

Foundation Paper Piecing

By Maria Hrabovsky

Paper or Foundation Piecing is a quick, accurate, and easy way to make quilt blocks. Even beginners to quilting can make perfect blocks using this method of sewing on drawn lines.

Choosing the Foundation

There are several from which to choose.

- A. There are a variety of papers, which have been developed specifically for paper piecing. Generally, these sheets tear away smoothly and easily. They do not stretch or shrink when pressed with a dry iron. Look for them at your local quilt shop.
- B. Other types of paper are also usable, including computer paper. However, many are heavy, more difficult to sew through when joining blocks, and harder to tear away after sewing. Some are too thin and tear easily, coming apart while you are still working on them. Some stretch or shrink when pressing. To determine the paper foundation that works best for you, experiment by making a sample block with each. Use these samples to make a small project such as a hot pad, a doll quilt, or a child's charity quilt.
- C. A light, quality muslin or a very light interfacing can also be used as a foundation for paper piecing. These are permanent and do not need to be removed. Muslin should be prewashed and preshrunk before using.
- D. If you have problems seeing through the paper, try a transparent or semi-transparent paper.

Preparing the Foundations

1. Decide on the finished size of the quilt you will be making.
2. Count the number of blocks you will need and multiply that number by the number of foundation patterns needed to make one complete block. The result is the number of pattern pieces you will need to copy and print or photocopy. For example, if a block is made up of 2 different sections and you want to make 12 blocks, you will need to copy 12 of each. You will print 24 altogether. Photocopies may not all print to the exact size. Check them for accuracy by stacking them and holding them to the light.
3. To make several paper copies at once:
 - **remove the top and bobbin threads** from your machine.
 - stack 4 – 10 blank papers, placing the printed pattern paper on the top
 - using an old needle, stitch along the pattern lines – **remember, no thread**. The perforations made by the needle will create quick, accurate, multiple copies of the pattern.
 - copy the numbering and any lettering on each perforated paper pattern just made.
4. If you are using muslin or interfacing, trace the number of patterns you need onto the fabric. Remember to draw and cut the foundation patterns with the grain line. Use a good quality, permanent fabric pen and a ruler to ensure accuracy. Copy the numbers and any lettering.
5. Do not cut your patterns right on the cutting line. Leave added space around them. They will be trimmed to size when the piecing is finished.

Sewing Notes

- Use a shorter stitch length - 18 stitches per inch or set your stitch length to 2, depending upon your sewing machine's stitch regulator type. The shorter stitch will make removing the paper easier.
- Use an 80/12 needle with specialized foundation paper, muslin, or interfacing. Use a 90/14 needle with thicker papers.
- Begin sewing a few stitches before the pattern lines and end a few stitches after them. This will prevent seams from opening as you remove the foundation. If your machine has a lock stitch (or backstitch), you may want to use it to start and end each line of sewing. You can also start and end with tiny stitches.
- Use neutral-coloured threads such as light gray or beige, as they will work with most fabric colours - or a dark gray for dark fabrics.
- Do not remove the paper backings until all the blocks are sewn together and the quilt top is finished. This will ensure accuracy in sewing and matching points.
- When removing the paper, fold or crease it along stitching lines then, start tearing from the center of the crease. This puts less stress on the stitches.
- When using scrap fabrics for your project, cut them at least 3/4 to 1 inch larger all around than the pattern patch size. Check that the size is adequate by holding the fabric against the back of the foundation pattern and holding it up to a light or window. It is better to have a little extra fabric than to fall short.
- If using new fabrics, measure the patches you are covering, add the extra 3/4 to 1 inch, and cut strips which will fit the spaces.
- You can use freezer paper templates to cut your fabrics to size. Trace the pattern shape onto the freezer paper remembering to reverse the pattern section as you will be working from the back of the foundation paper. Add a 3/4 to 1 inch seam allowance. Iron the templates onto your fabric. Use them as cutting guides for your pattern pieces. Peel and reuse the freezer paper templates.
- An open-toe foot will help you to see the pattern lines clearly as you sew.
- **Remember** that the printed side of the foundation pattern will be the back of your finished, sewn block. It will be a **mirror image** of the printed pattern.
- Use a **dry** iron to press seams – or use a wooden finger presser for each seam and a dry iron for a final pressing when a block is completed.
- Press each seam twice - after sewing to set the stitches – and again after flipping to the side.
- A good pair of tweezers will help to remove heavier paper. A wet cotton swab rubbed gently on the paper along the seam line will also make tearing the paper away easier.
- This is a sew and flip method. All fabrics will be **right side up** on the **blank** side of the paper after sewing.

