



Sewing by Sarah

ENGLISH PAPER PIECING GETTING STARTED GUIDE

WRITTEN BY CATHY PERLMUTTER
COMPLIMENTS OF SEWING BY SARAH

Welcome to English Paper Piecing!

by Cathy Perlmutter*



English Paper Piecing doesn't require a big investment in materials. Here are the basics. If you're a stitcher you probably own most of them!

Your First EPP Kit

- **FABRIC** - In theory, you can EPP with almost any fabric, but quilting cottons are ideal, because they are high quality, sturdy, press well, and crease easily.
- **SEWING THREAD** - Good quality, poly-cotton blend or 100% polyester thread. (100% cotton may be more likely to shred from rubbing against cardstock.)
- **GLUE STICK or PEN** - Stitchers' glue pens (right) are perfect for EPP, because of the narrow tip. There are several brands. Regular "temporary" glue sticks also work well, and are less expensive, but also messier; you'll have to wash your hands more often.
- **ERASABLE FABRIC MARKER** - The purple air-erase markers, or blue washout markers, work well. It should show up on the back of the fabric.
- **LIGHTWEIGHT CARDSTOCK** - The kind that goes through a printer, sold at the office supply store; or use old file folders and other cardstock items.
- **SLENDER, STRONG HAND-SEWING NEEDLES** - EPPers favor Hemmings Size 11 Milliners, but you can start out with any slender, long small-eyed needle.
- **SCISSORS** One pair for fabric, plus another pair for paper/plastic/cardstock.
- **EMBOSSING STYLUS (right) or NARROW CROCHET HOOK (around size D)** - Optional, to break through glue on cardstock templates and pry them out, with minimal risk of poking through fabric. One stylus ball end should be no smaller than 1.5-2 cm.
- **ROTARY CUTTER AND MAT** - Optional; faster way to cut out templates and fabric.
- **THREAD CONDITIONER** - Optional; reduces spontaneous thread knotting.
- **TEMPLATE PLASTIC** - Optional; Flat sheets of translucent plastic are sold in sewing stores. Useful for fussy-cutting designs from fabric.
- **CLIPS** - Optional: Paper clips or sewing clips are helpful for holding fabric in place.



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Introduction: What Makes EPP Excellent

Wrap fabric around paper (or cardstock) shapes, and sew the edges together - that's the simple idea behind English Paper Piecing, a 400-year old technique that really did come from England.

EPP requires no pinning, no math, and imperfect seam allowances are usually ok - the paper shapes make it accurate. Complicated-looking stars, kaleidoscopes, and Y-seams are all accomplished more easily than with traditional piecing.

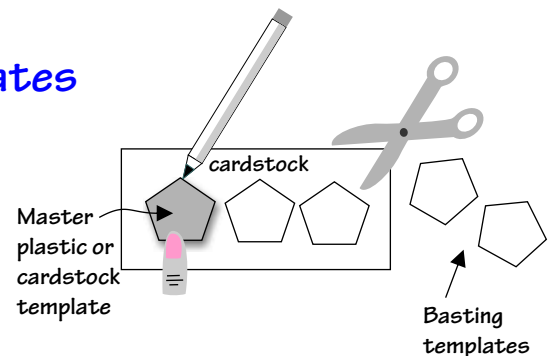
And as if that wasn't enough, EPP is portable. Fill a lunch box with EPP papers, needle, thread and a glue pen. You can do it on airplanes, subways, beaches, any place with adequate lighting! For all these reasons, EPP may be the most addictive of all quilt-piecing techniques!



STEP ONE: Create cardstock basting templates

Start with a "master" template. It could be a plastic template you buy or make (directions on p.3). Or, it could be a cut-out shape from p. 10. With a sharp or mechanical pencil, trace around that shape onto cardstock, to create as many "basting template" copies as you need. Cut them out on the line.

Except: If you buy specialized oversized plastic EPP templates, which incorporate seam allowances, you can't use them to make same-size basting templates. These acrylic templates are usually sold with precut basting paper packs.



STEP TWO: Choose a seam allowance, cut out the fabric

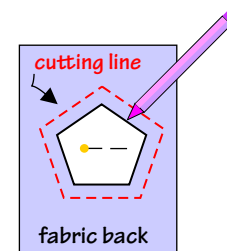
Place a basting template on back of the fabric. Hold in position; or pin it; or add a light dab of glue to its center back.

Cut the fabric about 1/4" - 1/2" larger than the template (or its outline), all the way around (red dotted line in the diagram.) Some EPPer's like a 1/4" seam allowance, some prefer 1/2" - but 3/8" seems to be the most popular! Do some experimenting to figure out which works best for you.

