How to Sew Borders on Quilts

Step-by-Step Instructions for Sewing Borders with Butted Corners, Borders with Corner Squares, and Mitered Borders

Robin Strobel
Are We Done Yet?

Many quilts languish as unquilted tops, never finished, never used. I happen to be a “process” person—I like making the quilt top but am often bored with it by the time it comes to finishing. But if I tell myself “Done is better than not-done” and take the few remaining steps to complete my quilt, I’m a lot more satisfied. I still need to:

1. Add borders if desired (and I’ll tell you how to do that in this article).
2. Make the back. Layer and baste the quilt, batting, and backing. Then quilt or tie the layers (see Making a Quilt Sandwich).
3. Bind (See Binding a Quilt).

Quilt Borders

Sometimes we quilters add borders without really thinking about it, but not every quilt needs or should have a border. Borders also don’t have to be uniform. I made a quilt for my bed, and I made it long enough to have a pillow tuck but realized that if I put multiple borders at the top of the quilt, you’d just see strips of the borders running across the pillows. So I made the side and bottom borders the widths I wanted, but I didn’t put any borders at the top edge. Now the pretty piecing shows on top of my pillows.

Experiment by sewing borders of uneven widths, or try adding borders on only one or two sides of your quilt. Borders should enhance the quilt, not just make it larger (though I figure that is a good enough reason if needed).

For best results, don’t cut border strips and sew them to the quilt without measuring first. I used to just sew on the border strips and trim them to size afterward, and then wondered why my quilts were odd shapes and would not lie flat. But my imperfect piecing, added to my lackadaisical pressing, equaled a top that was not a rectangle but instead a trapezoid with sides more than an inch different in length. If I make opposing borders the same length as one another, I can ease or stretch the quilt top to match the borders, and then I end up with a miraculously rectangular quilt! Measuring the quilt top through the center and cutting strips to match ensures that the finished quilt will be as straight and as “square” as possible, without wavy edges.

So the first step in making borders for quilts is to measure the quilt top through the center in both directions to determine how long to cut the border strips. If your quilt sides are uneven, measuring through the center usually gives you a length midway between the shorter side and the longer side. If one side of the quilt top is longer than the other, cut opposite borders to match the center length measurement, and then ease in or slightly stretch the quilt top to fit the matching borders. If a quilt is rectangular instead of square and the borders are just basic strips, I think it usually looks a little better if you sew the side borders on before the top and bottom borders. It really doesn’t matter which is sewn first, it’s just a personal preference.

Many quilt patterns call for plain border strips. If a border is longer than 40”, some instructions have you cut along the crosswise grain (selvage to selvage) and join the strips where extra length is needed. Other patterns have you cut border strips from the length of the fabric (parallel to the selvage) so that you don’t need to piece. Some quilters hate seams in the borders and others feel that by the time the quilt is quilted, the seams aren’t visible. Cutting all the borders on the crosswise grain and piecing borders can save fabric, and that is a factor for me. A big part of my decision depends on what my border fabric looks like.

Most of the time I don’t mind seams, but be aware that solids show seams a lot more than small prints do. Large prints sometimes end up with a seam right in the middle of a motif, which can be visually distracting, so in that case I’m more likely to choose the seamless option. If you’re using a directional print, you may want to cut the borders so that the print faces one direction in the side borders and the other direction in the top and bottom borders. That can take a lot of fabric, but it might be worth it! Look at what a difference the direction of the border print makes.

Borders with Butted Corners

A border with butted corners is the easiest and most common border to make. It’s particularly well suited for a quilt pieced simply from squares and rectangles, such as a Nine Patch.

1. Measure the length of the quilt top through the center. Cut two border strips to this measurement. Determine the midpoints of the border strips and quilt top.
by folding them in half and creasing or pinning the centers. Then pin the borders to opposite sides of the quilt top, matching the center marks and ends, and easing as necessary. Sew the border strips in place. Press the seam allowances toward the border strips.

Measure center of quilt, top to bottom. Mark centers.

