A good whetstone session has a particular feel to it. The knife moves with intent, the edge quiets down as burrs form, and the surface of the steel starts to look more uniform than you remember. When it goes wrong, the signs are just as specific: the edge feels “shiny but dull,” the stone skates instead of biting, or you end up chasing mystery microchips that are really just burrs folded back on themselves.

I’ve seen most of these problems show up the same way across kitchens, workshops, and garages. The tricky part is that a lot of sharpening errors are subtle, so you keep making adjustments that worsen the situation. The fix is usually not a new technique, it is correcting one or two mechanical mistakes: angle consistency, burr management, stone condition, and grit progression.

Below are the common errors I run into when people sharpen on stones, along with practical fixes you can apply immediately. I’ll also touch on honing, because people often use that word like it means the same thing as sharpening, and it doesn’t.

## The first mistake: treating “angle” like a guess

A stone can do impressive work, but it cannot do guesswork for you. Most kitchen knives sharpen best when you keep a stable angle through the entire stroke. If your angle wanders, you will alternate between removing steel where you need it and polishing areas that are already close to flat.

### What it looks like

- The edge doesn’t improve in a noticeable way after you “match the angle.”
- One side of the bevel looks more polished than the other.
- You feel a burr on only part of the blade, often near the tip or the heel.

### Why it happens

People tend to start at the correct angle, then adjust mid-stroke as the knife handle rises or the body shifts. Another common culprit is inconsistency along the blade length, especially on curved blades or knives with thick bellies.

### The fix

Commit to a physical reference. A simple one is to sharpen with your elbows slightly braced and your wrists doing micro-adjustments only. Another is to use a guide you remove after you learn the feel. You can also practice with a cheap knife or the back side of a worn blade to get your muscle memory.

If you want a concrete starting point, many common kitchen knives (Western styles) do well around 15 to 20 degrees per side for sharpening, with honing later at slightly steeper or more consistent angles depending on how your edge behaves. For thinner specialty blades, you’ll often go lower. For heavy-duty cleavers or hardening-tough steels, you may stay closer to the higher end. The point is not the exact number, it’s that you stay near the same geometry every pass.

## The second mistake: confusing honing with sharpening

Honing is maintenance. Sharpening is material removal to reestablish the bevel and apex. Both involve abrasives, but they target different problems.

- Honing typically aligns or lightly reshapes the edge by removing tiny amounts and redistributing metal along the apex.
- Sharpening creates a new bevel and establishes a new apex by grinding away steel.

If you try to “sharpen” with light honing strokes on a fine stone, you may get cosmetic improvement while the edge keeps the same core bluntness. If you try to “hone” away burr remnants aggressively, you can also round the apex and make the knife seem worse.

### A quick reality check

When you sharpen on a stone, you should expect to form a burr. When you hone, the burr is not *sharpening guide* the goal. In fact, with proper honing you may not even notice a burr, especially if your edge is only slightly degraded.

If you find yourself doing many passes but never feeling a consistent burr at the apex, you are likely using either too little pressure, too steep or too flat an angle, or too fine a grit too early.

## Stone error: using the wrong grit order, or skipping too far ahead

There’s a reason people talk about grit progression. Coarse grits remove steel and establish geometry. Mid grits refine the bevel and reduce deep scratches. Fine grits polish and help reduce micro roughness, which can improve slicing feel.

Skipping from very coarse to very fine without establishing the bevel fully leads to a frustrating cycle. You polish an imperfect apex, so the edge “looks sharp” but doesn’t cut better.

### What it looks like

- The knife becomes more reflective at the edge but still struggles to slice tomatoes or paper cleanly.
- You see scratch patterns that look like they never fully go away.
- You feel the edge catch on your fingernail even when you think you polished enough.

### The fix

Treat grit steps like ranges, not rules carved in stone. A practical approach is to start coarse enough that you can establish the bevel quickly, then progress one level at a time until the previous scratch pattern is gone. On many common knives, that might look like a coarse stone followed by a medium stone, then finishing with a fine stone. Exact grits vary wildly by brand, so don’t obsess over numbers; focus on the visual transition and the feel of the bevel.