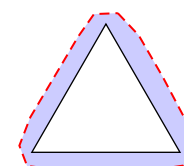
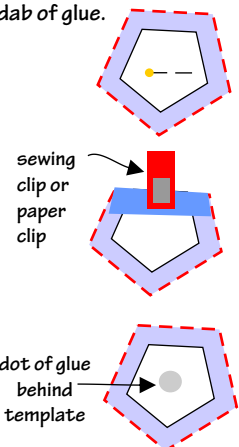
The first time you EPP, you may want to use a ruler and temporary marker to trace around the template and draw the outer cutting line. With a little experience, you can eyeball it - and it needn't be perfect. Cut with fabric shears; or a rotary cutter.

If it's a tiny triangle, or has narrow sharp points, cut a little less of a seam allowance - a scant 1/4" - above and next to the points, and across the tip.

[Continue to p. 4 - unless you're fussy cutting - in that case, go to p. 3.](#)



You'll wind up with cardstock templates held temporarily in place with pin, clip, or a light dab of glue.



Fussy Cutting: What, When, Why and How

“Fussy-cutting” means cutting specific designs out of print fabric. It can create spectacular kaleidoscopic effects. You’ll need a “master” plastic template. Buy a set, or make your own from translucent plastic sheets (see supply list). If you bought yours, skip step A.

A. Tape plastic over a template outline (like one of the shapes on p. 10). Trace the shape onto the plastic. Cut it out. In this example, it’s a triangle. You only need one plastic template per shape.

B. Trace around the plastic template to draw as many cardstock basting templates as needed - six in this example.

C. Here’s our imaginary print fabric. Lay it out flat. If you want to cut with a rotary cutter, lay it on a cutting mat.

D. Slide the template around until you find a location you like. Use a pencil, a waxy china marker or a sharp crayon (green in the diagram) to trace a few lines from the print **onto the plastic template**. (You can wipe them off later.) Trace enough so you find the same design elsewhere on the fabric. Diagram **E** shows the marked template.

F. Use temporary fabric marker (pink in the diagram), or a pencil, to draw a seam allowance line $\frac{3}{8}$ ths- $\frac{1}{2}$ ” beyond the template outline. Cut on that outer line with scissors or rotary cutter.

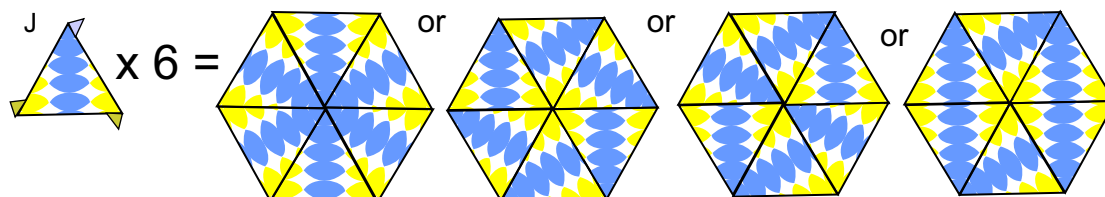
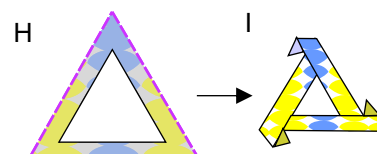
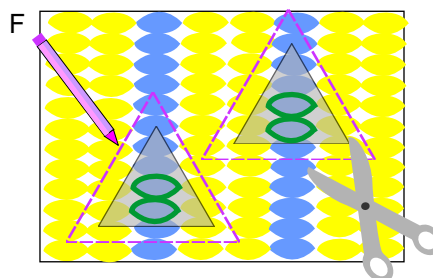
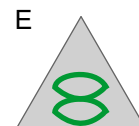
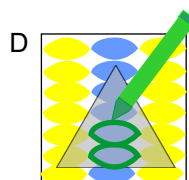
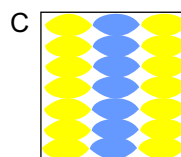
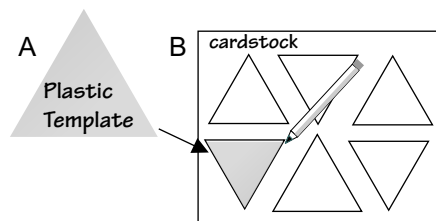
Then use the marked plastic template - or your first cut piece of fabric - to find, mark, and cut out as many more identical pieces as you need - in this example, 5 more.

