

The First Steps When Beginning with Quilting

How to Start with Quilting - Part 3

If you're a complete beginner eager to embark on your quilting journey, this guide is here to help you through every step of the process. From choosing fabrics to mastering basic quilting techniques, let's explore how to start and finish your very first quilt.

There are a few basic techniques and knowledge areas that will help you feel more confident as you just start with this craft. This blog is the third part of a How to Start with Quilting Series. In this series, you can read about:

- Part 1: [Basic quilting terminology](#)
- Part 2: [What you need to get started with quilting](#)
- Part 3: The fundamental steps to start quilting

Before you start setting up your sewing space, first read Part 1 and 2 of this quilting beginner series. Throughout all three blogs, we'll provide links to in-depth articles that will help you delve deeper into each aspect of this captivating craft.

Once you have the materials and tools at hand, you can practice cutting, pressing, basting and quilting on scrap fabrics. Then set up your quilting space with our checklists. After all this, you'll be ready to start making your first quilt with a head start. We'll cover a bit more about what to practice and when, a little further on, in this blog.

What Do You Need to Master Before You Make Your First Quilt

The most important point of attention when making a quilt is accuracy. Accuracy means that corners line up, that points are sharp, and that quilt blocks fit together. In order to be accurate, you need to practice. It will take time to fully master all the different steps and you will learn by doing. But if you have never sewed before, I would advise you practice a bit beforehand. The following four skills don't involve all the steps to make a quilt. I picked the basic skills for every step. Within each step there are more advanced techniques that I don't talk about.

1. Basic Sewing Skills
2. Cutting Skills
3. Pressing Skills

4. Quilting Skills

Be sure to practice on scraps so you don't mess with your carefully selected (and maybe expensive) fabrics.

1. Basic Sewing Skills

You need some basic sewing skills when you want to make a quilt, both hand sewing and machine sewing. Go to the Madam Sew [Learn How to Sew Series](#) if you want a complete guide for beginners. Find out what really matters, learn how to use a sewing machine correctly and get plenty of tips and exercises that will give you a head start.

To make a basic quilt you need to know how to do a **basic straight stitch** with a sewing machine. Just set your machine on a regular 2.5 stitch width, put a fabric scrap fabric that is folded in half (to make two layers of fabric) under the sewing machine and go slowly, trying to keep a straight line at a consistent speed. When you can do that, practice **sewing straight seams maintaining a consistent ¼ inch seam allowance**. Accurate seam allowances contribute to precise piecing and a well-constructed quilt top. With these two skills you can start constructing a basic quilt block.

If you struggle with sewing straight lines you can try the extra [sewing exercises for beginners](#) that we shared in the Learn How To Sew Series or try one of the different [tools that help to keep a straight line when sewing](#).

2. Cutting Skills

Be sure to invest in [good cutting tools](#) so you won't be frustrated when trying to cut accurately. Get a rotary cutter with a sharp blade, a sturdy non-slip ruler and a self healing cutting mat that is in good condition.

In the following two blogs you can find tips on how to hold your rotary cutter firmly (don't grip it too tightly!) and maneuver it safely. Practice controlling the pressure applied to the cutter as you move it along the fabric. Know that your body position is important too for safety and the right pressure.



If you want to practice cutting with a rotary cutter, start by cutting fabric precisely along straight lines.

1. Mark some lines with a marker and ruler on scraps and cut on the lines.
2. Mark squares and rectangular shapes with a marker and try to cut these without slipping and sliding. Start with small pieces and gradually move to bigger pieces. Measure afterwards to see how accurately you really cut.
3. Cut long strips of fabric and cut them up into smaller pieces as this is a more efficient way to cut fabric pieces for quilting.

Safety tips for cutting fabric

- Always use a cutting mat underneath your fabric when cutting.
- Be sure to keep your fingers away from the edge of the ruler.
- Always cut away from your body, not toward it. This may mean that you have to move around the cutting mat & work surface or physically turn the cutting mat.
- Always keep the rotary cutter in the closed position and out of reach when not in use.
- Use [a sharp blade](#) in your rotary cutter for the best results. Throw away old blades.
- Take your time and be patient – rushing can lead to inaccurate cuts and potential injury.

