

chapter

1

Introduction to Quilting

At its simplest, a *quilt* is two pieces of fabric sewn together with a layer of batting between them. It is an ancient technique, practiced all over the world. Evidence of quilting has been found among Egyptian artifacts and in Buddhist temples located along the Silk Road trade routes that once stretched from the Middle East to China. In medieval Europe, quilting protected knights from the roughness of their armor. In cold climates, women quilted their petticoats for extra layers of warmth. At night, their children slept under thick quilts stuffed with wool.

Until the early 1800s the majority of quilts in this country were made of whole cloth, not scraps of fabric. But the introduction of factory-made cloth in the 1820s and then the sewing machine in the 1840s made it possible for women to make their families' clothes at home. Their leftover fabric scraps were used to make patchwork quilts.

Quilting is still one of the most popular crafts practiced around the world, and the variety of quilts and quilting techniques is staggering. The focus of this book is on the essential techniques you need to start your own quilting adventures. This chapter provides you with the basic concepts of quilting and an overview of the quilting process. Once you've mastered these techniques and understand the basics of the craft, I encourage you to step out with confidence to explore the breadth of the entire quilting universe. The opportunities to experience beauty through this craft are nearly endless.

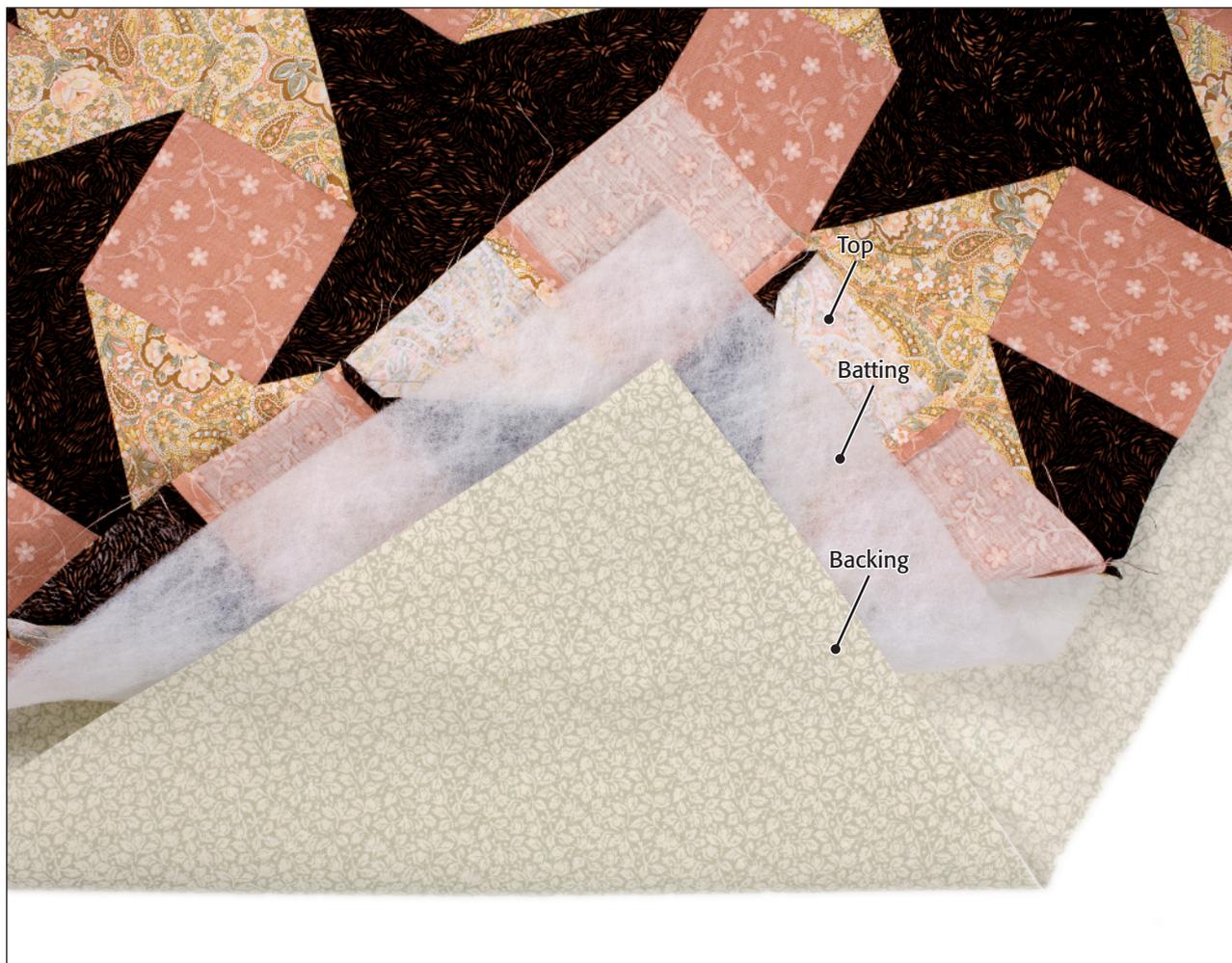


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The Parts of a Quilt