G. Before basting, each piece looks like G from the front.

H. Center a cardstock basting template on back. Check the front with the marked plastic template.

I. Baste the edges inward (The next 2 pages explain how). The basted triangle will look something like I.

J. Before sewing, experiment with different ways to orient your pieces. There will be surprises! The figure below shows some of the possibilities. The hardest part is deciding which kaleidoscopic arrangement you like best!



STEP THREE: “Baste” the fabric around the cardstock

In English Paper Piecing, “basting” means wrapping and securing fabric around the paper or cardstock shape. Traditionally, the fabric was held in place with long basting stitches on back. And many EPPers still prefer the stitch method. (See box on next page.)

But using a glue stick or pen is much faster and more accurate. And if you do the gluing at an ironing board, it goes even better, with less glue.

No matter how you baste, it’s important to be consistent about which edge you fold in first - otherwise, seam allowances might bash into each other, preventing a tight fit.

Here’s how the folding works. Place the template on the back of the cut fabric. (If there’s still a pin or clip in it, remove it now.)

A. Imagine L and R markings indicating each corner’s left and the right sides. You don’t have to mark these on the fabric - just keep them in mind.

Decide whether you want to fold the left or right side in first, and **stick with that decision for the entire project**. For this illustration, let’s decide to always turn in the **LEFT SIDE FIRST**.

Along with left and right, these diagrams have numbers to help you follow along - no need to mark any of these on your fabric.

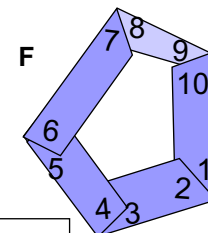
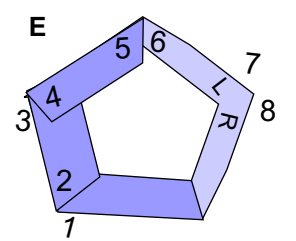
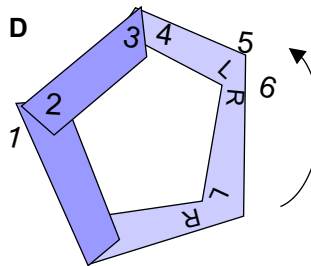
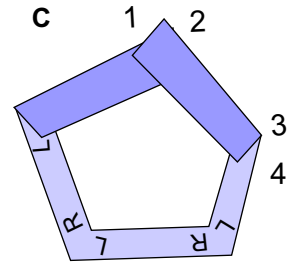
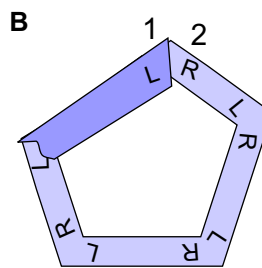
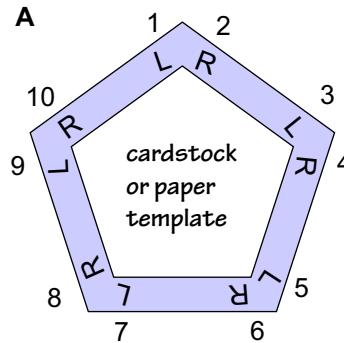
B. Fold the left side of the top corner down - that’s at 1. Use glue sparingly - a dab under flap 1. Press with a finger or iron, so the upper part of the fold is tight against the cardstock . Dab more glue on top of flap 1.

C. Fold side 2 downward and press (with fingers or iron.) [If stitch basting: Put a knot at the end of the thread, and take two small stitches in place to hold flap 2 down on top of flap 1. See box on next page.]

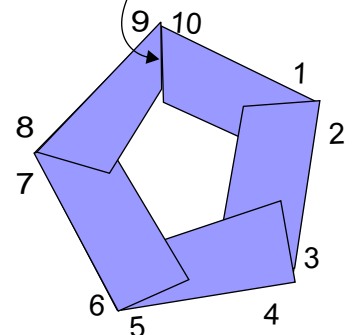
D. Rotate the piece counterclockwise so corner 3-4 is at the top. Dab glue under flap 3 and fold it down. . Dab glue on top, and fold down 4. [If stitching, take a few long stitches to get you from the first corner to this corner; then take two stitches in place to hold 4 on top of 3.]

E. Fold down flap 5, with a dot of glue. Fold 6 on top of it. Do 7-8 the same way

G. For that last corner flap - 9-10 - tuck corner 9 into and under the seam allowance at 10. Press.

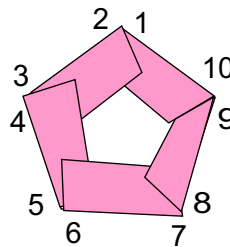


G Tuck the last flap into and under the first flap.



...Or, do the opposite!

