



# Preparing Your Quilt for Long Arm Quilting

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Thinking about sending one of your quilts out for long arm machine quilting? There are several things you should know that will affect your choices and preparation. By preparing properly you'll be happier with the finished product, and keep the costs down (as well as prevent frustration for the quilter).

### What you'll need to provide for the quilter:

For any machine quilting, accuracy while creating your quilt top is the single most important issue. The top, batting, and backing are pinned to rails that are perfectly parallel. If you've not made sure the top and backing are super square (meaning the corners are 90 degrees), you can end up with tucks, puckers, or added costs since the quilter will have to correct your mistakes. See further down in this article about preventing wavy borders, and take the time to check all components for square edges on a large group of tables. Frequently, your local shop or the long arm quilter has the facilities for this, and are happy to provide them for your use. Use a large square ruler and extended (36" or more) straight edge.

Again, accuracy every step of the way while completing your top counts! There are loads of wonderful resources to show you proper technique. Press the top, and stay stitch any pieced edges for stability (1/8" from the raw edge so that the stay stitching will be covered by the binding). Remove any extra threads, cat hairs, or other guest fuzzies. To prevent wrinkling, fold the quilt in accordion folds that are parallel to the top and bottom of the quilt. Hang this over a padded coat hanger. This is easily accomplished by wrapping some extra batting around a hanger. Press the backing, and hang

as discussed for the top. Folding the top and backing in accordion folds parallel to the top and bottom edges will ensure that these folds will be released because of the tension of the rails of the machine. If the folds are perpendicular to the sides, it is difficult to eliminate them without pressing. If the quilter has to press, you get to pay for that time!

If you are providing batting, prewash or preshrink if necessary. Some batting has a 6-10% shrinkage rate if not preshrunk. Quilting can also reduce the size of the quilt somewhat (depending on the density of the quilting and the tension of the thread). So, if you don't preshrink, you can lose 10 inches on a 100 square inch quilt. Follow the manufacturer's directions, and discuss batting choices with your quilter. Batting can vary greatly in cost and quality, and how it will affect your final project.

You will need to provide a batt and backing that is at least 8-10" larger than your top. See below for more information on this. If you have thread preferences, check with the quilter, and make sure you provide more than enough thread, if you are supplying it. Cone thread is necessary for longarms, and the quilter may wish to only use threads they have.



## **Costs and how they are determined:**

Many things will affect how much you pay for quilting services. If you have thoughts about the design and density of the quilting, you can get a pretty accurate estimate. Most quilters charge by the square inch. Compute this by multiplying the width times the length of your quilt. Very loose quilting can run \$.02-.025 per square inch. Custom or dense quilting can run \$.03-.06 per square inch, depending on complexity. If you have a quilt design in mind, discuss it with the quilter, or better yet, provide photos or web links. There are many sources for continuous line patterns that can be adapted for your quilt. Try giving specific guidelines, or else know that the quilter will do what they're either most accomplished with, or that requires the least amount of time. Some quilters will only use pantographs, or patterns that run the width of the quilt. Others prefer to do custom work that enhances the design you've created. The prices and quality can range considerably, so you may want to check around, and ask for referrals for the type of quilting you desire.

Ask for a timeline. Many quilters are backed up several months. If there is a quilter that you are willing to wait for, ask if you can schedule the project, and provide the quilt and other materials just before they are ready to begin. Some quilters prefer not to store a large number of projects for an extended length of time, so are willing to make arrangements to get your quilt at a date close to when they can complete the job. Think ahead, and take waiting times into account. If you need a quilt for a deadline, you may end up paying a "rush" fee.

There are several machines out there of varying quality that can affect the costs. Some machines have stitch length regulators or a robotic system that does computer driven quilting. This will affect the quality of your finished quilt. Other systems go one speed, and the skill of the quilter determines the stitch length. Tension control and the way the quilt is loaded onto certain machines can also affect the finished quality. You get what you pay for here. If you are looking for a bargain, you may not be as happy with the finished job. Check references and ask to see samples of the quilter's work. Carefully inspect both the front and the back of the quilt.

## **Cotton vs. synthetics: Batting and Threads**

Batting is a critical component of your finished quilt. Polyester battings may be less expensive, but can have their own set of issues. We have many quilts that are still in excellent condition from the 1800s. Cotton batts were the only battings available, and they've withstood the test of time. Polyesters can break down or stretch, and a quilt with a high loft when made may ultimately lose the loft. They tend to dull needles faster, and since they are so slippery, can lead to unintentional puckers and tucks. Most quilters prefer cotton, an 80% cotton/20% poly blend, or even wool. There are also now cotton/wool blends and cotton/silk blends. The right battings have low shrinkage rates, do not require pre shrinking or washing, and is very consistent in quality. The drape is wonderful, and since cotton and cotton blends "stick" to the top and the back, there is never any shifting of the layers. Rolled battings vary from 90-120" wide, and because it comes on a roll, there are no wrinkles and compression that happens to batting that comes in tight bags. There is even a black batting for dark quilts.

If you provide your own batting, open it, lay it flat and let it relax before taking it to the quilter. You may want to place it in a dryer with a damp cloth to eliminate the wrinkles or flattened areas. Preshrink the batting if recommended, or prewash it if it has cotton seed husks that will later leak oil (these are visible little flecks of brown commonly found on 100% cotton batts from chain stores, follow the manufacturer's instructions).

Threads are constantly evolving, and there are many wonderful choices on the market. Take the time to discuss thread choice and colors with your quilter. There can also be a big difference in costs, so communication is essential.

### **Wavy Border Syndrome**

Walk any show, and you'll see loads of quilts hanging with wavy borders. These are caused by a number of problems. Preparation and proper technique will prevent W.B.S.