Quilts are built like jigsaw puzzles, one piece at a time. They are a fascinating blend of pattern and color, and are as individual as the people who make them. Your quilts won't look exactly like mine because you have your own sense of color and design, and that's the way it should be. Let's start by learning the parts of a quilt. Each of these terms is explained in further detail in this book but a quick overview is helpful.

Welcome to the quilting universe. I hope you stay for a long time.



THREE LAYERS OF A QUILT

See the photo on the previous page, which shows the three layers described here.

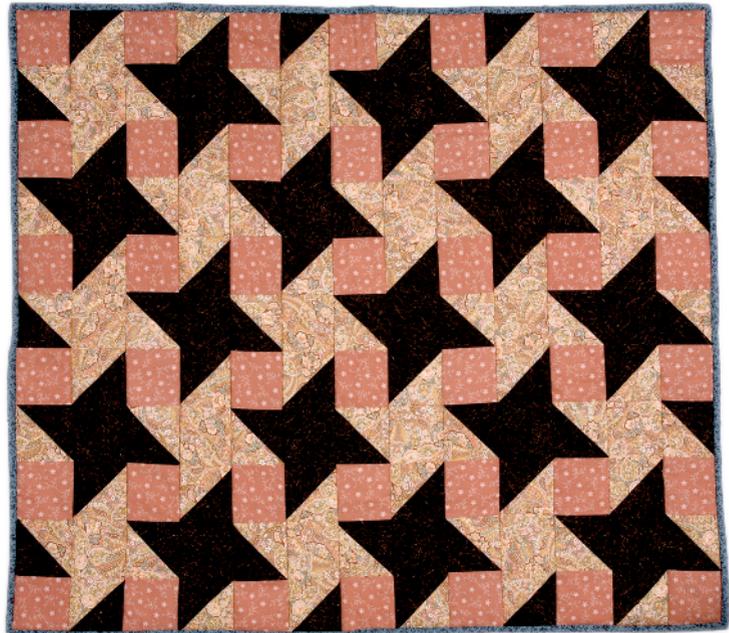
- **Top.** A quilt top like the one on this page is created by stitching small pieces of fabric together in distinctive patterns. The result is called *patchwork*. The process is called *piecing*.
- **Batting.** This is the middle layer of a quilt. It can be made of cotton, wool, or polyester.
- **Backing.** The backing is the bottom layer of a quilt sandwich.

PARTS OF A QUILT TOP

- **Blocks.** Patchwork quilt tops are made in small units called blocks. A block pattern dictates the sizes and shapes of fabric used by a quilter. There are hundreds of different block patterns to choose from.
- **Sashing.** Sashing is the border around an individual block.
- **Posts.** Posts are squares of accent fabrics used at the junctions of two pieces of sashing.
- **Borders.** Borders surround the elements of a quilt top and function as a frame. Quilts can be made with or without borders.
- **Binding.** This is a doubled strip of fabric sewn around the outside edge of a quilt. It is the last step in the quilting process.

THE ESSENTIAL SHAPES OF PATCHWORK

- Squares are the simplest and most basic of all the shapes used in patchwork.
- Rectangles appear in nearly every patchwork quilt and are an essential part of many block patterns.
- Triangles add visual excitement to a quilt top. They are a bit more complicated to work with than squares or rectangles but their versatility is worth the effort.