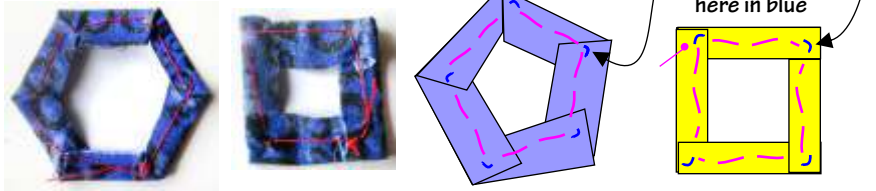
What if you prefer to fold the right side of each corner in first? Right-handed stitch-basters might prefer this. The pink diagram shows how the finished piece would look. Unlike the example above, you would turn the piece clockwise as you go.



Stitch-Basting Instead of Gluing

Follow the folding procedure on the previous page, but instead of gluing, take long stitches through the turned seam allowances. With large pieces, over about 1.5", you may also need to sew through the cardstock, to the front side, and then back again.

Pull thread tight as you go, to bring in the raw edges. At the beginning, end, and at each corner, take a second, tacking stitch. Baste with any thread you like - remove it after the shapes are joined. Or, if you didn't have to stitch through the front, you can leave it in forever!



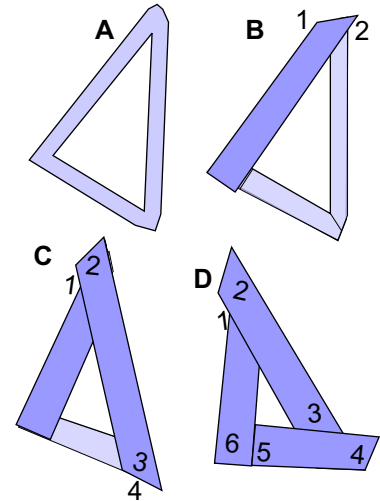
Basting, continued

Basting triangles and other shapes with sharp angles is done the same way as the previous page, but creates what EPPers call "tails," "flags," or "dog ears." They're confusing, but if you stay consistent about which edge you turn in first, they won't create problems.

A, B. Fold the left side of the top corner over to the right, at 1. Then push side 2 over to the left. Apply dabs of glue as needed.

C, Fold down corner 3, and glue.

D. Then fold corner 4 up over 3. Fold corner 5 up, and tuck it underneath flap 6. Press.



Finishing Stray Dog Ears

If a triangle is surrounded by other pieces, the dog ears created by basting don't need special treatment. They're usually easy to turn under as you join pieces. And if you were consistent about which edge you basted inward first, adjoining ears will nest nicely rather than getting in each others' way.

But if a triangle point winds up alone at the edge of a piece, or if you weren't consistent about which side you folded in first, dog ears can be trickier to deal with. Here's a resolution.

A. Open up the tip that needs finishing. If it's glue basted, you might need to spritz a few drops of water on it to loosen glue. Press it flat.

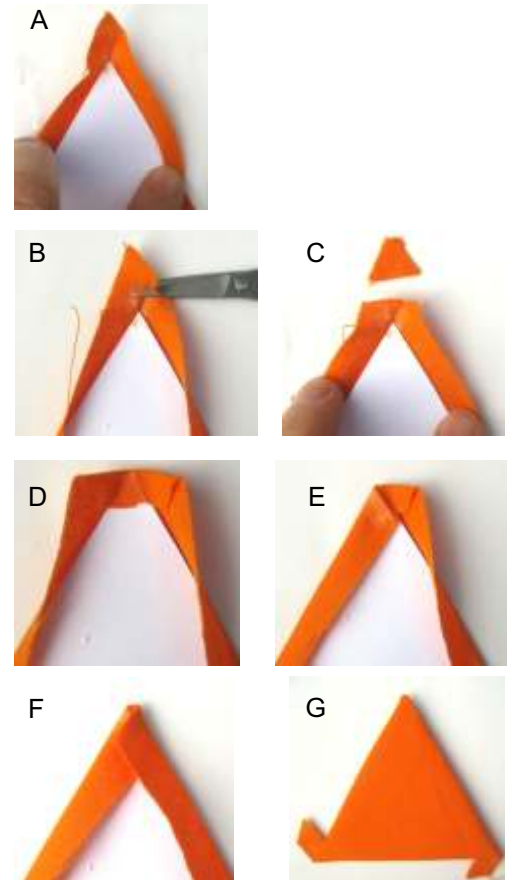
B, C. Trim the tip fabric flat across. There should still be a scant 1/4" of fabric above and next to the template tip.

