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QUILTING BLOG

Can You Free-Motion Quilt With Feed Dogs?

By **Rachel Hauser** on March 7, 2018

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When the piecing is done, the quilt is basted and you're ready to **start free motion quilting**, there are two steps to prepping your machine: install a free motion quilting foot and disengage the feed dogs. But what are feed dogs and why would they interfere with free motion quilting? Get the full scoop on feed dogs in free motion quilting.

WHAT DO FEED DOGS DO?



All sewing machines have feed dogs. This odd name refers to two rows of little metal teeth that emerge from slots in the needle plate, just under your needle area.

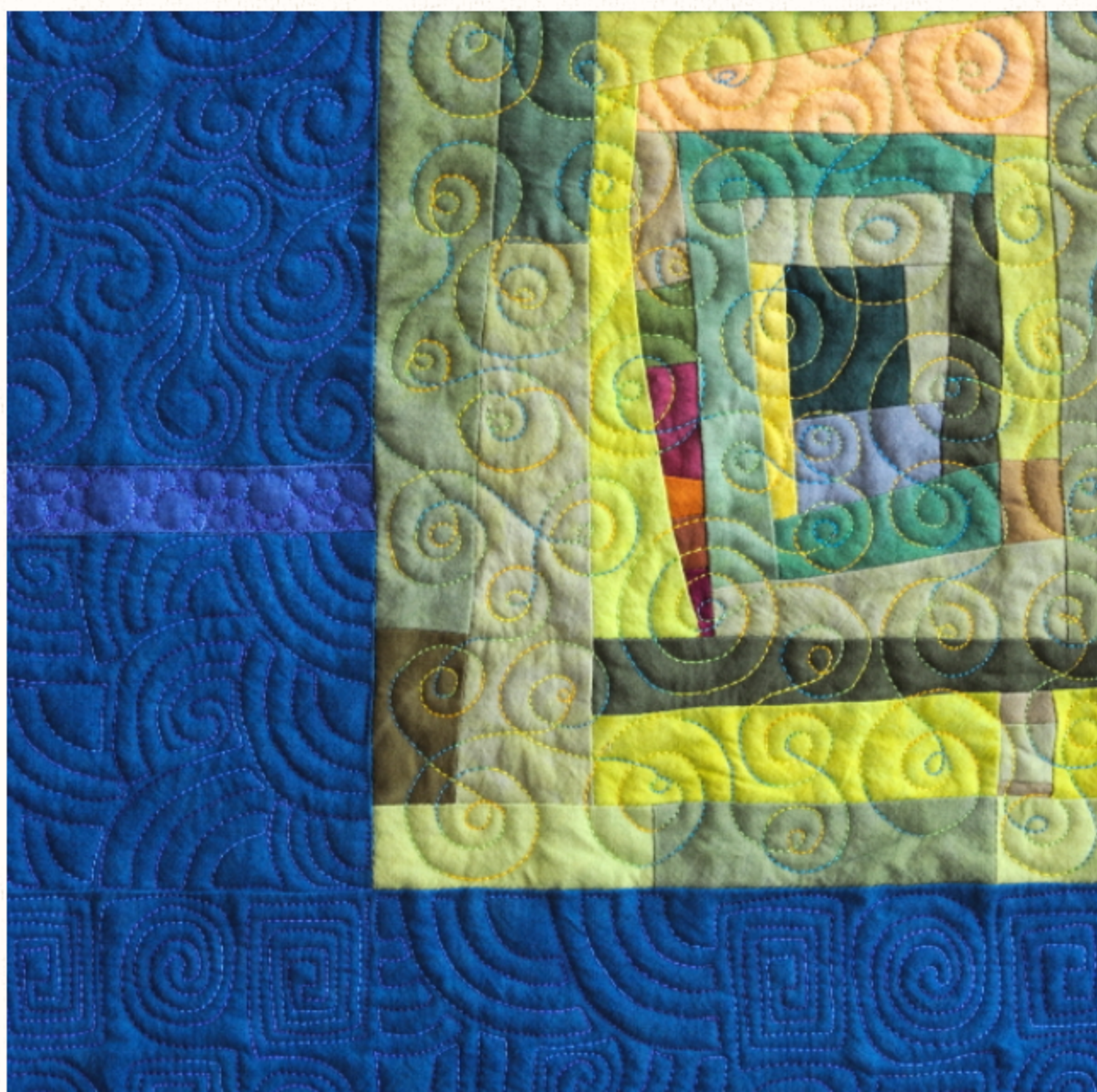
To see yours, turn your sewing machine's hand wheel. The feed dogs should move up and down in time with the needle. In rhythmic motion, they just barely push up from the needle plate slots.

The grooves on feed dogs move fabric along as you stitch, gently pulling it forward. They help you sew a nice straight line, with evenly spaced stitches.

WHAT SHOULD I DO WITH FEED DOGS WHEN FREE-MOTION QUILTING?

By default, a sewing machine's feed dogs are engaged. That means that when you go to quilt, the feed dogs will pull your work straight forward. That's not what you need to quilt your own designs!

WHEN FREE-MOTION QUILTING, YOU WANT TO BE IN CHARGE OF MOVING THE FABRIC UNDER THE NEEDLE!



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With the feed dogs engaged you must sew in a straight line, with the fabric always moving away from you as it travels under the needle. The feed dogs pull it along.

With the feed dogs disengaged you can move the fabric under the needle, toward the right or toward the left. You can pull the fabric toward you instead of pushing it away. You can even sew curves and glorious swirls! Plus, you can stop and change direction on a dime.

