

WEEKEND 1: CLEANING THE LIVING ROOM, DINING ROOM, BEDROOMS, AND HOME OFFICE

- Start by eliminating clutter. Gather up all those magazines, newspapers, catalogs, bills, mail, and any other pieces of paper that have been hanging around for months. Go through the stack, placing each item in a Keep or Toss pile. File any items from the Keep pile that have a permanent home elsewhere (e.g., your electric bills), and immediately throw the tossables in the recycling bin. Then go back through the Keep stack a second time. Do you really need that issue of House Beautiful from November, simply because it had a photo of your dream dining room? Instead rip out any pages you plan to refer back to, and organize them in folders or binders for later. Then scrap the mag.
- Put away books, kids' or pets' toys, clothes, or other objects that shouldn't be decorating the arm of favorite chaise or your floor.
- Remove any sheets, blankets, duvets, quilts, or slipcovers that need washing, and place them in a laundry basket. This is also a good time to wash pillows and duvet inserts. You can start the laundry at any time of the process; set a timer to help you keep track of when to switch out loads, to minimize wrinkling.
- Once the rooms are as organized as possible, give them a thorough dusting. If you have any wood furniture that needs oiling or polish to stay looking its best, now is a good time to do it.
- Without moving the furniture, give each room a good vacuuming. Once you're done, slide the furniture off any area rugs, shake the rugs outside, and allow them to hang in the fresh air while you're working. Pull the furniture toward the center of the room (or away from its normal position), and vacuum again, focusing on any areas that were covered by sofas, beds, bookcases, and other large pieces. This is often where you'll find the ickiest, tumbleweed-esque accumulations of dust, hair, and (gulp) dead insects.
- With the floors now dirt-free, you're in the perfect position to either steam-clean your carpets or steam or polish your wood floors. If you have pets or small ones in the house, be sure to use nontoxic cleaners. For wood and tile, we love McCulloch's PowerSteam series of home steamers, which can be used with hot (and we mean boiling hot) water alone, or with a bit of white vinegar poured into the mix, for an antibacterial boost.
- Finally, clean out your closet. No, really. We admit that we sometimes procrastinate on this one—parting is such sweet sorrow and all that—but the longer we wait, the less likely we are to do it. And then we'll be cramming extra stuff into a space that can't accommodate it, making it harder for us to see what we actually have and encouraging wrinkling. We like to set aside one of the mornings of this weekend for our annual closet cull, and pull out:
 - Anything we're on the fence about—e.g., “I loved it when I bought it, but . . .”—or pieces that we suspect may not flatter us
 - Items that we're pretty sure might be too big or too small
 - Clothes that need repair
 - Anything we haven't worn in the past two years; we see your “But it was on the clearance rack at Nordstrom!” and raise you a “Cut your losses and move on.” Preferably to other, better pieces you buy because you can't live without them, not because they seem like a great deal.

We try on any items we're not sure about, even snapping cell-phone photos if we have to, so we can take a more objective look at how they fit. Anything that doesn't pass the “fit, flatter, love” test gets put in a bag or box for giveaway or donation. As for those clothes that need fixing, if we can't imagine making the time to take them to a seamstress in the next two weeks, we add those to the bag, as well.