protects the wall and the relationship.

Curing Discipline, Day After Day

Curing is the slow process by which mortar gains strength and durability. It needs moisture and time. Most curing failures are not dramatic. They are quiet: a wall left to bake the afternoon it was placed, a section never misted on a dry weekend, a covering removed early because another job needed it.

Build curing into the daily plan and name the person responsible. After mortar has taken its initial set and can be misted without damage, light, controlled moisture — a fine mist, not a hard stream — helps keep the joint from drying too fast in hot or windy conditions. Timing and frequency depend on the product, the weather, and the manufacturer's instructions, so write the plan for each job instead of relying on a universal number of mistings a day. What is universal is ownership: someone checks the wall, someone records what was done, and fresh work is not left unvisited over a long, hot weekend without a plan.

Coverings can help where conditions demand them. Damp coverings or protective sheeting, used as directed, can slow moisture loss and shield fresh joints from driving rain, harsh sun, or a sudden drop. Secure them so wind does not flap them against the wall, and leave ventilation where the instructions require it. A covering thrown loosely over a wall and forgotten can do harm as easily as good.

Protect fresh work from other trades and from your own later work. Do not load a scaffold against a fresh elevation, wash a neighboring section in a way that floods fresh joints, or let sprinklers soak one part of a wall while another bakes. Tell the owner, in writing and in plain language with dates, what sprinklers and hoses should and should not do in the first days. Owners follow written instructions far more reliably than a shouted reminder from a ladder.

Record warning signs: fine map cracking, unusually pale color, a soft or powdery surface, or joints that crumble at the edge deserve a close look, photos, and an honest note in the job file. Do not hide a curing problem behind a surface patch. If a section has failed to cure, the professional repair is to remove it to sound material and redo it correctly — a hard conversation today, and a much harder one a year later when the customer finds it first.

Crew Health and the Daily Weather Call

Weather discipline includes the crew. Heat illness can come on fast, and a mason focused on a tooling window is the last person to notice his own warning signs. Schedule water, rest, and shade as part of the job. Keep cool water on site, encourage steady drinking, build in shaded rest — especially in the first hot days of the season, before anyone is acclimated

— and assign a buddy check for confusion, nausea, dizziness, or a sudden drop in pace. Anyone can call a pause without argument. Follow current guidance from safety professionals and official sources on heat illness prevention and response, and get medical help promptly when symptoms suggest a serious condition. No tooling window is worth an emergency room.

Make weather a formal call every morning. The foreman checks temperature, wind, rain, and overnight lows, walks the elevations to feel sun and shade, and decides: which wall first, how large the sections will be, how many batches, what protection goes up, and what curing visits are scheduled. Write that call on the job sheet. When conditions change at midday — in Texas they will — make the call again.

Customers respect this when they can see it. A short, plain morning update — we are starting on the shaded side because of the heat, we will mist the new joints this evening, we are holding the last wall until the freeze passes — builds more trust than any promise that weather does not matter. It does matter. Crews that last in Texas plan for it, cure through it, and never pretend a wall cannot tell the difference.

Chapter 9: Clean, Safe, and Welcome on the Street

A repointing crew works in public, whether it admits it or not. Your dust reaches the neighbor's porch. Your trucks set the parking pattern for the street. Your ladders, cords, and piles shape how safely a child, a mail carrier, or an owner carrying groceries can move around the house. Homeowners hire you for the wall, but they remember you for everything around the wall — and so do the neighbors who may hire you next. Being clean, safe, and welcome is not public relations added to the real work. It is part of the trade, planned, assigned, and checked like any other part.

Nothing in this chapter is a legal claim, a guarantee, or a substitute for professional safety direction. Rules and best practices change. Before any job, review current guidance from the Occupational Safety and Health Administration — OSHA — on the hazards your work involves, follow the instructions for every tool and product you use, and consult qualified safety professionals for your company's safety program, training, and equipment decisions. Where this chapter describes general good practice, treat it as a starting point for that review, not the final word.

Dust and Silica Awareness

Cutting, grinding, mixing, and sweeping masonry materials

can create dust that should be taken seriously. Some of that dust, including respirable crystalline silica that can be present when working with mortar, concrete, brick, and stone, is a recognized workplace health hazard when inhaled over time. Every person on a crew should understand that plainly, without panic and without shrugging it off. The goal is simple: create as little airborne dust as you reasonably can, capture or suppress what you do create, keep it away from everyone's lungs — the crew's, the owner's, and the neighbors' — and clean up in ways that do not put the same dust back into the air.

