ASK ANITA

What is your #1 piece of advice?

A: Always practice by making a sample block first, and never cut more fabric than you need to make a sample. Things happen, and like pancakes, the second one always turns out better.

Why are there paper patterns in the book?

A: Other than the Self-Mitered Log Cabin (page 88), a flip-and-sew block, all of the patterns are cutting or trimming patterns.

Isn't photocopying the cutting patterns a waste of money?

A: To make 50 blocks, cutting through 10 stacks of 5 squares of fabric requires 10 sheets of paper. Today that could cost less than a dime. Instead, consider the fabric saved because of this efficient no-waste method.

Does cutting paper dull a rotary blade?

A: Yes. Work with two medium-size rotary cutters: one for paper and one for fabric. Reuse dull fabric blades in the rotary cutter designated for paper.

On which side of an acrylic ruler should temporary guidelines be marked by permanent pen?

A: The unprinted side, so that nail polish remover or alcohol won't disturb any manufacturers' marks when the ruler is cleaned.

How many squares of fabric should be stacked at one time?

A: Start with just one or two squares. If you are new to this method and try cutting more at one time, you could end up with a stack of mistakes. After you're comfortable with the method, you can add more.

Do you ever tear fabric?

A: Yes, instead of cutting fabric, I tear it, as needed, into a manageable size and then rotary cut it.

Do you prefer to press your seams to one side or open?

A: I like them open for three reasons: It makes the quilt appear flat like wallpaper, I can match the seams more easily, and ridges won't form during machine quilting.

Do you use pins when constructing blocks?

A: Rarely. I attribute this to my sewing machine, which makes pinning generally unnecessary for me. When I do use pins, I prefer long-shafted, fine pins such as the flat flower pins or long glass-head pins. At times, short, sharp appliqué pins suit me.

Do you backstitch?

A: Not when seams will cross. To backstitch at the beginning of a seam, I drop my needle about three stitches forward, then sew backward for three stitches and then forward, continuously. At the most I'll have a single line of three stitches on top of one another.

Had I begun to sew at the very beginning of a seam, I would have sewn three stitches forward, then three stitches backward, then three stitches forward. There would be three lines of stitching instead of a tidy two. Also, by initially stitching inside, instead of at the edge, the fabric is less likely to be sucked down into the feed dogs.

How do you prepare fabric?

A: I launder and starch everything *except* striped fabric; I don't want to distort the stripes.

How do you launder your cotton fabrics?

A: Before starching and pressing the fabric, I machine wash (warm) and machine dry (hot). I join cut edges of the folded yardage, perpendicular to the selvages, with a machine zigzag or serger stitch into manageable fabric loops that won't tangle or fray in the washer or dryer. There are no loose ends to knot together. Afterward, I trim off the sewn edges and both selvages. I am not wasting fabric by trimming because the edges would have otherwise raveled while laundering.

Why do you starch?

A: I piece and quilt by machine, and I starch all of my fabric. Starched fabrics are easier to cut and sew. They will hold sharp creases, including those made by finger-pressing. When pressed during construction, blocks made of starched and pressed fabric will not shrink or become further distorted.

I am convinced that most quilters' accuracy problems stem from virgin fabric shrinking when first ironed during block construction rather than from a flawed ¼″ seam. Starched fabric is already predistorted before the first stitch is sewn. I wouldn't starch if I didn't get tremendous results for my efforts.

What kind of starch do you use?

A: I mix a solution of 50 percent water and 50 percent bottled liquid starch for yardage. I cheat at times by spray-starching small pieces of fabric without prior laundering. These pieces shrink on contact with a hot iron, which serves the purpose.

How do you starch the yardage?

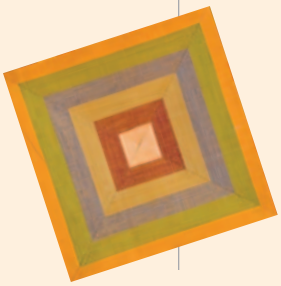
A: Separate light fabrics from dark to avoid possible color transfer or bleeding. Stuff the fabric into small plastic bags, and then pour in the starch solution. The amount of solution you will need varies with the quantity and type of the fabric. Squeeze any excess air out of the bag and close it. The goal is to lightly dampen the fabric but not to soak it. Put the bag in the refrigerator. The starch solution will be distributed through all of the fabric in the bag by osmosis.

After a few hours, remove the fabric from the bag. Roll each piece individually, then return all to the bag and refrigerate again. If starch dries your skin, wear waterproof gloves.

The goal is fabric that is lightly and evenly damp, but not soaking wet. In this step, excessively damp fabric comes into contact with dry fabric.

If the fabric is too dry, add more starch solution; if the fabric is too wet, add some dry fabric. You'll soon get the hang of it. The damp fabric will keep for about a week in the refrigerator. If you don't iron it within a week, move the bags to the freezer to avoid mildew. Defrost in the refrigerator when the mood hits you. Chilled, damp fabric irons very easily.

You needn't mount a campaign to immediately starch all your cotton fabric. Begin by starching the oversize squares for these blocks with regular spray starch—*not* heavy starch or fabric sizing. Heat the fabric with the iron first, and then spray the starch. The warm fabric will absorb the starch more readily. When dried, press and repeat the process with one or two more coats of starch. You want fabric with the consistency of paper, flexible but not stiff.



Tip

Before starching a laundered length of fabric of one or more yards, tear it lengthwise down the middle. Each piece will now be no more than 22″ wide and will fit easily on the ironing board and later on the shelf. I have never run out of fabric from splitting yardage. I've only made my life easier by not having to manage a large piece of fabric. It's comparable to pressing the width of a pillowcase instead of a sheet.

Pressing dark fabrics right side down will prevent white flakes of starch from forming on the right side. A hot, rather than a warm, soleplate is less likely to stick to damp fabric.

Starch residue develops when an iron isn't hot enough. To clean the soleplate, wipe an iron clean with a water-dampened rag. For serious buildup use a commercial cleaner such as Iron-Off by Dritz.

I use an old dry iron for three reasons:

1. There are no holes in the soleplate, so more of the surface comes into contact with fabric.

2. Both old and new irons have cotton and non-cotton settings, but I believe old irons reach a higher temperature than new ones. I find a hot iron most effective on cotton. Secondhand irons are easy to come by. Many lingered in their original boxes when they were replaced with irons that weighed less. I am not bothered by the weight of an iron. My ironing surface is low, below my waist, so my arm needn't bend very much; also, I don't iron for extended periods of time.

3. Sometimes brownish water will spurt from an iron. Even when water isn't added into a steam iron, moisture may seep out.

Moisture, whether from fabric dampened by water or spray, vaporizes and travels up into the iron by way of the holes in the soleplate, to be spit out later as brownish spots on the fabric. That won't happen if there are no holes in the soleplate.

Did you know that because starched and pressed fabric is flatter than fabric on the bolt, you're able to store more of it on your shelves? Hooray!

What are *rough-cut squares*, and why are they used?

A: Rough-cut squares are fabric that is cut or torn larger than needed, typically 1″ larger than its final trim size. They needn't be true squares, particularly when a scrap is used.

When rough-cut pieces are starched, stacked, and well pressed together *before* being trimmed to size, they will be reliably identical in size. Also, it is easier to prepare and accurately trim roughly cut pieces of fabric instead of cumbersome pieces of yardage. The trim size is the exact dimensions that a stack of rough-cut pieces of fabric is cut, with or without the use of a cutting pattern.

What size seam allowance is used?

A: Unless noted, a ¼″ seam allowance is used throughout this book.