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How Do You Press Your Quilt Seams?

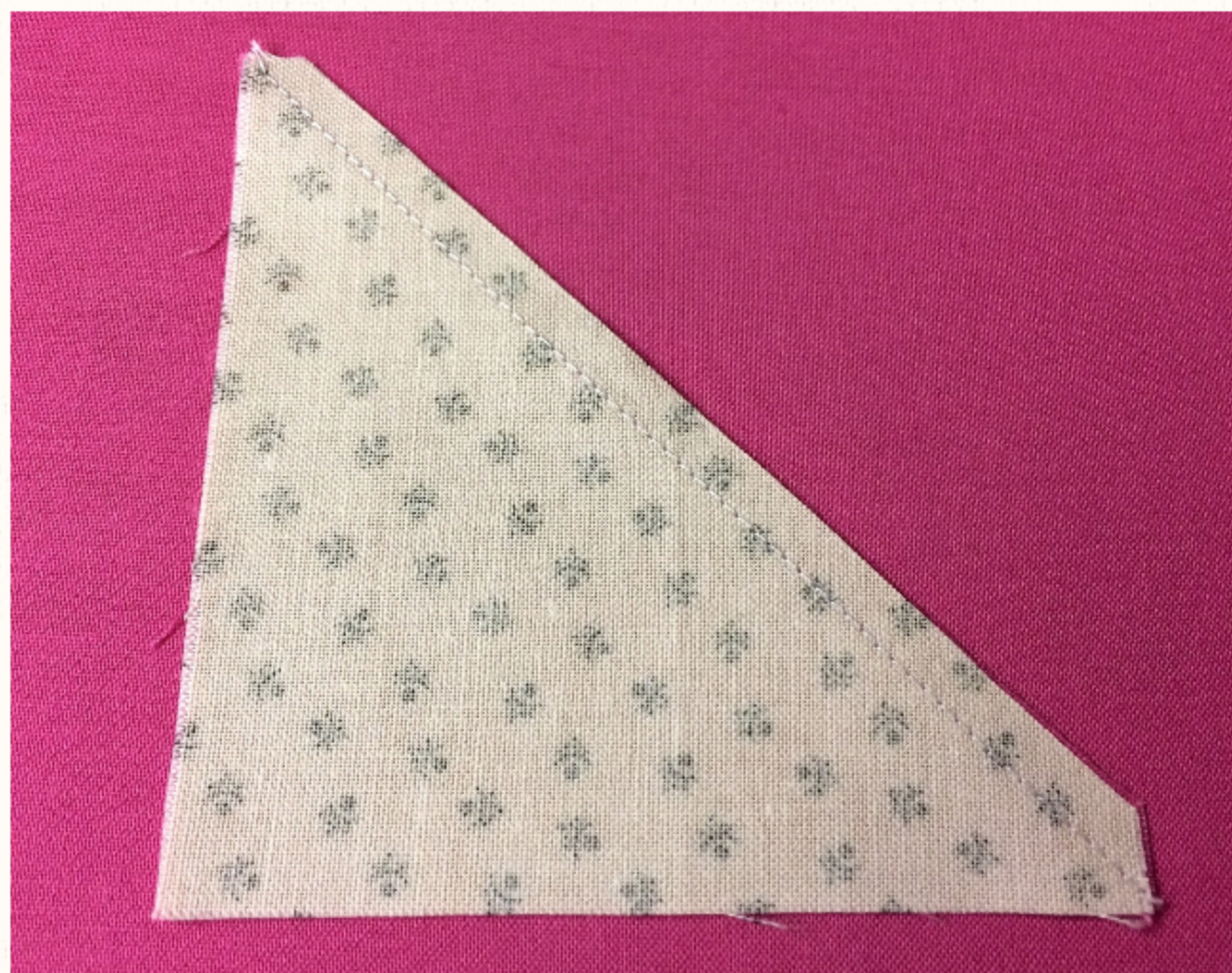
By **Lindsay Conner**, **Diane Knott** and **Karen Walker** on June 2, 2018[♥ Add to Favorites](#)

If the seams in your piecing are causing issues, it could be because of your pressing. Believe it or not, the way you press those seams can really affect your final quilt! We'll show you why pressing your seams open vs. to one side can make a difference, plus when to use each technique.



4 WAYS TO PRESS YOUR PATCHWORK SEAMS

1. SETTING THE STITCHES



One method to help achieve nice, flat seams is to press the seam closed before pressing either open or to the side. By pressing the seam closed, the stitches are set in place and the seam is nice and flat. Doing this will become a habit and takes only a few seconds.

2. PRESSING SEAM ALLOWANCES TO THE DARK SIDE

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Patterns and instructions often tell you to press seams toward the darker fabric. This prevents the darker colors from “shadowing through” the lighter fabric when the quilt is finished.

Pressing seams to one side also can help stagger seams, meaning that side-by-side patchwork pieces have seam allowances that face opposite directions. When the seams nest or face away from each other at intersections, it reduces bulk and increases accuracy.