If your knife is already close to sharp, you can sometimes start at a medium grit and move upward without ever touching a very coarse stone. The error is when “close” is wishful thinking. If the edge has chips, real dullness, or you can clearly see rounding, start earlier in the chain.

## Pressure problems: grinding too hard or too gently

Pressure is a controllable variable, and it affects bevel formation and burr behavior.

### Too much pressure

When you press hard, you can do two damaging things:

1. You can create uneven bevels because the edge digs in and the angle changes under load.
2. You can overwork one area until burrs become thick and stubborn.

Thick burrs can feel sharp briefly, then fail because the burr flips or breaks off unevenly. That gives you an inconsistent edge that seems to get worse after a few minutes of use.

### Too little pressure

When you are too cautious, the stone may polish rather than abrade. You can burn through time while the bevel hardly changes, and you may never form a burr strong enough to confirm consistent contact. People often interpret “polishing” as “progress” and keep repeating the same motion.

### The fix

Use moderate pressure at the beginning to establish the bevel, then reduce pressure as you approach the refinement stage. A useful mental model is that the first passes do the heavy lifting, and later passes do cleanup. You should still feel some resistance from the stone, but the knife should not be wobbling or flexing under your grip.

One practical clue: if the stone starts to sound scratchy and the swarf (stone slurry or metal paste) stops forming the way you expect, you may be forcing too hard or using the wrong grit or lubrication.

## The burr trap: chasing the burr without managing it

A burr is not a failure. It’s proof that you’re creating an apex. But a burr can also mislead you.

### What goes wrong

- You create a burr, then immediately polish it with finishing strokes without checking the other side.
- You spend too long “burr hunting,” especially with very fine stones, so you keep thinning and reshaping the burr until it tears, folds, or creates a ragged edge.
- You remove the burr unevenly. The edge becomes asymmetrical, which can feel like dullness on one side of the cutting stroke.

### How to manage it

After you’ve made several consistent passes, you want to verify burr presence carefully. The check needs to be controlled, because aggressive burr checking can bend the burr back and forth, which changes your feel.

A safer approach is to use a light touch check along the edge, focusing on near-heel and near-tip areas, then alternate sides to ensure you are not only grinding one bevel. When you switch sides, you should feel a similar level of burr formation if your angle and pressure are consistent.

Once you have a burr on both sides (for most sharpening styles), the goal becomes controlled removal and refinement. This is where honing intersects with sharpening. Many people lightly deburr on a softer medium or with careful edge-leading passes on fine stone surfaces, keeping pressure minimal. If you skip deburring or remove it too aggressively, you trade “sharp” for “chippy” or “rough.”

## Skating and glazing: when the stone stops cutting

Stones behave differently based on water, oil, slurry, and how clogged their pores become. A glazed stone feels smoother, sometimes almost slippery, and you end up polishing instead of grinding.

### Signs of a problem

- Your strokes feel like the knife is sliding, not grinding.
- The slurry looks thin and watery instead of paste-like on water stones.
- It takes far longer than expected to change the bevel.

### Fixes that actually help

First, match the stone type to its lubrication method. Oil stones, water stones, and synthetic stones have different expectations. Second, clean the stone. Over time, embedded steel particles dull the surface. If you don't clean, you lose cutting speed.

If your stone supports it, refreshing the surface with a stone dresser can bring it back. On some natural stones, a light recontour is needed to maintain a flat working face. On synthetic stones, cleaning and periodic dressing can restore performance.

If you notice the slurry turning dark and then not changing, pause. Clean the stone and reestablish the right lubrication or slurry level rather than forcing more pressure. Forcing pressure on a glazed stone can also cause micro-chips because the edge grabs unevenly.

## One of the most common errors: not keeping the stone flat

A stone that is dished can sabotage your angle. You think you're holding a stable angle, but the stone face is changing height under the blade. That means the bevel becomes inconsistent along the length, and you'll end up with an edge that feels sharp at some points and dull at others.

### Symptoms

- The tip cuts well but the heel struggles, or the opposite.
- Your scratch pattern appears deeper in one region.
- After lots of passes, the edge still won't match your expectations.

