

Pressing Pieced Blocks and Setting Blocks Together, Courtesy of Quilting Board

Pressing machine pieced blocks

Many quilt books and patterns instruct you to "press to the dark". Sometimes that is not possible when there are too many seams coming together and there is too much bulk. The pressing to the dark "rule" is left over from our hand piecing quilting ancestors. When hand piecing templates were made the exact size of the finished patch and the seam allowance was added randomly or "eye-balled". Because of this the seam allowances were usually uneven and of different widths. Also, all the stitching was done by hand -- sometimes with large stitches -- and the seams were weak. Pressing to one side -- usually to the dark -- was necessary to keep the strength of the quilt even after being hand quilted. So, if you are piecing by hand, pressing in one direction is necessary for the strength of the quilt.

Rotary cut pieces -- press to light or dark

Now that we rotary cut our pieces and our seam allowances are a standard width, there is no reason to continue in this archaic pressing method. Also our lock stitch [sewing machines](#) make a very firm and tight seam.

It is OK to press to the light if it is necessary to keep the buildup of numerous intersecting seam allowances less bulky. If the dark color shows through slightly, you might want to trim a slight amount from the dark seam allowance allowing the light color seam allowance to cover the darker seam allowance.

A good rule to follow especially in strip piecing is to press in the direction stated in the pattern. Most pattern designers carefully plan pressing directions for ease of future assembling so you would want to follow their directions. That way when you are working on the next step you will have your seam allowances pressed in the direction required to continue the piecing process as the designer planned.

When piecing individual blocks and the block has a center area it is usually recommended to press seam allowances toward the outside although this is not an absolute rule. Also, if several seams are intersecting from one direction and the other direction has fewer seams, press in the direction of the fewer seams.

At other times you might want to press seam allowances toward the piece you want to "come forward" or stand out. By pressing seam allowances toward these pieces, they become prominent because the pieces surrounding them tend to recede.

Pressing seams open

Did you know it is OK to press seams open? Today's quilter has a lock-stitch [sewing machine](#). Many quilters began sewing by making garments. We used to stitch the back seams of our trousers and press the seams open! Then we wore them for several years and sat on that seam and gained weight in those pants and still the seam didn't split open. All men's dress trousers have the back seam pressed open.

Many professional quilters press all their seams open. Machine quilting of our modern-day quilts help stabilize the stitching of the piecing. Our machine-made quilts are stronger than the handmade quilts of yesteryear.

The direction you press your seams is also determined by how you will be quilting. If you will be machine quilting "in the ditch" you will want to press seams away from where you want to quilt. This way you are quilting only through the three layers of the quilt "sandwich" rather than the additional layers of the seam allowance.

If you will be "outline" quilting (1/4" from seam) it really doesn't matter the direction of pressing for quilting purposes because you will not be quilting in the area where the seam allowance is.

If you find your seam allowances are "twisting" remember that once some of the seams in your block are pressed you will need to be careful to not turn them in the opposite direction when stitching a new seam.

Look at your block carefully and decide the direction you wish your seam allowances to be pressed rather than following any rule. As you become more experienced at piecing, pressing will become easier and

you will know the direction to press each seam allowance.

Setting blocks together

If you are setting pieced blocks together with plain squares it is recommended to press the seams toward the plain squares. This will reduce the bulk of the pieced seam allowance area.

If you are setting a pieced block to a pieced block, you will need to choose which direction you should press. One of your blocks may have fewer intersections than another so you would press toward the block with less seam intersections.

When setting blocks together it is easy to get the seams going in opposite directions so when you press your quilt top you find the seam allowances are "twisting". There is nothing wrong with this. When this happens to me, I simply press the seam down flat at one end and at the other end I allow the seam allowance to "twist" and press it very flat. Once the quilt is layered with batting and backing and quilted you can hardly tell that the seam allowance was "twisted".

If this "twisting" bothers you, simply place a pin in the opposite end of the seam allowance as you are stitching to keep that end of the seam allowance flat. When you are stitching the next row of blocks, the pin will automatically show you which way the seam allowance should go as it is already pinned down in the proper direction.

Pressing a quilt top is important and you should press as well as possible but don't obsess about it so much that it makes you not enjoy the quilting process.

