

Why Knit in the Round?

At first glance, knitting in the round (also known as circular knitting) may seem frightening or too difficult, but on closer examination, you'll find many advantages to working in the round. It's almost as old as knitting itself, whose origins are a mystery, and has been used wherever knitting has been practiced. Circular knitting gained a very undeserved reputation as "peasant" knitting in the mid-nineteenth century when flat patterns for the latest fashions were becoming available through new needle arts publications that focused on the emerging middle-class woman with free time on her hands. The idea that circular knitting was something only the lower classes did to earn a living through production knitting lasted well into the twentieth century.

Over the past few decades, circular knitting has been regaining some of its popularity (although there have still been many patterns written during this time that call for knitting pieces flat). The explosion in the popularity of Fair Isle designs during the late 1980s and '90s exposed many knitters to the idea of not only working in the round, but to *stranded* (or Fair Isle) knitting as well. New generations of knitters were reintroduced to the idea of working the body as one piece. Even so, many patterns currently appearing in books, magazines, and on the Internet are still worked flat and seamed, despite the fact that it would be very easy to convert these patterns to circular knitting. Yet most patterns worked in the round are rated as intermediate or even advanced.

One of my favorite features of knitting in the round is no side or underarm seams (and two fewer ends to be woven in for each eliminated seam). Finishing has never been one of my favorite parts of knitting, so any time I can get away with not having to sew another seam or weave in ends, I'm happy. Many garment patterns that are written to be worked flat, at the most basic level, consist of two rectangles and two trapezoids. Finishing has always felt like an afterthought and, I believe, is a good reason why some knitters never do their own finishing. The Norwegian methods covered in this book incorporate garment finishing into the entire construction process.

Because both front and back are worked at the same time, the tension is the same for both pieces—who hasn't spent many hours making a separate back and front only to find that their tension wasn't consistent and one piece is longer and wider than the other? This is also one reason some knitters work both sleeves, whether flat or in the round, at the same time.



Differences in tension between knit rows and purl rows is another reason why working in the round is a great idea. The vast majority of knitters don't purl at the same tension as they knit (did you ever notice horizontal stripes in your stockinette?), or at the same speed. Working in the round will give you a more evenly tensioned result, and if speed is important, it will also work up more quickly.

A number of knitters don't like to purl; some do what has been referred to as *knitting back backward* in order to avoid having to turn their work and purl across the wrong side. Have they ever realized they're actually knitting every alternate row left-handed? This could cause its own problems with uneven tension.

For the most part, working in the round eliminates the need of having to purl, except for texture patterns, ribbing, or when working back and forth after dividing for armholes or neck openings. Using steeks even eliminates the need to do that! For anyone unfamiliar with Fair Isle knitting, *steek* is a term used when referring to the stitches that are added for openings and later cut so that knitting continues in the round. Norwegian knitting tradition doesn't have a special name for these stitches and usually just refers to cutting stitches. More on this later!

A distinct advantage to working in the round has to be that you will always see your pattern on the right side as you knit. Anyone who has tried to purl a stranded pattern from the wrong side can attest to how confusing it can be.

Almost all pattern stitches can be worked in the round, with the exception of a few lace-type stitches and intarsia. (Although there is a limited amount of intarsia that can be worked in the round, too, it's still one technique that is best worked flat.) Cables, when worked back and forth, need an odd number of rows between crossings so that they can always be crossed on the right side of the work. When knitting in the round, you don't need to follow that rule and can cross a cable on any round you like.

Anyone concerned about garment shaping such as darts, waists, armholes, and necklines can rest assured that most shaping can be done in the round, too. About the only shaping that needs to be worked back and forth is when binding off multiple stitches at one time to shape the lower portion of an armhole or crewneck opening. In that case, you can work a few rows back and forth, then cast on stitches for a steek, and continue in the round. Alternately, shaping can be done by decreasing a single stitch each round to shape the opening. The former method will allow you to give your garment a more fashionable silhouette, while the latter will have a more traditional look.

Finally, for the knitter who desires a garment made in a more traditional manner, knitting in the round is the way to go. Just as there is no single *right* way to do anything in knitting, there are an unlimited number of techniques, from folk to fashion, that can be incorporated into your work. Let all of them inspire you!