2 Measure the width of the quilt top through the center, including the side borders just added. Cut two borders to this measurement. Mark the centers of the quilt edges and the border strips. Pin the borders to the top and bottom edges of the quilt top, matching the center marks and ends, and easing as necessary. Sew the border strips in place. Press the seam allowances toward the borders.

Measure center of quilt, side to side, including border strips. Mark centers.

3 If you want to add multiple borders, repeat steps 1 and 2 for each round of borders.

Borders with Corner Squares

If you like the simplicity of sewing a border with butted corners but want to add a bit of variety, you can piece contrasting corner squares, run a narrower inner border out to the quilt edge, or piece the entire border! Here’s how to add a plain border with corner squares.

1 Measure the length and width of the quilt top.

2 For the sides, cut two border strips the same length as the quilt top. For the top and bottom, cut two border strips the width of the quilt top.

3 Sew the side border strips to the quilt top and press the seam allowances toward the border strips.

4 Cut or piece four corner squares to the same dimension as the width of your borders. For example, if your border will finish at 4” wide, then cut contrasting squares 4½” x 4½” (they’ll finish at 4”), or piece quilt blocks that will finish at 4” square.

5 Sew a plain or pieced block to each end of both the top and bottom border strips. Press the seam allowances toward the border strips.

Matching seam intersections, sew the border strip/block units to the top and bottom of the quilt. Press the seam allowances toward the border strips.

Borders with Mitered Corners

Mitered borders on quilts give a picture-frame look and tell your fellow quilters you were game to try something considered a little more difficult than butted borders. The truth is, mitering quilt borders is not that difficult. Once you muster the courage to try them, mitered borders are a great addition to your quilting repertoire. I like them in quilts with two or more borders and in quilts with a lot of angles in the piecing.

1 Estimate the finished outside dimensions of your quilt, including the border. For example, if your quilt top measures 45½” x 60½” across the center and you want a 5”-wide border, your quilt will measure about 55½” x 70½” after the border has been attached. You
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You need ¼" on all sides for seam allowances, so to give yourself some leeway I suggest adding an additional 2½" to 4" to the border’s length. Then add ½" to the border’s width. For our example quilt, you’d cut two border strips that measure 5½" x approximately 59" long, and two border strips that measure 5½" x approximately 73" long.

If your quilt has more than one border, you can match the center marks of each and then sew all the border strips for each side together at once, and then sew the resulting border units to the quilt top. To calculate the different border lengths, estimate the size of the quilt after the first border is added, just as you would for only one border, and then add ½" to the width and 2½" to 4" to the length. For example, if you wanted a finished 1"-wide inner border for your 45½" x 60½" quilt top, you’d cut two strips 1½" x 50", and two 1½" x 65".

1. Fold the quilt in half and mark the centers of the quilt edges. Fold each border strip in half and mark the centers with pins. Measure from the center of the quilt top to the edge to find the halved length of the top. Measuring from the center of each strip, use a pin to mark the halved quilt-top length on each border.

2. Pin the border strips to the quilt top, matching the centers. Align the pins at either end of the border strip with the ends of the quilt, and ease the remainder of the border strip to fit. Stitch to the quilt top, beginning and ending ¼" from the raw edges of the quilt top. Repeat with the remaining border strips.

3. Lay the first corner to be mitered on an ironing board. Fold under one border strip at a 45° angle to the other strip. Press and pin.

4. Fold the quilt with right sides together, aligning the adjacent edges of the border. If necessary, use a ruler and pencil to draw a line on the crease to make the stitching line more visible. Stitch on the pressed crease, sewing from the previous stitching line to the outer edges. If you have multiple borders, be sure to match the seam intersections of each border.

5. Press the seam allowances open, check the right side of the quilt to make sure the miters are neat, and then turn the quilt over and trim away the excess border strips, leaving a ¼" seam allowance.

6. Repeat with the remaining corners.

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19021 120th Ave. NE, Ste. 102
Bothell, WA 98011 USA
(800) 426-3126
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