

Charming Station

Quilt Project

The Quarter Inch Seam



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The 1/4" Seam

If you have any experience with garment sewing, you have learned to sew with a 5/8" seam because that is what most patterns instruct you to do. In quilting however, you will need to learn to sew all of your seams with a perfect 1/4" seam or nothing will fit together properly..

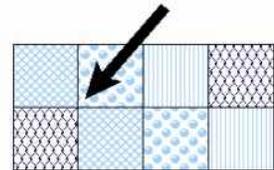
There are several reasons why the quarter inch seam became the standard:

1. There is less waste - you don't have extra bits and pieces on the inside of the quilt at the seams
2. There is less bulk - once your top is complete and you sandwich it together with the batting and backing fabric, you will be quilting it (either by machine or by hand). With the smaller seam allowance on the inside, the layers are easier to sew through.
3. The math is a lot simpler - when you calculate how much fabric you need for a quilt or how wide to cut a strip, it is a lot easier to add in increments of 1/4" than 5/8". For instance, if you want a block that is 6" wide when you are finished sewing, you will add 1/4" to each side so you cut a piece that is 6 1/2" wide to start with.

Quilt patterns are created so that every patch is pieced with a 1/4" seam. Let's suppose that you are sewing a set of patches together to create a row. You want to be very careful to make each seam 1/4" .



Once you have several rows sewn, you'll start sewing them together into the quilt top. As long as your seams are each 1/4", everything will line up nice and neatly. If you are off (too large on some and not quite large enough on others) your quilt top is going to get a lot of puckers as you try to line things up. Or, your corners simply won't match and that is a "no no" in quilting.



Whatever the reason, the bottom line is very simple:

**You must learn to sew an even, quarter inch seam for
virtually all piecing for a quilt.**

If your seam is off by 1/8" in sewing a garment, the effect is really not noticeable. But think about it this way: if your seam is off by 1/8" in quilting, and there are 16 seams in one row on a quilt, your rows may be as much as 2 inches off! If you are too generous on one row and too stingy on the next, those two rows could be 4 inches off! And, since many bed size quilts have more than just 16 seams on a row, this can accumulate into a huge mess.

The easiest way to get going with a perfect 1/4" seam to use some scraps of material and sew practice seams until you find the exact spot **on your sewing machine** for perfect seams.

There are two basic ways to get the perfect 1/4" seam.

1. Use a presser foot that comes with your sewing machine
2. Find or place a mark on the throat plate of your machine that you will be able to follow

Most sewing machines have lines on the throat plate to indicate seam allowances. Traditionally the 5/8" line has been the longest. Check to see where the 1/4" line is on your machine (if you have one).

Tip: You do not have to backstitch at the beginning or the end of this seam. In quilting, most seams are going to be crossed by another seam so anchoring your stitches the way you had to in garment sewing is unnecessary (and this will save you a lot of time in the long run).

Tip: Your seams are going to be completely enclosed in a quilt so you can use white thread for most of your sewing. If all of your fabrics are dark, you could use a dark color thread. Regular sewing thread is fine for what we are going to do here.

Tip: In quilting, after you have sewn a seam, you **do not** press is open like you do in garment quilting. In the next pages, we will show you how you press seams so that both sides of the seam go in the same direction. This is crucial for several reasons:

- If you press your seams open, tiny bits of stabilizer may poke through. This is called "bearding" and it's not very nice.
- Pressing seams open puts more pressure on the seams and threads will wear out faster.
- Pressing seams to one side will help you match up your corners later on and that is very important in quilting

In the rotary cutting lesson, we asked you to cut and keep eight 3" squares. . Take two squares and put them together evenly (right sides together). We are going to sew this pair together to test for the 1/4 inch.

- **If you have a presser foot that is 1/4 inch, turn to the next page to test your sewing.**
- **If you do NOT have a presser foot to test, skip the next section and go to Testing Your Sewing Machine.**

Using the Presser Foot

If you have a 1/4 inch foot for your machine, put it on now. If you don't have a special foot like this, skip to the next section for an easy way to get the seam right.

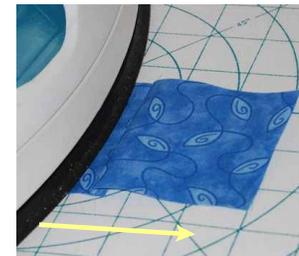
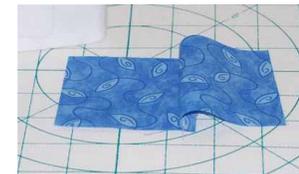
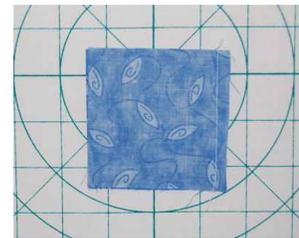
- If your presser foot has a little metal guide along the edge: take the two squares and sew along one edge. The idea is to have the fabric just touching the guide as you sew. Remember you do not have to backstitch at the beginning or the end.
- If your presser foot is just a regular narrow presser foot, the idea is to sew with the edge of the fabric right at the edge of the presser foot. Take the two squares and sew along one edge. Remember you do not have to backstitch at the beginning or the end.