Start with methods that reduce dust at the source. Wet methods are among the most widely used general practices: applying water at the point of cutting or grinding, in a controlled spray that suppresses dust without flooding the work or creating a slipping or electrical hazard. Keep the water delivery working, check nozzles and hoses at the start of the day, and stop if suppression fails rather than grinding dry to keep moving. Where wet methods are not suitable, ventilation and dust collection — such as tool-mounted vacuum systems with appropriate filtration, used and maintained as the makers direct — are other general approaches covered in current OSHA guidance. Match the method to the task using that guidance and your safety professional's direction. Do not improvise a system you have not been trained to use.

Housekeeping is dust control. Avoid dry-sweeping large amounts of masonry debris in ways that put dust into air people are breathing. Use wet cleaning or vacuum methods appropriate for the material, as directed by current guidance. Bag debris, keep mixing areas tidy, place the mixer where dust and slurry do the least harm and are easiest to contain, and do not let dry material build up on walks and drives where feet and tires grind it airborne all day.

Respiratory protection, protective clothing, hygiene, and training are formal parts of a safety program, not personal choices left to each worker each morning. Whether respirators are required for a task, what type fits it, and what fit testing, medical evaluation, cleaning, and training go with them are questions to answer from current OSHA guidance and with qualified safety professionals before work begins. The same applies to exposure assessment and to how long any person spends on the highest-dust tasks. The foreman's job is to ensure the program that was set up is the program actually followed — equipment on site, in working order, and in use — and to stop and ask for direction when a task does not match the plan.

Look beyond the crew. Keep owners, children, and pets out of the work area during grinding or cutting. Close or protect

nearby windows, doors, and fresh-air intakes, and warn the household before a high-dust task starts. If wind carries dust beyond your control toward neighbors, pause and reset your controls.

Access and Scaffolding Care

Most serious injuries in masonry work involve falls, falling objects, and unstable access, and most trace back to a rushed setup, a defect nobody reported, or a shortcut that became a habit. Treat access with the same respect as the wall. Use only ladders, scaffolds, lifts, and other equipment you and your crew are trained and authorized to use. Set it up and inspect it as the manufacturer and current safety guidance direct, and involve a qualified or competent person where guidance or your company program requires one for erection, inspection, or use decisions.

Inspect before you climb, every day, and again after any move, alteration, or weather event that could have changed the setup. Look for damaged or missing components, loose connections, unstable footing, missing guardrails or planks where they belong, and mud or debris that makes a platform slippery. Remove from service any equipment that fails inspection until it is properly repaired or replaced, and mark it so no one grabs it by mistake. Never let a schedule talk you into working from equipment you have just decided is questionable.

Mind the ground. Set access equipment on firm, level footing, clear of door swings, driveways in use, and overhead power lines, and maintain the clearances current guidance requires around electrical hazards. Never move a scaffold with people or loose materials on it unless it is specifically intended and set up for that use under proper direction. Load platforms within their rated capacity, distribute weight evenly, and keep only the materials needed for the work in progress at height. A crowded platform is a slow platform and a dangerous one.

Protect people below. Where overhead work creates a risk of falling material, establish a controlled area and use toe boards, netting, canopies, or other measures as directed by your safety program. Never throw debris from height; lower it, carry it, or chute it by an approved method. Protective equipment belongs to the same formal approach: what is required, for whom, and when is set from current guidance and professional direction, kept on site, inspected, and actually worn. Treat ladders with discipline as well: right length and duty rating, correct angle and footing, three points of contact while climbing, and no standing where the manufacturer says not to stand. A ladder is access, not a platform for extended grinding; a task needing force, time, and two hands plus material needs a better setup.

Protecting the Home, the Landscaping, and the Neighbors

Before the first tool comes off the truck, walk the property with the owner, or note and photograph its condition on your own thorough walk. Identify plantings that matter most, newly mulched beds, irrigation heads, fragile stone, painted surfaces, and where children and pets move. Then protect them as if they were your own, because for the length of the job your reputation is growing in that yard.