D. Apply a dab of glue to the tip and fold it straight down. Press if an iron is available.

E. Fold in one side, pressing the fold close against the template by hand or iron. (Here, it doesn't matter which side you fold in first.)

F. Fold in the other side.

G. Ta daa! There's your finished tip, ready to be applied.



STEP FOUR: Stitch the pieces together

Like everything else in EPP, people have different favorite stitches. The simplest is a whipstitch. If you're right handed, start stitching on the right, holding left ends together with your left hand (Lefties: Reverse!)

A. Knot the end of the thread (pink), send the needle under and out of the seam allowance. Pull to the knot, and take two tiny stitches.

B. Line up the top edge of the first piece with the top edge of the second piece (the yellow square in the diagram), right sides together. Double check that the corners of the front and back piece line up.

C. You can send the needle from back to front, or front to back - whichever you prefer. It should go through both fabric folds, *just* above the templates. With each stitch, pull the thread all the way through. Then bring the needle up into the air and back to the starting side. Keep going. Take an extra tiny stitch at the end, through the front piece's seam allowance, to secure the side.

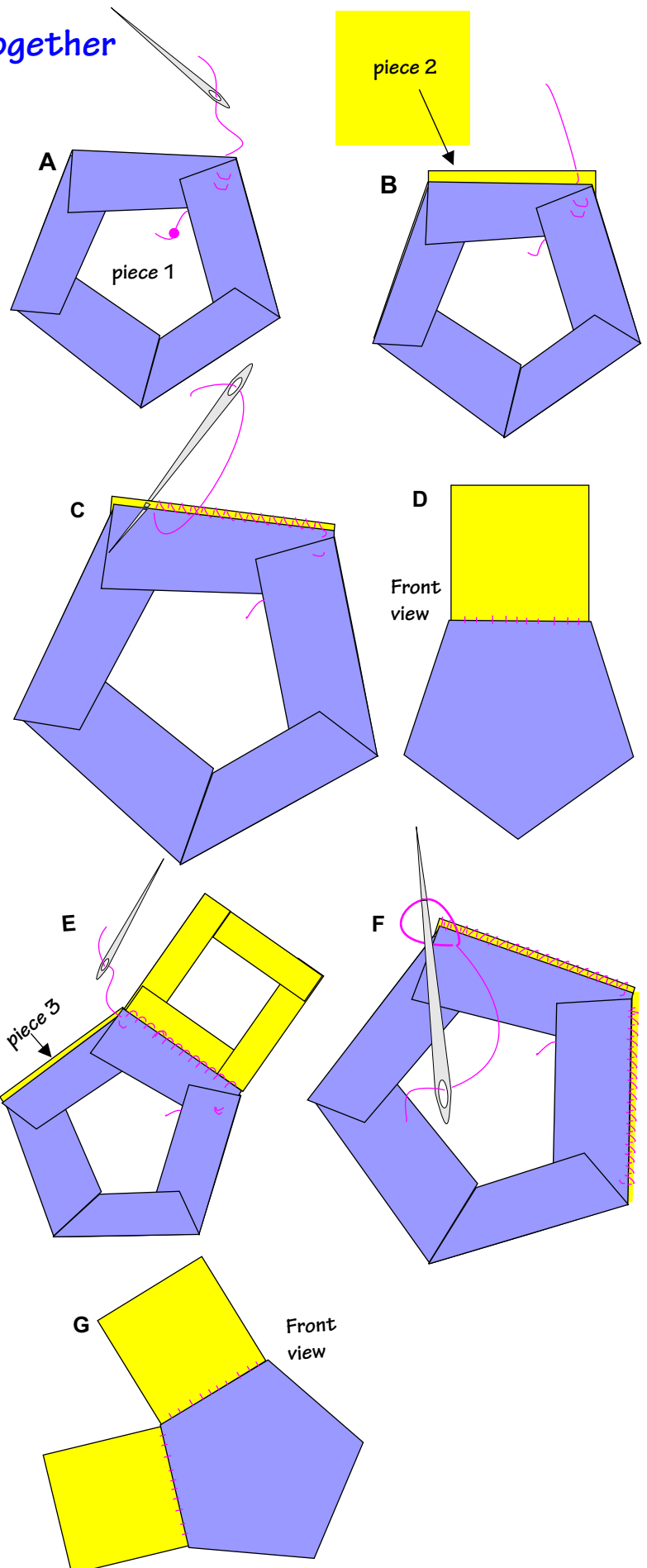
D. In the example, if you flip these shapes to the front, and open them, the unit would look like Fig D. Depending on the thread, the stitches might not be visible at all!

