

May 2008 Newsletter

Textiles 101 – Seams

We can all expound on the need to have accuracy in a finished project. Two key factors are the seam allowance and the direction of the grain. If you have read the previous newsletters, you have seen the pattern, and maybe wondered why this subject is important to us. We will try to explain...

Seam Allowance

All projects will have a standard seam allowance. When I was younger, I learned to sew with a 5/8 inch seam allowance on clothing. We used this allowance to adjust for sizing and fitting of the article of clothing.

With machine piecing/quilting your seams allowance is a standard 1/4 inch. But sometimes figuring the 1/4 inch seam is not always easy.

Most sewing machines will have markings to the right and left of the presser foot as a seam guide. Most of us assume that these measurements are accurate – but are they?

The best way to establish accuracy is by doing a test sample on your machine. Using two pieces of scrap fabric, stitch a “normal” 1/4 inch seam on your machine (as you would usually do). Then, using a seam gauge or ruler, measure your allowance. Your seam from the fabric edge including the stitching should be 1/4 inch in width. Any variation in that amount will create inaccuracy in your piecing and seaming. Let's calculate:

8 seams x 1/4 inch = 2 inches lost in seam allowance

24 seams x 1/4 inch = 6 inches lost in seam allowance

Now that is established, what if your seams are off by another 1/8 inch (which is fairly common and easy to do).

8 seams x 3/8 inch = 3 inches lost in seam allowance

24 seams x 3/8 inch = 9 inches lost in seam allowance.

Let's consider, if you were piecing a section with 8 seams. Those 8 seams are supposed to be sewn to a section with 24 seams; the first 8 sections will be off by 1 additional inch, while the 24 section piece will be off by an additional 3 inches! If you are also mixing in whole blocks and a variety of other blocks, you have a pattern for disaster. All of those sections will not match up and fit together if you seams are off by only 1/8 inch. If your seams are off by more than 1/8 inch

– say another $\frac{1}{4}$ or even $\frac{1}{2}$ - you will have more of a struggle trying to complete the project. Can you say frustration? I have been guilty of this several times over.

The last quilt that I pieced, I decided to get it right. I tested my seam allowance first, and I was off. So, I adjusted my allowance by using a seam guide. Seam guides can be purchased or ordered from your machine manufacturer or local quilt shop (if they sell machines). It is a small device that includes a screw to secure into the machine base, next to your pressure foot. It is used to as a guide for your fabric. It will ensure that you are continually “getting it right” in terms of seam allowance.

I also correctly laid out my squares using the vertical and horizontal grains. Horizontal grain should run left and right (the most stretch is the horizontal weave). Vertical grain should run up and down (the least stretch – or no give when pulled). If you are sewing blocks into horizontal strips, then your stretch will allow you to match seams when sewing the strips together. And – it will be a lot easier because you aren’t fighting against your fabric in order to match those seams.

My quilt turned out beautifully in spite of any concerns I had to the contrary.

As you will notice from this discussion, understanding the directions of the weave and grain really become essential to completing a quality product. Most quilters can and have sewn projects using other methods without checking these items and it has been fine, but, you will remember fighting to get the project to go together. Or you will have that one seam that you just couldn’t get right...