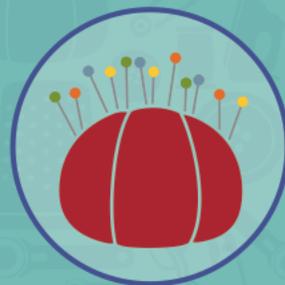


# Piecing Quilts

How to Sew Seams, Chain Piece,  
Match Points, and Press for Success

Robin Strobel



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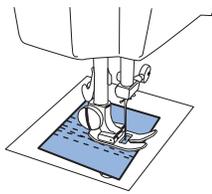
## Quilt Piecing

Here are my tips for piecing a quilt, with methods that make the process as easy and painless as possible.

### Sewing Seams

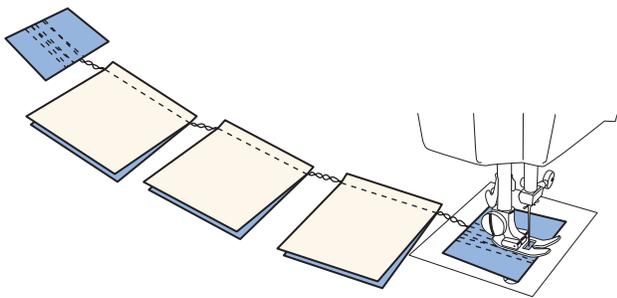
Quilts, especially those pieced with triangles, are much easier to sew together if you try to keep an accurate  $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance. Even if you use a  $\frac{1}{4}$ " presser foot, you may find that your seams are slightly wider or narrower than a true  $\frac{1}{4}$ ". I check my seam accuracy when I first start sewing a new project. Having said that, I admit that after the first units are sewn, I pay less attention to the correct seam width and focus more on getting the pieces together with seams aligned and the tips of any triangles tidy at the seams.

When I begin stitching, my sewing machine tends to swallow the beginning strands of thread, tangle them up, and form a large knot under the bottom piece of fabric. To keep this from occurring, I start and stop on a small scrap of fabric.



### How to Chain Piece

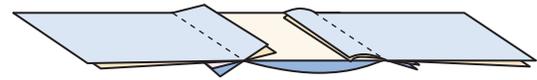
When possible, I take an assembly-line approach to sewing, feeding pieces through the machine one after the other and stopping to cut the thread only when an entire group is sewn. This is called chain piecing.



### Matching Seams

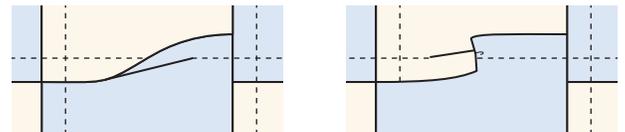
I seldom pin individual pieces together before sewing, and I also do not pin units together unless I need to match a triangle point. I make certain that the seam allowances that are supposed to match are pressed in opposite directions and then use my fingers to pinch and regulate the fabric as I feed it under the presser foot. About half of my students like this technique, while the other half are more

successful when they pin. Use the technique that gives you the best results. If you pin, you can help avoid damage to your machine if you remove the pins just before crossing over them with your needle.



Opposing Seams

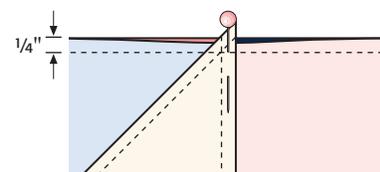
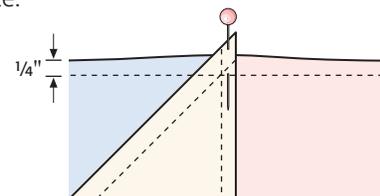
Sometimes, when one portion of the seam allowance has already been stitched down, such as when you are stitching blocks into rows, you will find that opposing seams might be pressed in the same direction, making them difficult to align accurately. My solution to this problem is to finger-press one seam in the opposite direction before sewing. The disadvantage to this technique is that it causes a twist in the seam allowance, which can form a tiny lump on the front of the quilt. The lump usually disappears, but some people like to cut a  $\frac{1}{8}$ " notch in the seam where the twist occurs.



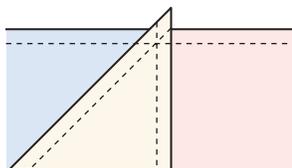
### Sewing Designs with Triangles

For the first few years that I made quilts, I avoided any patterns with triangles. Triangles terrified me, and my first few experiences with them were, literally, not pretty. Over the years, I've learned how to get the points of the triangles to match. It may not be precision quilting, but it works for me.

