

Tip of the Month

September 2016

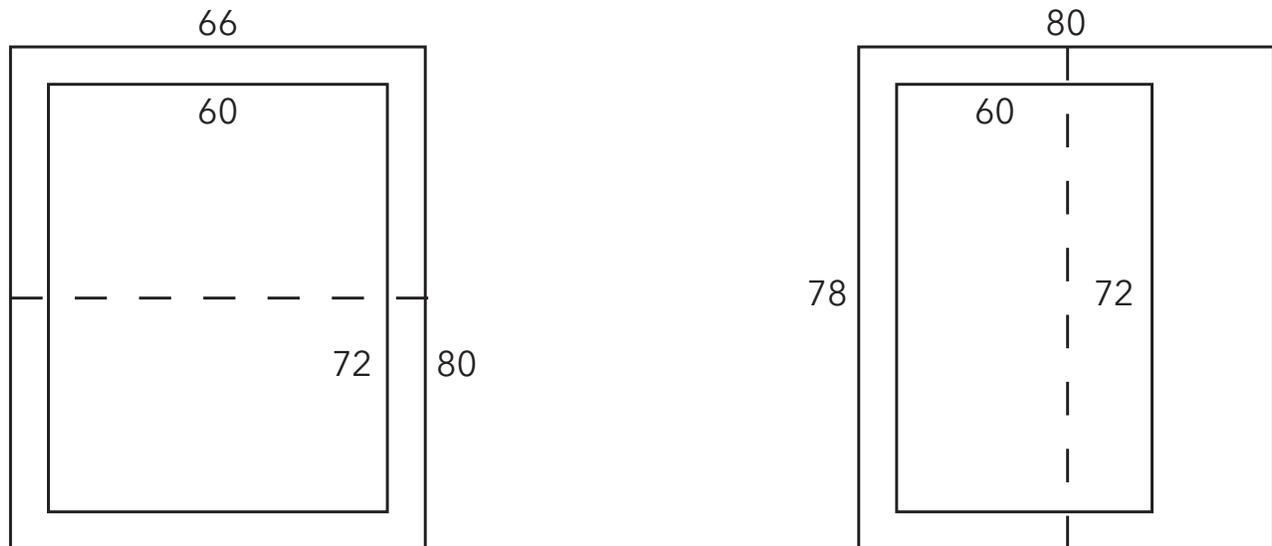
Provided by Elaine Theriault of Northcott

How to prepare your quilt backing

The easiest way to prep a quilt backing is to use a wide backing. They come in widths of 108" and Northcott has a wide variety of colors and styles.

If the wide backing doesn't work for your project, you can always piece the backing. Backings must be larger than the quilt top. If you're quilting on a domestic sewing machine, you need the extra fabric beyond the edge of the quilt to maintain control as you quilt along the edges. If the quilt will be quilted on a long arm, the extra fabric is needed to secure the backing to the bars and clamps that support the quilt during the quilting process. The backing should be at least three inches larger on all four sides. Some long arm quilters prefer more than 3 inches so best to check before you prepare your backing.

It's easy to calculate how much fabric you need. I'm a visual person so I start by drawing a rough outline of the quilt top including the measurements. Then I bump up those measurements by 6" (3" per side). For a quilt top that is 60" by 72", the backing should be at least 66" by 78". To keep the math simple, a general rule of thumb is that the width of fabric is 40". Two widths of fabric measuring 66" long and sewn together along the selvage edge, will make a quilt backing that measures 66" by 80". The fabric is usually wider than 40" so the seam allowance comes out of the extra. Quilt backings don't need to be exact, and larger is always better than smaller.



Here's the math (pieced horizontally): $66" \times 2$ widths of fabric = 132". Divide that by 36 (inches in a yard) to get 3.67, which is the equivalent of $3 \frac{2}{3}$ yards. If you're working in metric, divide by 39 (inches in a meter) to get 3.4 M.

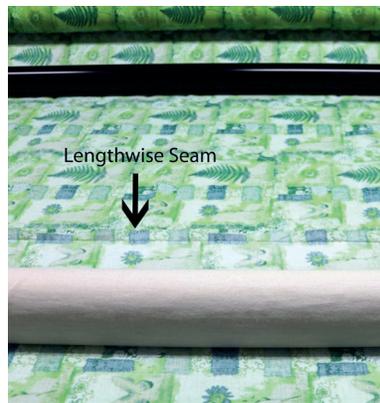
What happens if the backing is pieced vertically? It's obvious that one width of fabric isn't wide enough for the quilt. You could use one complete width and then do some creative math to figure out the rest, but that takes time and I want to keep this simple. If you do want to fuss, then draw yourself a good diagram in order to figure out the measurements.

Here's the math (pieced vertically): $78" \times 2$ widths of fabric = 156". Divide that by 36" to get $4 \frac{1}{3}$ yard or divide by 39 to get 4 M.

Based on those calculations, it would seem logical to seam the backing in the direction that uses the least amount of fabric. However, there are two instances where this logic doesn't apply.

1. If the fabric is directional, you would want the images on the fabric to be in the right orientation, which would require that the seams be pieced vertically (in most instances) rather than horizontally.
2. If the quilt is headed to the long arm quilter, it's preferable that the seam runs parallel to the bars that support the quilt during the quilting process. As an efficiency to the long arm quilting process, it's usually faster to load the quilt to be quilted lengthwise, rather than widthwise. That means that the seam should be running the length of the backing (pieced vertically), not the width (pieced horizontally).

If the backing is loaded with that seam rolling upon itself on the bar, some distortion and slight stretching can occur. But the biggest issue is that unless the backing was carefully pieced, one side will often be slightly looser than the other which can result in ripples or tucks in the backing. Or it means that the long arm quilter has to take extra care to prevent that from happening and can result in extra charges to the owner of the quilt.



Excess fabric when quilt is loaded with the seam perpendicular to the bars on the long arm

Tips for piecing your quilt backing.

- REMOVE the selvages. The selvage is on the fabric for the manufacturing process and is woven much tighter than the rest of the width of fabric. ALWAYS remove the selvages.
- Use a shorter stitch length (2.0). This helps to keep the backing seam secure.
- Use a walking foot to piece the backing. The walking foot ensures both lengths of fabric are feeding through the sewing machine at the same rate and keeps the seam smooth.
- Use a wider seam allowance. This one is personal preference. I'm not sure there's an advantage.
- Press the seam allowance to one side. Don't press this seam open. Hand quilters used to press this backing seam open to help reduce bulk. That isn't necessary for machine quilting.
- If the quilt is going to be long arm quilted, make sure the backing is SQUARED up or be prepared to be charged for that service by the long arm quilter. A squared up backing loads better, faster and less danger of tucks and ripples on the back.
- While we're reluctant to buy yardage at full price for the backing, make sure you're using good quality fabric. The quality of the backing is just as important as the front from a longevity perspective. And good quality fabric quilts much better than cheaper fabrics.