

BASIC FOUNDATION PAPER PIECING

By Carol Bruce at *Needlesongs*

Overview

A variety of foundation piecing and paper piecing techniques go back several centuries, although not all quilters use them. However, now with the advances in computers and copy machines, foundation paper piecing has become popular for it's ease and accuracy.

The technique covered here makes use of paper patterns with printed sewing lines. The fabric is placed on the blank side of the paper and sewn on the printed side. Accurate template cutting isn't necessary (although fabric is roughly cut to shape) because the accuracy is in the sewing.

Where designs cannot be completely sewn in one piece because of odd angles, blocks are sometimes broken into easy sections that are then joined together.

One point to remember is that the actual finished block is a mirror image of the printed pattern, since it's sewn from the reverse side. This isn't important when sewing symmetrical blocks, but should be kept in mind when patterns involve numbers, letters or directional designs.

Supplies:

- 100% cotton fabrics (refer to individual patterns for yardage)
- Copies of foundation paper patterns, enough to complete project plus extras
- Sewing machine and sharp # 14 sewing machine needles.
- Sewing thread to match fabrics
- Iron and ironing board
- Rotary cutter, mat and ruler
- Scissors, pins and basic sewing supplies
- Fabric glue stick
- Tweezers

Optional supplies:

- Small wood, bone or plastic pressing stick
- Fun-dation [by HTC, Inc., 103 Eisenhower Parkway, Roseland, NJ 07068] a transparent, easy-tear, computer friendly paper for copying quilt patterns.

Preparations:

1. Pre-wash and iron fabrics

Always pre-wash fabrics to deal with any possible shrinkage, dye bleeding, and to wash out any sizing or chemicals that may cause fabric not to bond if the scraps are later used for fusible appliqué.

2. Copy patterns

Use a copy machine or computer to run off one copy of the foundation pattern. Then lay it over the original and hold up to a light to be sure the lines overlap exactly and are not distorted. With some patterns this isn't critical, but others have seam lines that must match up and won't if the pattern is distorted. If the copy is acceptable, make enough for the project plus extras for practice and in case one gets torn.

Patterns may also be traced and copied using a fine-line marker, but it's more time consuming if there are a large number of blocks. Be sure to transfer all numbers and important markings.

Special papers such as Fun-dations™ are easy to tear away or are light enough to be left in some projects. However, regular computer paper can be used.

Designs may be enlarged or made smaller, but for any size change be sure to redraw all seam allowances to ¼”.

3. Sewing preparation:

Set the sewing machine stitch length at 15 to 20 stitches per inch and use a sharp # 14 sewing machine needle. This makes the paper easier to tear out. When doing a lot of blocks the needle will become dull, so keep a supply on hand. If the machine is adjustable, try tightening the needle and bobbin tensions slightly.

4. Make a test block or section:

Assemble one of the extra block or section patterns (according to the directions which follow) as a practice piece to fine tune your technique and also test the sewing machine settings. Then tear out the paper and check the seam stitching to see if further adjustments are needed to stitch length or tensions. It may take a couple of tries to get the technique down, but once it “clicks,” the sewing can be fast, easy and accurate.

5. Fabric cutting:

Most of the time it's easiest to strip-cut pieces if a number of blocks are being made up. Cut the number of strips required and slice to length or roughly cut around a template (for triangles or odd shapes) placed on the strip. If the pieces are odd shapes, it may be wise to cut generously, with a 3/8” seam allowance rather than the usual ¼”. Excess fabric will be trimmed as needed.

If cutting pieces one at a time as the foundation block is sewn, simply be sure the piece covers the outlined area on the paper plus ¼” to 3/8” for the seam allowance.

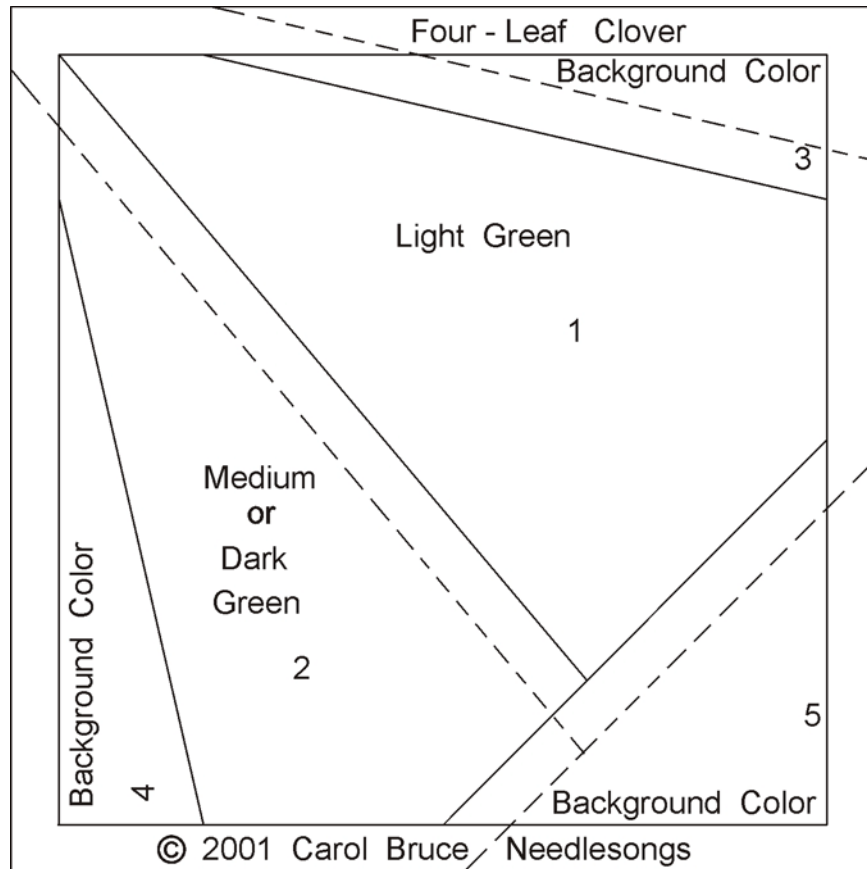
When cutting fabric pieces, keep in mind the grain or design of the fabric. If there is a distinct pattern that should be kept aligned, try marking grain lines on the foundation paper.

