

## **Binding: Something even Lily does once in a while.**

Binding on a quilt is the small edging that wraps from front to back, enclosing the raw crust of your quilt sandwich in a nice, finished way. Many people refer to this as a border, or edging, or other terms, but the term “binding” makes it clear to anyone who might be helping you that you are referring specifically to the final step in finishing your quilt.

Why bind? You may ask. Some alternatives to binding are flip and sew (when you put the right sides of the quilt and back together, sew around the edge, flip it right sides out, and hand stitch the small opening you left; or bringing the back around to the front and stitching it down. You can finish your quilts like this, and sometimes that’s appropriate, but I will say, even as someone who hates binding, there are a couple really good reasons to bind your quilt.

The most important questions you should ask yourself when preparing to finish your quilt sandwich is “How long do I want this to last?” followed closely by “How do I want this to look?”

I most often hear people want to flip and sew or pull the back around for kids’ quilts, citing the fact that it will be dragged around and washed extensively. Well, while we often think that a kids’ quilt is not an heirloom or something you want to spend loads of time on, for many a child (this one included), a beloved “baby blankie” might be the center of their very existence for sometime, and then tucked away in a box when all that remains is tatters.

The primary advantage of binding is that it is *replaceable*. If you flip and sew, or wrap around, when the edge wears out, which it will, the whole back often needs replacing, and the top is often damaged. The outside edge of the quilt will be the first thing to go, no matter how gently a quilt is cared for as it will drag the most, be pulled on the most, and be subjected to friction from all sides, unlike the back and the top, which have one side safely shielded by a layer of batting. When a binding wears out, it’s a simple thing to make a new binding and sew it on and hip, hip, hooray, your quilt is practically new again!

That being said, I will only address methods of binding here, rather than alternatives. My primary bias against other methods however, even as extremely lazy quilter, is aesthetic. I think binding looks really nice and adds a frame. If you choose to flip and sew or wrap-around, that’s okay too, but do consider how you want your quilt to look as well as wear. They both do have their uses, such as oddly shaped quilts, art quilts where maybe you don’t want a “frame” , or for small things such as table runners and placemats that you just need to get done because it’s Christmas and you don’t want your mother-in-law to go without a handmade gift (but you don’t want to spend that much time ;).

There are two main types of *traditional* binding: straight grain and bias, both of which can be done on the four sides of a quilt, or continuously. I won’t even discuss non-continuous traditional binding because I think it’s tedious and doesn’t look any better than continuous. You can also do single-fold or double fold. Again, I won’t discuss single-fold because it doesn’t wear well and is more irritating to apply. Save your single-fold for garments. Then there are some new-fangled bindings designed to have the beautiful edge and finish of traditional bindings but to be done entirely by machine: piped binding, scalloped binding, and flanged binding. These newer bindings are done individually on the sides, not continuously.

**Straight grain binding** is made from strips of fabric cut on the straight of grain, typically crosswise, but they can also be cut lengthwise as in the case of directional prints or to avoid seams. Typical double-fold straight grain binding is cut at 2 1/2" , but you can alter this and make it wider for thicker quilts (minkee and puffy batt) or slim it down for a finer frame or a thinner quilt. To make straight grain, cross-cut binding, measure the perimeter of your quilt (width x 2 + length x 2) and divide that number by 40" . This will give you an approximate number of strips you need to cut. Bear in mind that you must round up, even if your number is 6.1 you have to cut 7 strips, you need a little bit extra and fabric is not always 40" of useable width. If your number was close to being its higher friend (say 6.8), you may even want to cut 8. I always cut one extra strip just because there is nothing more annoying than getting around that last corner on a quilt and realizing that you don't have enough binding to finish.

Next, sew all your strips together in one long fabric snake. Be very careful with batiks and solids that don't have an obvious right and wrong, you must have all your seams on the same side of your binding. To sew them together, lay one out lengthwise from left to right in front of you, lay the next one perpendicular to that one on the right hand end of the strip. Rotate this until their corners are pointing like an arrow toward the throat of your machine and sew along the diagonal from corner to corner. This is a necessary way to piece binding to avoid having umpteen layers of fabric once it is double-folded.