First Stage: The Quilt Top

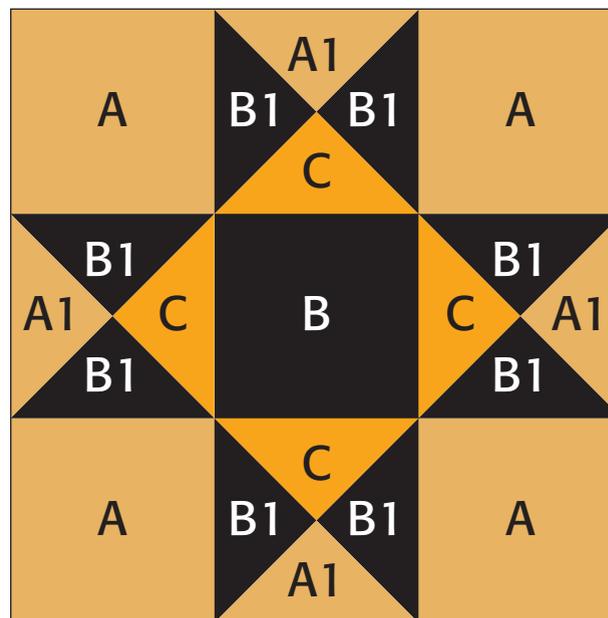
Most quilters begin a new project with the same sequence of steps. Quilters choose a block pattern, pick out the fabrics they want to use in the block, cut the fabric according to the pattern, and then sew the pieces together. *Block patterns* are the instructions a quilter uses to cut and sew pieces of fabric in a particular arrangement. Then the blocks are sewn together to create a quilt top.

PIECING

Patchwork quilt blocks are made by cutting fabric into certain shapes and sizes. These shapes, in turn, are stitched to one another in an order dictated by the block pattern the quilter has chosen.

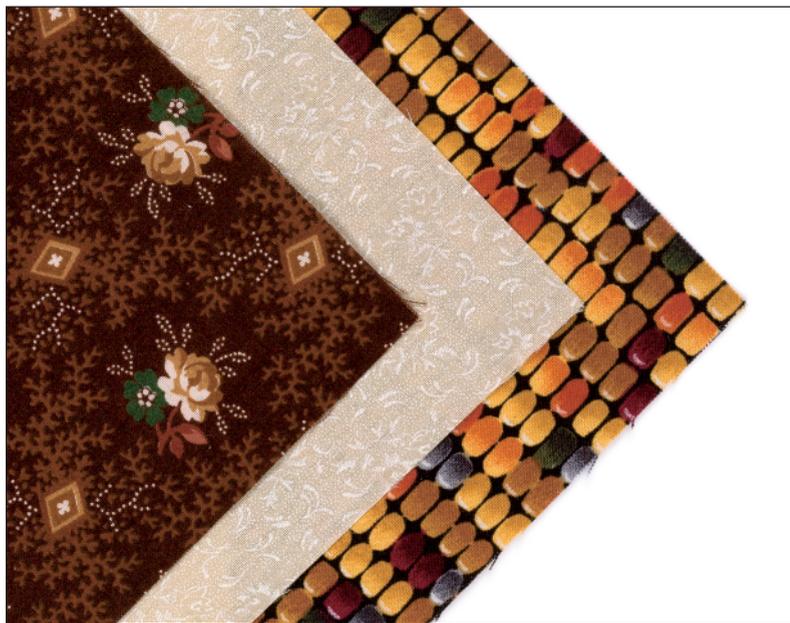
Note: *The process of cutting and sewing units of fabric together for patchwork is called piecing.*

Shown here is a diagram of a block pattern called Ohio Star. It is made of nine individual units—a square in the center and in each corner interspersed with four units containing four triangles. The letters in the diagram indicate pieces of fabric of the same size, shape, and fabric. The shading of the diagram indicates places where the same fabric is used in the construction of the block.