DISENGAGING THE FEED DOGS CREATES A HUGE AMOUNT OF FREEDOM.

This is precisely what makes free-motion quilting possible. It's also what makes free-motion quilting a skill that takes time to perfect. Engaged, the feed dogs control stitch length. Disengaged, you need to move the fabric at a suitable speed to create your desired stitch length. Practice, practice!

HOW TO DROP YOUR FEED DOGS

To free-motion quilt, you need to lower or disengage your feed dogs. But how do you disengage them?



Most modern sewing machines and many older ones have an option for dropping or disengaging the feed dogs. Consult your machine manual.

You'll likely discover a little lever that controls this mechanism. With a simple toggle from on to off, your feed dogs are on vacation. Turn the needle and you'll see that now they remain still as the needle moves.

CAN'T LOWER YOUR FEED DOGS?

If your machine doesn't have a built-in mechanism for disengaging feed dogs, there are a few work arounds.

- Try covering the needle plate area with low-tack tape. The tape prevents the moving feed dogs from grabbing your project, allowing you to control the motion of the fabric.
- Try buying a **Supreme Slider**. This is a slick plastic sheet that clings to your sewing machine bed like a vinyl decal. It peels on and off, leaving no tacky residues. There is a small rectangle cut out at center for the needle hole, but it covers the feed dog slots.

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16 COMMENTS



DJ
March 7th, 2018

If you use the Supreme Slider without lowering your feed dogs, the feed dogs will chew the Supreme Slider. Unfortunately, I know from experience!

[Reply](#)



Rachel Hauser
March 7th, 2018

Gotcha – so Supreme Slider PLUS tape then. Thanks for sharing!

[Reply](#)



Sandra Walker
March 7th, 2018

I've quilted for over 20 years, most of it on a DSM. First, I quilted on my Elna, which couldn't drop the feed dogs, and since 2003, on my Bernina, which can....but I don't drop them. I find I get better stitch quality if I do not drop them. I have never found them to hinder my movement and I do a LOT of fancy quilting, both on my Bernina and for the past few years, on my longarm. I just want people to know that it is not imperative that you disengage or cover the feed dogs, since I have had tremendous success by not doing so! 😊

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Susan and Thomas Kelly
March 7th, 2018

I have read this advice about the need to disengage the feed dogs repeatedly on Craftsby for several years now. However, it is not correct to state that the feed must be lowered in order to do free-motion quilting. In fact, on my older machines (by which I mean in some cases, antique treadle machines) even using the feed cover plate is an unnecessary inconvenience. On my newer modern machines I have found this is entirely optional. If the stitch length is set to zero, then the dogs only move up and down (and not back and forth to pull the fabric) so they only touch the underside of the quilt for a fraction of a second on each stitch. As Sandra Walker knows, this can actually produce better stitch quality without interfering with the free motion.

[Reply](#)



Bobbi Beharrell
March 8th, 2018

So logical, the way you have explained it! Thanks for posting this.

[Reply](#)



Margaret
March 7th, 2018

My older Elna Jubilee comes with a darning plate that fits over the feed dogs.

[Reply](#)



Marianne Perry
March 7th, 2018

I'm a long time quilter, too, and cannot drop the feed dogs on my old cheap and basic machine. I've tried covering the feed dogs with something thin but it doesn't really matter so I don't bother anymore. The free motion foot is what makes the difference. Most of the time, I set the stitch length to zero but if the tension needs tweaking, I set it on a stitch number to get better tension.

[Reply](#)



Linda Bartolotta
March 7th, 2018

Sandra: THANK YOU! so much for this information. I just bought a little Babylock Amelia machine to carry around for classes, etc. The feed dogs don't drop. Now, I won't worry about that!

[Reply](#)



Sandra Walker
March 10th, 2018

You are most welcome, Linda! As you see from several other comments, I'm not the only rogue FMQ-er LOL! Anytime I can help encourage people to FMQ and NOT give up, I will. 😊

[Reply](#)



Kim B

March 7th, 2018

I never drop feed dogs and have no problems free motion quilting. I never could get my stitches to do right when I did drop them on any of my machines (I have 3) so I leave them up and have no problems anymore. When I first started free motion quilting I dropped them because that's what everyone said to do and it took me probably a year to see a post by a well known quilter that mentioned leaving them up because sometimes that works better. I did and all my problems disappeared!

[Reply](#)



Leah Day

March 8th, 2018

An easy alternative to dropping the feed dogs is to set the stitch length to 0 or just the lowest setting. I've found personally that dropping my feed dogs causes issues with the machine tension and stitch quality. Instead, I just lower the stitch length and start quilting!

[Reply](#)



Tina Tippin

March 18th, 2018

This is so encouraging! I will now bravely go where I was afraid to go before! Thank you all.

[Reply](#)



Jayashree

December 9th, 2018

Can you please tell how do you Quilt free motion designs without dropping feed dogs? E.g feathers... swirls etc

[Reply](#)



Wendy Rubbo

March 8th, 2018

What a relief to find that I can try FMQ with the feed dogs engaged. I have tried it with them dropped as everyone has instructed and the results were disheartening, to say the least. I will give this a shot, now. Thanks!

[Reply](#)



3patch

March 20th, 2018

On my Janome 1600 I have to put additional cover plate. I really hate changing the plate. Definitely try with stitch zero length.

[Reply](#)



Nancy

March 24th, 2018

The freedom to try! Thanks.

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