Cover and move what you can. Shift potted plants out of the fall and dust zone with the owner's permission. Cover beds and shrubs near the work with breathable coverings that will not cook plants in Texas heat, and remove or vent them as conditions require rather than forgetting them over a weekend. Lay boards where foot traffic, wheelbarrows, or staging would tear turf or crack pavers. Keep mortar, slurry, and wash water out of beds, pools, drains, and water features; mortar stains stone and changes soil and water chemistry. A spill cleaned in five minutes is a small story. A spill found in a flower bed a week later is the story the owner tells about you.

Control the site through the day. Keep one tidy staging area instead of spreading bags, tools, and buckets across the yard. Coil hoses and cords so they do not cross walks as trip hazards. Close gates every time, without exception, whether or not you believe a pet is out. End each day with a sweep of walks, porch, and driveway, a check for nails, shards, and mortar lumps, and materials secured against overnight wind and curious visitors.

Talk to neighbors before they have a reason to complain. A short, friendly introduction on the first morning — who you are, how long the job will run, your working hours, and who to speak to with a problem — prevents most friction. Keep work within the hours the owner and any local requirements allow, watch radio volume, and never block a neighbor's driveway, mailbox, or trash pickup. If a neighbor raises a concern, listen fully, fix what you can on the spot, and tell the owner what happened. Do not argue at the curb.

Hypothetical example: a grinding crew starts at dawn with no introduction, blocks a shared drive, and leaves dust across the neighbor's porch. The brickwork is excellent. The owner still spends a week apologizing on the street, and no one on that block asks for the crew's name except to avoid them. The technical job passed. The street job failed — and the street job decides referrals.

Leaving Welcome

On the last day, remove every trace of your staging area, haul

out all debris rather than leaving a pile for the owner to arrange, clean hard surfaces where appropriate for the materials and drainage, replace anything you moved, and walk the yard as carefully as you walked the wall. Check the neighbor's side of shared fences and drives one last time. Thank the owner, thank any neighbor who was patient with the work, and leave a clear way to reach you.

A clean, safe, welcome crew is not slower in the long run. It has fewer injuries, fewer callbacks, fewer damaged plantings to replace, and fewer angry conversations at the curb — and more referrals for the right reasons. That is how a repointing company built on 50 years of hands-on field experience keeps earning the next street, one well-kept job at a time.

Chapter 10: Crew Systems — Roles, Training, Checklists, and the Daily Rhythm of a Repointing Crew

A good repointing job does not happen because one talented mason had a good day. It happens because a crew runs a system that produces the same clean result on Monday morning, on a hot Friday afternoon, and on the third house in a row. After 50 years of hands-on field experience, the lesson that holds up is simple: talent matters, but systems are what make talent repeatable and profitable.

This chapter is about building those systems. Not paperwork for its own sake, and not a corporate manual no one reads. These are field systems — who does what, how a new hand learns without ruining a wall, what gets checked before anyone leaves, and how the day flows so grinding, mixing, pointing, and cleanup do not trip over each other.

Define the Roles Clearly

On a typical residential repointing crew of three to five, four roles cover almost everything.

The lead mason owns the job. He or she walks the wall first, confirms the scope, decides joint depth and mortar approach, sets the color standard for the day, and makes the final quality call. The lead is also the main point of contact with the homeowner. When two people are both answering the customer, confusion follows. One voice, one lead.

The grinder operator handles removal. This is skilled work, not entry-level work, even though it is often treated that way. A careless grinder scars brick faces, widens joints, and

creates dust problems that poison the whole job. The operator controls depth, keeps the blade in the center of the joint, and stops when the sound or resistance changes — a sign that something behind the mortar is different than expected.

The mixer and tender keeps material flowing. This person batches mortar to the lead's standard, watches consistency as temperature changes through the day, keeps water, sand, and pigment organized, and stages tools so masons are not waiting. A good tender saves more time than any single tool purchase. A poor tender starves the wall or floods it with mortar that is too wet to hold a finish.

The pointer or pointers do the placement and finishing. On smaller crews the lead also points. On larger crews, pointers work a defined section at a time, tool joints in a consistent sequence, and brush and clean as they complete each section rather than leaving all cleanup to the end.

On a two-person crew, the same roles still exist — they are just combined. One person leads and points, the other grinds ahead and tends. What matters is not head count. What matters is that every role is assigned by name at the start of the day. If grinding, mixing, and customer communication are all assumed rather than assigned, they will all be done halfway.