E. To add a third piece, there's no need to cut thread. Bring the piece (a second yellow square) right sides together against the first piece's adjoining edge. Stitch as before. When flaps get in the way of the needle, try to peel or push them away whenever possible, so you're only or mostly catching the edge folds.

F. To finish: Stitch a small loop. Bring needle and thread through it twice and pull tight. Take two tiny stitches in place, just through the seam allowance. Then send needle under seam allowance flap, pull out, and clip thread.

Sometimes the needle accidentally bites into the template - that's ok, you needn't undo it, but strive to stitch just the fabric

G. Here's what we've made on this page.



EPP with Machine Stitching

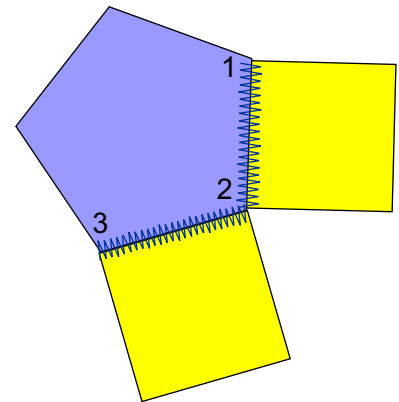
Basted shapes can be joined with a sewing machine instead of by hand. It's MUCH faster. But it takes skill. Machine stitches show much more than hand stitches. Bits of cardstock will be left in the quilt. Most templates can't be used again. And it's not as portable as hand stitching.

To prepare for machine stitching, you'll need an open-toe foot. Work from the top of the patchwork, and use a tight, narrow zigzag. Try to penetrate as little of the cardstock as possible. Use invisible monofilament or fabric-matching thread if you don't want the stitches to show much; or, choose a contrasting thread to celebrate the stitches!

Start and end each seam with a couple of back-and-forth straight stitches.

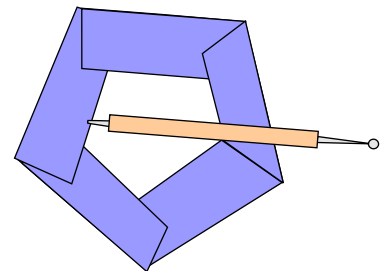
Before putting your project in the machine, sew some samples first to get tension and stitch right. After sewing a sample, rip out the cardstock template - if the stitches rip out too, you need to narrow and shorten the stitch more. If removing the cardstock STILL rips out stitches, consider these options:

- Switch to paper templates. Paper's more difficult to "feel" when basting fabric over it; but ripping paper out won't tear stitches out. Or,
- Switch to a medium-weight fusible interfacing like Decor Bond, instead of cardstock or paper templates. Draw the shapes directly on the back (non-glue side) of the interfacing, fuse it to each fabric piece. It has enough body to feel and fold around the shape. And it stays in place permanently - no need to rip it out, saving lots of time!



STEP FIVE: Remove the papers

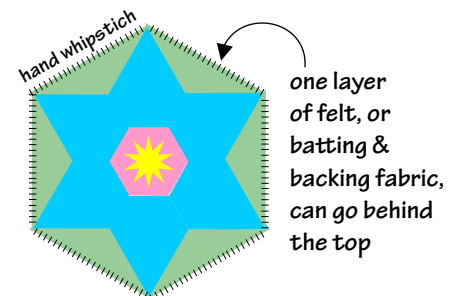
Once all your pieces are joined, it's time to remove the cardstock. Slide your embossing styus or crochet hook under the seam allowances, and gently rub all the way around inside, to separate the cardstock from the fabric. Then you can slide the tip under the cardstock to pry it out.



STEP SIX: Finish the project

You have many options:

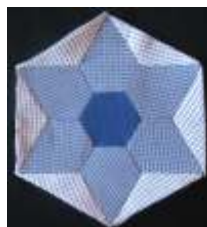
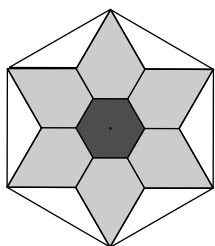
- Your EPP formation can be applied to a larger background fabric.
- If you don't want it bigger, you can sew it to a same-size piece of felt.
- To make it a quilt, add a layer of batting and backing. Trim a piece of batting slightly smaller than the top. Cut backing fabric at least 1/4" bigger than the top, all the way around. Press the backing's edges 1/4" inward. Tuck the batting edges inside. Stitch the top's outer folds to the backing's folds, with whipstitch or machine straight stitch.
- For a puffy ornament, you can even stuff the piece with stuffing or fabric scraps, before you finish sewing the top to its backing!



So Many Ways to Enjoy EPP!

