

Home Improvement

101

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One fall, my wife and I were remodeling our kitchen. We were anxious to see how the kitchen would look with all our new, black appliances in place. I didn't know it at the time, but that rushed environment was about to get me in trouble.

It started with a trip to the local appliance store, where I bought a combination microwave-range hood. I decided to kick-start our home improvement by installing the hood without delay. The first step was to remove the old range hood. "After all, how hard can that job be?" I reasoned.

I removed all the screws so the hood would hang down and expose an electrical outlet and plug—or, so I thought. Unfortunately, neither existed. Instead, a supply wire ran through a hole in the wall and powered the old range hood. I realized this job was going to be harder than I had envisioned.

More anxious than ever to remove the old range hood and to install the new one—and, more importantly, to impress my wife—I ran to the breaker box in the garage. I scanned the rows of breakers for one marked "range hood" but found none, which told me the hood shared a circuit with something else. What, though? There were three possibilities: kitchen lights, kitchen outlets, or kitchen range. I figured "kitchen outlets" had to be the one, so I tripped the breaker, grabbed a handful of tools, and ran back to the kitchen.

I decided the quickest way to remove the old appliance was to cut the wire, instead of removing the cover and disconnecting the terminals one at a time. Because I was in a hurry, I didn't test the circuit to ensure I had tripped the right breaker. I took a pair of insulated wire cutters and went to work. As I increased pressure on my grip, I felt the hair standing up on the back of my neck. When the wire cutters went through the insulation into the conductive



After you trip a breaker, make sure you also test the circuit. Otherwise, you may not live long enough to tell your story.

wire, I heard a loud "bzzzzt," and a shower of sparks came from my hand.

I jumped from being startled, and my wife, who had been watching with interest, ran for cover in an adjoining room. I wasn't injured, but my heart was racing, and I could feel the adrenaline pumping through my body. I stood there staring at the jaws of my wire cutters, which now were melted into a strange configuration. My mind flooded with hundreds of thoughts at the same time. The most relevant were, "Why hadn't I checked the circuit to make sure I had tripped the right breaker?" and "Why had I been in such a hurry?"

If it hadn't been for the insulated wire cutters, I probably wouldn't be telling this story. Because of this incident, I no longer get in such a hurry that I ignore precautions. I also don't take shortcuts, and I always use the proper tools for a job. ■

The author was assigned to VAQ-139 when he wrote this article.