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Piecing

Example - Diagram A - Printed Side of Pattern

- The printed side of the paper pattern will be the back of your quilt block after it is sewn.
- All sewing is done on this side.
- Note that seam allowances are included. **Do not remove them.**
- Remember that this is a mirror image when placing your fabric. Fabric placement is determined from the blank side.

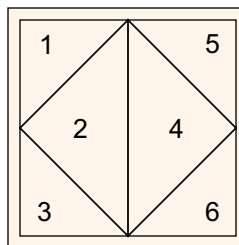


Diagram A
Printed Side of Pattern

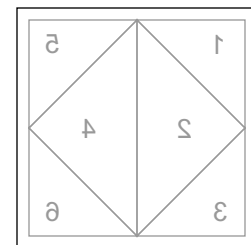
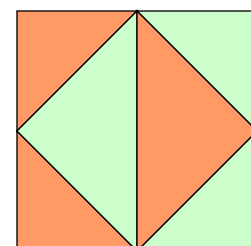


Diagram B
Blank Side of Pattern

Example - Diagram B - Blank Side of Pattern

- The blank side of the paper will be the right side of your quilt block.
- The print from the other side of the pattern shows through.
- This is the side where fabrics are placed.



Finished Block

Practice

Print the foundation template at the end of this tutorial. Cut out the foundation 1/2" beyond the dotted lines and use the foundation in the following steps for practice.

Note: In the diagrams that follow, "R" will indicate the right side of the fabric and "B" the backside.

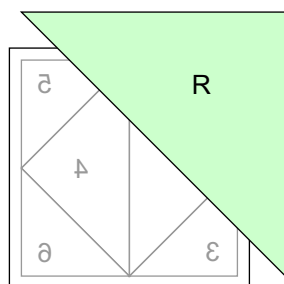


Diagram C

1. Place the fabric for piece #1 (right side up) on the blank side of the foundation (diagram C).

- Hold it up to the light and check that the fabric covers piece #1 with about 3/4 inch to spare all around it (diagram D).
- Pin the fabric to the foundation from the printed side so your pins can be seen as you sew.

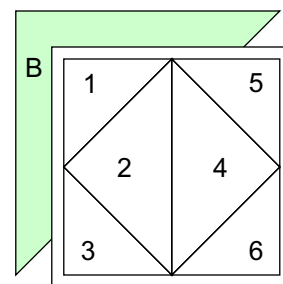


Diagram D

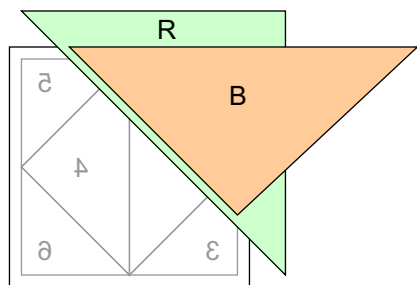


Diagram E

2. Place the fabric for piece #2, right sides together, over fabric piece #1 (diagram E). **Note:** Raw edges should be aligned where they will be sewn. Separations in the diagrams are for illustration purposes only.

- Flip the fabric over and hold it up to the light to make sure it will cover the area for piece #2 including the seams plus an extra 3/4 inch. **Note:** It is helpful to place a pin along the seam line before flipping.
- Pin in place from the printed side (diagram F).

