

American Patchwork & Quilting® Presents: Tips for Long-Arm Quilting



prep quilt layers

❑ **Both the batting and the backing should be 6"-8" wider and longer than the quilt top.** Confirm this measurement with your quilter if you're sending a quilt out for finishing.



❑ **Make sure the quilt top lays flat** by using consistent 1/4" seams, pressing seams to one side, and watching for seams that twist and cause a bump. Give a finished quilt top a final press to ensure it is ready to be quilted.



❑ **Clip all loose threads and fabric, and trim dog-ears.** Any of these can cause a shadow behind lighter fabrics if not removed. Loose fabric can bulk up in a quilt sandwich and make it look bumpy.



❑ **Repair raveling seams and stay-stitch quilt top edges.** Especially if you have a pieced border, it's a good idea to stay-stitch a scant 1/4" from quilt top edges to secure unintersected seams. It prevents them from popping open when the quilt layers are loaded onto the machine.

To prevent raveling seams, stay-stitch quilt edges.



do's & DON'TS

DON'T USE SHEETS AS BACKING. Sheets have a higher thread count than quilting cottons and the difference can cause skipped stitches and broken threads or needles.

DO REALIZE THAT A BACKING WITH A BORDER, A PIECED BACKING WITH A DESIGN, OR A REVERSIBLE QUILT means the quilt top needs to be centered with the backing for quilting. A reasonable effort can be made to do this, but the quilt layers shifting as they are rolled up, bias in the quilt, or a quilt top that is not quite square can lead to the backing being off-center.

DON'T PUT EMBELLISHMENTS (crystals, buttons, beads, etc.) on your quilt prior to quilting as they might get broken during the quilting process or they could break the needle and damage the quilt.

DO MAKE SURE YOU PRESS BACKING SEAMS OPEN.

Because there's no way you can predict exactly where seam lines on the backing will fall in relation to the quilt top seams and because most seams on the quilt top are pressed in one direction, pressing backing seams open prevents bulk where seams might overlap. Use a 1/2" seam or a true 1/4" seam (not a scant 1/4") for the backing seams.



DON'T BASTE QUILT LAYERS TOGETHER prior to loading them on the long-arm frame or taking them to a long-arm machine quilter.

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4 points to ponder

If you're having someone else do the quilting, be sure to talk about the following with him or her.

- ① **Discuss a turnaround time.** Realize that certain times of the year, such as Christmas or graduation seasons, tend to be busier.
- ② After critically examining your quilt top, point out any possible problems, realizing that **some things simply cannot be "quilted out."** Wavy borders, multiple fabric types, and bias edges (which easily stretch) all can lead to puckering during the quilting process.
- ③ **Determine how loose items (such as lace, prairie points, and flanges), appliqué, photos printed on fabric, or embroidery should be handled.** Be clear about whether you want these embellishments quilted or unquilted.
- ④ If you are unsure of **how you would like your project to be quilted**, ask your quilter for suggestions on design and thread options (see more about design *below* and *page 3*). Let your quilter know if you want the thread color to blend in or be the main attraction.



Nancy stitched a freehand design of daisies, leaves, and pansies in the border of our quilt top.

design decisions

THINK ABOUT THE PERSONALITY OF THE QUILT: Is it formal or whimsical, modern or traditional, elegant or casual? Consider stitching motifs that match the mood of the quilt.

EVALUATE THE QUILT'S INTENDED USE AND RECIPIENT: Are you making a quilt for a baby or child, which will get plenty of use and likely be washed and dried? In this case, an allover design might be best. Is it an heirloom quilt that will be displayed on special occasions? More elaborate quilting may be called for in that case.

KEEP A THREE-RING BINDER OF QUILTING DESIGNS, including sketches or printouts of designs you want to try and actual "stitchouts" of patterns you've mastered. If you're sending a quilt out to be finished, see if your quilter has such a book showing what allover, edge-to-edge designs are offered. These may be free-motion designs or pantographs (patterns that are rolled out behind the machine and followed with a laser stylus).

GET CREATIVE WITH CUSTOM QUILTING. If you want more than an allover design, consider custom quilting, which can range from stitching in the ditch to feathered wreaths to interlocking circles or other shapes. If you're sending a quilt out to be finished, see if your quilter has photos of custom quilts previously done.

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Rulers specially made for long-arm machine quilting allow you to trace a specific shape or travel in a perfectly straight line.

When quilting with rulers, hold on tight to the ruler but have a loose grip on the machine handles. (Note: Long-arm rulers are thicker than standard acrylic rulers used for rotary cutting.)



TO QUILT WITH A PANTOGRAPH, roll out the pattern on the table and secure it. Orient the machine needle and quilt top so that you align the beginning point of the quilt with the beginning point of the pattern. Then mark the quilt top side edges on your paper pattern to prevent stitching too far beyond them. Follow the printed lines of the pattern with a laser stylus.

Nancy's TIPS FOR STITCHING



To start, bring the bobbin thread to the front or top (otherwise it can tangle on the back and you might catch it in the subsequent stitching) and tie it off with a few little stitches, barely moving the machine.

Use clips that come with the machine to hold the backing taut. To some degree you can smooth out the quilt top with your hands, but the backing needs to be taut so no pleats are stitched into it.

Test your combination of thread, needle, and tension in the batting and backing area to check the tension and to make sure the thread isn't going to break.

Machine-baste the top and side edges of the quilt top to the batting/backing, stitching close to the edges. Stitch the desired design across the section of the quilt sandwich that is showing, moving from left to right, or in the direction the quilting machine "likes" to go.

Take regular breaks to give your body and eyes periodic rest. Wear shoes that support your feet. To prevent muscle fatigue, relax and go with the flow of your design; don't grip the machine handles too tightly.

Check the machine tension often because something as simple as a thick seam can temporarily throw it off. Here are common causes and solutions for tension issues:

- * Dull needle. Change your needle about every 8 hours of quilting.
- * Wrong size needle for thread. Check the thread manufacturer's suggested long-arm needle size.
- * Quilt top and/or backing are too tight. Loosen the tension.
- * The machine's timing is off. Check with the machine manufacturer for instructions to time your machine.
- * Machine and/or bobbin not threaded properly. Rethread them.
- * Not moving the machine at a consistent speed. Practice will help you become constant with your speed. Some machines offer a stitch-regulating option.
- * Bobbin case and bobbin area clogged with lint. Brush out lint regularly, preferably every time you change the bobbin.