3. PRESSING SEAM ALLOWANCES OPEN



Another option that’s a little less common is pressing the seams open. Many quilters have a fear of pressing seams open, but it’s not scary at all.

Use the tip of the iron, a stiletto or another tool to open the seam and prevent burns to your fingertips. Work slowly, using light pressure on your iron. Once the seam is open, flip the patchwork over and press again from the front to really set everything into place.

4. PRESSING SEAM INTERSECTIONS



Reducing bulk at intersections makes so many things easier and gives you more accurate results. Pressing the seams away from each other at the intersections minimizes the layers of fabric, resulting in a flatter, more accurate piece of patchwork. Hand quilters know this makes hand stitching much easier and many long arm quilters require this method of pressing before they accept a quilt.



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PRESSING QUILT SEAMS FAQs

Quilters have all kinds of questions about pressing, and we've got answers!

SHOULD I USE STEAM?

Steam is personal preference. Some folks use steam, others use a dry iron with a spray bottle of water or spray product. Try both ways and see which you prefer!

WHICH BRAND OF IRON IS THE BEST?

Any brand of iron that gets hot and stays hot will work. There's no need to go out and buy a new iron just to press your quilt seams.

WHY IS MY STRAIGHT SEAM NOW A CURVE?

If your seams become curved, you're applying too much pressure and pushing the iron across the fabric. Try laying the patchwork on top of a striped fabric, which will help you keep things aligned.

PRESSING SEAMS OPEN VS. TO THE SIDE

Now that you've learned a little bit about how to press seams different ways, let's look at why you'd choose to press them one way or another.

THE CASE FOR PRESSING SEAMS TO ONE SIDE

1. IT ALLOWS YOU TO QUILT IN THE DITCH



If you plan to **stitch in the ditch**, or stitch right over your patchwork seams, you must press your seams to the side. The needle pierces the seam, but it's protected by the direction of the fold.

When seams are pressed open, stitching in the ditch is not an option. The needle would go directly into the open seam, catching only threads.

2. YOU CAN CREATE NESTED SEAMS





When seams are pressed to one side, it creates stability and allows your seams to “nest together” when pressed in opposite ways. You can see an example of this in the [churn dash quilt block](#) shown above. When you join the rows together, the seams pressed opposite ways will fit together so nicely that you may not even need pins!

3. SEAMS ARE CONSIDERED MORE STABLE



Over time, quilts with seams pressed to one side may hold up better than quilts with open seams. It’s not the only factor — how much you use and wash the quilt, the density of your quilting and the thread you choose all make a difference too — but quilters tend to believe that pressing seams to the side and stitching in the ditch gives your seams the best chance of lasting a long time.

THE CASE FOR PRESSING SEAMS OPEN

Sometimes there are benefits to pressing them open.

1. YOUR BLOCK WILL SIT FLATTER



Not only will each block look flatter, but your finished quilt will be flatter and look better, too. You can clearly see that the block with seams pressed open (on the left) is much flatter than the one with seams pressed to the side (on the right).

And here’s what they look like on the back:



2. YOU'LL GET SHARPER POINTS



Half-square triangle points are sharper, crisper and easier to match when the seams are open rather than to one side. You can see the precision in the basket block above. When the seam is pressed to the side, you may get a bit of distortion because the fabric pulls in one direction. With the seams open, the fabric won't skew as much.

3. IT MAKES MACHINE QUILTING EASIER.

The flatter the pieces are, the easier the quilting will be. When you have lots of seams intersecting in a block, it creates lots of layers for your machine to manage. By pressing the seams open, you can reduce that bulk, so you can quilt more smoothly over all the layers. This is especially helpful when free-motion quilting an intricate design. You don't want to be in the middle of your feather and get stuck on a bumpy, side-pressed seam.



So which will you choose? Most likely, you'll find that each technique has its time and place. If you ever press a block and don't like the way it turns out, you can always press it the other way!



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34 COMMENTS



Elaine Waters

December 30th, 2014

Thanks

[Reply](#)



Elaine Waters

December 30th, 2014

Thanks

[Reply](#)



Kay Brooks

December 30th, 2014

tk

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December 30th, 2014

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Shannon Gibbons Clarke
December 30th, 2014

Thank you, I really like your site

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Shannon Gibbons Clarke
December 30th, 2014

Thank you, I really like your site

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Shannon Gibbons Clarke
December 30th, 2014

Thank you, I really like your site

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Melinda Weidenborner Ebelhar
December 30th, 2014

I've never seen that before, pressing from the backside rather than the front.

[Reply](#)



Maria Ljubic
December 30th, 2014

very , very informative, greeting's from Austrlia.

[Reply](#)



Rosimere dos Santos Silva
May 29th, 2015

Olá tenho uma dúvida gostaria de saber como faço para comprar esse livros aqui no Brasil pois não tenho cartão de crédito internacional se vocês tem algum representantes Obrigada.