6. Sewing steps:

Choose one of the patterns, make a copy of it and cut it out slightly outside of the seam allowance cutting line. (Some people prefer to cut it out on the printed cutting line now, at the beginning).

If the design requires piecing in sections (usually labeled Section A, etc.) there may be several of these. Each pattern or section should have numbered divisions starting with "1." The numbers indicate sewing order.

Here is an 8" Four-leaf Clover pattern that can be used as a practice block. It doesn't have different sections to be assembled, but it is a quarter-block and four copies need to be sewn together to make the whole design. It can also be done in pastel colors as a flower block.



Since the fabric is placed on the blank side of the paper, it helps to have a placement guide. Creases in the paper work fine for this. Remembering that the printed lines are sewing lines, look at the lines that go around # 1.

Carefully crease the paper $\frac{1}{4}$ " or a smidgen more **outside** of the sewing line in the areas marked 2, 3 and 5. (Dashed lines have been drawn on this pattern to indicate where the creases should be made). Then, turn the paper blank side up. Next, cut a piece of fabric that will cover the whole area (wrong side against the paper) between the creases on the blank side, to cover area 1. Use a dot of the fabric glue or a pin to hold it in place if desired.

Next, cut a piece of fabric to cover area 2 plus a seam allowance all the way around. Think of this piece as a door, hinged on the line between patches 1 and 2. Flip it over face down on patch 1, lining up the fabric edges that extend into the patch 2 space. Hold or pin in place. Turn paper and fabric over so that the printed side of the paper is up. Sew on the line between 1 and 2. Try to sew as straight a line as possible and be sure to extend the stitching through the seam allowance. Some people prefer to back stitch (1 or 2 stitches only) at the beginning and end of the seam line while others do not. Try both ways and when peeling the paper off later, it will become obvious whether your sewing technique requires the back-stitching or not.

When the first seam is done, bend the paper out of the way and trim any excess fabric to leave a $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance. On the right side of the fabric press the seam flat with a pressing stick, your fingers or the iron. Patch #2 Should now cover and extend at least $\frac{1}{4}$ " past area "2 into #4.

For positioning patch #3 there should already be a crease just outside of area #1 running across area #3. Cut a patch of fabric to cover area #3 plus the seam allowance. (It may help to lay the fabric on the lined side of the pattern to visualize it). On the blank side of the paper, lay this fabric face down on piece #1, with the edges of the fabrics together. Pin or hold the fabric in place, turn the paper lined side up and stitch on the line between areas 1 and 3. Flip the fabric over right side up to be sure it covers the area and seam allowances. Then, bend the paper away and trim the seam allowance to $\frac{1}{4}$. "

If a patch has a long section containing the outside seam allowance (for example, pieces 3, 4, and 5 in the Four-leaf Clover pattern) they can be stitched to the paper in the seam allowances as you go. (Although some quilters prefer to sew completely around a block and anchor all the edges at the same time after it's completed).

Finish the quarter-block by adding patches # 4 and 5 in the same way as # 2 and #3.

Finally, press the completed block or section and use a rotary cutter or scissors to trim the piece exactly to its outer seam allowance.

If assembling a design with more than one section, place the sewn sections with fabric sides together, matching any seams. Take straight pins and carefully pin straight through the fabrics and papers at the beginning and ending of the sewing lines, as well as any other matching points. Keep the pins at right angles to the paper and parallel to the other pins. With these in place, stick other pins flat through the paper and fabric, parallel to them. Sew, slowly sliding pins out as you get to them.

When the last piece is assembled and edges are trimmed to the cutting lines, the paper may be removed. Sometimes pulling the fabric on the bias will pop it loose easily. It can also help to fold the pieces back and forth on the sewing lines before removing them. The last little stubborn bits can usually be removed with the tweezers or a pin.

Chain sewing: To streamline the foundation process, chain sewing is recommended. Begin by making neat stacks of all pre-cut fabric pieces and paper sections by the sewing machine. Start sewing patches #1 and 2 on the first section. Don't cut the machine thread but pick up and sew the same patches to the next section until all of the first 2 patches are sewn down. Then trim and press all of them before continuing. Proceed on to sewing all of the #3 patches before going on to #4, etc. until all have been sewn.

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