### The fix

Flatness is non-negotiable for consistent bevel geometry. Check your stone face regularly. If it is not flat, dress it. How often depends on how much you use it and how your stone is stored, but any persistent unevenness you see in your bevel is a sign the stone may need attention.

If you are using a two-sided stone, also check that both sides are true and not subtly cupped.

## Blade geometry: knives that don't cooperate

Not every knife loves a simple, symmetrical sharpening routine.

### Convex edges and unusual grinds

Some knives have convex bevels, wide swedges, or thick compound geometry. If you try to sharpen these like flat-bevel knives, you may get a bevel that's the wrong width or an apex that doesn't fully form.

### The fix

When the bevel isn't flat, you need to accept that "angle per side" is not identical along the blade. Instead of forcing symmetry, aim for consistent contact where the steel actually meets the stone. You can also do more passes with lighter pressure, allowing the stone to shape the convexity without gouging.

A useful instinct is to look at the bevel after a few passes. If the steel removal is concentrated only in a narrow stripe, you may need to adjust stroke length or pressure, or you may be riding the wrong portion of the stone.

## Stroke mechanics: using your arms instead of your hands and body

A lot of people try to make a perfect sharpening stroke, but they unintentionally "steer" the blade mid-stroke. That steering creates angle changes and inconsistent bevels.

### What it looks like

- The scratch lines curve or vary in width.
- The edge becomes unevenly polished.
- You end up overworking the center of the blade because you keep pausing there.

### The fix

Stabilize your setup. Keep the knife supported in a way that your hands control direction and your body provides smooth motion. Shorten your stroke slightly so you can maintain angle stability through the entire movement. Longer strokes are not automatically better. Consistency beats reach.

If you are sharpening near the tip, reduce motion and be deliberate, because tips magnify errors. A small change in angle can remove more steel than you expect at the very end of the bevel.

## Lubrication and slurry: when water or oil becomes a variable you ignore

People sometimes treat stone lubrication as a ritual rather than a tool.

- Too little lubrication can increase loading and friction.
- Too much lubrication can reduce contact pressure and slow grinding.
- Slurry, when used appropriately on certain stones, can help you get even abrasion and faster progress early on.

### The fix

Follow the stone's intended method. If you are on a water stone, make sure you know whether it expects clear water, a natural slurry, or added slurry. Don't mix systems unless the stone explicitly supports it. If your stone is producing poor slurry or seems to stop cutting, adjust lubrication before you change your sharpening technique.

## A compact troubleshooting checklist you can use mid-session

When the knife does not improve as expected, it helps to stop guessing and diagnose. Here's a quick set of checks that cover many stone-sharpening failures.

- Are you getting a burr consistently on both sides near the heel and the tip?

- Is your bevel scratch pattern wide and even, or narrow and patchy?
- Does the stone still cut well, or does it feel glazed and slippery?
- Is your stone face flat, or do you notice uneven wear on the stone surface?
- Are you progressing grit in a way that removes the previous scratch pattern instead of just polishing it?

If any answer is “no,” you usually don’t need to do more passes, you need to fix that specific variable first.

## How to choose a stone for sharpening and honing (without buying your way out)

Stone choice matters, but it doesn’t have to be expensive to be effective. Many people buy a fancy, huge stone and then struggle with technique because the stone’s behavior doesn’t match their workflow.

### What to consider

A stone’s grit, binder, and whether it’s natural or synthetic affect feedback and cutting speed. Some stones produce fast abrasion but can leave deeper scratch patterns, while others feel smoother and guide you toward refinement.

Also, size matters. A stone that is too small can tempt you into awkward stroke mechanics. A stone that is too large might encourage messy handling and poor stability on your work surface.

### Stone pairing strategy

For many kitchen setups, a two-step system covers most needs: a medium grit for establishing the bevel and a finer grit for refinement. If you already have a sharp edge and want mainly maintenance, you can rely more on fine honing than frequent sharpening sessions.

