Everything You Need to Know About Nail File Grits

By Ela Loszczyk

A nail file is one of the most important tools that nail technicians use, but do you actually know enough about them?

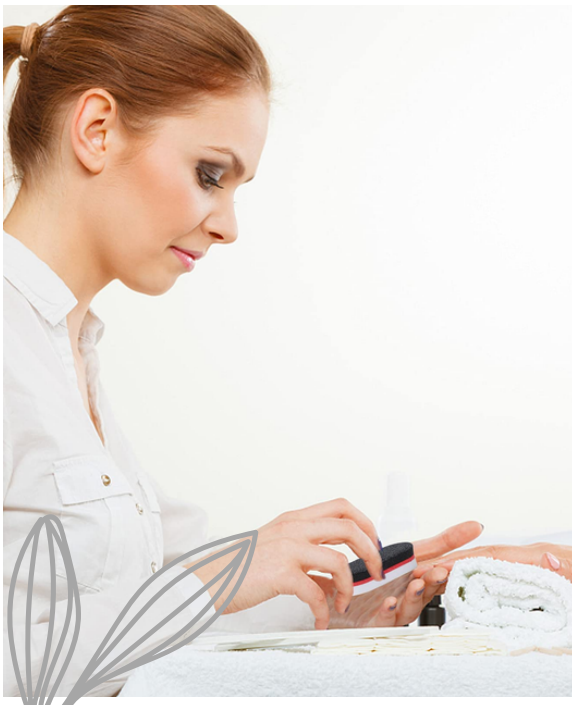
Read more to find out everything you need to know...

Nail File Number Meaning

To start with, let's take a look at the fundamental piece of information you need to know about nail files – nail file grit grades.

I'm sure you've seen numbers on pretty much every file on the market. But what do they mean?
The numbers refer to how course the grit is on the nail file surface. If both numbers are the same then both sides have the same grit- if the two numbers are different then both sides have different grit.

For example, a 180/180 grit file means both sides are the same and that there is 180 grit on 1square cm. A 100/180 grit file on the other hand, will have one side with a coarser grit than the other.



Knowing that, we can now clearly understand which file is sharper and which one softer:

- The higher the number, the softer the file grit;
- The lower the number, the coarser the file grit

Nail File Grit Guide – Nail File Grits Explained

80/80 grit
Used for heavy product removal (the sharpest file you can find on the market). However, bear in mind that you should never overfile the nail, so don't use 80 grit when the product is very thin or on the natural nail. Also remember that gel is easier to file than acrylic, so reduce the pressure adequately.

100 grit
Used to take the length down and to shape side walls and free edge

150 grit
Use to file nail surface and to shape the whole nail. You can also use it to blend tips to the natural nail and to remove any lifting prior to new product application.

180 grit
Use to contour the whole nail; to prep natural nail before applying any product and also during manicure to shorten or shape natural free edge.

240 grit
Use to prep nails especially before UV gel polish application due to its low corrosive surface.

The extremely important fact you must always remember, is to prepare your file before its first use. Sides/edges of a new file are very sharp and could easily cut clients cuticle or side walls. So ALWAYS get rid of those sharp edges by filing edge to edge with another file.

Nail Buffer Grit Guide

Nail buffers have numbers too, just like files, however, they are made with sponge which makes them more delicate and softer than a hard file. Use buffers to bring the shine to acrylic or natural nails. To make acrylic nails shiny start with the lowest number of your buffer and work towards the highest one.

100/180 – should be used first. 180 grit side may also be used to prep natural nail before UV gel polish application. This particular buffer eliminates scratches after hard file created during filing and shaping.

220/280 – this is your second step. You can also use this buffer during manicure treatments to eliminate ridges from natural nails and make the whole surface even and smooth prior to nail polish application. It eliminates scratches on acrylic nails.

600/4000 – this is the magic wand which brings the whole shine up. Most of the brands have one side in green and second in white. Many people concentrate on the white side ignoring the green, while it's the green one which creates the shine and white one only reveals it. So to have a beautiful, mirror glass shine make sure you do really good job with the green side.

What Grit Nail File to Remove Gel?

When removing gel nails, you want to make sure that you do not damage the natural nail underneath by using too coarse a nail file. For removing gel nails, a medium grit 100/180 nail file is usually best. If you are removing soak off gel polish, it is usually best to use a 180 grit nail file to break through the top coat before applying the remover for as long as needed.

Once the gel polish is completely removed, you can gently buff the nail with a 180 grit buffer if needed – but, be very gentle and take care that you aren't thinning the nail.

What is the Best Nail File Grit for Acrylic Nails?

Acrylic nails are harder than gel nails, so they require a little more pressure when filing. A 100/180 grit nail file should still suffice for both shaping and debulking acrylic nails – the 100 grite side can reduce length and take down the surface; the softer 180 grit side can be used for shaping the natural nail.

What Grit File to Use on the Natural Nails?

Never use a nail file with a grit coarser than 240 on the surface of natural nails – buffers can be coarser, as they have a cushioned layer which offers more protection.

