

10 Tips to Improve your Machine Quilting

By Jennifer Gigas

While most of us are familiar with the process of machine quilting, the thought of actually quilting our projects can be intimidating. There is no magic formula or secret to successful machine quilting; it's a matter of practice and following a few guidelines. These tips will improve your quilting skills and the look of your finished project.

1 Prepare

In order to quilt the project with the least amount of frustration and top-notch results, the quilt layers must be properly prepared for the quilting process. Before layering the quilt sandwich, make sure the top is squared. If any adjustments are needed, make them now. Excessively wavy borders, for example, will not quilt out.

To layer the quilt sandwich, spray the batting with quilt basting spray, fold the quilt top in half and position the fold in the center of the batting. Smooth one side of the quilt in place, then the other. Press from the front, this will ensure everything is nice and flat. Spray the other side of the batting with quilt basting spray. Fold the backing in half and smooth into place, one side at a time. Press from the backing side.

2 Bond with your machine

Is your machine in good working order? Has it been in for professional servicing by a qualified technician in the last 6-12 months? Regular servicing protects your machine investment and keeps it operating at its best. After every sewing session remove the throat plate to brush out the lint and fuzz that accumulates around the feed dogs and bobbin area. Oil as recommended by your sewing machine manufacturer.



3 Play with your feet

Most machine brands have several styles of presser feet for free motion quilting, as well as straight stitch throat plates, walking feet and seam guides. Having the tools for the technique at hand not only makes the process more enjoyable, but will also result in a better over-all finished project.

A walking foot will keep the quilt layers from shifting as you stitch. It is commonly used for channel quilting, grid quilting and stitching in the ditch. When stitching parallel rows, use seam guides to maintain spacing rather than marking each line.

Experiment with different free-motion feet to find the one that is most comfortable for you. Keep in mind that the best foot for the job may vary depending upon the type of free motion pattern being stitched.

A straight stitch throat plate improves the look of the stitching on the back of the quilt. The small opening provides more support under the quilt, eliminating what often appears to be a tension problem.



4 Choose the correct needle and thread

Be sure to use high quality thread and change needles often. Needles should be changed frequently, approximately every four hours of sewing. Keep an assortment of needle sizes and styles on hand. Use the smallest needle possible, while still maintaining stitch quality. Thread selection is primarily based upon the desired look and quilting technique. For finer stitches, use a smaller thread. If you want the stitches to stand out, use a heavier weight thread or contrasting color.

5 Positioning is important

Take the time to set up the sewing area for comfort and to accommodate the size of the project. There should be adequate area around the machine to support the quilt.

Be sure the machine bed is at the correct height; hands should be placed on the quilt without having to reach up; elbows bent at a right angle. Stay relaxed; take frequent breaks to stretch.

Proper lighting in the sewing area is more than just a luxury. Working in a dimly lit room will not only make it more difficult to see the stitching, but will cause eye strain and fatigue.

6 Practice, practice, practice

Nothing will improve free-motion quilting skills like practice. Prepare several mini quilt sandwiches and spend some time each day quilting. Once the basics have been mastered (consistent stitch length while moving in all directions, smooth curves, and a stipple), experiment with other allover patterns. Move on to continuous outline motifs, first free form, then marked.

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7 Prepare a doodle cloth

A doodle cloth is a mini quilt sandwich made of the same fabrics used in your project. Before you begin stitching on the quilt, use the doodle cloth to audition thread selections, tweak tension and warm up.

8 Plan ahead

Utility quilting consists of grid quilting, channel quilting and stitching in the ditch. Before filling in the quilt with a background grid, look at the seam lines and block formations. Plan the spacing and placement of the stitching lines to correspond with major visual landmarks on the quilt. For example, if quilting diagonal lines across a four-patch, the lines will look best if they intersect the patches at each corner. Sketch your quilt on graph paper and experiment with quilting placement. Use the sketch to plan the stitching route eliminating excessive tie-offs.

For continuous quilting motifs, unthread the machine, remove the needle thread and bobbin and needle trace the design on a doodle cloth until you develop a feel for stitch sequence.

Take your eyes off the needle. If watching the needle, by the time you realize your quilt is in the wrong place, it is too late. Instead, keep an eye on where you are going.



9 Get a grip

There are various gloves and "grippers" on the market for improving hold on the quilt. Experiment to find the one that works best for you.

As a general rule, hold the area that is being free-motion quilted as if your hands were a hoop. Stop the machine when it is time to reposition. Occasionally it is more efficient to hold "bunches" of the quilt in your hands to move it.

10 Continuing ed

Take classes as often as possible and indulge in reference books for your quilting library. If you have an opportunity to attend a quilt show, study the quilts on display. Make note of the things that make the quilts successful. Ask questions of other quilters, quilt teachers, and staff at your local quilt shop. Remember, quilting is a leisure time activity. Experiment with techniques until you find the ones that give you the best results with the least amount of frustration.

Tips from the experts

The following tips were gathered from quilting experts, award winners, authors and designers:

"My best tip for improving the overall appearance of the finished quilt is to hand baste it with water-soluble thread. I further baste by machine to anchor the straight lines in the top by stitching in the ditch with water-soluble thread."

—Ricky Tims

"If I only could tell you one thing about machine quilting it would be that you must be comfortably in control of all three layers of the quilt sandwich and the best way to accomplish this is to use a Flynn Multi-Frame when you machine quilt."

—John Flynn

"Needles lose their points very quickly and are not the place to pinch pennies. When it comes to needles, if in doubt, throw it away."

—Sharon Schamber

"I quilt using the "fluff and stuff" method rather than rolling the quilt into a tight roll. The quilt needs freedom to move under the needle."

—Paula Reid

"Don't forget to breathe. Relax while quilting, remember this is supposed to be fun."

—Laura Cater-Woods

"Be sure you are sitting high enough to be comfortable while you are quilting. Think about elementary school penmanship, fluid motions, and control."

—Holice Turnbow

Always looking for a creative outlet, Jennifer Gigas has found sewing to be her passion. From heirloom to embroidery to quilting, she's yet to find a technique she doesn't like. Jennifer began her sewing career designing custom children's wear and teaching fine sewing techniques. She currently works as the Vice President of Training and Education for Bernina® of America, and has been an instructor at many national sewing and quilting conferences.