Pressing the blocks open

If you haven't quilted before, this phrase may sound odd. You will discover that it is used a lot in quilting. What we mean by this is that you will now use your iron to press the blocks in a very specific way.

- Lay the closed, sewn pair on your ironing surface.
- Press with a hot iron exactly the way it is (closed)
- Now, open the pair (like the pages of a book). Notice that both seams go to one side when you do this - this is exactly what we want!
- Place your iron on the square that is flat and gently press across the seams - do not push down on the iron and do not scrub back and forth - gentle is the keyword because you don't want your iron to stretch the fabric.



Now use a ruler to measure from one end of the row to the other. Your row should measure a perfect 5 1/2 inches.

- ! If it is bigger, your seam is too small.
- ! If it is smaller, your seam is too big.
- ! If it is bigger at one end and smaller at the other, you aren't feeding the fabric through the sewing machine evenly.



If you used your presser foot and got a perfect 1/4" seam, congratulations! You are ready to start working on your quilt. You can skip the next section and go to the section titled, "Free Arm, Regular or Extended Table".

If you didn't get the right measurement with this first test try it again. Sew a pair of 3 inch squares together adjusting just a little to the right or to the left as you go. Then check the sewn pair - your row should measure 5 1/2 inches.

Once you find just the right spot, you might want to mark it with a little piece of masking tape so you will be able to find it easily each time. (see the next section for tips on this).

You might also want to check out the next section to see if that is an easier method for you.

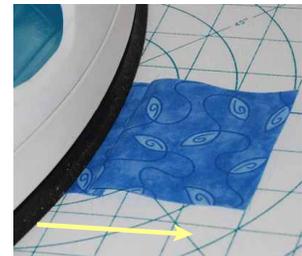
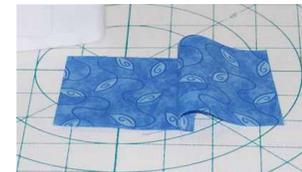
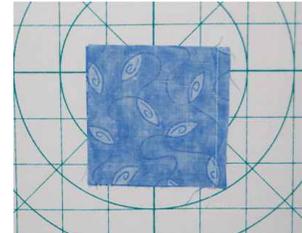
Testing your Sewing Machine

Take the two squares and sew along one edge, where you think the 1/4" seam should be. If you have a line on your throat plate for 1/4 inch, try to sew along that line. Remember you do not have to backstitch at the beginning or the end.

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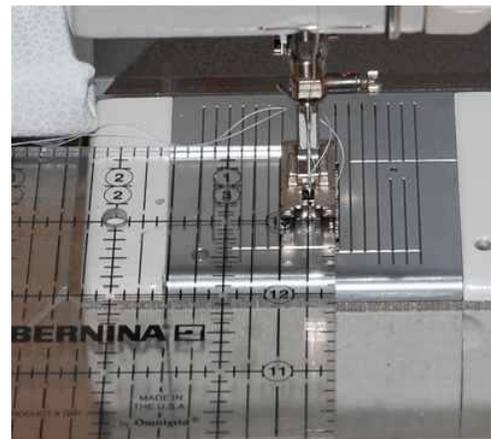
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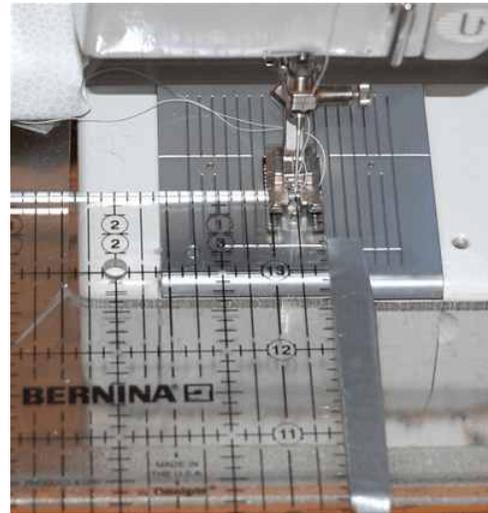
If you got a perfect 1/4" seam, congratulations! You are ready to start working on your quilt.

If your measurements are not exact, welcome to the club! Most people aren't lucky enough to hit it on the first try. There are some things you can do to make this easier.