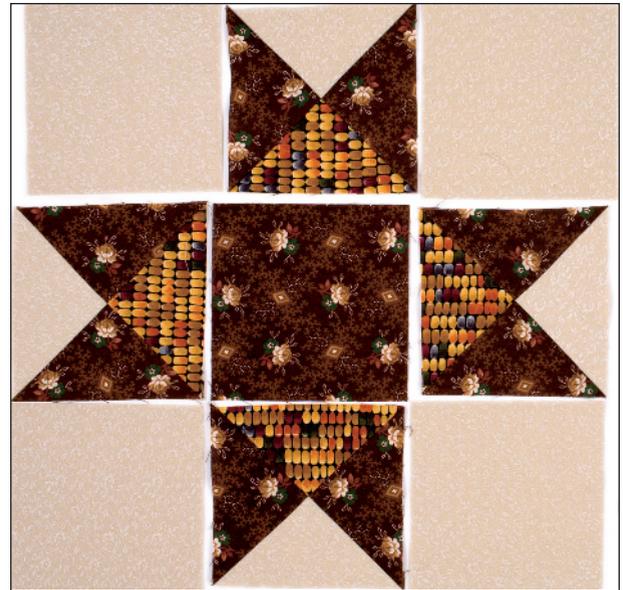
ARRANGE FABRICS

Notice that the block pattern diagram (shown above) is shaded. This shading indicates how the fabrics need to be arranged to make the individual block pattern work. As you will learn in Chapter 4, successful quilt tops and blocks depend on the *contrast*—differences in color—among fabrics selected to make a block. The differences among the three fabrics shown here are quite clear. Compare the above block pattern diagram with the photos of the finished Ohio Star block using these fabrics on the opposite page. Notice how the fabric placement in the finished blocks reflects the shading in the diagram. Also note how the same three fabrics can be rearranged to make blocks that look quite different from one another.



CUT AND JOIN FABRIC

This photo shows the fabrics cut into the shapes indicated by the Ohio Star block pattern. When sewing the block together, the triangles are joined to one another first. Then, working from left to right, the units of each row are joined to one another. Once the three rows are complete, they are sewn to one another.



A COMPLETE BLOCK

The fabric pieces have been sewn to one another to complete an Ohio Star block. Note that the four triangle units are turned so that the corn print fabric always abuts the center square.



The Essential Shapes in Patchwork

When you sew scraps of fabric to one another, it's called *patchwork*. Squares, rectangles, and triangles are the most common shapes used in patchwork.

We often hear the words *patchwork* and *quilt* together, but they are not quite the same. A quilter creates patchwork when she stitches small pieces of fabric to one another in a specific pattern. This technique, though it did not originate in this country, is most often associated with American quilts.

The **square** is the simplest shape to use in a quilt. Squares can be cut from all sorts of scrap cloth and sewn together randomly, or you can choose to repeat fabrics to achieve a particular design.



Just because the square is simple doesn't mean a quilt top made of squares must be simple. The square is a great candidate for playful color and design combinations.



The **rectangle** is the second staple of quilting patterns. Its versatility makes it a welcome addition to nearly every quilt.



Rectangles, such as the ones in this variation of the Log Cabin block, are created by cutting fabric into strips with a rotary cutter, sewing strips of different fabric together to create a *strip set*, and then cutting strip sets into particular shapes.



Because they are three-sided instead of four-sided, **triangles** can be something of a challenge to handle successfully. But they add visual excitement to a quilt pattern.



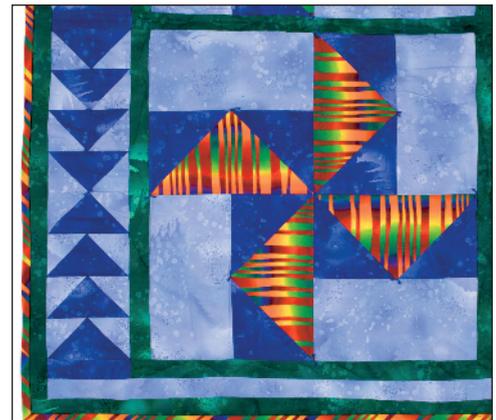
The number of block pattern possibilities, such as this Pinwheel Star block pattern shown here and the Flying Geese block pattern shown below, become nearly endless when you add triangles to squares and rectangles.



