



Partner with Your Long-Arm Quilter

Tips from a professional quilter for enhancing your quilt and building a creative relationship



by Barbara Shie

Long-arm quilting is a wonderful way to get your projects from the 'top' stage to a finished product that can be used, loved, and enjoyed. Remember it isn't a quilt until it is quilted!

Quilt Top

Borders One of the most common complaints about quilt tops is that the borders are too long/full for the pieced top, and therefore the quilt cannot be quilted flat. Before adding borders, measure the top through the middle (not at the edges) in three locations, and take an average of that number...that measurement should be the length of the first border that you add. Do this each time you add borders, to ensure that they are the correct size and fit your pieced top.

Edge stitch If your top has numerous seams in the last border (e.g. piano keys, small pieces, bias edges) consider stitching completely around the outer edge—this will prevent your seams from distorting or popping out when the top is pulled taut on the machine.

Square Ensure the top is squared up at right angles, unless of course it is supposed to be angled or a unique shape.

Press A really good final pressing will enhance your quilt experience—any puckers or seams not pressed flat will result in possible puckers in your finished quilt, or distortions where there is excess fabric. While you are pressing your top, remove any and

all stray threads, check for seams that are not closed, and look for any stray pins, etc.

Backing

Size Most long-arm quilters require three to five inches of backing completely around your quilt top. This is necessary so that clamps can be used on it to pull the fabric taut, and to pin the backing fabric to the leaders on the rollers. If the quilt top measures 80" x 100" and your quilter requires "three inches all around your top" then your backing will need to be a minimum of 86" x 106". If your top is pieced on-point or a diagonal set, consider providing extra inches of fabric for the backing since the top may give/stretch a bit more than a quilt set straight.

Seams When possible, it works better to have any seams in the backing run from side to side rather than the length of the quilt. Ensure that you have a square edge—no excess fabric on one piece that makes it longer/wider than the fabric next to it. A heavily pieced back is usually not a problem as long as it too is pressed well, and the outside edges are square.

Design/Orientation If you have a specific design or need the pieced top and back to be oriented a certain direction, be sure and let your quilter know. It is simple to



center the quilt top on the backing from side to side once it is on the machine; it is more challenging to center the quilt top from top to bottom.

Selvages ALWAYS remove the selvages from your seams in the backing. The weave is different (tighter) than the actual fabric; selvage will shrink differently when your finished quilt is washed.

Muslin This fabric is usually a looser weave than most quilting cottons. Generally it will not enhance your finished quilt. If not pre-washed, it will certainly shrink the first time your quilt is washed.

Wide fabrics Fabrics, including muslin, are available in 90" and 108" widths. These fabrics are great for those who do not want to have a pieced back. Although these fabrics are usually cut when sold to the customer, the fabric should be torn at some point prior to providing it to your quilter. The fabric is rarely straight when cut from the bolt, and needs to be 'straightened' prior to putting on a long-arm machine for quilting. If muslin is to be pre-washed for the backing, keep in mind that it will shrink considerably—ensure you purchase an adequate amount to allow for shrinkage and squaring up!

Print vs. plain Busy prints will camouflage the quilting on the back of your quilt; plain fabrics will show all of the quilting. Keep in mind which look you desire and the skill level of your long-arm quilter. Although a print may cost a bit more, over the life of your quilt, it may be worth it. Sale tables at quilt shops are a great place to shop for backing fabrics.

Thread

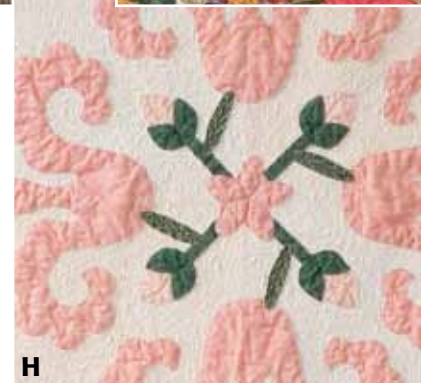
Types Today's quilter has numerous types and qualities of thread available for long-arm quilting. The most frequently used threads in long-arm machines are either cotton or polyester. Discuss options and availability with your long-arm quilter. Thread used in a long-arm machine is usually a stronger thread than thread used in a home sewing machine; it must hold up to the speed and tension of a commercial machine.

Color There is a vast array of colors as well as variegated colored thread. Most quilt makers will tolerate a light thread on dark fabric before they will have dark thread on light fabrics. For example, if you have a red and white pieced top, you will either have red thread in the white areas, or white thread in the red areas—you have to decide which is acceptable to you. Requesting one color thread on the top and another color on the bottom (in the bobbin) can create problems referred to as "pokies"—when the tension is not perfectly balanced, the thread may pull up from the bobbin and appear as dots along the stitching line. This is fairly common and sometimes difficult to avoid.