A 180 grit nail file should be fine for shaping the natural nail edge – if nails are very soft or damaged, a 240 grit file may be better.

Nail File FAQs

Does file shape matter? Not really. You can find different shapes: straight (wild and slim), half moon, diamond, banana etc. It's really up to you which one you want to use. I personally like half-moon shape when working around cuticle area, as it's lower risk to cut or irritate the client. A straight file is the best for filing free edge, side walls and lower arch; as it makes it easier to get a nice and straight shape.

Is it worth to pay a bit more for a file? Yes, it is. You should remember that files can be disinfected and used more than once. That will save you money as you don't have to throw away good files (unless they come into contact with blood or any type of bacteria).

How to do it? Simply brush the dust off using your ordinary manicure brush, wash it with a hint of soap and then spray or soak with disinfectant liquid. I recommend Mundo products as they have a wide range of products that work really well. Remember that every file, no matter how good and strong, is not going to last forever and after a while you'll have to change it. The moment to do so is when you notice that filing takes you longer than usually and instead of filing you're more likely to buff a nail.

The Ultimate File Guide

By Suzette Hill

What Is a File Made Of?

Use this guide to understand the materials most commonly used in file abrasives, backings, and substrates (cores). Each component has its own strengths and weaknesses; it's up to you to decide which ones make a file best suited for your needs.

ABRASIVES

Silicon Carbide. A bluish-black synthetic crystalline compound; one of the hardest known substances; individual crystals have very jagged edges with high peaks and valleys; cuts deeper, faster; tends to shed black dust on the nails during use.

Aluminum Oxide. A chemical compound widely found in nature; only abrasive that can be dyed; individual crystals have less dramatic peaks and valleys than silicon carbide; with the same grit and pressure, it is less likely to "shred" product or natural nails.

Garnet. Unground, it is a gemstone; reddish-brown in color; most commonly used on wood files; a long-lasting, inexpensive abrasive; the jaggedness of the individual crystals fell between silicone carbide and aluminum oxide.

Silicon Carbide With Zinc Sterate Coating ("zebra"). The zinc sterate coating is a lubricant that prevents the grit from "loading up" with filing dust; grit feels smoother than the same grit of other abrasives.

Compressed Aluminum Oxide. Compressed and bonded with porcelain, it results in a “filing stone”; comes in 180 and 220 grits only, best used for shaping and smoothing natural nails; doesn’t absorb water or chemicals; can be used like a pumice stone to remove excess cuticle and hangnails; should never wear out.

BACKINGS

Paper. The first abrasive backing used on the original wood garnet files; inexpensive durable; not water-resistant

Waterproof Paper. Paper impregnated with an oil resin; dark gray or black in color; can be immersed indefinitely in water and temporarily in sanitizing solutions.

Mylar. Trade name for polyester film; washable; sanitizable; very durable and long-lasting: more expensive than files with paper backings.

Cloth. Cotton is most commonly used; the most flexible of all abrasive backings; higher-cost backing, very long-lasting; won’t crease; abrasives tend to embed in the cloth, resulting in less aggressive cutting action; commonly found on buffers.

SUBSTRATES (CORES)

Wood. First substrate used to make files; still very popular; inexpensive; rigid; most commonly used with garnet abrasive.

Plastic. High-impact polystyrene is most commonly used; more flexible than wood; commonly overlaid with polyethylene foam in cushioned files; without a polyethylene foam overlay the plastic tends to transmit more vibration to technician's hand than a wood substrate; look for a plastic core that is neither so rigid it won't give or so flexible it bends easily when pressed on the nail surface.

Plastic. High-impact polystyrene is most commonly used; more flexible than wood; commonly overlaid with polyethylene foam in cushioned files; without a polyethylene foam overlay the plastic tends to transmit more vibration to technician's hand than a wood substrate; look for a plastic core that is neither so rigid it won't give or so flexible it bends easily when pressed on the nail surface.

GUIDE TO GRITS

This chart was prepared with the assistance of DHS, ESI Industries, H&H, Flowery Beauty Products and Tropical Shine/Realys.

GRIT	CATEGORY	RECOMMENDED FOR
60-80	Extra Coarse	Reducing the length of extra long nails or shaping very thick or misshapen acrylics or gels; also used for scoring the edges of other files.
100-150	Coarse	Reducing the length of and shaping acrylics or gels
150-240	Medium	Shaping the free edge of acrylics or gels; light shaping of acrylics or gels; sometimes used to lightly etch the natural nail in preparation for product (many manufacturers recommend against etching the nail surface with any file); grits higher than 220 are good for shaping and smoothing all nail surfaces as well as the free edges of natural nails.
240-400	Fine	Finishing work on acrylics, wraps, and gels; filing on natural nails.
400-900	Extra Fine	Finishing natural nails; removing ridges and stains from natural nails; preparing all nail surfaces for buffing and shining.
900-12,000	Buffers (Microabrasives)	Smoothing and shining both artificial and natural nails.