- ! Take an acrylic ruler and place it so that the 1/4" line is directly under the needle. (Lower your needle slowly with the fly wheel to make sure that it is positioned correctly.)



- ! Now move the ruler *just a hair* to the left. The idea here is that you really want to make your seam a scant 1/4" so that the space that is taken up when you fold the fabric back out after sewing leaves you with the perfect 1/4" seam.
- ! The outer edge of the ruler is the spot that should be marked *on your machine with this type of needle at its current setting.*
- ! Without removing the ruler, use masking tape to put a marker down on the throat plate of your machine at the precise mark for sewing the 1/4" seam.
- ! Remove the ruler and place two or three more pieces of tape on top of the first one. This will build a little ridge that you can use for a guide as your fabric moves through the sewing machine. This will help keep your fabric straight as well as help you get a perfect 1/4" seam.
- ! Try to place the tape in a line leading up to the needle, **without getting it in the way of the feed dogs** (the little teeth that pop up underneath your fabric to push it through the sewing machine).
- ! Try not to tape over the part of your throat plate that opens for you to change your bobbin either. You'll find that you do that rather frequently in quilting and taping the opening shut can get annoying!



Now try sewing more two squares together with your new guide. Open it out and measure it. If it is exactly 5 1/2", you're set to go. If it is not right, remove the tape and measure and mark it again.

Keep trying until you get the correct measurement marked on your sewing machine.

Remember that if you change the size or position of your needle, you should retest to make sure that you know where the quarter inch mark is.

This is a really tedious part of the "set-up" for quilting. If you take the time to do this now though and to do it correctly, it will save you a lot of headaches later on.

Note: We used duct tape in this picture. Masking tape will be a little easier on your machine and/or the table you use. It holds up well and is easily removed if you want to sew something else. And, you can buy a role of masking tape that is 1/4" wide in the quilt notions section of your favorite store.

You can use any tape that you are comfortable with - masking tape, duct tape, magic tape in various colors, etc. About the only thing that won't help much is scotch tape - it isn't very durable.

Free Arm, Regular or Extended Table

Depending on the brand of your sewing machine, you may have very little space around your throat plate.

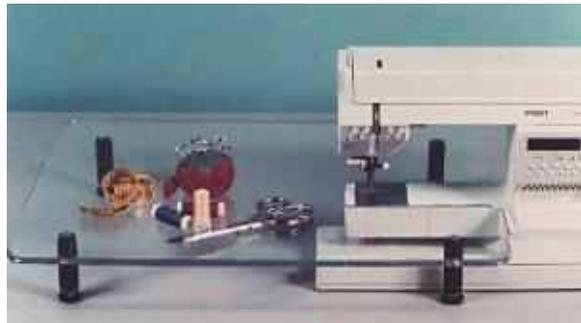
If you have an attachment that you removed so that your machine sews as a "free arm", you want to put it back on the machine now.

The more space that you have level with the throat plate, the easier sewing for quilts will be for you.



Nice to have but expensive:

For most machines you can get a plexiglass table that can be set to the same height as the bed of your machine. This gives you a much greater "flush mounted" sewing space. The picture here shows one of these tables with some notions under it (since it is clear plexiglass you can see through it).



The advantage to an extended table like this is that you have a much larger, completely level sewing space in front and in back of the needle.

These tables are nice - but expensive since they have to be custom fit to every individual machine. You do NOT need to buy one for your first quilt. After you finish this first quilt, if you decide to continue quilting, you might want to consider one of these extended tables. These run around \$49.00 to \$79.00.

Nice to have but REALLY REALLY expensive:

There are all kinds of tables and cabinets available for quilters. One top of the line cabinet from Horn has an extension on the back (like a drop leaf on a dining table) that you can set up for the bulk of your quilt, a flush mounted plexiglass piece that fits around your machine and extra space on the front and left as well. This particular cabinet also has an "air lift" system that allows you to lower the machine down out of the way if it is not in a dedicated sewing room.



This is certainly nice to have but runs about \$1000. This is NOT something you buy for a first quilt and not necessarily something you have to have even if you continue quilting. It is, however, a nice way to handle full size bed quilts.

What's Next?

After you master sewing the 1/4 inch seam, we will start embroidering the blocks for your quilt. If you haven't already done so, please make sure you have the following items ready for the next lesson:

1. fabric for your embroidery blocks
2. stabilizer for your embroidery blocks
3. designs for your embroidery blocks

As we have said all along, you do not need to buy any specific set. If money is tight, use a dozen of the free snowmen for this first quilt.

Although you may be anxious to get started, please wait for the next lesson before starting your embroidery. If you start with the wrong size square, you may not be able to follow the rest of the instructions for your quilt.