Once you've sewn all your strips together, trim the seams to 1/4" (no measuring necessary, I just eyeball and lop off with scissors as I press them), and iron the whole long snake in half widthwise, making it into a double layered 1 1/4" snake. I like to do all these steps when I cut and piece for the rest of the quilt because it makes me more likely to bind the sucker once it's quilted. The last little bit of preparation is to unfold a little of one end and cut it off at a 45 degree angle.

To apply the binding to your quilt you will need a walking foot (a foot with feed dogs). You will also want to clear off the area around your sewing machine. Then, starting in the middle of one of the long sides of your quilt, lay your binding with the raw edges along the raw edges of your TOP, leave a tail of binding, the one that you cut 45 degrees, flopping around. I like to leave about a foot, but on smaller projects, smaller amounts must suffice. You want the dangly piece of binding to still be on that side, away from your corner. Start stitching your chosen distance below the end of your strip. Make sure you back stitch or do a locking stitch, then proceed down the side of your quilt with a 1/4" ish seam allowance. I like a slightly fatter edge, so I do a little more than a 1/4" , but you should try to be consistent around the quilt, whatever width you choose. I like to move my needle a little to the left (about 1.5mm) so that I can move the quilt over so both upper feed dogs are on the quilt.

Stitch all the way until you are your seam allowance distance away from the next side of your quilt. Make sure your needle is down. Rotate your quilt and stitch off the very tip of the corner (this should make a 135 degree angle with your other stitching, or a 45 degree bisection of the 90 angle of your quilt). Leave your needle down and don't cut your thread. Now rotate your quilt to stitch down the next side, but don't start stitching until we make the corner of your binding. To do that, first fold the binding back along that short line of angled stitching you just made: the remainder of your binding should now be "pointing" away from you, but in line with the side of your quilt that we're getting ready to stitch. Then you will fold it back over toward you, making another fold that runs along the edge of the quilt you've already stitched. Then start stitching on that top folded edge at your special seam allowance, and continue around the rest of your quilt until you get about 20" from where you started stitching. Backstitch or lock stitch, cut your thread, and remove your quilt from the machine.

Now all we have to do is join the floppy tails of our binding and stitch it down and we'll be done with the machine stage of continuous binding. To join, lay that edge of your quilt on a flat surface and put the long, uncut tail inside the cut dangly tail you left when you started. Make sure the binding lays flat along the edge as it would if you were going to stitch it. Use

chalk or some other removable marker and trace the edge of your 45 degree cut onto the uncut tail. Make sure you trace enough to get the direction of angle and where they meet, you don't need to get the whole shebang. Now take the uncut tail and lay it on your cutting surface. Using your ruler to get an accurate 45 degree in the right direction (ie—along the line that you just drew) cut 3/8" past the mark you just made. Again, that is make sure there is 3/8" MORE of tail past that line. If you cut your line off, you should be sad. Let's hope that you measured twice and cut once though, and carry on. Then put that 45 degree angle right sides together with your other cut tail, with approximately a 1/4" dog ear off each side. Sew a full 1/4" seam. Then you should be able to finger press the seam, fold the binding back in half, and have it lay nicely along the edge of your quilt. Stitch the last bit onto your quilt and move on to the hand-finishing.

The world is not a perfect place however, so if you've got a little extra binding, feel free to rip, trim, and resew that seam. If you are a bit on the tight side, see if you can make it stretch. I actually like my binding pretty snug, so I prefer this to saggy, but if it's too snug for your to stitch it down on the side, you can sew your cut off tail back on, and retrim, giving yourself a little more extra, then repeat the joining steps above. When I've had to do this, and I certainly have, I like to move back about 5 or six inches on the tail, cut it off, sew a new piece on, and then remark, trim, and join so I don't have two seams 1/2" apart. Whatever you have the heart to do.

Once you've completely applied the binding by machine, you're ready to hand stitch it down. In certain cases, I machine stitch to the back and hand stitch to the front, namely when I'm using a really long-haired minkee, but there's nothing wrong with that if your hand stitches are neat and tidy. If not, I'd recommend keeping those hand-stitches on the back.