Training Without Risking the Wall

You cannot train a new hand by turning him loose on a customer's front elevation. You also cannot train him only in a shop and expect him to be ready for real joints, real dust, and real time pressure.

Use a three-stage path.

Stage one is observation with a job. The trainee carries, mixes under direction, watches grinding from a safe position, and learns to read a joint: How deep is it? Is the backing mortar sound or crumbling? Where is the water getting in? At this stage, the trainee learns language and sequence. He should be able to explain the job order — grind, clean out, rinse or blow out dust, dampen as needed, pack, tool, brush, final clean — before he ever holds a grinder on a wall.

Stage two is supervised work in low-visibility areas. A side wall, a back corner, or a test panel the homeowner has approved is the right classroom. The lead checks depth every few feet at first, corrects hand position early, and stops work the moment a pattern of brick damage appears. Short, corrected practice beats a full day of uncorrected practice that builds bad habits.

Stage three is measured independence. The trainee gets a defined section, a defined standard — this depth, this finish, this color sample to match — and a check-in interval. Fifteen minutes at first, then thirty, then by section. Independence is earned section by section, not granted because the crew is busy that day.

Hypothetical example: A new hand is fast with a grinder and wants to move ahead of the pointers by an entire elevation. The lead instead limits him to one section ahead. That limit protects quality twice — the open joints do not sit exposed overnight, and the lead can check the grinding before a whole wall is cut too deep. Speed is rewarded later, after accuracy holds for several jobs.

Document training the same way you document work. A simple sheet per person — date, skill practiced, who checked it, result — prevents arguments and helps you price work honestly. If only one person on the crew can match color reliably, your schedule must reflect that fact until a second person is trained.

The Daily Rhythm

A repointing day has a natural rhythm when it is planned, and a grinding, stop-and-start feel when it is not.

Start with a ten-minute huddle at the truck or scaffold. Scope for the day in plain words: which elevation, how far you intend to get, who is in which role, any hazards, any homeowner requests. Check weather. Rising heat changes mortar behavior by midday. Approaching rain changes what you should open up. Never grind out more joints than you can point and protect if weather turns.

Grinding runs ahead, but not too far ahead. In most residential work, staying half a section to one section ahead of the pointers is a good balance. Grinding the whole building on day one feels productive, but it leaves open joints exposed to rain, leaves the customer looking at a torn-up house, and removes your ability to adjust if the first pointed section reveals a color or depth issue.

Mix in smaller, consistent batches rather than one large batch you fight all morning. Mortar that sits too long gets re-tempered too often, loses quality, and changes color as it goes on the wall. The tender calls out batch times, watches the clock in hot weather, and discards material that is past its working life — even when that feels wasteful. Putting tired mortar on a wall is more wasteful. You will be back to fix it, for free.

Pointing and finishing follow a fixed sequence in each section:

pack in lifts where depth requires it, let it firm to the right point, tool in the same order every time, brush at the same stage of set. Inconsistent tooling time is one of the most common causes of color variation across a wall. The lead checks the first finished section of the day under natural light and sets that as the day's standard. Everyone matches to that section, not to their memory of yesterday.

Cleanup is not an end-of-day event. It is continuous. Dust control, drop cloths, protection for windows, doors, landscaping, and air conditioning units are set before grinding starts and maintained as you move. A crew that cleans as it goes leaves at a reasonable hour. A crew that saves all cleanup for the end leaves late, rushes, and misses things the homeowner will find that evening.

End the day with a fifteen-minute closeout: walk the day's work with fresh eyes, photograph it, note how much was completed, note what material is needed tomorrow, secure open joints if any remain, and leave the site safe and tidy. That walk is where you catch a missed joint, a mortar smear, or an unprotected area while fixing it still costs minutes instead of a return trip.

Checklists That Actually Get Used

A checklist only works if it is short, visible, and tied to a moment in the day. Keep three.

The arrival checklist: confirm address and scope, walk the wall with the lead's eyes, photograph before conditions, confirm water and power access, set protection, confirm color sample and finish sample with the homeowner if that step is due that day.

The midday checklist: check grinding depth, check mortar consistency and batch times, check dust control and neighbor impact, check pace against the day's goal, adjust how much more to open up based on weather and pace.

