

Charming Station

Quilt Project

Basting 101



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Basting 101

After your top is completely finished and your batting has been prepared, you are ready to make a "quilt sandwich". You will put your backing fabric together with your top with the batting in the middle. It is crucial to hold these layers together in a way that eliminates all the puckers and wrinkles both on the top and on the bottom while you add the quilting stitches.

The goal here is to get your backing fabric as taut as possible so that as you pin your quilt top to the batting and backing, you don't have any puckers.

The Old Way

Prior to the resurgence of quilting in the 1970's, there was really only one way to baste a quilt. Once your quilt sandwich was prepared, you used a long (2 inch or so) needle to sew very large basting stitches in a grid pattern all over the top of the quilt. Then, as you quilted it (usually by hand), you would have to pick out all these basting stitches.

Someone (we aren't sure who) thought up the idea of using safety pins to do this basting and the idea caught on like wildfire. The pins hold much more securely than the basting stitches did and are re-usable. Somewhere along the line, another very forward thinking person realized that if we used safety pins that were curved, they would go in and come out of the quilt sandwich even more easily causing less wear and tear on your fingers.



There are many professional quilters who still stitch-baste their quilts, particularly if they are going to hand-quilt. The advantage for these quilters is that if they get side-tracked, the stitches can stay where they are for months (or years). If you are using pins, you don't want to let them stay in a quilt very long. They could leave noticeable holes in the top when removed and, if they get damp, they might leave a rust stain if they are left in a quilt for months on end.

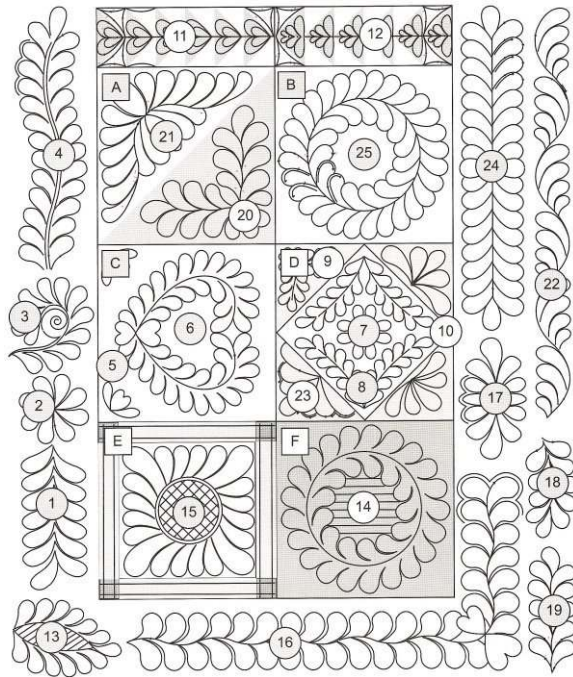
For a baby quilt, pin basting is a quick and easy way to get the job done. That's the approach we are going to use for this project.

Marking a Pattern on the Quilt Top

If you were going to use an elaborate pattern for a quilting guide (like a feather pattern), you would want to mark on your quilt top where this pattern would be sewn. It would be nearly impossible (even for a master quilter) to use patterns like the ones pictured here without marking the top first.

For this first project, we are going to use very simple quilting steps. You will either be sewing straight lines along your sashing strips or using an easy random pattern all over your quilt top. In both of these cases, you do not need to mark anything on your quilt top in order to do the quilting.

There are a lot of tips and tricks for marking your quilt but since we don't need to do that for this project, we'll skip over these for now.



An elaborate quilting pattern - not for beginners!

Frame it?

Some people like to use a frame in order to make sure that their quilt sandwich is assembled properly. The idea here is that you would attach the parts of your quilt sandwich to the frame and put tension on the sides so there could not possibly be any bubbles or puckers.

There are all kinds of frames on the market. The low end frames are made from PVC pipe and can be folded up and put away in a very small place. They are also extremely light weight and won't hold much of quilt without sagging. While the price and storage issues might make this type of thing appealing, you will quickly find out that it won't be much help.



You can also purchase full size wooden frames that are either built-it-yourself kits or come completely assembled. The kits are much less expensive than a fully assembled frame (less than \$100) but you have to put them together.

