

Before you finish your basement

A checklist to work through before the first stud goes up.

Below the Sill

WATER FIRST

- ☐ **Gutters, downspouts, grading and window wells** checked and fixed outside.
- ☐ **No active leaks**, and you know when, where and with what rain water has come in before.
- ☐ **Sump and drainage working**, if the basement has them.

DRY ENOUGH TO FINISH?

- ☐ **Humidity logged for two to four weeks**, including a heavy rain (Robert Stulp's field rule). The EPA recommends keeping it below 60%, ideally 30–50%.
- ☐ **Checked after a big storm**: the wall-floor joint, cracks, window wells, the sump and low spots.
- ☐ **Plastic-square test** on the concrete for a day or two. Moisture underneath means the concrete is passing moisture. A clue, not proof.
- ☐ **Wood moisture checked** in the sill plate, rim joist and framing; no mold or musty smell.

STRUCTURE

- ☐ Horizontal, stair-step or offset cracks looked at before they're covered
- ☐ No bowing, leaning posts or sagging floors left unexplained
- ☐ Cracks photographed and measured, so you can tell later if they move
- ☐ No columns, beams or posts moved without a design

PLAN BEFORE THE WALLS CLOSE

- ☐ Sump pump reachable for service
- ☐ Backup pump and high-water alarm, if a failure could flood the room
- ☐ Dehumidifier location and drain
- ☐ Access to cleanouts, shutoffs, plumbing and mechanical equipment
- ☐ Egress window for any bedroom
- ☐ Permit from your building department

AVOID

- ✗ Plastic sheeting behind the drywall on a basement wall
- ✗ Fiberglass right against the concrete
- ✗ Drywall touching the slab
- ✗ Carpet on a damp slab
- ✗ Finishing during a dry spell without seeing a wet season

By Robert Stulp and Daniel Mercer · belowthesill.com/basement-finishing/ · Sources: EPA, A brief guide to mold, moisture and your home (2026); U.S. Department of Energy, Building Science Education and Building America Solution Center. Rules and permits vary by locality.