Making a Quilt Sandwich

How to Piece a Backing, Select Batting, Baste the Layers, and Quilt or Tie Your Quilt

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What’s a Quilt Sandwich?

The quilt “sandwich” consists of backing, batting, and the quilt top. First, you’ll cut the backing 4” to 6” longer and wider than the quilt top. Then, if you’re planning to quilt the project yourself, you’ll baste the layers together, using thread if you’ll be hand quilting or safety pins if you’ll be machine quilting. To complete the sandwich, you’ll quilt either by hand or by machine. If you plan to have someone else do the quilting for you, you don’t need to baste the layers, and oftentimes you don’t need to supply the batting. But do check with your machine quilter before assembling the quilt backing to make sure the size is sufficient for his or her needs.

Backing a Quilt

The back of your quilt can be as fancy or as plain as you want. If you are proud of your quilting I suggest you use a solid or tone-on-tone fabric for your back, because then the stitches will show well. If you’d prefer not to see the quilting stitches on the back, then a fanciful print will help hide them. I often piece the back using leftover fabrics. This gives me an illusion of thrift, and makes the back fun to look at.

Cut the backing and batting about 6” larger than your quilt top, so that you have an extra 3” on all sides in case things slip or have become uneven by the time you work your way to the edges. More than one of my quilts have little wedges of fabric and batting in the corners because I was being parsimonious and only made the backing about 1” larger than the quilt top. I had to add extra bits to complete the job, and boy, were they a hassle to sew!

Many patterns tell you to buy more fabric than you really need for the back when, with a little creative piecing, you can get by with a lot less. If my quilt measures between 45” and 60” wide, one way I save on backing is to buy enough for the entire length (plus 6”) and then cut the fabric lengthwise into two pieces. I like to make my lengthwise cut off-center, so that I end up with two pieces of different widths. I then cut and piece long strips of leftover fabrics from the quilt top (or from my stash), inserting them between the two larger pieces of backing fabric. By keeping everything deliberately off center and the wide pieces of unpieced backing at the sides, I make it hard to see if everything is a little off-angle.

Choosing Batting

I confess, I don’t do a lot of my own quilting these days, and so I’m limited by the type of batting my machine quilter offers. I like the breathability of 100% cotton batting. A quilter friend of mine has four kids, and she realized when looking around the family room that they always gravitated to certain quilts. She asked them why they liked what they did, and every last one said it felt better than the others. She looked at the quilts and realized that each one of the favorites had cotton batting. The polyester and poly-cotton quilts were admired, but no one cuddled under them.

I’m a terrible hand quilter. My stitches make a goat laugh, so I won’t pretend to be an expert. My hand-quilting friends prefer to sandwich their quilts with 100% polyester batting, because it’s much easier to get the needle to rock in and out as they make beautiful, tiny, even stitches. When using polyester batting, be careful to choose one that has some type of bonding, or the little white polyester fibers may creep to the surface of your quilt and wave in the breeze. This is called “bearding,” and it’s enough to make Santa Claus get a buzz-cut. Murphy’s Law for quilters states that bearding usually occurs with a black-background quilt and is impossible to control.

I do love machine quilting. You can be as creative or as plain as you want. Once again, I like a 100% cotton or sometimes an 80% cotton/20% polyester batting because these types don’t stretch out of shape and are breathable. Whatever type of batting you use, check the manufacturer’s directions to see how closely it should be quilted. Batting varies quite a bit in this regard.

Layering and Basting

If you quilt a quilt yourself, you need to layer the backing, batting, and quilt top and then baste it all together so you can quilt it. The main challenge is to keep all the layers flat, without wrinkling or shifting. I end up doing this on the floor or in my friendly neighborhood quilt shop’s classroom, where I can push several tables together. Of course, I time this for when the shop doesn’t have a class, and they are happy to accommodate me because I always spend some money on fabric I can’t live without.

1 Lay the freshly pressed backing wrong side up. Smooth it out so it’s flat. I find it helpful to use masking tape or painter’s tape, taping the edges to the floor or table about every 6” to 8” so it doesn’t shift. Arrange the batting on top of the backing, patting it smooth. Be careful not to tug and twist, just gently loft it up and down to get it straight on the back. (If you’re using a packaged batting that’s been folded, take it out of the package the day before and fluff it out to let the creases relax before you start to baste.)
2 Center the pressed quilt top, right side up, on the batting and backing. Check to be certain that both the backing and batting extend several inches past the quilt top on all sides (have I said this enough?).

3 Starting at the center, baste the three layers together—either with a needle and strong thread or with nonrusting safety pins. If you know how you’re going to quilt the project, place the pins and stitches where they won’t interfere with your quilting. Often people use thread to baste quits that will be hand quilted, and safety pins to baste quits that will be machine quilted. That’s because pins tend to get in the way of a quilting hoop, but thread is hard to remove when it’s been repeatedly stitched over by a machine.