The fully assembled frames can be as big as a living room sofa in length and run \$400 or more dollars. The advantage of these fully functional frames is that it has three rails - one for the top, one for batting and one for the backing. As you put the three layers together, these can be pin or stitch basted and you are assured that all three layers are as taut as they can be.



Unless you plan to hand quilt and spend many hours at it over the next several years, you don't need any of these high end products.

For a full size bed quilt, a large frame is helpful. For a wall hanging or a baby quilt, you don't need to get that elaborate. There are much simpler (and far less expensive ways) to guarantee that your quilt won't have any puckers. If you use the steps here, you'll be able to lay out and baste your quilt without the expense of any frame.

One note: If you have a quilt store near you, they may have a frame that they allow their customers to use. If you have a full size bed quilt to baste, it is worth it to try out a frame. It is NOT worth it to run out and buy one until you are sure you will use it more than once (and that you have room for it in your house!).

What You Really Need

For our project, the first thing you need a table top that is at least as big as your quilt top. Most dining room tables will do just fine for a baby quilt. If yours isn't big enough, can you ask a neighbor or use a table at church, school or a library for the short while it would take to baste your quilt? If none of these are available to you, consider buying a 4x4 piece of plywood to lay on the table or on your bed. That would give you the same hard surface to work on.

If you are using your dining room table, be aware that you will be sticking pins through the quilt top (toward the top of your table). You might want to use padding to prevent scratching your table top.

There are many professional quilters who describe basting their quilts on the floor (either on the bare floor or on top of their carpet) but it is actually hard to bend over or be on your knees all that time and to avoid pinning your quilt to the carpet. Having a hard surface underneath will help in several ways. Having it higher than on the floor makes it much easier physically.

The second thing you need is masking tape. This does not have to be any special quilters' tape - get 1" or 1½" wide tape at the hardware store or Walmart. You want tape that is strong enough to hold your backing fabric in place without slipping yet not so strong that it will take the finish off of your table when you are finished basting your quilt. In a pinch, I've even used duct tape (but tell any men in your house!).

Next, open up your package of curved safety pins and find a dish or container that will allow you to grab them as you need them. Since this is the first time you are using them, you will want to sit down for a few minutes and open all the pins. Drop them into the dish already opened. That way, when you are ready to pin something, you won't have to let go of the quilt to open the pin. I never have figured out how to open a safety pin with one hand!

Recently, our group talked about using pin covers with the curved safety pins. Those who have tried them say that they are terrific. You will be using 50 to 100 or so safety pins in order to baste this baby size quilt and that is a lot of wear and tear on your fingers. These fall into the "nice to have" category. You can get by without them but if you plan to do more than one quilt, these might be a good investment. If you buy these covers, take the time now to put them on your pins so you don't have to do them one at a time as you are basting.



The next step is to get out your backing fabric. If we were making a larger quilt we might need to piece something together to completely cover the back. If you are following along with all of the steps in our project, your quilt will fit nicely in the center of one piece that is 1¼ yards long (that is approximately 45" square).

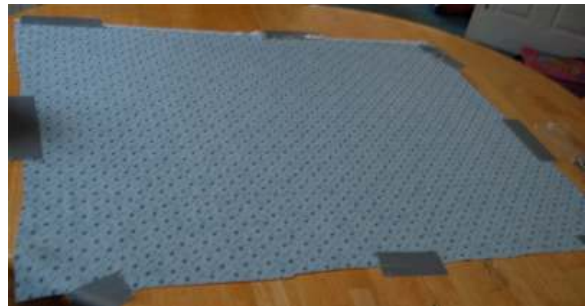
- We are assuming that you are using 100% cotton for the back, just like you did for the top.
- Press your fabric so that it is wrinkle (and fold marks) free.
- If your backing fabric has a directional pattern like stripes, decide which way you want that pattern to go (up and down or across the back).
- Even if your backing is bigger than your quilt top, don't cut it yet. As you quilt, the backing could be drawn in a little and it would end up too short.

Building the Quilt Sandwich

Now you are ready to actually get started.

