

Tips for preparing quilts for longarm quilting.

1. Custom or edge-to-edge

Edge-to-edge quilting is the same design repeated over the entire quilt top regardless of the piecing. It is the most cost-effective way of having your quilt professionally quilted. Custom quilting is when the quilting design has different elements applied to the different components of the quilt. It is very labour intensive and is thus more expensive.

2. Backing

Backing and batting need to be larger than the quilt top. Rule of thumb, 4 inches on each side, i.e. 8 inches longer and wider than the top. This is to allow the back to be attached to the rollers on the quilt machine at the top and bottom and to be clamped at the sides and to allow some shrinkage of fabric (pulling in) as it is quilted. Your quilter may agree to work with less and she may agree to add a temporary border to facilitate this – negotiate with her.

Backing fabrics should be squared - quilt backs which are not cut straight cannot be loaded to a longarm with a good result!! This is especially important for wideback fabrics which are often cut crookedly (on an angle) in the shop. Allow extra fabric to accommodate the pieces removed as you straighten the edges.

Pieced quilt backs are fine, but watch additional bulk in the seams. Always remove selvages from internal seams as these can distort the back.

It is almost impossible to control the exact position of a quilt back in relation to the quilt top once it is on the quiltframe, so trying to match designs on the top and on the back is very difficult. Aim for approximate positions e.g a panel positioned “in the middle” might be very close to the middle but not absolutely dead centre. Speak with your quilter if you have specific requests.

3. Batting

There are many battings available today made from natural fibres (cotton, wool, bamboo) and synthetics as well as combinations. Most come in wide (240cm/96 inch) and extra wide (310cm). Charcoal battings are also available for dark quilts.

Some battings are pre-shrunk with minimum residual shrinkage (e.g 60/40 wool/poly). Others will shrink when laundered creating a slightly crinkly look. If you don't like this look, avoid this type of batting.

Each type of batting has a recommended quilting distance (the maximum distance between quilting lines). Some can be quilted up to 10 inches apart, others require much closer quilting, so keep this in mind when choosing your batting.

When choosing your batting, keep in mind the recommended quilting density i.e how closely your batting needs to be quilted. Very stable quilting battings can withstand quilting further apart. Some types of batting require quilting which is quite close and dense and which will tend to bunch up without this.

Battings made of natural fibres may be joined with a batting fusing tape. This makes it possible to join all your batting offcuts (of the same type). If you are joining battings with a scrim using batting tape, ensure the scrim is always facing the same side.

4. **Pressing**

I can't emphasise enough the need for pressing your quilt at each stage of construction. This will help you sort out the direction of your seams and achieve a flatter quilt. Quilts which have not been pressed during construction are more difficult for the quilter to quilt well.

Generally, press seams towards darker fabrics. Press with an up and down motion, rather than a sweep which may distort/stretch the fabric.

Occasionally you will have a "flipped seam": one that changes direction mid-way. This is usually not a problem, but try to avoid this where you can.

Traditionally seams are pressed to one side, but I am now seeing quite a few quilts with seams pressed open, and "swirling" where seams intersect. These methods are good for reducing bulk, but if you want any stitch-in-the-ditch work on your quilt, seams should be pressed to one side. You cannot stitch-in-the-ditch in an open seam as you are effectively stitching on nothing!

5. **Borders**

Before attaching your borders measure your quilt width or length in three different places, approximately at the $\frac{1}{4}$, $\frac{1}{2}$ and $\frac{3}{4}$ points. Add these three measurements and divide them by three to arrive at an average. Cut your border to this measurement. This will help you have a border which fits your quilt edge. Borders which are too full and wavy are difficult to quilt and may pucker.

Similarly, tops which have fullness in the centre are difficult to quilt well. It is better to undo a few seams and correct the problem before quilting.

6. **Check your quilt top**

Before you take your quilt to the quilter, check the seams to ensure none have started to come undone. Once tensioned on the quilting frame, any such seams will pop undone and create a hole.

Check that all applique is secure – loose pieces may get caught in the hopping foot and cause damage.

Snip off any stray threads including those on the wrong side of your quilt top which may show through. Once quilted, these annoying blemishes are difficult to get rid of.

7. **Best avoided**

Embellishments should be added after quilting. This may even apply to wider rick-rack and some trims. The machine moves over the surface at speed and any edge which is not secured may become hooked in the hopping foot and cause damage to the quilt.

Wider rick-rack edges tend to flip over. Sometimes tacking an edge in place may help.

Three-dimensional applique should not be added until after quilting where edge-to-edge quilting is used. Even with custom quilting it has the potential to get in the way.

The use of non-conventional fabrics, especially very thick ones and work with very thick seams can also be problematic.

Some fabrics (e.g., silk) can be stabilised with a fused stabiliser before incorporating in a quilt. Speak to your quilter and seek her advice.

8. Thread

The colour of your quilting thread may be subtle and blend in with your quilt top, or be a contrast and stand out as a feature on its own. Either way, you may want to keep this in mind when you choose your fabrics and especially the backing. Most quilters will use the same colour in the top and in the bobbin as this gives the nicest result.

When “auditioning” thread colours, be prepared to consider some unlikely candidates. Your eye often reads thread colours differently when applied to a quilt top so sometimes an unlikely candidate is perfect! Your quilter will probably be able to make some suggestions if you feel unsure.

9. Quilting pattern

When deciding on a quilting design, your quilter will probably ask you for the sort of pattern you like – do you want a very geometric look with straight lines, or something with curves which offers some movement? The intended owner (you or someone else, male or female, adult or child) and purpose of a quilt (wall-hanging or bed-quilt or baby’s play mat) may also factor in any decision you make.

Many quilters have stitched samples of edge-to-edge designs so that you can see how they will look.

Your quilter will be able to give you good advice.

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