4 Once everything is securely basted, remove the masking tape. You’re ready to tackle quilting or tying the layers together.

**Quilting the Layers**

You have several choices when it comes to quilting. Nowadays there are lots of talented long-arm machine quilters ready to quilt your quilt with custom or commercially available allover patterns. If you send your quilt out to be quilted, check with the quilter to see how large she wants the backing and what type of batting she uses. Be sure to discuss what type of pattern you want, the colors of thread to use, and of course the price.

If you want to quilt it yourself and have never quilted before, whether you’re quilting by hand or machine I suggest you work on a small practice piece first. Like everything else, it takes a little bit of doing it to achieve even, straight stitches.

Hand quilting is usually done with a slightly heavier quilting thread than that used for piecing. Use a needle you are comfortable with. I usually use a longer needle than my expert friends because I have trouble hanging onto and threading a little one. A thread wax or conditioner might help keep the thread from tangling. Make a knot in the thread and pop it through the backing so it sits between the backing and batting. Bring the thread to the front.

When hand quilting, there are two stitches to choose from. One is a running-type stitch where you rock the needle from front to back to front for several stitches before pulling the thread through. The other stitch is done one at a time in a stabbing motion. Stab directly to the back and draw through, then over and directly up to the front in a straight up and down motion. Of the two stitches, the running stitch is the more popular because it seems a little quicker. (Okay, a lot quicker!)

For machine quilting, a simple approach is to just quilt with a straight stitch while using a walking foot (a special sewing-machine presser foot that moves up and down, “walking” across the fabric rather than sliding along it, so that your layers of fabric and batting won’t bunch up as you quilt). When machine quilting with a walking foot, you can stitch “in the ditch” along a quilt block’s seam lines, or on long diagonals or gentle curves.

If you’re more adventuresome, try free-motion quilting. You’ll need to use a darning foot and be able to lower the feed dogs on your machine. Feed dogs are the metal teeth under the presser foot that grip the fabric and move it forward and backward, and a darning foot jumps up and down, releasing pressure on the fabric so that you’re free to move the quilt layers under the needle. It also lets you easily see where you’re stitching.
Now the fun starts! With free-motion stitching, the only way the fabric will move is if you move it. Push it forward, backward, or sideways as you push on the sewing machine foot or knee pedal, and the fabric will move in that direction. Freeze in indecision, and the needle just plops up and down in the same spot, making a knot. You can quilt stars and flowers and feathers—anything you can imagine!

Practice making smooth, even movements. Try running the machine fast and try it slow. Some people do better with the pedal to the floor, others with a grindingly slow, even pace. (That’s me!) On my first stitch, I pull the bobbin thread to the surface so I won’t run over it a thousand times. Then I take a stitch or two in the same place. When I’m done quilting, I thread that tail on a needle and pull it to the back. Others just take a stitch or two in the same spot to anchor the thread and then quilt on. When you need to stop, do so with the needle in the down position so that you can resume stitching in the same exact spot. Be careful when you start stitching again, because sometimes the weight of the quilt can drag it sideways and your first stitch ends up jumping quite beyond your control.

**Tying a Quilt**

You can tie together the layers of your quilt sandwich instead of quilting it. I confess, I’m not a big fan of tying, but it does have its uses, and a certain old-fashioned charm that can make a quilt extra special. Tying is not as durable at holding the layers together as quilting, so take extra care when washing the quilt not to stress and stretch it. Tying can also be hard on your hands, so take breaks if you are working on a large project.

Use a heavyweight thread, such as pearl cotton or embroidery floss, and a heavy needle such as a sharp-tip tapestry needle. If you do a lot of tying, there are some curved needles on the market that are well worth the investment. The curve makes it easy to take the stitch to the back and front in one move.

Check the batting to see how closely it needs to be quilted, and plan on placing your knots at least that close together. Baste the layers together just as described for quilting. You can hand baste, but I always pin baste because I can do that faster.

When tying a quilt, the knots can be made either on the front of the quilt or on the back—it’s completely up to you. If you don’t want them to show, knot them on the front.

Start at the center of the quilt and take a small stitch, about ¼” to ½” long, through all the layers. (Some quilters like taking two stitches, one on top of the other). Leave about a 2” tail. Pull the thread through and cut it, leaving another 2” tail. If your ties are at least 4” apart (and I hope for your sake that they are), you don’t have to cut the thread before you move on to the next tie. Just let the thread float over the quilt to the next tie location. After all of the ties have been stitched, carefully cut the thread halfway between each tie.

Make a square knot (right over left and under—left over right and under) or a surgeon’s knot. A surgeon’s knot is just like a square knot except you make one more wrap at each step. Trim the tie ends if they seem too long.

I especially like quilts that put a button in each or in some of the ties. The button can be on the side of the quilt with the knot (my preference) or on the other side. The knots are made the same way whether you add buttons or not.