Backing Fabric

- Lay the backing fabric down Face Down on the table and spread it out completely.
- Start in one corner of the quilt and place a piece of tape on the backing fabric and the table to hold it in place.
- Going down one edge of the backing fabric, place tape every 6 or 8 inches making sure you smooth out any excess fabric as you go.
- At the next corner, smooth from the center of the fabric all the way out to the corner so that the fabric is taut and tape that corner down.
- Repeat the smoothing from the center to the edge and pull the fabric taut all along the next edge, taping every 6 or 8 inches.
- Continue this all the way around the edge of your backing fabric.



If you take the time to do this carefully, you will be very pleased with the outcome of your basted quilt. If you try to take a shortcut here, you will most likely trap a bubble or a wrinkle in your backing fabric and that can really ruin the back of your quilt.

Batting

In the previous lesson, you have already pre-shrunk or aired out your batting. It should be completely dry and ready to go before you add it in here.

- Unroll or unfold your batting so you are working with a single sheet rather than a folded one.

- Lay this down on top of your backing fabric
 - If your batting has a scrim (web netting) on one side of it, put that side toward the backing.
 - If your batting doesn't have a noticeable scrim, then there is no right or wrong side to the batting.
 - This picture is when the batting has just been placed on the backing.



- Start in the middle and GENTLY spread the batting out toward the edges of your backing. Use a gentle motion so that you don't stretch the batting too much (particularly if it is polyester - you don't want to create a thin spot).
- Your batting should be centered on your backing. It doesn't matter at this point if the batting is bigger or smaller than the backing - we'll fix that later.

Quilt Top

Now you are ready to lay out the quilt top.

- Make sure you have pressed the top so there are no wrinkles or fold lines.
- Start in the center and position the quilt top on top of the batting
- Smooth the top from the center out in all directions.
- We have to do two more quick things before we start pinning any of this in place.

Reality Check Time

Now you have to stop for a crucial reality check: is the quilt top larger than the piece of batting?

- If yes, you have to remove the top and the batting. Put this piece of batting aside and get a different one.
- If it just fits but barely, you still want to get a larger piece of batting. As you quilt, the batting may get pulled in just a little bit and that will leave areas along the edge of your quilt with no batting!
- If the batting is sticking out on all sides of the quilt top by at least 1 to 2 inches, go ahead to the next step.

Next crucial reality check: is the backing fabric larger than the quilt top?

- You may have to lift the batting to double check but be sure that the backing is sticking out at least 2 inches all the way around the quilt top (it doesn't matter if the batting is bigger than this - it will get trimmed later).
- If your backing fabric is not big enough - take everything off the table and get a larger piece.
- If your backing fabric is big enough, go on to the next step.

Ready, Set, Pin

The object now is to pin all three layers together so that nothing will shift as you do the machine quilting. Your backing fabric is taped down and taut so it is not going to wrinkle. The batting and the top are just sitting there so those are the layers you are going to work with to get a smooth quilt sandwich.

Tip: We are going to put all of the pins in but leave them Open until we have verified that the back of the quilt looks good. Proceed cautiously here so you don't prick your fingers!

- Place one safety pin in the center of the quilt - pin through all three layers.
- You will Close this one pin since it is at the center and we don't plan to move it.



You will now place pins (through all three layers) in a grid format working from the center of the quilt to the outer edge, smoothing as you go. This way, if there are any puckers or bubbles in the batting or the top, you are pushing them to the outer edge of the quilt.

- Using one hand to smooth, start at that center pin and smooth the quilt straight out to the left edge.
- Place pins through all three layers about every 4 inches on a line from the center to the edge. You can use your palm as a guide - it's about 4 inches wide.
- These don't have to be exact - it's okay if one is 3 inches and another is 5 inches as you need to skip over the embroidered sections
- Do NOT CLOSE these pins - leave them open. If we discover that there is a pucker on the back of the quilt, it will be a lot easier to move 50 open pins than 50 closed ones!
- When this first line is done, go back to the center pin.
- Now smooth and pin from the center to the bottom edge of your quilt



- Go back to the center pin and smooth and pin to the right edge of your quilt
- The go back to the center pin and smooth and pin to the top edge of your quilt.

Your quilt has now be sectioned into four quarters by these first rows of pins. Going back to the center, smooth and pin in rows about 4 inches apart across all of the rest of the surface of the quilt.

Including the borders?

