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Preparing Your Quilt for Long Arm Quilting

If you are planning on taking your quilt to be quilted by a Long Arm professional, here are some tips that will help. You will need to prepare the quilt top and back to assist the quilter in achieving the best possible outcome.

What to prepare for the quilter:

Accuracy in creating the top of your quilt is always important and your quilter wants to maintain that throughout the process. Since the backing, batting and sometimes the top may be pinned to the rails of the machine, having a square quilt is important. If your quilt is not prepared, you can end up with pleats and tucks in the front or back.

Press the top of the quilt, making sure all the seams are as flat as possible. Stay stitch approximately 1/8" from the raw edge of the quilt top. This will help the seams stay closed and minimize distortion and fraying on the edges. Remove any extra threads, lint or pet hair from the quilt top and backing. If you have a lot of fraying on the back which could lead to darker threads being trapped in a light background space, consider "Fraycheck" or similar product to seal the edges. Once threads are trapped, it is difficult to fish them out. After pressing, fan fold the quilt top parallel to the top and bottom of the quilt.

Place over a padded hanger. (Use leftover batting pinned on a hanger) Once the quilt is loaded, these folds will be released as it is quilted. Once the backing is prepared, fold in the same way and place on a hanger. Failing to do this may cause your quilter to iron your project resulting in an extra charge.

If you are providing the backing, make sure you prewash the fabric, especially extra wide fabrics. The extra wide backing is milled in a different fashion and usually shrinks more than standard width fabrics. (up to 10%) It can also interfere with the thread tension of your quilt due to the different fabric density. A tip when buying extra wide fabric is to buy 6-10% more than you need and have it torn on the straight of grain to insure that once it is preshrunk, you will be able to square it up and have enough backing.

You will need 8 inches more backing and batting than the top of your quilt. More than 12 will need to be removed. Your quilter may provide the batting, but be sure if there is a specialty batting such as black or wool blend, that it is available.

Piecing the Backing:

Piecing the backing is a very important step in finishing the quilt. Many times, by the time we finish piecing the top, we just look for any old thing that will do. Take time to prepare the backing correctly to insure that your quilter does not have to struggle with this. As mentioned before, prewash or preshrink backing by wetting the fabric and placing in a relatively hot dryer.

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If you are not using a wide back, chances are that you will be piecing the fabric. There are some things you must do or risk paying your quilter more to fix. The best way to piece the backing is to have the seams parallel to the top and bottom of the quilt. **Remove the selvages from the fabric.** Leaving the selvages can cause the backing to "hammock" on the frame due to the difference in the density of the weave thus leading to puckers. Sew ½" seams and press to the side. Pressing open leaves the seam vulnerable to stress during quilting and the wear that comes with using the quilt.

If you must seam the backing perpendicular to the top, the quilter may choose to load the quilt sideways. This may limit the patterns you choose for quilting. Perpendicular seams build up as the quilt is rolled and also lead to a "hammock" effect.

Sometimes we really get creative and have pieced backing from all of our leftover projects. Although creative and cute, we may not be able to use them. It is extremely difficult to line up the top and back once the quilting has started. The quilter can do their best to center side to side and estimate top to bottom, but as the quilt is stitched and rolled, the top and back shrink, often at a different rate. If there are many seams in the backing, it may shrink faster than the top. In addition, extra back seams can cause the needle to deflect resulting in skipped stitches and other problems.

Once the backing is pieced, please square the top and bottom edges. Many piecers think that it is no problem for the quilter if the seams do not match or are ragged. It is an extra step and can cause problems with loading the quilt.

Other factors to consider for backing fabrics are differences in fabric type such as silk, minkee, batik or flannel. All of these have specific characteristics and should be discussed with your quilter.

In summary, discuss all of these options with your quilter to achieve the best possible results.

Checklist for preparing your quilt:

- Top and backing pressed and clean
- Top and backing are accurately squared
- Backing and batting are at least 8" larger than the top
- Top and backing flat folded and place on a padded hanger
- Call ahead to schedule a drop off
- Be prepared to discuss themes and thread colors
- Decide what batting to use
- Communicate to quilter timeline and any other wishes you have for completion
- Relax and the PRO create magic.