First, pick a thread that matches your back or binding. If they're completely different colors, I tend to go with the binding color, but I'm not sure it matters. Cut a length about 24" and thread your needle. I actually like small embroidery needles or large milliners needles, so I can see to thread them, but also so I have a bit of stiffness. I've used betweens and broken them. Use whatever needle suits your fancy though. Tie a knot on one end of the thread, do NOT double your thread. Doubling the thread means that in your stitch the two pieces will twist around each other, adding additional wear to the stitches.

There are two styles of hand-stitching and I confess that I'm actually in the minority camp, but one quilter at a time I will drag other quilters over to my side. The typical tack down stitch of choice for binding is just a tiny whip stitch or blind stitch, and when done by fine hand-appliquers is often invisible. Many quilters do nice whip stitching, but the stitching is still visible. I personally prefer to do a blind running stitch. At least I think that's what it's called. It's more common in Hawaiian applique.

To start either, pull your thread through the fabric under where the binding will lay, then get a bit of the binding with your needle. For a whip stitch, you will keep taking a little bit of quilt and a little bit of binding at 1/8" to 1/4" intervals. If the quilt was invisible, but you could see the stitching, it would "whip" around like a little tiny spring.

To do a blind running stitch, come up directly inside the fold of the binding then go down under the quilt back for 1/8" and back up into the edge of the binding for 1/8" and repeat. The result is that you have a long, flat, line of thread lying either inside the folded edge of the binding or underneath the quilt backing and you will rarely if ever see any thread. This is my favorite advantage, but the other huge advantage is that the force exerted on each stitch is spread along the length of the thread, rather than at discrete stitches, as with the whip stitch, so the thread almost never tears your binding. This means that the stitch wears out first, so

you can restitch your binding on a couple times before having to replace the whole thing. With whip stitching, the stitches often win out and tear the binding, so you have to replace the whole binding (and therefore re-handstitch it), rather than just re-stitching it. Whip stitching is very strong, and in this case, can be too strong for the binding. So that is why I like the blind running stitch.

Whichever stitch you choose, just do it around the entire quilt, then I stitch back and forth a couple times, tie a knot, and bury it for a nearly invisible finish.

**Continuous bias binding** has the advantage of being very flexible, so it is perfect for going around weird angles, scallops, rounded corners, or irregular edges. I will not pretend that I can best the “Quilter’s Pocket Reference” in describing how to make continuous bias binding, so I will say, spend \$8.95 and get that book if you don’t already have it. It is full of useful information. Bias binding is also a very fun way to use stripes, plaids and their close relatives because it puts them on a 45 degree angle, giving a “candy cane” effect to the edge of your quilt. It is absolutely necessary for any type of curved edge. In general, bias binding is applied just like straight grain binding, accounting for curves by going around them :) Usually for a scalloped edge, you mark the scallops, apply the binding, and then trim the quilt, giving you a little room for error. If you happen to make something like a double wedding ring, however, it is “pre-scalloped” , so you will have to be more careful.

If you want to have rounded corners on a quilt, I recommend marking them, applying binding and then trimming for the same reasons. If you’ve got weird angles (like an octagonal runner or wall-hanging), just remember that when you stitch off of a corner, you have to bisect the angle on the quilt (ie—a 67.5 degree angle—approximately anyway :) Inside angles need bias binding to stretch over them as you can’t fold the fabric in any way to maneuver around them.

**Piped binding, scalloped binding, and flanged binding** all involve a bit more work on the front end, but less work on the back end (ie—no hand-stitching) and can add a very cool effect to the edge of your quilt by creating a miniature border between your quilt and binding. They also use that miniature border to hide machine stitching that is used to put them on. They require slightly more fabric than either traditional binding method, and generally at least two colors. As I learned everything I know about these types of bindings from Ricky Tims, I highly recommend his video Grand Finale for any quilter interested in these methods or machine quilting. It’s over two hours of amazing information about machine quilting, marking, trapunto, and of course, his magical methods of binding. Plus he’s all kinds of fun to watch!