Here are two practical pairings that work for many people, depending on how dull the knives get and how often you maintain them:

1) **General sharpening pair:** medium for correction, fine for finishing

2) **Maintenance-forward pair:** fine stone for touchups, occasional medium sharpening when edges degrade

If you can only pick one stone for now, choose one that matches your most common situation. If your knives often arrive at the stone visibly dull, “finish only” is going to waste time.

## The part people skip: edge testing and what it can tell you

A lot of knife sharpening is iterative, but you need feedback that corresponds to the actual geometry. Tests can be deceptive if you don’t understand what they’re sensitive to.

### What’s useful

You can learn a lot from how the edge behaves on tasks that reveal micro-roughness and apex stability. Slicing tests with tomatoes, careful paper cuts, and observing how the edge slides through food fibers can show whether you’re dealing with burr issues, a rounded apex, or uneven bevel contact.

If a knife cuts briefly but then loses performance quickly, it often points to burr remnants that fold or chips forming under load. If it never cuts cleanly, it may indicate insufficient bevel formation, too high an angle, or inconsistent contact due to stroke mechanics.

### A note on safety

Testing on your fingertips is tempting, but it can also fool you by bending burrs. Use controlled tests. A sharp edge should do real work with confidence, but it's not worth risking skin to confirm a burr.

## Fixing two common scenarios from real kitchens

Sometimes the easiest way to understand the mechanics is to follow a typical failure path and correct it.

### Scenario: "I sharpened for a long time, and it still won't slice well"

This often comes from polishing without establishing the apex. The fix is usually not more time on the fine stone.

Start by going back to a mid grit. Use moderate pressure and consistent angle until you feel a burr near the heel and the tip. Then switch to the finer grit just enough to refine the bevel and reduce scratch depth. Finally, deburr carefully, keeping pressure light. The difference is that you shift the goal. Instead of trying to "make it sharp by polishing," you make it sharp by creating geometry first.

### Scenario: "My knife is sharp but it feels harsh, like it catches"

This is frequently a burr or micro wire problem, or it can be uneven polish that leaves a rough apex.

The fix is to refine and manage the burr. Use lighter pressure as you approach finishing, make sure you alternate sides to avoid over-thinning one edge, and then deburr with care. If the edge is still harsh, you can do a short session with a fine grit at very light pressure, focused on the apex, followed by controlled deburring.

In those cases, honing may help later for maintenance, but it cannot undo a poorly formed apex. Honing works best after sharpening has already rebuilt the edge geometry.

## Putting it all together: a workflow that avoids the usual traps

You don't need a complicated ritual, but you do need a sequence with clear intent. Think in phases: establish geometry, refine the bevel, manage burr, then finish and maintain.

- Start with consistent angle and enough pressure to get real cutting.
- Use grit progression so each step removes the previous step's scratch pattern.
- Switch sides intentionally, so burr formation is symmetrical and you don't chase phantom sharpness.
- Deburr without turning the process into extra grinding.
- Finish at a grit that matches your steel and desired feel.

Then, use honing for what it's meant for. When your knives are already generally sharp but the edge dulls gradually, honing can restore performance without the full rebuild that sharpening requires.

If you're building a habit, pair sharpening with periodic honing rather than treating every dull moment as a reason to grind. It saves time, reduces wear on the blade, and keeps edges consistent over the long run.

## A final word on judgment

Stone sharpening rewards judgment more than it rewards repetition. The right angle for one knife is not always the right angle for another. The right grit step depends on the edge condition, chips, and whether you're

correcting geometry or maintaining it. Even with the best technique, you'll occasionally run into steel that behaves stubbornly, or a stone that needs cleaning before it acts the way you expect.

When something feels off, stop at the symptom and fix the mechanical cause. Angle inconsistency usually shows up as uneven bevels. Glazing shows up as friction and stalled progress. Burr confusion shows up as "sharp but inconsistent" performance. Once you learn to read those patterns, sharpening on a stone becomes less of a chore and more of a skill you can trust.

And that's the real payoff, you end up with knives that stay sharp longer because the edge you built is the one you keep maintaining. Sharpening brings the edge back to shape, honing keeps it there.