Decorative These threads frequently contain Mylar or plastic, and are not smooth. Many long-arm quilters find them difficult to work with, but they can be stunning if your quilter has adequate experience using them.

Machine Quilting by:

- A) Mary Vaneecke of El Sol Quilting Studio,
- B) Cheryl Winslow,
- C) Angela Walters,
- D) Janet Howse,
- E) Shelley Nealon,
- F) Angela McCorkle of Quilts With a Heart,
- G) Karen Dovala,
- H) Sue Pollard,
- I) Barbara Shie,
- J) Ardis Young,
- K) Rebecca Segura of Zeffie's Quilts



Batting

Type There are many types and qualities of batting on the market for today's quilt. The quilt maker must decide which type of batting is desired—cotton, polyester, wool, silk, bamboo, organic, or a combination.

Size The batting must be larger than the pieced top.

Loft Many quilters prefer a certain look to their quilts, and therefore want a higher or lower loft. Cotton batts will usually provide a more antique/flat look, while polyester batts will yield more pouf. Very high loft batts should be used for comforters, not quilts.

Packaged vs. roll Quality should be paramount! Many long-arm quilters make available various types of batting for their customers, which is handy for the quilt maker. Some long-arm quilters will decline to use certain products due to prior experiences—check with your quilter. If you are providing a packaged batting, consider taking it out of the package and 'fluffing' it to allow folds to relax prior to quilting.

Piecing If it is necessary to piece your batting, make sure that it is 'butted' and whip-stitched together. Do not overlap the edges, as this will result in a lumpy area in your finished quilt.

Color Batting is usually white or cream colored, the exception being black/grey batting. Consider the end product of your quilt; if it is pieced with very white fabrics, then use white batting, as the cream or natural color may show through the white fabric.

Pattern

Pantograph This type of quilting allows the quilter to duplicate a set pattern from side to side on your quilt. It will result in consecutive rows of a pattern, which may or may not inter-lock for an overall design.

Overall This may mean the quilter will do an overall free-form type of meander quilting with no particular pattern on the quilt; this may include a certain motif interspersed in the stitching such as hearts or stars. This type of quilting is random and usually does not detract from the piecing.

Custom This is the most costly type of quilting. It will entail specific designs to follow or complement the pattern of the piecing, or enhance large open areas of the quilt top. The quilter will most likely use their own imagination and designs and it can't be rushed. If you are expecting to enter your finished quilt in a competitive show, let the quilter know. Show quality quilting needs time and patience; be aware of your deadlines.

Basting Yes, your long-arm quilter can baste a quilt sandwich for you! Many quilters who prefer to hand quilt their work use a long-arm quilter to assemble the quilt top, batting, and backing. A simple grid is done on the long-arm machine, using a long stitch which can be easily removed.

Density The amount of quilting on the project should be consistent throughout. If you want a medium amount of quilting, or very dense/tight quilting, then it should be the same for all areas of the quilt. Exceptions might be to accent a certain area, or fill an area to give the illusion of it receding, or in special instances such as accenting appliqué or doing trapunto type work.

You the Customer

Be reasonable and patient.

If you have specifics in mind—let your quilter know; the quilter is able to handle many requests and ideas, but she/he is probably not a mind reader.

Give your quilter a reasonable amount of time

to complete your project. Setting up and doing the quilting on a long-arm machine takes time. Discuss with your quilter the length of time that can be expected to finish your project, and where you will be in their queue. Do not expect your quilter to handle every project of yours as if it were an emergency; you need to do the planning.

Allow time for pick-up and delivery, your time to bind and label your quilt, and transit time if you intend to ship it. If you drop off and pick up your quilt at your quilter's home, be prompt and do not dally; your time, and that of your quilter, is valuable!

Ask for recommendations

for a quilter from your friends and fellow students in quilt classes. Quilt shops usually have a list of persons who are available for long-arm quilting. Ask to see samples of their work. Be clear on pricing; determine if you must use cash, a check, or credit card, and when payment is due. Just like a good hair stylist or auto-repair person—word of mouth is the best form of advertisement!

Barbara was born and schooled in San Diego, California. Upon college graduation she was commissioned in the US Navy and had a 22-year career. While stationed in Colorado she found and developed a love of quilting. She owned a quilt shop for four years, and then worked for a national insurance company for seven years. She 'fell' into long-arming, and now, residing in Colorado Springs with her husband of 37 years and two dogs, she has quilted (hand-guided) over 2500 quilts.



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