The departure checklist: walk and inspect finished work, photograph completed sections, clean tools and area, account for materials, secure the site, update the homeowner in plain language on what was done and what comes next.

Laminate them. Keep them in the job box. The lead initials them. Not because anyone distrusts the crew, but because memory fails under heat, fatigue, and schedule pressure. The checklist remembers so people do not have to hold everything in their heads.

When a crew runs clear roles, trained skills, a steady rhythm, and short checklists, repointing stops being heroic effort and

becomes a profession you can price, schedule, and stand behind. That is the foundation the next chapter builds on: proving the work with records, photos, and a warranty written in honest words.

Chapter 11: Documentation, Photos, Warranties, and Getting Paid Without a Fight

Most payment fights in repointing are not really about money. They are about memory. The homeowner remembers the conversation one way, the crew remembers it another, and three weeks later no one can prove what the wall looked like before, what was agreed, or what was actually done. Good documentation ends most of those arguments before they start — not by being legalistic, but by being clear, dated, and shared as the job goes along.

This chapter covers the working papers of a professional repointing job: what to write down, how to photograph, how to write a warranty you can honestly honor, and how to structure payment so neither side feels trapped.

Start With a Written Scope Anyone Can Read

A scope should be readable by a homeowner who knows nothing about masonry. Name the elevations included — front, left side as you face the house, rear — and the areas excluded. State the approximate area or linear extent in plain terms, the joint preparation approach, the mortar approach including color matching effort, and the finish profile. State what is not included just as clearly: brick replacement beyond a stated number, structural repair, work on chimneys or steps unless listed, and painting or sealing unless listed.

When a job involves a condition you cannot fully see until joints are opened — deteriorated backing material, hidden voids, or damage behind the surface — say so in writing before work starts, and state how that condition will be handled if found: who will be notified, how added work will be priced and approved, and that no added work will proceed without the homeowner's approval. That one paragraph prevents the hardest conversation in the trade, which is asking for more money for work the customer never agreed to and cannot see once it is covered.

If during the walkthrough you see cracking or movement that suggests a structural concern beyond mortar deterioration, say so plainly and recommend the homeowner hire a

structural engineer to evaluate it. A repointing contractor's job is mortar joints and masonry care within his field experience. Referring a structural question to the right professional protects the homeowner and protects you from owning a problem repointing cannot fix.

Costs in proposals should be presented as a clear price for the defined scope, with any allowances or alternates listed separately. When you discuss general market costs in conversation — for example, that repointing prices vary widely by region, access, height, and joint condition — note that prices vary and that a ballpark is not a quote. Precision on your own scope, honesty about general ranges: that combination builds trust.

Photos: Before, During, After

Photos are your best witness and your best teacher. Take them as if you will need to show them to a reasonable person who was never on site — because you might.

Before photos: take wide shots of each elevation and close shots of typical deterioration, the worst areas, and any pre-existing damage to brick, windows, concrete, or landscaping near the work. Pre-existing damage photographed before you start cannot later be attributed to your crew. Date and location information embedded in modern phone photos helps, but also keep photos organized by job and elevation so you can find the right image in seconds, not after twenty minutes of scrolling in front of a frustrated customer.

During photos: photograph opened joints showing depth and condition, any hidden condition you find before you cover it, and a test or sample section after approval. If a hidden condition leads to a scope conversation, the photo of the open joint is what makes that conversation factual instead of emotional. Send it the same day, with a short written explanation.

After photos: retake the same wide and close views from as close to the same positions as you can. Matching before-and-after pairs show the work honestly — including that good repointing should look like the wall was cared for, not like it was replaced with a different wall. Keep the set with the job file.

Share photos proactively. A brief daily update — two or three photos, two or three sentences on what was completed and what is next — does more for customer confidence than any brochure. Homeowners get anxious when they cannot see progress or do not know if the crew is returning tomorrow. Short, regular communication removes that anxiety, and

anxious customers are the ones who withhold payment or write harsh reviews. Calm, informed customers pay on time.

The Honest Written Warranty

A warranty is a promise, so only promise what you control.

You control workmanship: whether joints were prepared to proper depth, whether mortar was placed and tooled correctly, whether the material was appropriate for the wall. You do not control future building movement, roof leaks that pour water through the wall, plumbing failures, impact damage, or work done later by others. An honest warranty says both things in plain language.

