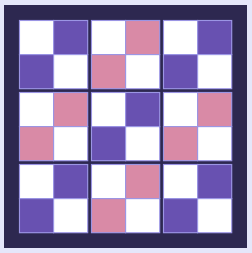
FREE GUIDE

Beginner's First Quilt Guide

Everything for a first quilt: the supplies to start with, cutting and the 1/4 in seam test, a four patch to practice on, how to finish, and the words patterns use.



Start to finish

Choose	Buy	Cut	Sew	Press	Layer	Quilt	Bind
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8

Steps 1 to 5 make the **quilt top**. Steps 6 to 8 turn it into a quilt: layering it with batting and backing, stitching through all three, and wrapping the edges in binding. Pick a pattern first, then buy what it lists.

What you need to start

For	Start with	Can wait
Cutting	Rotary cutter (45 mm), self-healing mat (at least 18 x 24 in), 6 1/2 x 24 in ruler	A 12 1/2 in square ruler
Sewing	Any machine with a straight stitch, a 1/4 in foot, 50 wt cotton thread, pins	A walking foot for quilting
Pressing	An iron and a firm ironing board or pressing mat	Starch or sizing
Fixing	A seam ripper	Fabric marking pencil

Buy the ruler and mat together, so the markings match. Borrow what you can for a first project, and see what you miss. More in Quilting supplies for beginners.

Choosing a first pattern

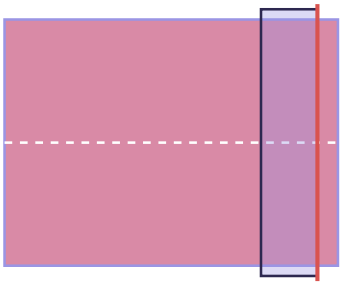
- Squares and rectangles only: no triangles yet.
- Large pieces (3 in and up) sew faster and hide small errors.
- A baby or throw size finishes in weeks, not months.

Choosing fabric

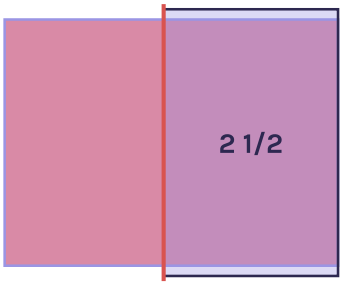
- 100% quilting cotton: it presses flat and holds a crease.
- Mix light, medium and dark, so the pattern shows.
- Buy a little extra of each fabric for a miscut.

STEP 3

Cutting



1. Fold selvage to selvage. Lay the ruler square to the fold and trim the ragged edge.



2. Line the ruler's 2 1/2 in mark up with the cut edge. Cut along the ruler: one strip.



3. Turn the strip, trim the selvage, and cut it into 2 1/2 in squares.

Good cutting habits

- Press the fabric before you cut it.
- Cut strips across the fabric, selvage to selvage, unless the pattern says otherwise.
- Hold the ruler flat with your fingers spread and away from its edge, and cut away from you.
- Re-square the edge every few strips: a strip with a bend in the middle (a "V") means the fold wasn't square.
- Check each strip with the ruler before you cut it into pieces.

Rotary cutter safety

- Close the blade every time you put the cutter down.
- Change the blade when it skips threads: a dull blade needs more pressure, and slips.
- Stand to cut, so you press straight down.
- Keep cutters and blades away from children and pets.

More in Rotary cutter skipping threads.

Reading a cutting list

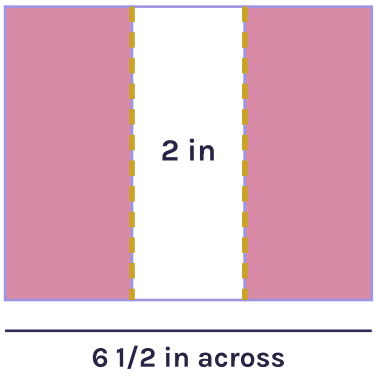
A pattern line such as "**From the dark fabric, cut 2 strips 2 1/2 in x WOF; subcut 24 squares 2 1/2 in**" means: cut two 2 1/2 in strips across the width of fabric (WOF), then cut those strips into 24 squares. Cut sizes already include the 1/4 in seam allowance on every side.

Fabric totals for any cut size: fabric yardage calculator.

STEPS 4 AND 5

Sewing and pressing

The 1/4 in seam test



1. Cut three strips 2 1/2 x 6 1/2 in. Check each one.
2. Sew two together along a long edge, then the third, with your 1/4 in foot or guide. Press.
3. Measure the center strip in three places, near each end and in the middle. It should be 2 in everywhere, and the whole unit 6 1/2 in across.
4. Too narrow? Your seam is too wide: move the needle or the guide a thread toward the edge, and sew again. Too wide? Move it the other way.

Every quilt pattern assumes a 1/4 in seam. A seam a thread too wide, repeated across a row of blocks, can make a quilt inches too small. Mark the setting that passes the test on a piece of tape on your machine. More in The 1/4 in seam test.