3. Pressing Skills

Proper pressing is essential for accurate piecing and quilt making in general. Learn how to press seams to one side and nest seams to achieve a flat and professional-looking quilt top. With some seam intersections, pressing to one side is not the best solution. Read all about the different pressing techniques in Carole's blog about [Pressing Principles for Quilting](#). In [Pressing Basics for Quilters](#), Ana talks about the best pressing set-up, how to correct mistakes and when to use starch.



Pressing is a very important part of [achieving flat seams](#) but did you know that using 50wt cotton thread also helps to achieve flatter quilt seams? Or that ironing instead of pressing can stretch your seams?



4. Quilting Skills

Quilting is stitching through all layers of the quilt sandwich to secure all layers together. You can quilt in straight lines, curved lines, intricate shapes, in the seams or across all seams. To practice, you will need to make a quilt sandwich first so you have some volume. It isn't necessary to make an actual quilt top. Just grab two pieces of cotton and some batting, baste them together with some pins (batting in the middle) and topstitch in straight lines across the fabric sandwich through all layers. Quilting in straight lines is the safest option if you are just starting. You can draw some lines with a [temporary fabric marker](#) to guide you.



How To Prepare for Quilting

We have [a checklist for you to get everything set up to quilt](#). If you follow this checklist your quilting experience will be much easier and stress-free.

There are three areas that this checklist addresses

1. Your quilting environment or quilting space: Get your sewing machine ready so you won't encounter too many technical issues that slow you down. And set up your sewing table, ironing station and tools in a way that will make the process more efficient.
2. Take your time for the "Before-You-Start-Quilting" prep work. Even though it is not the most fun part of quilting, you will be happy when you are actually quilting that you got it done.

3. The Piecing Prep List is a list with tools and sewing machine settings when you start piecing the little fabric pieces together.

One of the things that also goes into a good preparation is having your fabrics ready to use. When you sew clothing, you need to prewash your fabrics, period. You don't want your pants to shrink when you wash them for the first time. In quilting, there is a debate going on about this. Do you prewash your quilting fabrics or not? There are some pros and cons. Cara listed them in [the prewashing-debate-for-quilting-fabric blog](#).

Another is to make sure to read the quilt pattern instructions from start to finish before you start to quilt.

How To Make Your First Quilt

If you think a complete quilt is too daunting, you can first try [making a quilt block](#) and maybe make a mini hanging quilt out of a single block. This will help you get familiar with the quilting process without feeling overwhelmed. You'll practice most of the steps and have something that won't take too much time, as a little test project. Consider this your "practice quilt."

If you want to learn what some of [the most common quilt blocks](#) are, read this blog, get inspired and know what design to look for.

These are the 10 main steps you will basically go through when making any quilt. The first steps are already covered in the previous parts of this series. If you want a tutorial for a specific quilt, you need to go to one of the Madam Sew tutorials. The links are provided in this blog.

OVERVIEW OF THE 10 STEPS TO MAKE A QUILT

- Step 1: Gathering The Supplies
- Step 2: Choosing A Quilt Pattern
- Step 3: Setting Up Your Quilting Space
- Step 4: Cutting The Fabrics
- Step 5: Assembling Quilt Blocks and Constructing The Quilt Top
- Step 6: Optional: Adding Borders
- Step 7: Layering - Adding Batting and Backing
- Step 8: Quilting
- Step 9: Trimming the Quilt Sandwich
- Step 10: Binding a Quilt

Step 1: Gathering The Supplies

Go to part 2 of this quilting series where you find an [overview of what you need to get started with quilting](#) and details about how to select the right tools, fabrics and other materials.

Step 2: Choosing A Quilt Pattern

Choose a simple quilt pattern for your first project. Make sure it doesn't involve intricate piecing or too complicated shapes. Basic patterns like a simple strip quilt, a four-patch quilt or a nine-patch quilt are perfect for a beginner. They involve straight-line cuts and either rectangles or square shapes. On the blog we have 3 posts that guide you step-by-step through the process of making a nine-patch quilt.