A sound workmanship warranty states: the time period, what is covered — for example, mortar installed by your company failing due to workmanship, such as debonding or premature cracking attributable to installation — what the remedy is, typically repair of the affected area at no charge, what is excluded and why, and how the homeowner makes a claim, with a phone number and email. It also states that it covers the repaired joints, not the entire wall's future, and that existing structural movement or water intrusion from other sources must be corrected for joint repairs to last.

Avoid two traps. The first is the exaggerated lifetime promise written to win the sale that no one intends to define later. If you say lifetime, define whose lifetime and what it actually covers — or better, choose a clear period you will stand behind and stand behind it completely. The second trap is the warranty so full of exclusions in fine print that it covers nothing. Homeowners can sense that, and they are right to distrust it.

Deliver the warranty in writing at completion, not only verbally at the sale. Keep a copy in the job file with the completion date, so if a call comes in years later, you can confirm coverage in one lookup instead of debating dates.

Composite example: A homeowner calls fourteen months after completion saying a section of new mortar has cracked. The job file shows photos of that elevation, a note that a gutter overflow was pointed out at completion with a recommendation to correct it, and the warranty terms sent at the time. The visit shows water has been pouring through the joint from the still-unrepaired gutter. Because the record exists, the conversation can stay fair: explain the cause, offer a priced repair after the gutter is fixed, and still inspect the rest of your work for any true workmanship issue you should cover. Without the record, that same call becomes an argument about who said what.

Getting Paid Without a Fight

Structure payment to match progress and to keep trust balanced. A common, fair pattern for residential repointing is a modest deposit to schedule the work, a progress payment at a defined midpoint or milestone, and final payment on completion after a walkthrough with the homeowner. State each amount and its trigger in the proposal. A trigger should be observable — "first elevation complete" — not vague.

Never make final payment a surprise. Tell the homeowner a day ahead that tomorrow is the planned completion and walkthrough. On the final walk, go elevation by elevation, show the after photos alongside the work, hand over the warranty, explain care basics — avoid harsh cleaning, give new mortar time before pressure washing, watch gutters and water management — and then present the final invoice, which should match the agreed price plus only those additions the homeowner approved in writing.

If a disagreement does arise, stay with the file. Show the scope, the photos, the approvals. Offer to correct any item that is genuinely yours promptly and without debate — a smear, a missed joint, a finish that does not match the approved sample. Crews that fix their own small misses quickly, without making the customer fight for it, rarely end up in payment disputes over the whole job. Protect the relationship first and the paperwork will usually protect you second.

Keep records for every job in one place: proposal, approvals, photos, daily notes, warranty copy, invoices, and payment record. Keep them for years, not months. The file is how a one-person memory becomes a company asset — and it is exactly what allows the business in the next chapter to grow on referrals instead of promises.

Chapter 12: Growing the Repointing Business Honestly

There is a slow way to grow a repointing business and a fast way that burns itself out. The fast way buys leads of uncertain quality, promises whatever wins the job, cuts depth and material to protect margin, and spends the next year fighting callbacks and bad reviews. The slow way does excellent work, documents it, asks satisfied customers to tell their neighbors, and becomes the name people in a neighborhood pass to each other. After 50 years of hands-on field experience, the slow way is not actually slow. It compounds.

This chapter is about growth you do not have to apologize for: referrals, reviews earned the right way, specialty niches that

reward skill, and the discipline to decline jobs that would hurt your customers, your crew, or your name.

Referrals Are Built on the Job, Not After It

A referral is decided long before you ask for one. It is decided when you protect the landscaping without being asked, when you send the daily photo update, when you tell a homeowner that a section of wall does not need repointing yet and take that work off the proposal. That last moment — recommending less work than you could have sold — is the single most powerful referral builder in the trade. Homeowners may not be able to judge joint depth, but they can judge honesty instantly, and they repeat that story to neighbors for years.

Make referring easy. At completion, after the walkthrough and after any small miss has been corrected, thank the customer and say plainly that your business grows by referrals and you would be grateful if they kept your name in mind for neighbors with similar homes. Leave a few clean cards — not a pile of flyers — and follow up once, a week or two later, to confirm everything still looks good. That follow-up call, made when you want nothing, is remembered.