Sewing tips

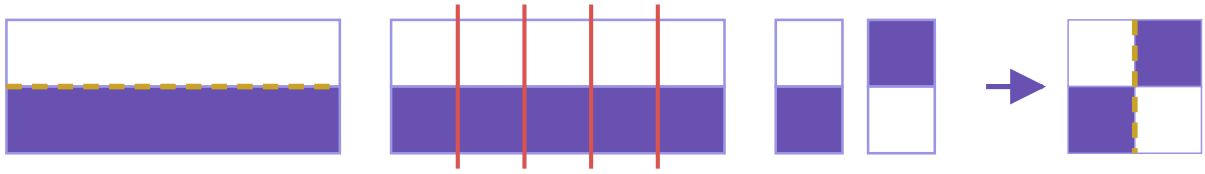
- Stitch length about 2 to 2.5 mm: short enough that seams don't open, long enough to unpick.
- **Chain piece:** feed pairs through one after another without cutting the thread, then snip them apart.
- Pin where seams must meet, and take the pin out before the needle reaches it.
- Let the machine pull the fabric; guide it, don't push it.

Pressing

- **Press, don't iron:** set the iron down, lift it, move it. Sliding it stretches the fabric.
- **Set the seam:** press it flat as sewn first, then open the top piece and press the seam to one side.
- Press **toward the darker fabric**, so it doesn't show through.
- Press rows in opposite directions, so the seams **nest** (butt together) where rows meet.

More in Pressing seams open or to the side.

Practice on a four patch



1. Sew a light and a dark strip together. Press toward the dark.

2. Cut segments as wide as the strips were cut.

3. Turn one segment. Seams nest in the middle.

4. Sew: one four patch. Press.

1. Cut one light and one dark strip across the fabric, both the width in the chart below.
2. Sew them together along one long edge with a 1/4 in seam. Press the seam toward the dark strip.
3. Trim the selvage ends, then cut the strip set into segments as wide as you cut the strips.
4. Turn every other segment end for end, so dark sits beside light. Put two segments right sides together; the seams butt against each other.
5. Sew the long edge, keeping the center seams nested. Press the new seam to one side, and check the block against the chart.

Strips for four sizes

Finished (in)	Cut strips	Cut segments	Block measures	Segments per set
4	2 1/2	2 1/2	4 1/2	16
6	3 1/2	3 1/2	6 1/2	11
8	4 1/2	4 1/2	8 1/2	8
12	6 1/2	6 1/2	12 1/2	6

Sizes in inches. Two segments make one four patch. A 40 in usable strip set gives the segments in the last column.

A first quilt from it

The free Four Patch pattern makes a 68 x 68 in quilt from 12 in four patches with a border, with cutting charts and drawn steps. Try your own colors on it first in QuiltLab, free.

More first blocks: rail fence, nine patch and churn dash in Easy quilt blocks for beginners.

STEPS 6 TO 8

Finishing the quilt

Step	What to do	More
Layer	Tape the backing down wrong side up, then the batting, then the top right side up. Pin every 3 to 4 in.	Basting and Batting Guide
Quilt	With a walking foot, sew straight lines: in the seams ("in the ditch"), or 1/4 in beside them. Start in the middle and work out.	Walking foot vs free motion
Trim	Trim the batting and backing even with the top, using a long ruler and keeping the corners square.	
Bind	Sew 2 1/2 in strips into one long strip, fold it in half, sew it around the front, and wrap it to the back.	Binding calculator
Label	Write or stitch your name, the date, and who it is for on the back.	
Wash	For the first wash, use cold water and a color catcher, and dry flat or on low.	First wash

A simple first quilting plan

Stitch in the ditch along every seam between blocks, then once more 1/4 in inside each block's edge. Check the widest gap between your lines against the batting package's limit; add a line through any gap that's too wide.

Can't face quilting it yourself? A long-arm quilter will quilt a top for a fee; ask what size backing and batting they need first.

Before you buy for the finish

- Backing and batting: 4 in bigger than the top on every side. Backing calculator.
- Binding: the distance around the quilt plus about 10 in. Binding calculator.
- Thread: a 50 wt cotton that blends with most of the top.

GLOSSARY

Words patterns use

Backing. The fabric on the back of the quilt.

Basting. Holding the three layers together with pins, spray or long stitches before quilting.

Batting. The soft middle layer.

Bias. The diagonal of the fabric. It stretches, so handle bias edges gently.

Binding. The fabric strip that wraps and finishes the quilt edges.

Block. One repeated unit of the quilt top, such as a four patch.

Border. Strips framing the quilt top.

Chain piecing. Sewing pieces one after another without cutting the thread between them.

Fat quarter. An 18 x 21 in piece of fabric, a quarter yard cut wide.

Finished size. A piece's size once it is sewn in. The cut size is 1/2 in bigger.

Grain. The direction of the threads. Lengthwise grain, along the selvage, stretches least.

HST. Half-square triangle: a square of two triangles.

In the ditch. Quilting right in a seam, where it barely shows.

Nesting seams. Seams pressed in opposite directions so they butt together where they meet.

Sashing. Strips sewn between blocks.

Selvage. The finished edge of the fabric as it comes off the bolt. Trim it off.

WOF. Width of fabric: selvage to selvage, about 42 in usable.

Your first quilt

Pattern	_____	Finished size	_____ x _____ in
Fabrics	_____	Yardage	_____
Seam test	center _____ in	Machine setting	_____
Backing, batting	_____ x _____ in	Binding	_____ in

How we made this guide. QuiltLab wrote and drew it with AI tools from published beginner quilting instructions, summarized in the articles linked above, which cite their sources. The pictures are diagrams, not photos, and no one has made a first quilt from this guide yet. Spot a mistake? Tell us at quiltlab.co/help.