

UNDERSTANDING SHEEN AND GLOSS

Sheen selection is one of the most visible finish decisions in architectural coatings, affecting both appearance and functional performance. The selected sheen influences perceived smoothness, glare, defect visibility, washability, and long-term maintenance—often as much as the color itself. While sheen terms such as Flat, Eggshell, Satin, and Semi-Gloss are commonly used in specifications and finish schedules, the most reliable way to communicate and compare finishes is through measured gloss values and standardized gloss level definitions, including the Master Painters Institute (MPI) Gloss Level Standards, which provide defined gloss ranges used widely in architectural specifications.

Sheen vs. Gloss

In everyday use, gloss and sheen are often used interchangeably to describe how dull or shiny a painted surface appears. However, there is a technical distinction behind these terms that is often unknown to many in the field. In architectural coatings, gloss is typically expressed as the measured reflectance taken at a 60° angle (the most common standard geometry for mid-range finishes), while sheen is commonly associated with measurements taken at an 85° angle, which provides better sensitivity for low-gloss and flat finishes.

Gloss measurements at 60° and 85° refer to the angle at which light is projected onto a painted surface and measured by a gloss meter. These angles are measured relative to a line perpendicular (90°) to the surface, also called the normal to the surface. Imagine a perfectly flat wall, a line sticking straight out from the wall at a 90° angle represents the perpendicular (normal) line. Gloss meter angles (60° and 85°) are measured away from that perpendicular line, not from the surface plane itself (Figure 1). Practically, both values describe the same optical behavior—how light reflects from a coating film—but they are measured at different angles to improve accuracy across different reflectance ranges. As a result, “gloss” is generally the reference point for higher-sheen finishes, and “sheen” is frequently used to differentiate and control lower-sheen finishes where 60° readings can cluster too closely to be meaningful.

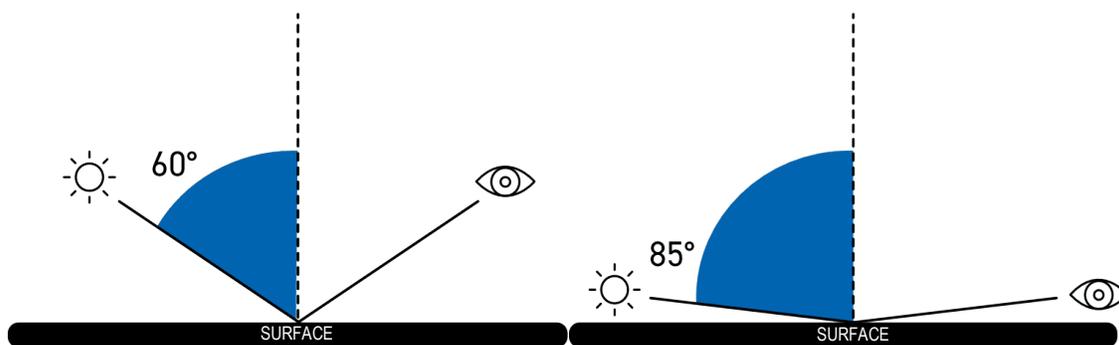


Figure 1

Sheen Names Aren't Standardized

The architectural coatings industry does not have universally enforced naming standards for common in-between sheens. Terms like Eggshell, Low Sheen, Low Luster, Velvet, and Satin can vary significantly from one paint manufacturer to another, even when products are positioned similarly. That means two “Eggshell” products from different brands may not match visually when placed side-by-side or used in adjacent areas. Because of this, the most dependable approach—especially for specifications, multi-phase construction, or touch-up planning—is to specify and compare actual gloss measurements (Gloss Units at 60° and/or 85°) rather than relying only on sheen names. MPI’s gloss level ranges are one widely used method to define those targets in a consistent way.

Sheen Standards and Vista-MPI Alignment

MPI defines paint “gloss” (sheen rating of the applied paint) using ranges of gloss units at 60° and 85°. To reduce ambiguity when translating finish schedules into product selections, Vista Paints’ standard sheen names can be mapped to these MPI gloss levels as shown in Table 1.