Track where each new inquiry came from. A simple log — name, neighborhood, who referred them — lets you thank referrers, see which neighborhoods are becoming strongholds, and schedule work geographically so crews spend less time driving and more time pointing. Serving a cluster of homes in one area also builds visible proof: people see your crew's tidy site and finished walls on their own street, which is advertising no money can buy as credibly.

Consider a standing relationship with related trades who see walls before you do: roofers, painters, home inspectors, and real estate agents who handle older homes. The honest version of this is simple reciprocity — you refer customers to people whose work you have seen and trust, and they do the same. Never pay for a referral in a way you would be embarrassed to describe to the customer, and never accept a referral arrangement that requires you to inflate a price to fund it.

Reviews Earned, Never Bought or Fabricated

Online reviews matter, and precisely because they matter, they must be real. Never buy reviews, never offer a discount or gift in exchange for a positive review, never write a review for a customer, and never ask family or crew to pose as customers. Those tactics are dishonest, they are usually detectable, and when they are exposed they destroy the one

asset a local contractor cannot rebuild quickly: his name.

The honest system is simple. Do work worth reviewing. At the right moment — after the follow-up call, when the customer has expressed satisfaction in their own words — ask if they would be willing to share their experience online, and make it easy by providing a direct link. Ask everyone you served well, not only the happiest customers, and accept what they write. If a review is lukewarm and points to something real, fix the underlying issue and respond publicly with grace: thank them, state what you did to address it, and invite them to contact you directly. A measured response to criticism often persuades readers more than a page of praise.

If a negative review describes a job you did not do or facts you can show are wrong, respond briefly and factually without argument, and use the platform's reporting process if the review violates its policies. Do not create counter-reviews to bury it. One more honest review at a time, earned from real work, is the only durable answer.

Hypothetical example: A contractor finishes two similar jobs in the same month. On the first, he asks for a review at final payment, while presenting the invoice. The customer, feeling cornered, agrees but writes nothing. On the second, he completes the walkthrough, collects payment without linking it to any review, calls a week later to check the work, and only then asks. The second customer writes a detailed review mentioning the follow-up call itself. Timing and freedom are the difference. A review must be a gift the customer chooses to give, never a toll for getting their job finished.

Use reviews as operational feedback, not just marketing. If three reviews mention great work and poor cleanup, your work is not great — your cleanup is part of the work, and the market is telling you where your system in Chapter 10 needs attention.

Specialty Niches That Reward Skill

General repointing is competitive. Specialties reward the skills this book has built and often carry better margins because fewer crews can do them well.

Historic and older masonry is the most natural specialty. Older brick and softer mortar punish shortcuts and reward careful matching, gentle removal, and patience. Homeowners of historic houses actively seek a mason who talks about preserving the brick rather than just filling joints, and preservation societies, historic districts, and owners of older commercial buildings form a referral network once you have served it well. Price this work for the time it truly takes. Rushing historic work destroys both the wall and the niche.

Chimney and above-roofline work is another niche — visible deterioration, clear water-entry stakes for the homeowner, and access and safety requirements that screen out casual competitors. So is detailed color-matched work on prominent front elevations, where the customer's real purchase is that the repair disappears. If you mention related services in conversation, describe them factually. For example, Travis Nech's lintel work uses LintelLOCK, his field-developed system for supporting steel lintels above windows and doors — described plainly as field-developed, with its scope and limits stated honestly and structural questions referred to a structural engineer the homeowner hires when the situation calls for it.

Whatever niche you pursue, enter it by competence, not by advertising first and learning on the customer's house. Do the training, do supervised jobs, photograph the results, and only then promote the specialty. A niche built on proof grows. A niche built on claims collapses at the first failed job.

Knowing Which Jobs to Decline

Growth is as much about the jobs you refuse as the jobs you take.

Decline work outside your competence — structural rebuilding you are not equipped for, or a wall whose failure cause you cannot identify. Refer it onward and say why. Decline work where the customer demands a shortcut you know will fail, such as pointing over unsound material to save cost before a house sale, with your name to be attached to the result. Offer the correct scope in writing; if they insist on the shortcut, let another name go on it. Decline work that would require lying — covering a known defect for a seller who wants it hidden from a buyer is a line that, once crossed, defines your business to everyone who learns of it, and someone always learns of it.