This booklet illustrates the approach that works for me - but with EPP, it seems like everyone who has done it has a different method that works best for them! If you go to Youtube, you'll find many EPP videos. There are also plenty of EPP books on the market. The more you learn, the more likely you'll find a technique that you truly enjoy - and that's what this is all about!

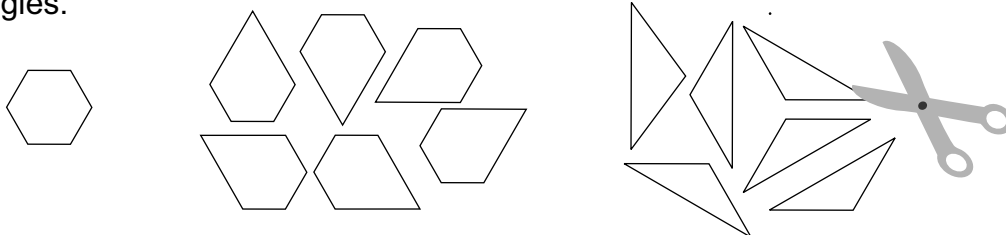
One-Block Star Trivet/Mug Rug/Ornament



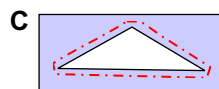
The fastest way to make this hexagonal block is with solids or small-scale prints, like the mens' shirt fabrics in the first photo on the left. Or, choose fussy-cut print fabrics: In the second photo, a celestial print was cut to show off different gold stars in each star point. In the last photo, vines from African fabrics are highlighted in the star points.

A. Print out the template sheet on p. 10 onto lightweight cardstock. If you don't have printer-friendly cardstock, you can print it onto paper, then glue the paper to cardstock and cut out the shapes.

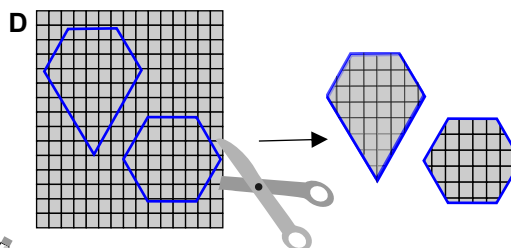
B. Cut out all 13 pieces from cardstock - one hexagon, 6 "jewels" and six wide triangles.



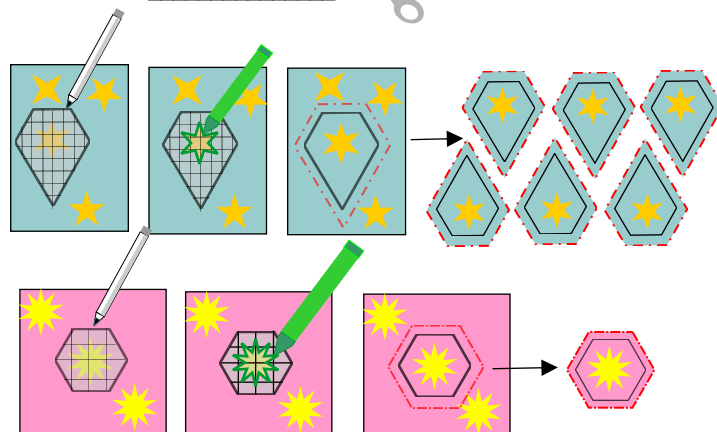
C. NOT FUSSY CUTTING THE SHAPE? Skip the plastic template. Place cardstock templates directly on the back of the fabric. Cut the fabric larger than the template, by your chosen seam allowance. Cut as many fabric pieces as you need (shown on bottom of p. 2). Go to step E, next page.



D. FOR FUSSY CUT SHAPES ONLY: Trace and cut just one of each shape you wish to fussy-cut onto template plastic (The gridded kind is shown in the diagram).

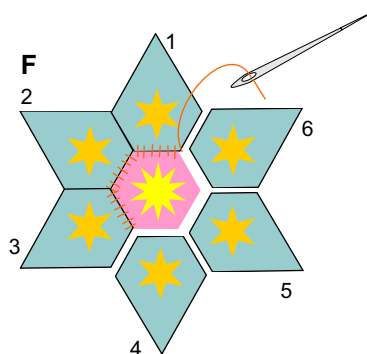


Place plastic template on the fabric. Select a location, and mark the template so you can find an identical location (a centered star in the example.) At each location, cut the fabric larger than the template, as explained on p. 3. In these diagrams, we are fussy-cutting the six jewel shapes and one central hexagon shape, but not the wide triangles.

