How to Check if a Wall or Door Frame Is Plumb With Your Phone

Plumb means perfectly vertical — and it matters more than you think. Here's how to check walls, door frames, fence posts, and more using just your phone.

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Plumb vs. Level: Why the Difference Matters

These two words get mixed up constantly on job sites and in DIY videos, but they mean opposite things. **Level** refers to a horizontal surface — a countertop, a shelf, a floor. **Plumb** refers to a perfectly vertical surface — a wall, a door frame, a fence post. A plumb line hangs straight down due to gravity, forming a 90-degree angle with the floor. When a wall is plumb, it reads 0° of deviation from true vertical.

This distinction matters because the fix is different. A wall that isn't level is a floor problem. A wall that isn't plumb is a wall problem — and it will affect everything attached to it: tiles, cabinetry, door frames, shower enclosures, wardrobes. Getting it right before you install anything saves hours of frustration later.

When You Actually Need to Check Plumb

Not every surface needs to be checked, but these situations demand it:

- **Before tiling a wall** — Tiles amplify errors. A wall that's 5mm out of plumb over 2 meters will cause grout lines to visibly widen or narrow top to bottom.
- **Before hanging a door** — A door frame that's out of plumb will cause the door to swing open or drift closed on its own. It also puts stress on hinges over time.

- **Installing a wardrobe or tall bookcase** — These need to sit plumb so doors and drawers align. If the wall behind them is out, you need to compensate with feet or shims.
- **Fence posts and structural columns** — Plumb is load-bearing here. An out-of-plumb post transfers stress unevenly and can fail faster.
- **Shower walls** — Water runs down plumb walls cleanly. An out-of-plumb shower wall can direct water toward joints, causing leaks over time.

How to Use Your Phone to Check Plumb

Open **Bubble Level & Angle Gauge** and switch to **vertical (plumb) mode**. Hold your phone flat against the surface with the back of the phone touching the wall — not the edge. The app displays the angle deviation from true vertical in real time.

For practical construction use, switch the unit display to **mm/m**. This tells you directly: "this wall deviates by X millimeters per meter of height," which is exactly how tolerances are written in building codes and finish specs. You don't need to do any mental math.

Use the **hold function** to freeze the reading once you've found the worst spot on the wall. You can then step back, mark the wall, or take a photo without the number changing on you.

Construction Tolerances: What's Actually Acceptable

Not every wall needs to be perfectly plumb. Here's how professionals think about it:

- **±2 mm per 2 m (0.06°)** — Premium finish. Required for high-end tile work, frameless glass, or luxury cabinetry installations.
- **±5 mm per 2 m** — Standard residential construction. This is the tolerance most building codes allow for new builds.
- **±10 mm per 2 m** — Renovation acceptable. Common in older properties where achieving tighter tolerances isn't cost-effective.

The **tolerance bands** in Bubble Level & Angle Gauge (OK / NEAR / OUT) give you an instant visual verdict without having to remember these numbers. Green means you're within spec; yellow means you're getting close to the limit; red means you need to address it.

Why Old Houses Are Rarely Plumb — And When It Doesn't Matter

Buildings settle over decades. Foundations shift slightly, timber frames dry and twist, and walls that were plumb when built are often no longer so by the time you're renovating them. In many cases, this is cosmetic and structural checks matter far more than a millimeter reading.

When it doesn't matter: painting a wall, hanging artwork, running baseboards. Minor deviation is invisible and doesn't affect function.

When it does matter: installing anything with a fixed-height relationship to the floor (floor-to-ceiling cabinetry, tiled wainscoting), fitting a pre-hung door, or installing a shower enclosure.

In these cases, you need to know the deviation so you can compensate — not discover it after grouting is complete.

What To Do When a Wall Is Out of Plumb

You have three main options depending on severity and context:

1. **Shims** — For door frames and cabinetry, thin shims behind the frame at measured intervals bring it back to plumb without touching the wall itself.
2. **Adjustable feet** — Most modern flat-pack furniture includes these. Dial them to compensate for an out-of-plumb wall and the unit will sit correctly even if the wall doesn't.
3. **Float the wall** — For tiling over a seriously out-of-plumb wall, a plasterer can apply a skim coat or render to build up the low side and create a plumb surface. This is the most work but results in a genuinely flat, plumb substrate.

In all three cases, measuring the deviation first — with a reading in mm/m from **Bubble Level & Angle Gauge** — tells you exactly how much material or adjustment you need. Guessing wastes time and materials.

Download Bubble Level & Angle Gauge free for iOS or Android — no ads, no tracking, and it works fully offline.

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