

From Good to Phenomenal

10 Tips to Skyrocket Your Quilt to the Next Level



by Cathy Thomas

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Introduction

Whether you're new to quilting or an old pro, it's probably safe to assume that you desire a finished quilt like none other. Time and money, two major factors in the creation of a quilt, demand that you put forth your best effort. There are several simple steps in the quilt making process that will assure better than average results.

In fact, the subtitle for this guide could be, "What Every Longarm Quilter Wishes Her Customer Knew About Quilting." Following these few simple suggestions can take your quilt from good to phenomenal with very little extra effort on your part. It will also enable your longarm quilter to give you the awe-inspiring quilting results you desire and deserve.



Use Quality Fabric

Yes, there is a difference in chain store fabric vs. quilt shop fabric. In the article, *The Difference Between Chain Store Fabrics and Quilters' Grade Fabrics* by Jim Salinas, he states, "Premium brands start with high quality greige (gray)

goods. Premium greige goods have a thread count of at least 60 by 60 threads, and most have thread counts higher than 60 square. Higher

thread counts produce a silkier hand, less bearding when quilted, longer fabric life and better printing definition.” To learn more, read the entire article on my blog, [Quilt Shop Fabric vs. Chain Store Fabric](#).

Pre-wash the Fabric

I am well aware of the ongoing debate over whether or not to pre-wash your fabric. The dyes in the quality fabrics of today are more stable and less likely to run or bleed. There are also laundry products that can be used to prevent such occurrences. So the choice over whether or not to spend the extra time washing and drying your fabric is totally up to you. However, I have had more than one customer share her tale of woe over a dark fabric bleeding onto a lighter fabric when the quilt was laundered.

Cut Accurately

It goes without saying that in order to make a quilt block that matches the pattern directions, the individual pieces must be cut accurately according to the measurements given. A quarter of an inch off can make a big difference in the final result. Don't rush or cut through too many layers of fabric at one time.





Clear Your Workspace

I know, I know... some of you are saying that you are at the height of your creative genius in the midst of a big mess. So this tip may not apply to every personality type. But consider the benefits of having all your supplies at your fingertips and an area to lay out your blocks without competition from a pile of scraps. A clear workspace is definitely a timesaver, not having to go through your work to get to your work, and helps avoid frustration when trying to keep all those squares, triangles, and rectangles in order. See my blog post, [A Clean Slate](#), for organizational tips and inspiration.

Have Your Iron Handy

An iron is a quilter's best friend. May I repeat---an iron is a quilter's best friend! I get many quilts that won't lay flat simply because the quilter never took the time to press the seams flat in each unit. I keep my iron right next to my sewing machine, so I can just reach over and press the seams. Some women prefer to get up, stretch, and walk to the ironing board. Either way, never neglect the ironing step. It makes all the difference in the world in creating a nice, smooth block. Notice I mention pressing the seams. We iron shirts with a back and forth motion, but we press quilt seams with an up and down motion to prevent distortion of the blocks. Using steam is widely debated. The key seems to be not whether you use it, but how you use it. Avoid stretching the block and "steaming" it to the point of distortion.



Keep Seam Allowances Uniform

Most quilt patterns use $\frac{1}{4}$ " seams. Many sewing machines have a $\frac{1}{4}$ " foot which helps the seamstress keep the seam allowance accurate by sewing with the edge of the foot along the edge of the fabric. If your machine does not have this foot, it may have a grooved line on the throat plate with a $\frac{1}{4}$ " line to follow. Whatever the case may be, keeping the seam allowances uniform will

make the block size accurate. I am always a bit shocked when I see seams of varying widths in the same quilt. It's no wonder points of triangles get cut off and blocks need to be stretched in order to fit together. Any distortion when the quilt top is assembled makes it difficult for the longarm quilter to avoid having puffy areas in the quilt or at worst, tucks in the quilt top.

Measure Each Finished Block or Unit and Compare to Pattern Measurement

Consistency reaps great rewards in the overall appearance of the finished quilt. If the finished block size is 8" x 8", the unfinished block should measure 8 ½" x 8 ½" to allow for seams when joined together. If some blocks measure 8" square and others 9" square, the finished top will be bumpy and hard to quilt properly.