Stack-n-Whack (r) and Stack & Slash

Stack-n-Whack (r) and Stack & Slash are two entirely different techniques in cutting fabric for piecing quilts. Even though the two techniques have similar names, they utilize entirely different methods of cutting and sewing.

Stack-n-Whack (r) -- The Stack-n-Whack (r) technique was developed by Bethany Reynolds and is presented in her first book entitled Magic Stack-n-Whack Quilts. This method is an easy way to create quilt blocks with unique [kaleidoscope](#) designs. These designs usually require a set of six or eight identical pieces cut from a large-scale print fabric. Rather than finding and cutting each piece individually otherwise known as "fussy cutting", a quilter can cut and layer a number of large, identical print rectangles to make a stack.

Then each triangle or wedge cut from the six or eight layer stack to produce a block kit, or a set of identical pieces that will create the kaleidoscope effect for one block. The eight layers of stacked rectangle are cut at the same time but each motif is simply cut in strips and sub-cut into shapes required by the pattern and each area of the [fabric design](#) is not selected. The kaleidoscope motifs formed when the pieces are stitched together are entirely random.

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These quilt blocks are public domain blocks but Bethany's Stack-n-Whack (r) technique's trademark is owned by her so this title should not be used for another quilting method.

Whatever method you enjoy doing and choose to use in your quilt making experience, be sure to keep the names of the methods independent of each other.

Fussy or selective cutting -- Before we learned Bethany's Stack-n-Whack (r) method we would lay out our fabric and carefully select an area to be cut. We would mark our template with a flower or portion of the motif and cut this piece. Then we would carefully look for seven more motifs from another part of the fabric that is an exact match. This is called fussy cutting or selective cutting. This is a much more time consuming method than Stack-n-Whack (r) although many quilt designers still prefer to cut pieces individually for their [kaleidoscope](#) type blocks.

When choosing an area of the fabric for selective cutting a window template and two mirrors may be used to view how the final block will appear when stitched. A window template is simply the exact finished size of the template is cut from the center of a sheet of paper or card stock. Some quilters like to have control over the appearance of the motif in the center of the block so prefer to view the area they wish to cut before cutting.

Most traditional blocks used for this method are structured and need to be carefully pieced to be effective. Many have y-seams in part of the block assembly. Blocks designed for careful piecing appeals to many quilters who enjoy the challenge of such intricate piecing.

Random Stack & Slash -- Stack & Slash is a very random cutting style that has very few rules and little structure. To make eight blocks -- eight different fabric squares are chosen. Any size square may be chosen to begin with but remember your blocks will be smaller than your original fabric squares due to the take up for seam allowances.

This piecing method is very easy as seams don't need to be matched and there is no setting in or y-seams. When all the piecing is finished the blocks are trimmed and ready to set together. This would be a fun beginners project.

Begin with a 12" to 16" square of fabric. Fat quarters would work well for 16" squares of fabric. Make sure all your fabric squares are the same size.

Stack all the fabric on the cutting board. Lay your rotary ruler down on an angle and make one cut (or slash) through all layers. Take the top fabric of one of the stacks and put it on the bottom of the same stack.

Go to the [sewing machine](#) and stitch all the pieces together -- try to keep them in order. Press seams open or to one side. Stack them all together and go to the [cutting board](#). Make another slash the opposite direction of the first slash.

Again, take the top piece of one of the stacks and place it on the bottom. Stitch all pieces together and press. Continue stacking and slashing until you have all your blocks pieced with the number of pieces that looks pleasing to you.

Each time you cut, remember to move fabrics from one stack before stitching, so no two fabrics are touching each other. You are working toward a scrappy crazy quilt look.

Press blocks well and trim them all the same size. These blocks may be set side by side or set with a sashing and cornerstones.

Planned Stack & Slash -- Patterns are available to purchase or appear in books for a planned stack & slash technique. A [freezer paper](#) pattern is included and the pieces are all cut from the [master pattern](#). Then the pieces are then mixed in a way described in the pattern and stitched together as instructed. They are trimmed and used in the quilt pictured.

Some of the patterns that are available include five-pointed stars, hearts and other familiar motifs. These quilts can be quite scrappy and if that is your choice you might enjoy making one of these patterns.