



It's cool to be square

Hello, and welcome to a Cornwall bathed in beautiful sunshine and looking gorgeous again. Pull up a lounge, get that drink sorted out and kick back for a while. It's a long-ish post and I'm diving straight in.

This month I wanted to talk about 'The Importance of Being Square Not, in this case, Ernest. I'm quite sure that when we all first started out on our quilting journeys we were told or we read how important it is to measure and cut accurately, to sew an accurate $\frac{1}{4}$ inch seam, to 'press' the seams not iron them and to square up at every step. Over time, we all, and I include myself in this sweeping statement, grow complacent. The ruler slips a smidge when we are cutting? Never mind, I can fudge that in the seam. I cut something at $2\frac{3}{8}$ " or $2\frac{5}{8}$ " instead of $2\frac{1}{2}$ ". Never mind, I can fudge that too. I sew a seam that is a little off that $\frac{1}{4}$ inch? Never mind, I can make allowance for it somewhere else. Ironing board too far away/not even set up/I'm too impatient to get on with the sewing to bother? Never mind, I'll finger press and it will be fine. Ironing instead of pressing so the pieces go out of true? Never mind, I'll just pull it the other way and it will go back ok.

If any of these sound even a little bit familiar, step away from the cutting mat and sewing machine now. It is time to re-visit the basics and have a refresher session. You will need your sewing machine threaded up ready to go, a cutting mat, ruler and cutter and some fabric scraps. Before you start, make sure you have a sharp blade in your rotary cutter and take the time to press your fabric so that it lies flat. For thinner or delicate fabric, spray starch is your friend. Use it a lot.

For this exercise, we are just going to make a basic 9 patch, so find yourself a couple of left over pieces from a jelly roll and take them to your cutting mat. Measure accurately, and measure again, then cut $9\frac{1}{2}$ " squares, 4 from one fabric and 5 from the other. When you are cutting, make sure you are standing behind the cutting edge and not over to one side. Hold the cutter so that the blade is at 90° to the mat and the edge of the ruler, not leaning at a greater or lesser angle. Position the cutter butted up to the ruler on the mat just below the edge of the fabric, and pressing the cutter down firmly, run it in one smooth cut away from you, not in a sawing back and forth motion. Maintain the pressure on the ruler and double check that the cut has gone through all layers of fabric. If not, then repeat the cut, away from your body in one smooth run. Check again to make sure the cut has gone through. Only when you know it has can you move the ruler. Repeat for all 9 squares.



So much for the cutting. Line up all the squares along one line on your cutting mat. Place a long ruler along the opposite edge of the line of squares. Are they all the same size? Rotate the squares through 90 ° and check again. Once you are happy you have cut 9 squares accurately it is time to sew. I ' d like you to sew 3 rows of 3 squares each, alternating the fabrics, but let ' s take it one step at a time. After you have stitched the first 2 squares together, place them on the ironing board with the darker fabric on top. Leaving them still right sides together as you have stitched them, press the iron straight down onto the seam and hold still for a couple of seconds. Do not move the iron backwards and forwards, just hold it still. Then lift the darker square, like opening a box lid, right back until it is lying on top of the seam allowances. Press the iron down on the now open seam and again hold still for a couple of seconds. If you move the iron as though you were pressing a shirt, you will stretch the fabric. Sew the third square onto these 2, repeat the pressing stages.

Once you have a beautifully stitched and beautifully pressed row of 3 squares, you need to measure across the width of the centre square at it ' s top, middle and bottom. If your stitching is accurate, all three measurements will be 2 " .Not 1 15/16 " or 2 1/16 "2." All of them. If it ' s not, then you need to adjust the 1/4 " alignment on your sewing machine. Stick a line of tape along the edge of fabric line if you need a visual guide, or invest in a 1/4 " foot for your machine. A sixteenth of an inch might not sound much, but multiplied over a 9 patch block, that is an eighth of an inch just on the internal seams, plus another eighth for joining the blocks together, that ' s 1/4 " per block, so over a row of blocks it won ' t take many to be several inches out on your supposed measurements. And that is if your stitching is a consistent amount out. If the seams are thinner at one end than the other on some blocks, or one fabric slips during the sewing because you were too rushed to check the edges were lying together, then your measurements will be even more up the creek.

Sew the remaining 6 squares into 2 rows of 3, check the measurement of the centre squares each time. And then check the overall dimensions of the rows. They should be 2 1/2 " x 6 1/2 " .All of them. Lay the rows out in their block formation, making sure the seams are pressed in opposite directions from one row to the next. Sew the rows together, nesting the seams so the corners match. Press each seam as you go in the same way as before. Once the block is complete and pressed, beautifully and accurately, measure the centre square – you are aiming for it to be 2 " up, down and across. Now measure the overall size of the block. It should be, altogether now, 6 1/2 " square. If it is not it needs to be squared up. Find the exact centre of the block – in a 2 " centre square that should be easy enough, and measure 3 1/4 " out from that point in each direction. Trim away any excess. If the block is smaller than it should be then your cutting was not accurate, your seam allowances are not consistently accurate, or your pressing is not accurate and there is a small fold of fabric at the seam. Go back and check each of these.



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I know that life seems to be a constant rush and a battle to find enough time to do all the things we want to do, like quilting. To 'help' us with that, we are all encouraged to whiz through all the stages of making a quilt, constantly besieged by books and magazine articles to get it done in a day/afternoon/session. Well, I'd like to suggest that perhaps it's worth slowing everything down and taking the time to get it right all the way through. I'd also like to suggest you try to enjoy every process along the way. You will find that if you have measured and cut accurately, and stitched an accurate 1/4" seam, and squared up each block before you try and put them together, the actual putting together of the blocks will be a doddle. No really, because there will be no need for creative fudging, easing or stretching, and your points will be where they should be. With no fighting things along the way, you will find yourself enjoying the whole thing so much more. Try it and see for yourself.

And finally, on a non quilting note, my little girl turns 16 at the end of March. I tell her it is a miracle that she has managed to reach this great age, but oh, what a journey it has been.

Until next time,

Sara