Also decline on capacity. Taking a job you cannot start for two months while implying you can start next week, or loading a crew so heavily that quality and safety slip, converts growth into callbacks. A waiting list, honestly stated, enhances reputation. A broken schedule promise destroys it. Ballpark timing, like ballpark pricing, should be given honestly with the note that schedules and prices vary with weather, access, and condition found — and a firm commitment given only when you can keep it.

Price to sustain the business, not to win every bid. A price that leaves no room for proper depth, proper material, training, insurance, and warranty service is not competitive — it is a slow loss disguised as a win, and the customer ultimately pays for it in failed work. Know your true costs,

charge a fair price that covers them and a reasonable profit, and explain value in terms of scope and proof rather than disparaging competitors. Speaking well of competitors you respect, and saying nothing about those you do not, costs you nothing and marks you as the professional in the room.

Grow this way and something changes after a few years. The phone rings with people who already trust you before you arrive. Your crew works for customers who value the work. Your winters fill with referred work booked in fall. That is not a marketing trick. That is a reputation, built one honest joint at a time — and it is the most durable asset a repointing business can own.

Conclusion: The Wall Keeps the Record

Strip this book down to one idea and it is this: a repointing crew does not rise to the level of its best mason. It settles to the level of its system on its worst day — and then the wall keeps the record of that day, in color and texture, for everyone who drives past for the next thirty years.

That sounds hard, but it is actually the hopeful version of the trade. Hands vary. People have off days, new hires, sore backs, and August afternoons. A system does not have to vary. The wall gets read in zones before it is priced. The estimate carries honest units and stated allowances. The recipe is written, the sand is controlled, the water is measured, and the trial is judged dry before production starts. Joints are raked to sound mortar without scarring the brick. Tooling happens at the right moment, curing is protected against Texas weather, and the site stays clean enough that the neighbors become your advertising instead of your opposition. Somebody owns the mix. Somebody walks the final ten feet. Somebody photographs the work and writes the warranty in words the company can actually keep.

None of that requires a bigger company or expensive equipment. It requires deciding, once, how the work is done — and then doing it that way when it is inconvenient, which is the only time a standard means anything.

It also requires the honesty this book has insisted on from the first chapter. Price what the wall needs, not what wins the bid. Label your examples for what they are. Let reviews be earned. Decline the job your crew cannot do well, and refer the structural question to a structural engineer instead of guessing at it. Over a career, that honesty compounds the same way consistency does — quietly, wall after wall, until a whole town knows what your name means without you having

to say it.

So here is the closing assignment, and it is a small one. On your next repointing job, pick three things from this book — just three — and run them without exception. Write the recipe down. Judge the trial dry. Walk the final ten feet with a camera in your hand. When those three are habits, add three more. That is how a crew is built: not in a weekend, but in a season of kept standards.

The wall is going to keep the record either way. Make it a record you are proud to sign.

Thank you for reading. Now go point a wall nobody can find the repair in — and build the crew that can do it again next week.

Resources & Next Steps

Travis Nech has spent 50 years in brick, masonry, and foundation work across Texas. He owns and operates Champion Brick Repair, Metro Foundation Repair, LintelLOCK, MortarMagic, and WhiteStone Construction.

- **Champion Brick Repair** — brick & masonry repair, Dallas-Fort Worth — championbrickrepair.com — (817) 900-6324
 - **Metro Foundation Repair** — pressed concrete pile foundation repair — metrofoundationrepair.com — (817) 523-1540
 - **LintelLOCK** — the field-developed lintel replacement system — lintelrepair.com — (469) 730-0650
 - **MortarMagic** — mortar color matching & the Mortar Bucket — mortarmagic.netlify.app
 - **WhiteStone Construction** — stone, ranch & property work, Hamilton TX country — (254) 723-5040
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Travis writes the Mortar Magic, LintelLOCK, Engineering Truth, Champion, and Metro homeowner and professional book series to put fifty years of field lessons into plain language — so homeowners can hire with confidence, and working masons and contractors can deliver repairs that last and disappear. His authority is not a classroom credential; it is a lifetime spent on scaffolds, at mixers, and in front of walls that told him the truth whether he wanted to hear it or not. When a question on your project goes beyond repair and into the structure of the building itself, he will be the first to tell you to hire a structural engineer for an independent opinion — and then to hire the crew whose system makes the repair vanish.