Prevent Wavy Borders

Never pin one long border strip to the side of the quilt, stitch it, then cut it off at the end. The manner in which you attach the borders can make or break your quilt. Wavy borders are a longarm quilter's greatest nightmare, yet they can be easily prevented. Despite all efforts to make the perfect quilt, it is possible for one side to measure slightly longer than the other side or for the center of the quilt to be shorter than the sides. To compensate for the differences, the solution is to:



* Measure (vertically) the center of the quilt, plus each side, and add the measurements together. Divide by three to get the average. This will be the measurement you use to cut the side borders.

* Fold the border strips into half, then quarters, then eighths and mark each section with a pin. Repeat this process with the sides of the quilt.

* Next, pin the border to the side of the quilt with right sides together and match the pins used to mark the sections.



* Add more pins, easing the border and side of quilt together.

* Stitch.



* Repeat this process with the top and bottom borders.

* The quilt will now be “squared up”, meaning the top and bottom borders will measure the same and the sides will measure the same. When it is pinned to the rollers of a longarm quilting machine, the borders will lay flat.

*To go the extra mile with borders, consider stitching $\frac{1}{4}$ " or less from the raw edge of the border (Stay-stitching). This is especially helpful in stabilizing pieced borders, piano key borders, or borders with bias edges.

Prepare the Quilt for Longarm Quilting

Each longarm quilter will have her own preferences and requirements regarding batting and backing measurements.

- Choose a quality batting or purchase it from your quilter. The batting should be 4"-6" larger than the quilt top on all sides.
- Sew the quilt backing together so that it is also 4"-6" larger than the quilt top on all sides.
- You may wonder why it needs to be so much larger than the top--it seems so wasteful. However, the quilt and backing need to be pinned to the canvas leaders, and that requires extra fabric. Also, no quilter wants to get to the end of the quilt and find that the backing is too short. Extra fabric is needed on the sides for the clamps to grasp, holding the backing tight during the quilting process. So, please don't skimp on the batting and backing. The quilting results will be much better, your quilter will be far less frustrated, and you will have more scraps for your scrap bag!



- If your backing is solid black, dark purple, maroon, etc., it is possible that the batting will poke through to the back leaving unsightly white dots with each stitch. The solution is to use a dark cotton batting, or quality polyester batting.

Final considerations

Decide if you would like an all-over design (pantograph) or custom quilting. Cost may be a factor, with custom quilting costing significantly more than all-over designs. There are countless exciting pantographs available today that greatly enhance many different types of quilts. However, some quilts need the extra special touches

that only custom work can provide. Embellishments such as buttons, embroidery, some appliqué, etc. require custom work. Whether you choose custom or all-over quilting, your quilt will be absolutely phenomenal!



In summary, please do not feel your quilt top must be perfect in order to look absolutely gorgeous when quilted. No matter how hard we try, there will always be inconsistencies in our sewing and in the fabric itself when it is cut up and put back together in various shapes. The

eye does not pick up all the individual flaws in a quilt but sees it as a whole. (See my blog post, [Humility Block: Truth or Fiction](#)) The purpose of this guide is to help you make the most of your quilting experience and achieve the best possible results. If one of these tips helps you find more satisfaction in your quilt-making journey, it will have served its purpose.

About the Author

Cathy Thomas, Professional Longarm Quilter and Pattern Designer



My name is Cathy Thomas, also known as Cat. I live in the beautiful Rocky Mountain state of Colorado and have four grown children and four grandchildren, including a precious little boy recently adopted from the earthquake ravaged country of Haiti. I enjoy reading, writing, cooking, and quilt making — especially reproduction quilts from the Civil War era.

Since 2001 I have been a longarm machine quilter by profession, and more recently I have expanded my work to include pattern design. As any quilter will agree, it is the quilting that brings the quilt to life. In the countless hours I have spent 'bringing quilts to life,' I have developed a sincere appreciation for the story behind the quilt, whether it be traditional or abstract. I am intrigued by the picture and storyline the quilter has created through her use of color and design. I am privileged to be part of the overall result.