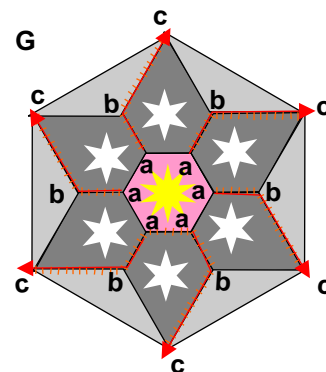


E. Baste each fabric piece around each cardstock template..

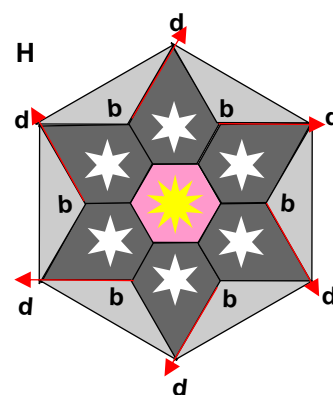
F. Stitch each jewel around the central hexagon. Righties will probably want to add each piece counterclockwise from 1 in the diagram. Lefties may want to stitch clockwise. You can surround the hexagon without cutting thread.



G. Stitch seams that shoot out from the central piece (a to b in the diagram). Continue stitching from b to a c, leaving one loose edge of each wide triangle. Knot off and cut thread.



H. Stitch the remaining wide triangle seams - from each b to each d.

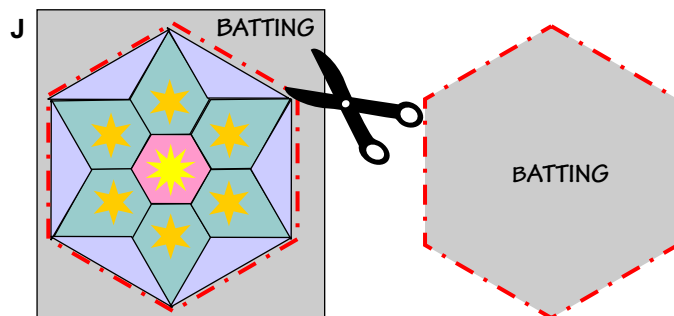


Note: This isn't the only possible route. With EPP, stitching order isn't as crucial as with other techniques. For example, if you want to inset the wide triangles in one shot, from star point to star point, you can do that instead, though it is a little more challenging.

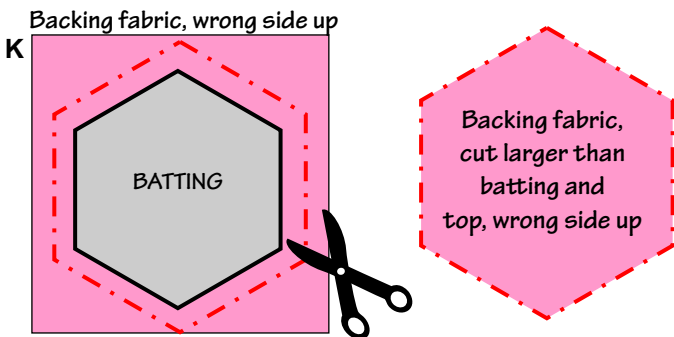
Finish the Project*

I. Press the outermost seam allowances of the top neatly under

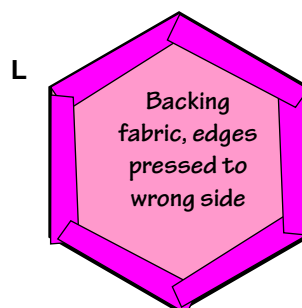
J. Center the unit on a larger piece of batting. Pin in place. Carefully trim the batting so it is about a scant 1/8" smaller than the top.



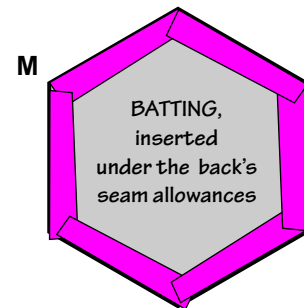
K. Place the batting onto the backing fabric's WRONG side, and cut out the fabric about 3/8" LARGER than the batting all the way around.



L. At the ironing board, turn each edge of the backing fabric inward, to the wrong side, by about 3/8".



M. Center the batting on it, and tuck its edges under the backing folds.



N. Place the top, good side up, on top of the two layers. Pin all the way around, and whipstitch or machine stitch the three layers together along the edges. See the bottom of p. 7 for more finishing options.

Templates for One-Block Star Pattern

These are the templates for the project that begins on page 8. Photocopy or print this page onto cardstock. In addition, if you plan to fussy cut, trace one of each shape onto translucent plastic, for master templates that will help you cut and align the fabric properly.