1. [Slash your Stash: Nine Patch Quilt Part 1](#)
2. [Slash your Stash: Nine Patch Quilt Part 2](#): How to use the "cutting number" and finish making the nine-patch blocks for the quilt.
3. [Slash your Stash: Nine Patch Quilt Part 3](#) : How to assemble the quilt, quilting and binding.



When you buy a quilt pattern, make sure to read the instructions carefully and go through the whole text before you start. If you are looking for more information on [how to read a quilting pattern](#), I can advise this thorough read by Amber Elliot. You'll learn how to read and understand pattern instructions in general, including fabric requirements, cutting instructions, and assembly steps.

You can find free patterns for quilting with a simple google search. If you want a Madam Sew selection, browse through this [blog with five easy free quilting patterns](#).

Step 3: Setting Up Your Quilting Space

Clean up your space, make some room and have all the tools at hand. You need a table to put your sewing machine on, some space to cut fabrics, and an iron and ironing board or mat. This can be in a dedicated space but a little corner of your kitchen table will also do.

Go to the previous section of this blog for tips on how to set up your workstation the most efficient way and how to get your sewing machine ready and prepare your tools before you start a project.



Step 4: Cutting The Fabrics

We've covered the tools (rotary cutter, ruler and mat) in Part 2 and shared how to practice cutting fabric for your quilt above. Now you can start cutting your fabric pieces for your quilt blocks.

- Smooth out your fabric on the cutting mat, align your ruler with the edge or fold of the fabric. If you are right handed, you position the raw edge of your fabric on the right. The ruler will be under your left hand and the rotary cutter in your right hand.
- Before starting to cut out the pieces for your quilt pattern, begin by cutting off the raw edge of the fabric you bought. This will provide a clean crisp edge to position your ruler on.



- Once you've cut a long strip, you can cut it into the shapes and sizes you need for your quilt pattern. As a beginner, that will most likely mean cutting it into squares or rectangles.



Step 5: Assembling Quilt Blocks and Constructing The Quilt Top

A quilt block is a building block of a quilt top. Most quilts consist of multiple blocks pieced together but you can also make a quilt top without blocks, like a crazy quilt for example. There are so many different patterns and options to make a quilt top. Using blocks makes it easier to structure the making process.



Once you have all the quilt blocks you need, it is time to sew the whole quilt top together. Quilt blocks are often bound together by sashing. Sashing offers a border around the block which is often more pleasing to the eye, it makes it less cluttered. There are different ways to add

sashing as you can read in this [making-and-sewing-sashing-for-quilting blog](#).



Matching and nesting seams accurately is very important in this phase of the process. With [the Web Method for Quilt Assembly](#) you can sew blocks together more easily and faster while keeping everything straight.



Step 6: Optional: Adding Borders

Borders not only frame your quilt but also provide stability. Not every quilt has borders. Attach borders to your quilt top as directed by your chosen pattern. In this blog you can learn [how to plan borders for a quilt](#).



Step 7: Layering - Adding Batting and Backing

Lay out your quilt backing, followed by the batting, and then your quilt top. This is the quilt sandwich.

To learn more about quilt batting check out the following blog post.



Traditionally white cotton fabric is a popular type of **backing fabric** as it suits most quilts. It is always a good idea to use a simple print or a plain color. A plain color can make the quilt stitches stand out. If you want to mask them, use a print. And, if you use a fabric that you like, you can use your quilt on both sides if you want. When choosing a quilt backing, aim for a fabric that has a comparable quality to the fabric used in the quilt top. This helps for the washability and ensures the durability of your quilt. Always cut the backing and batting 3-4 inches larger than the quilt top. This gives you some margin when aligning the layers.

Baste the three layers together using safety pins or temporary adhesive spray before sewing the layers together. This step prepares your quilt for quilting. The layers are secured and will not shift during quilting. More details about [basting in sewing in general](#) or [pin-basting a quilt](#) with curved pins can be found in these two Madam Sew blogs. To learn more about quilt batting and what to use for backing fabric check out the following blog posts.