In summary, I love quilts – antique quilts, traditional quilts, contemporary quilts! The craftsmanship speaks of love, comfort, and artistry. To me, every quilt tells a story, and the colors and designs are like snapshots of life. I am inspired by the lives of women in times gone by who have passed on a piece of their hearts through the simple art of quilting.

Please Visit My Blog at www.CatsQuiltArt.com/blog.

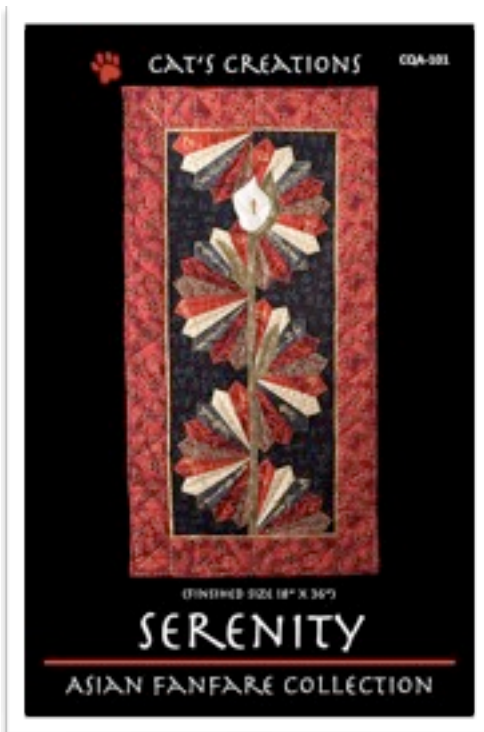
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Serenity

Asian Fanfare Collection

Price: \$9.50

Skill: Advanced Beginner

Finished Size: 18" x 36"

Link to Purchase:

[http://catsquiltart.com/
quilt-patterns/serenity](http://catsquiltart.com/quilt-patterns/serenity)



Nutcracker Sweet

Holiday and Seasonal

Price: \$9.50

Skill: Beginner

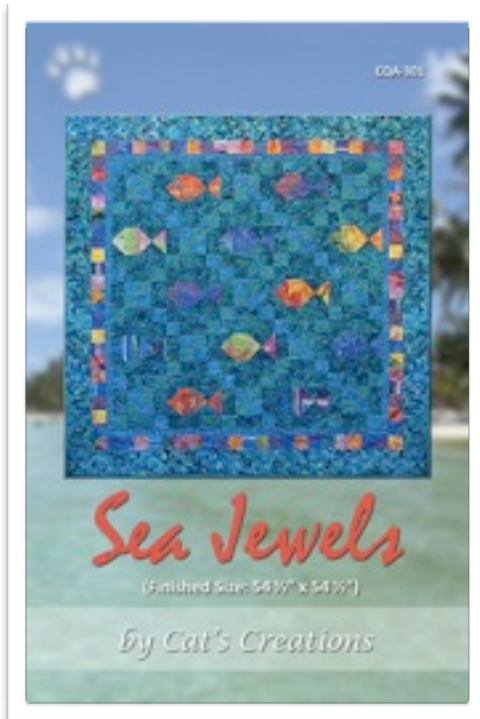
Finished Size: 20.5" x 31.5"

Link to Purchase:

[http://catsquiltart.com/
quilt-patterns/nutcracker-
sweet](http://catsquiltart.com/quilt-patterns/nutcracker-sweet)

Cat's Creations Patterns

For more details and larger images, please visit www.CatsQuiltArt.com/quilt-patterns



Sea Jewels

Batiks

Price: \$9.50

Skill: Beginner

Finished Size: 54.5" x 54.5"

Link to Purchase:

[http://catsquiltart.com/
quilt-patterns/sea-jewels](http://catsquiltart.com/quilt-patterns/sea-jewels)



Patriotic Parade

and

Little Red Cross

Pieces of the Past Collection

Price: \$12.00

Skill: Advanced Beginner

Finished Size: see link below
for further detail

Link to Purchase:

[http://catsquiltart.com/quilt-
patterns/patriotic-parade-
and-little-red-cross](http://catsquiltart.com/quilt-patterns/patriotic-parade-and-little-red-cross)

Cat's Creations Patterns Coming Soon...