[Reply](#)



ora Brown
June 1st, 2015

Very informative information, love all your suggestions, thank you.

[Reply](#)




Quilting Focus
October 3rd, 2015

We agree, one of the most pressing issues causing frustration in quilters is pressing issues! 😊
Thanks for this nice clear post on seams, a while back we did a post on Pressing Quilt seams with some great tutorial videos on this process <http://www.quiltingfocus.com/2015/05/pressing-quilt-seams>. Happy Quilting!

[Reply](#)



Karen Alexander

 October 12th, 2015

Of late, it's become somehow "fashionable" to press seams open. There are several reasons to press seams to the side....both for hand or machine quilting; open seams become a problem much later in a quilt's life... depending on the amount of washing, and the quality and type of batting. The batting fibers creep out of the opening between the thread lock of each stitch. I can always tell when I look at old quilts who was a "dressmaker" and who was a quilter! The dress-maker opened her seams. But the dressmaker did not have to worry about batting! The quilter (especially hand quilts) pressed to the side. The batting stays put, sealed inside the quilt, and the hand quilter has many ways to avoid dealing with those seams, which, are only found on HALF the surface area of the quilt – when compared to one with open seams! As one who's made a number of hand quilted quilts, and MANY machine quilted bed quilts, I'll stick with the method that I've seen as most successful in historical quilts: pressed to the side!

Reply



Becky
March 25th, 2016

Helpful. Thank you for your comments Karen.

Reply



Karen W
June 2nd, 2018

I agree with Karen! As a machine-piecer, hand-quilter & former seamstress, I believe the quilt is more stable, longer-lasting & generally better-looking with seams pressed to one side. If they seem a bit bulky, you can trim one side to be more graduated or "pink" one edge (quite time-consuming), but you'll need to use a more generous seam allowance . . . which can run you into sizing issues, even if you are consistent. 1/4-inch seams don't leave a lot of room for error & were created to be just enough to prevent raveling & not enough to cause bulk, while also conserving fabric. Some quilters prefer to stitch slightly away from the seam instead of in-the-ditch – which should be done on the lower side, not thru the bulk of the seam allowance. Opening up the seam will allow the batting to migrate unless you're careful to stitch all your seams down & even then can weaken over time. Why waste your time? For a quality quilt, turn your seams to one side.

For ease of pressing accurately, a pressing mat with gridlines is very helpful. I like to give the block a shot of steam to set before opening to press to one side. Remember to press – not iron!!

Reply



Linda L.
June 2nd, 2018

Thank you, Karen, that was very helpful. It's good to hear the voice of experience 😊 especially when you're a relative newbie.

Reply



Tracy
May 1st, 2016

Pressing incorrectly has always warped my blocks; the idea of laying it on striped fabric to press is really helpful. Thanks much. Love Craftsy!

Reply



Faye
January 22nd, 2017

OK ladies. WOF is width of fabric. What is YUM?

Reply



Patricia Lavallee
January 3rd, 2018

This is just a guess! Your Usual Method.....

Reply



bearsie
June 2nd, 2018

"Case for Pressing Seams Open" – It appears to me that the pictures referenced are actually the opposite. I.e., when pressed open as shown in the on the right" and "when pressed to one side, will look like the picture on the left." The statement stated the opposite with regards to the photos (i.e., pressed open shown on left photo" and "pressed to one side shown on right photo". Probably a minor boo-boo, but the subject matter was informational and very helpful except one will have to know in advance what type of quilting design a person will use in order to know which way to press seams. Perhaps instructions should start with the "end", i.e., choose your quilting design first". Just my observation.

Reply



Renee

June 2nd, 2018

For me it depends on the block. When I do foundation paper piecing I can only press in one direction within the block. More often than not joining these blocks requires pressing the seams open to prevent bulk. I do all my quilting by hand and the bulks makes passing the needle through the layers very difficult.

When not using FPP I tend to press seams open WITHIN the block and then to one side when joining them to make things more accurate and not so bulky. For those corners that meet up I actually remove a couple stitches to get the block to lay flat, something I learned from another quilter.

Overall it depends on the block I use. Again, all quilting is done by hand so no stitch in the ditch issue for me. It's more about laying these flat and having the ability to pass the needle through the layers without issue.

[Reply](#)



Terry Noel

June 2nd, 2018

YUM = YOUR UNIQUE MEASUREMENT according to master quilt expert Harriet Hargrave

[Reply](#)



Sandra

June 3rd, 2018

I decide which method I use according to my pattern. If I want points to match, I iron open. If light and dark is an issue, I press to the side. Overall, I like pressing open the seam. I do a lot of old fashioned hand quilting and it's much easier when I press the seams open. Thank you for all the articles you make available.

[Reply](#)



Lorraine Cooper

October 10th, 2018

I find it extremely difficult to press seams open if you use a scant quarter inch!





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