

A Guide to Quilting Terminology

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Entering the world of quilting often feels like learning a new dialect, but mastering the vocabulary is a necessary step in the learning process. When a new quilter understands the difference between a "fat quarter" and a "jelly roll" or the importance of "pressing" over regular ironing, they significantly reduce the likelihood of costly mistakes. Navigating a pattern becomes a much more intuitive process once the basic mechanics and labels are clear.



Appliqué: A specific fabric shape sewn onto a larger background piece to create a decorative pattern or image. This technique functions like a fabric collage and can be achieved through delicate hand-stitching or faster machine methods.

Backing: The reverse side of a project is formed by this fabric layer. Often consisting of a single wide piece of cloth, it can also be constructed by sewing smaller remnants together to create a decorative look on the rear of the quilt.

Basting: Safety pins, long temporary stitches, or a specialized adhesive spray are used in this temporary stabilization method. It holds the layers together before final stitching to keep the fabric from sliding or bunching.

Batting: This middle layer of a quilt provides warmth and thickness. Common materials for batting include cotton, wool, or polyester, and the choice of fiber determines the weight and texture of the finished blanket.

Bias: The diagonal direction of a woven fabric, running at a 45-degree angle to the straight threads. Fabric cut on the bias stretches and bends more easily than fabric cut straight, which is why bias-cut strips are often used to wrap smoothly around curves.

Binding: A long strip of fabric that wraps around the raw, outer edges of the project to hide the seams. This final step provides a clean, professional finish and protects the edges from wear.

Block: A single square unit of a quilt top, sewn separately and then joined together in rows to create the final design

Chain Piecing Fabric: A process in which pairs of fabric pieces are fed into the sewing machine one after another without stopping to cut the thread. It creates a chain of connected pieces that can be snipped apart once the entire row is finished.

Echo Quilting: A quilting style in which stitches follow the outline of a shape and repeat it in parallel lines. The lines spread outward like ripples, adding texture and emphasis.

Fat Quarter: A specialized cut of fabric measuring approximately 18 by 22 inches. It's made by cutting a half-yard of fabric in half the short way, creating a wider, more usable shape than a long strip.

Feed Dogs: Small metal teeth under the presser foot of a sewing machine that pull fabric through as you sew. They help keep stitches even and consistent.

Finished Size: The actual dimensions of a quilt after all seams have been sewn. The finished size is always smaller than the cut pieces added up because fabric is used up in the seams.

Free Motion Quilting: A technique where the quilter moves the fabric by hand while sewing instead of the machine feeding it automatically. This allows for drawing-like designs such as loops, swirls, or shapes.

Fussy Cut: Cutting fabric to center a specific design or image within a block. The goal is to highlight a particular motif rather than cutting randomly.

Grain: The direction of the threads in woven fabric. Cutting and sewing along the straight grain helps prevent stretching and distortion over time.

Jelly Roll: A bundle of pre-cut fabric strips, usually 2.5 inches wide. These coordinated sets save cutting time and are popular for beginner-friendly patterns.

Loft Height: The thickness or puffiness of the quilt's inner layer. Higher loft creates a softer, more traditional look, while low loft gives a flatter, modern appearance.

Longarm Quilting: A method of quilting using a large machine mounted on a frame. The fabric stays in place while the machine moves over it, making it easier to quilt large projects.

Masking: Temporarily covering parts of a quilt design with tape or paper during planning. This helps visualize stitching paths before committing to them.

Notions: Small tools needed for the craft, such as pins, acrylic rulers, needles, and seam rippers

On Point: A layout where square blocks are rotated so they sit on their corners. This creates a diagonal, diamond-like pattern.

Patchwork: Fabric pieces sewn together to form a larger design. This decorative piecing makes up the quilt top.

Pressing: Flattening a seam by placing the iron straight down and picking it up again, rather than sliding it back and forth. This prevents stretching the fabric and helps the pieces keep their shape.

Quilt Sandwich: The three-layer structure of a quilt: the top, the batting, and the backing. These layers are stitched together to complete the quilt.

Rotary Cutter: A cutting tool with a round blade used to cut fabric quickly and accurately. It's typically used with a ruler and a cutting mat.

Sashing: Strips of fabric sewn between quilt blocks. Sashing separates designs and can make a quilt appear larger and more organized.

Seam Allowance: The space between the fabric edge and the stitching line. Quilting patterns usually require a consistent quarter-inch seam allowance.

Selvage: The tightly woven edges of fabric made by the manufacturer. These edges are often trimmed off because they behave differently than the rest of the fabric.

Stitch in the Ditch: To quilt directly along the seam lines between fabric pieces. The stitches blend in, adding strength without being noticeable.

Walking Foot: A sewing machine attachment that moves the top and bottom layers of fabric together. It helps prevent shifting and puckering when quilting layers.