 MPI MASTER PAINTERS INSTITUTE	Gloss @ 60°	Sheen @ 85°	 Vista paint
Gloss Level 1 Traditional matte finish, Flat	Maximum 5 units	Maximum 10 units	Flat/Matte
Gloss Level 2 High side sheen Flat, “Velvet-like” finish	Maximum 10 units	10-35 units	Velvasheen
Gloss Level 3 Traditional “Eggshell-like” finish	10-25 units	10-35 units	Eggshell
Gloss Level 4 “Satin-like” finish	20-35 units	Minimum 35 units	Satin
Gloss Level 5 Traditional Semi-Gloss	35-70 units	N/A	Semi-Gloss
Gloss Level 6 Traditional Gloss	70-85 units	N/A	Gloss
Gloss Level 7 High Gloss	More than 85 units	N/A	High Gloss

Table 1

Interior: Where Each Sheen Typically Makes Sense

Sheen selection should balance appearance, cleanability, and surface tolerance (Table 2). Flat/Matte (MPI G1) is most common for ceilings and low-traffic walls, and it’s often preferred in critical lighting areas because its low reflectance helps hide joint telegraphing and minor surface defects. Velvasheen (MPI G2) and Eggshell (MPI G3) are a common choice for most interior walls, balancing a soft look with improved cleanability and touch-up compared to dead-flat. Satin (MPI G4) is frequently used in higher-traffic spaces where routine cleaning is expected, offering better washability but showing more imperfections than eggshell. Semi-gloss (MPI G5) is typically specified for trim, doors, and moisture-prone areas due to its durability and cleanability, while Gloss (MPI G6) is usually reserved for accents

or heavy-clean areas because it is highly reflective and requires the highest level of surface preparation to avoid highlighting defects.

INTERIOR PROJECTS	Flat	Matte	Velvasheen	Eggshell	Satin	Semi-Gloss	Gloss
Family Rooms, Living Rooms & Bedrooms	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Dining Rooms	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Ceilings	✓						
Kid's Rooms		✓	✓	✓			
Hallways			✓	✓	✓		
Kitchens					✓	✓	✓
Bathrooms					✓	✓	✓
Doors, Window, Shutters & Trim					✓	✓	✓
Cabinets & Furniture					✓	✓	✓

Table 2

Exterior: Where Each Sheen Typically Makes Sense

On exterior substrates, sheen selection balances aesthetics with weathering and substrate condition (Table 3). Flat (MPI G1) is often selected for large expanses of smooth wall substrates, such as tilt-up concrete, where uniform appearance is critical and surface variations can be challenging to fully eliminate. It helps obscure minor defects and reduces highlight/shadow contrast that can make imperfections stand out.

Satin (MPI G4) is widely used where a modest increase in cleanability and moisture shedding is desired without the high reflectivity of semi-gloss. Semi-Gloss (MPI G5) is commonly used for exterior trim, doors, and shutters because those components see more handling, moisture exposure, and cleaning demand. Gloss (MPI G6) tend to be limited to specific design intent or specialty uses (e.g., certain metals or feature details) due to reflectivity and the need for excellent surface preparation.

EXTERIOR PROJECTS	Flat	Matte	Velvasheen	Eggshell	Satin	Semi-Gloss	Gloss
Cladding & Siding	✓	✓	✓	✓			
Metal Fences & Railings					✓	✓	✓
Doors					✓	✓	✓
Windows & Shutters					✓	✓	✓
Trim					✓	✓	✓
Garage Doors					✓	✓	✓
Outdoor Furniture					✓	✓	✓

Table 3

Key Takeaways

When appearance consistency matters—multi-brand bidding, phased construction, repairs, or touch-ups—specifying the MPI gloss level (or otherwise specifying gloss unit targets at 60°/85°) reduces ambiguity versus relying only on terms like “eggshell” or “satin.” The descriptive sheen names commonly used in finish schedules are just that—descriptive—and their meaning can vary from manufacturer to manufacturer. The most robust approach is to list the sheen name for clarity and the gloss target range (or MPI gloss level) for enforceable consistency. MPI’s published ranges are a practical reference point for that purpose.

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