Borders should always be cut parallel to the selvage of the fabric. Cut the selvage off, and purchase enough fabric (if possible) that you can cut the border in one piece. You can piece the borders if necessary, but you lose some of the integrity and

strength of the long fibers in the weave. If you cut parallel to the selvage, these fibers are intact and won't stretch as much as if you cut the borders on the cross grain of the fabric, where the longest fibers will only be 42-44 inches.

Fold your quilt top in half, after pressing and squaring, and measure along the center fold to determine the length of your borders. Cut the borders to this measurement, and make the quilt edges fit the border. If you make the borders fit the edges, it is easy to have one side of the quilt longer than the other, or to stretch it. You can end up with a great deal of distortion in the quilt, or even tucks.

After cutting the borders to the measurement of the center fold, fold the border and mark half and quarter points with pins. Do the same to the edge of the quilt, match these and sew on the borders. The worse situation is caused by quilters who cut 42" widths of fabric and piece them together to create a super long border, place it against the feed dogs on the sewing machine, and then stitch them in place with the pieced quilt top closest to the foot. The feed dogs will ease in extra fabric. This is a sure way to add several inches to the edge of the quilt. Multiply this times several borders, and you can soon have 5-10" more width on the borders than across the quilt center. You'll get a call from the quilter giving you the choice of removing and fixing them, or paying the quilter to fix it for you.

Work with the quilter to plan quilting that is evenly dense across the entire quilt surface. If you desire tight quilting in the blocks, but loose quilting in the borders, you'll have wavy borders. Loose quilting in the blocks and a dense border gets you a bowl or double D cup. The quilting needs to be balanced in density over the entire quilt.

### **Piecing the backing**

There are now many wideback fabrics on the market. Be aware that these generally shrink much worse than standard width cottons. Buy plenty, and preshrink it by evenly wetting it and putting it in a moderately hot dryer. Stores usually use a rotary cutter to cut your yardage, which is not very useful for widebacks. Buy enough that you can tear each end to make sure the backing is truly on grain and square. An extra half yard would be recommended.

If you are not using a wideback fabric, chances are you will need to piece the backing. There are some things you must either know and complete, or be prepared to pay your quilter more. The best way to piece the backing is to have all seams parallel to the top and bottom edge of your quilt top. After **removing all selvages**, sew the sections together using a 1/2" seam allowance, and press all seams to one side, not open. This strengthens the seam. If you press it open, the only thing holding the seam together is the threads that travel between the two pieces at 12 stitches per inch. Many quilts go on beds, and are sat on, jumped on, etc. These seams can easily split if pressed open. Create a backing that is a total of 8-10 inches larger than the quilt top.

If there are seams perpendicular to the top and bottom, these seams build up faster on the bars on the longarm machine, causing the seam to be tight, and the rest of the fabric to "hammock". It can be difficult for the quilter to ensure that your quilt won't have tucks in the backing after it is quilted. Selvages left in place create a similar issue. They do not stretch, but the rest of the fabric can droop. The quilter might have to remove these, resulting in more cost.

If you have no choice other than to create vertical seams, the quilter may choose to load your quilt sideways. This might limit your pattern choices if you are thinking about a directional edge to edge pattern. Good communication with the quilter will help in this situation.

When delivering your quilt, place a pin and piece of paper on both the top and the backing indicating the top edges. If you have thoughts about how the backing needs to be positioned (centering it a certain way, etc.) let the quilter know immediately. Again, this may result in an additional charge.

### **What if I want to quilt my quilt?**

Some quilt makers do not wish to let someone else work on their quilts. Here at Jukebox, we provide support, education, and rental time on either our sit down, hand guided or computer guided machines. One of our outstanding staff members work with you through the entire process, and we have thousands of patterns to choose from. This is a great way to understand more about quilting, retain creative control over your quilt and to have

a thoroughly wonderful day. If you do get hooked and decide you might want your own machine, any rental time you have within six months of purchasing is credited back to you.

If you enjoy hand quilting or wish to quilt your quilt on your home domestic machine, we can also baste your quilt project, perfectly preparing and stabilizing it for you.

If you are happy with the quilting services you receive, tell your fellow quilters. If you are not happy, take into consideration that the quilter cannot perform miracles if your top was less than perfect to begin with, and probably does not read minds well. Discuss any dissatisfaction with the quilter to allow him or her to either correct or explain any problems, concerns, or issues.

A side note: if you are planning on entering your quilt in shows or competitions, please give your quilter credit for the quilting. Generally, if you pay for the quilting service, any awards received for your quilt are yours alone, but discussing this possibility ahead of time will eliminate hurt feelings and other confusion. Credit for the quilting is usually an adequate compensation, but opinions on this subject vary greatly, so confirm this with your quilter.

If you are thrilled with the quilting, communicating that happiness is highly recommended to guarantee the quilter will work with you on future projects. (Chocolate never hurts here.) Many quilters quickly develop a busy client base, and at a certain point, do not take new clients. If you develop a great working relationship, future projects will be fun and satisfying for your both.

## Checklist for taking your quilt to a long arm quilter:

- Top and backing is pressed and clean
- Top and backing are accurately squared
- Backing and batting are at least 8-10" larger than the quilt top
- Top edges of backing and top are marked
- Drape over padded hangers to prevent wrinkles
- Call ahead to schedule the quilting service
- Consider theme, designs and patterns for the quilting.
- Decide on threads and batting. Discuss this with the quilter.
- The more you plan and articulate to the quilter, the happier you'll both be. Clearly communicate any ideas or thoughts you have with the quilter.