FAQ

Is *block pattern* the term used to describe traditional quilting patterns? Or is it used to describe any quilting pattern?

The real answer to this question is *both*. But most of the time, and especially for the purposes of this book, a block pattern describes a traditional quilting pattern.



Three Levels of Pattern in a Quilt Top

There are three different levels of pattern possible in a quilt top. The first level is the patterns or prints and colors in the fabrics themselves. The second level is the arrangement of the individual pieces of fabric in a block. The third level is the arrangement of blocks in a quilt.

You wouldn't put all these fabrics together in the same blouse. It would be strange to make one sleeve dark and the other light. But you could put all these fabrics right next to one another in a quilt.



Quilt blocks take advantage of the differences among colors and the contrast between dark and light fabrics to create a pattern that combines very different fabrics in a pleasing way.



When you put quilt blocks together, they create a secondary level of pattern that brings the whole quilt top together visually. You can combine the same blocks in different ways to create different patterns, like these log cabin blocks and the ones to the right.



There are over 150 variations of the Log Cabin pattern. Each Log Cabin variation takes advantage of contrast to create an overall pattern in a quilt top. The fun of quilting lies in exploring all the possibilities.



Even though a quilt's top draws the most attention, it's just the first step of making a full quilt. Many quilt tops are framed by a border. Then fabric is chosen for the backing. Finally, a layer of batting adds the warmth to the quilt.

BORDER AS FRAME

Some quilters add borders to their quilt tops. Some do not. A quilt border frames a quilt top the same way pieces of wood frame a picture you hang on a wall. Visually, a border holds the elements of a quilt top together like the border on this Fence Rail quilt.



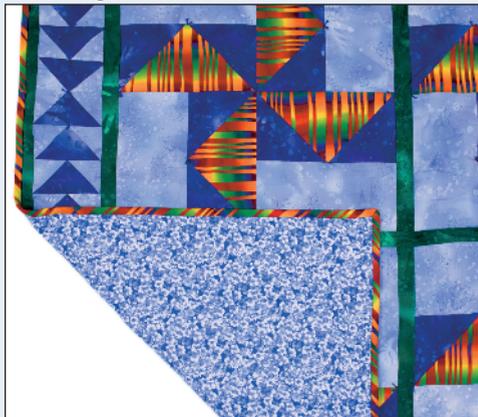
BORDER AS DESIGN ELEMENT

A border can be made of one fabric like the one at left. Or it can be made of several fabrics like the border featured below. In addition to framing a quilt top, a border can add another design element to a quilt.



BACKING

In the past, most quilts were backed by plain, unbleached muslin because the back of a quilt was not meant to be seen. But with so many fabrics to choose from nowadays, many quilters prefer to back their quilts with something more colorful.



BATTING

The warmth of a quilt comes from insulating materials called *batting* that lie between a quilt top and its backing. Originally quilts were stuffed with wool or cotton, and these are still popular batting materials. There are also polyester and polyester blends available for batting.



Third Stage: Finish the Quilt

Once a quilt's top is complete, the backing is cut, and the batting is layered between the two. Then it's time to finish the quilt.

QUILTING

The process of *quilting* is when you stitch the three layers of a quilt together to secure them and to hold the batting in place. Quilting can be done by hand or machine. Stitching can follow the straight lines in a block like this *outline stitching*. Please see Chapter 17 for more information about quilting.



Stitching can also be done in any number of fancy patterns that enhance the design and fabric in a quilt top. Please see Chapter 17 for more information about quilting and stitch patterns.



TYING

Instead of quilting, many quilters choose to tie the three layers of their quilts together. *Tying* serves the same function as quilting; it holds the three layers of a quilt together and secures the batting in its proper place. The material used to tie a quilt can be chosen to blend in with the fabric or you may choose a different color to add a design element to a finished quilt. Please see Chapter 17 for more information about tying a quilt.



BINDING

Once all three layers of a quilt—the top, batting, and backing—are quilted or tied together, a narrow strip of doubled fabric is sewn around the outside of the quilt to hide its raw edges. *Binding* a quilt is the last step in the quilting process. For more information about binding, please see Chapter 18.