In this phase you need to ask yourself if you will **quilt the quilt** yourself. You can decide to give the quilt to a long arm quilter to finish. Some bigger size quilts are hard to quilt with a regular sewing machine. If you want to do that, check with the quilter what size of backing and batting fabric is required.

When you are **not finishing the edges with binding**, this is the step where you close the edge with a stitch on the edge on the wrong side, plus leave a turning hole. Turn the quilt right side out and close the turning hole. The nine-patch quilt referenced earlier is finished this way.

Step 8: Quilting

Quilt by stitching through all layers of the quilt sandwich (the quilt top, the batting and the backing). You can choose from various quilting techniques like straight-line quilting or free-motion quilting. It is not necessary to quilt every square inch of a quilt. However, you do need to do something to hold the batting in place between the layers. Depending on the type of batting, there may be different requirements on how closely to quilt to keep it from shifting too much once the quilt is done.

The easiest way to quilt your quilt sandwich is to do [straight-line quilting](#). This involves stitching straight lines across the quilt top. You can do rows, columns or diagonals. This may not sound like the most exciting technique but it is a great way to build confidence and gain experience. On top of that it is time-efficient and cost-effective. It can be done with a regular sewing machine, if your quilt sandwich is not too thick and your quilt not too big. To make it more interesting, you can use different types and weights of thread and use contrasting colors. As you become more comfortable with quilting, you can explore free-motion quilting or start using more intricate designs.



Step 9: Trimming the Quilt Sandwich

Before you add the binding to a quilt, it is important to trim the quilt so you can add the binding in a straight line. This phase is also called squaring up the quilt. Precision is not only important when sewing seams and using consistent seam allowances, sewing blocks the correct size, and

squaring up the blocks. It is also important when dealing with quilt edges because they are often irregular due to quilting.

If you want to learn [how to square up your quilt](#), or a quilt block, read Ernie's blog and learn her technique to get straight edges and a straight quilt sandwich to attach the binding to.



Step 10: Binding a Quilt

Finish the edges of a quilt sandwich with binding. To perform this phase in the whole process, you first need to make the binding. To do so you need to make a very long fabric strip that fits around your quilt edge plus about 4-6 inches and press it in half lengthwise. This strip is wrapped around the edge of the quilt sandwich and stitched down on both sides. The binding will add a finished touch to your quilt while hiding the raw edges of the quilt sandwich.

Attaching binding can be a challenging part of making a quilt. There are various techniques to do this. One of the easier ways to bind a quilt is using a **double-fold straight grain binding**. This means using a binding strip that is cut on the straight grain and not on the bias. A strip cut on the bias has stretch. A straight grain strip doesn't.



You can use [a binding presser foot](#) or an [edge joining foot to help you attach the binding](#). If you want to use bias tape for binding, you can use our [bias tape maker set](#) to make folding the edges a piece of cake.



Another way of hiding the edges is [self-binding a quilt](#). With this technique you don't cut a strip but fold the backing over the quilt top to finish the edges.



Exploring Further

While this introduction provides a broad overview of getting started with quilting, there's a lot more to explore in each step. If you want to delve deeper into any of these aspects or learn more about advanced quilting techniques, browse through [the Madam Sew Sewing and Quilting Blog](#) or get updates by subscribing to our mailing list.

Conclusion

Now that you've been introduced to the world of quilting, it's time to roll up your sleeves, gather your supplies, and embark on this exciting journey. With practice and patience, you'll soon be creating stunning quilts to cherish for years to come.

Quilting in general is a skill that develops with practice. Be patient with yourself and don't be afraid to make mistakes; they're part of the learning process. Quilting is also a very versatile and forgiving craft. There is no need to master everything before starting your first quilt. Each project will enhance your skills. You will learn more with every stitch. If you are making a quilt to give as a gift and find that it isn't perfect, remember that the receiver will be thrilled that you made this for them, they will most likely not even notice.

Enjoy the creative process and don't be afraid to experiment!

Happy Quilting!

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