Yes - put pins in the borders, the sashing, the cornerstones, etc. Put pins anywhere they are needed except through the actual embroidery. You want to pin all the way to the edge of the quilt. Remember to leave all of these open until we check the back.

Make sure your pins are going through all three layers too.

Next Reality Check

The whole goal of basting is to create a quilt sandwich with no puckers on the top or the bottom. You can see the top and you have worked hard to smooth everything down as you put the pins in. Now it is time to check the back.

- Start at one corner of the quilt.
- Gently loosen the tape hold your backing fabric down on the table .
- Do the same for all the tape holding that quarter of the quilt down.
- Lift the three pinned layers and look at the back.
- There will be very small puckers where the pins go through the material - that's okay as long as they are very small
- Look for any bubble or pucker that seems to be trapped between two pins



- If you find one, remove the pins in that area starting from the pucker all the way out to the edge of the fabric - this area needs to be re-pinned to eliminate the pucker.
 - Lay the sandwich down and pull the backing fabric taut again and tape it back down
 - Re-pin that area smoothing as you go.
 - Untape the back and check again

Do this all the way around the quilt sandwich until you are sure there are no hidden puckers or bubbles. By the time you reach the last quadrant of the quilt, it will be free from the table. As a last check, turn the whole sandwich over and lay it flat with the quilt top down. Look over the backing one last time to make sure everything is smooth.

Closing the pins

If everything is smooth, you are ready to close up those pins.

- Carefully turn the quilt back over - watch out for all those pins!
- Start at the part of the quilt that is closest to you.
- Going from one side to the other, close the pins.

Here's where the Kwik Klip comes in. With one hand on the head of the pin, use the pointed end of the tool to push the other part of the pin in to close it. It takes a few tries to get the hang of this but once you do, you'll never want to go back to doing it by hand.



- Work in rows and don't try to reach over open pins to get to others (that's asking for scratches and pin pricks on the underside of your arm - ouch!)
- Keep going until you have closed all of the pins on the quilt.

What to do if you get stuck by a pin and bleed on the quilt:

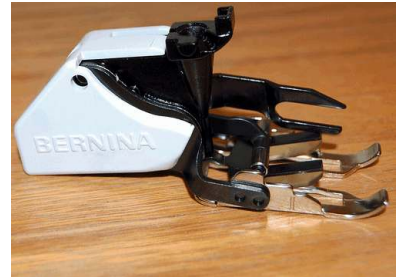
Believe it or not, your own saliva is a solvent for your blood. If you happen to prick your finger and get blood on your quilt, summon up some saliva and place directly on the spot. A little cold water will finish the job. You need to do this immediately - it doesn't work if the spot dries!

The Next Step

Before we actually start quilting your project, the next lesson will give you two things to practice to decide how you want to quilt your quilt.

1. The easy way: there is a simple quilting method known as “Stitch in the Ditch”. It just means sewing along the sashing and around the borders to anchor the quilt sandwich securely together. The first practice session will explain how to do this.

If you have a walking foot for your machine, you will want to use it. If you are thinking about buying one, this is the time to get it. It may look as elaborate as the one pictured here or it may be more like a built in foot. They are specific to each machine so you need to find the one that fits your machine.



2. The slightly more complicated way: there is a machine quilting technique known as “stippling”. This is a free hand random motion pattern that is actually fairly easy to do once you get the hang of it. This random pattern can be used to fill in the white space around the embroidery and that makes it stand out a bit. The second practice session will explain how to do this.

For this type of quilting, your machine will have to be able to drop the feed dogs down out of the way (usually a switch or a button on the machine). If your feed dogs don't drop down, there may be a cover that goes over them to keep them from guiding your fabric straight ahead. If you want to try this method, you will need to figure out if your machine can do this.

In addition, you will need a darning foot for your machine. This is usually an open circle that does not press all the way down on the surface of the quilt. This foot allows you to move the fabric around to do the stippling stitch. Like the walking foot, these are machine specific. Check with your dealer if you don't have one.



Note: There are some embroidery designs that do this kind of quilting. I have not used them because I haven't found any that fit exactly around the embroidery designs I'm using and still fill up the blocks. Once you get the hang of this technique though, you will find you don't need those designs. It will take less than an hour to quilt an entire top.