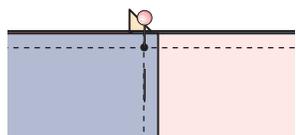
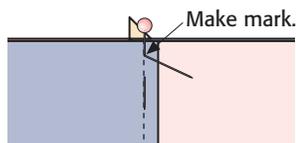
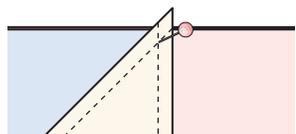
First, I try to sew an extremely accurate  $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam when stitching the triangle point. After that, I don't worry too much about the width of the seam allowance elsewhere in the block. I just sew the seam allowance to accommodate the point of the triangle. Any wobble in the seam can usually be pressed or quilted out and is not noticeable. The point of the triangle, which is very visible, will look sharp and accurate.



If possible, I sew with the triangle on top so that I can easily see the point. Pin through the seams, making certain that any opposing seams match. Stitch, aiming for one thread-width beyond the triangle point. Remove the pin just before sewing over it. When the fabric is opened and pressed, the point will appear to be perfect.

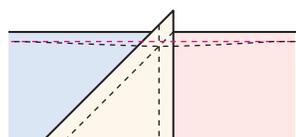


Sewing with the triangle on top is not always possible. Try this technique if the triangle is on the bottom layer. Pin the fabrics together, making certain that opposing seams match. Stab a pin straight through the tip of the triangle point through the top layer. Make a mark on the top layer directly where the pin exits the fabric. Stitch directly through the marked point.



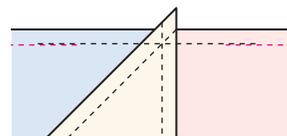
No matter how often I sew triangles, sometimes I miss sewing accurate points. When I miss, first I ask myself how bad it looks and if I can live with it. If it does not look too bad, and/or if I can live with it, I leave it. If I decide I want to fix it, I correct only the small area that bothers me.

There are two basic fixes. If the opposing seams match but the seam allowance is too narrow, this allows a gap between the point and the seam. If this is the case, I simply restitch, taking a larger bite. Sew with the triangle on top, even if you originally stitched with the triangle on the bottom.



---- Old stitching line  
---- New stitching line

If the seam allowance is too wide (cutting off the point), and/or the seams do not match, I take out the original stitching, usually up to the last place at which a seam or point matched correctly. I pin the point and a few places in between. Start by overlapping the original stitching for five or six stitches, and then sew the section, easing and stretching as needed to get the seams and points to match. (Remove the pins just before you sew over them.) End by sewing over the original stitching for five or six stitches.



---- Old stitching line  
---- New stitching line

If I still can't get the blasted point to match, I will finger-press the seams open, pin while matching the seams, and try stitching it that way. Sometimes this method works better for me than the opposing seams method. Use whatever approach you find to be most accurate. Pressing the seams open goes against conventional quilting wisdom, and people who quilt by hand probably will prefer to press their seams to one side.

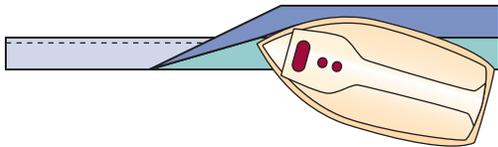
## Pressing Fabric

I like to use the technique that will give me the best visual results. I don't care if it is called pressing or ironing, the idea is to get the fabric to lie flat without stretching it out of shape. (I have a great history of creating many interesting shapes by stretching the fabric when I iron it.) I iron more accurately without steam, but some people prefer steam. Be careful not to press pleats along the seam lines as you iron. If I press pleats into a seam allowance, or if I need to re-press for any reason, I spray a little water on the piece, fluff it, fold it back into the shape it had before pressing, and iron it flat so that it looks just like it did when I first sewed it. I then open the pieces and press them correctly.

If you are a stickler for precision and feel that no matter how accurately you cut or sew, your pieces still don't measure up, the culprit may be your attention to pressing. Over the years, I've found that quilters generally take great care with cutting and piecing but don't give much thought to pressing. Usually the only topic that arises is whether or not to use steam.

Good pressing can really improve the quality of your finished quilt blocks. Take a few extra seconds to incorporate these tips, and you'll be glad you did.

- After stitching the seams, take the pieces to your ironing board and press the patchwork just as it came out of your sewing machine—with right sides still together. Pressing sets the seam, making the stitching nice and flat so that the thread takes up less bulk once you press the piece open.
- With the darker patch on top, use the tip of your iron to open up the patchwork and then press the seam flat from the right side. This way, the seam allowance will automatically be going toward the dark fabric.
- For long seams, such as those on strip sets or when attaching borders, don't be tempted to slide the iron along the seam allowance. After setting the seam, open up the pieces and, starting in the middle rather than at one end, use the tip of your iron to gently guide the seam open. Then press down on the seam, lift the iron, move to the next spot, and repeat. If you glide the iron along the strip sets, it's easy to stretch them out of shape, creating curved or bowed seams.



Don't slide iron.  
Press and lift.

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