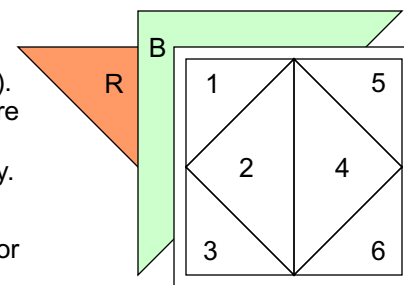


Diagram F

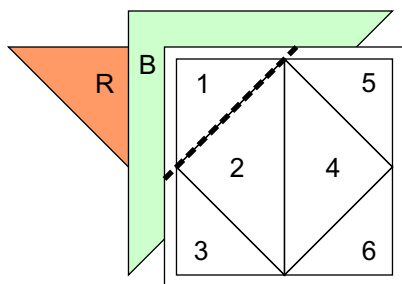


Diagram G

3. Holding your fabrics in place, turn to the printed side of the paper pattern.

- Stitch along the line between piece #1 and piece #2, starting a few stitches before the line and ending a few stitches after it (diagram G).
- Clip your threads.
- Press. Flip fabric piece #2 to the side (diagram H). Press again.

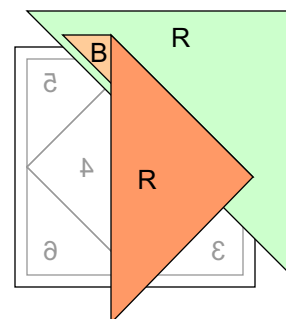


Diagram H

4. Fold the paper back along the stitched line.

- Trim the fabrics 1/4 inch from the sewn line to create a seam allowance. Be careful not to cut the paper pattern.
- Note: Do not trim elsewhere. A final trimming will be done when the block is finished.
- Remove pin.

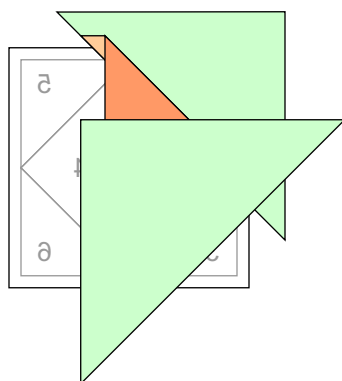


Diagram I

5. Place the fabric for piece #3, right sides together, over fabric piece #2.

- Align the fabric along the trimmed edges of fabric piece #2 (diagram I).
- Flip the fabric over and hold it up to the light to make sure it will cover the area for piece #3, including the seams. **Note:** It is helpful to place a pin along the seam line before flipping.
- Pin from the printed side.
- Stitch along the line between pieces #2 and #3.
- Trim as in step 4.
- Press. Flip (diagram J). Press.

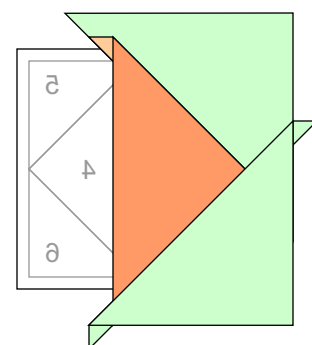


Diagram J

6. Place the fabric for piece #4, right sides together, over fabric piece #2.

- Align the fabric along the raw edge of fabric piece #2.
- Flip the fabric over and hold it up to the light to check it as before.
- Pin from the printed side.
- Stitch along the line between pieces #2 and #4.
- Trim as in step 4.
- Press (diagram K).

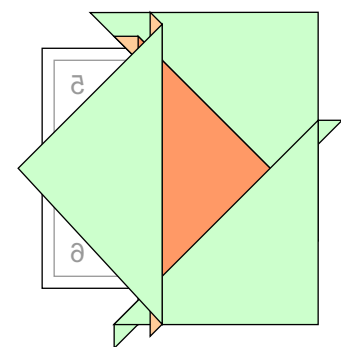


Diagram K

7. Place the fabric for piece #5, right sides together, over fabric piece #4.

- Align the fabric along the trimmed edge of fabric piece #4.
- Flip the fabric over and hold it up to the light to check it as before.
- Pin from the printed side.
- Stitch along the line between pieces #4 and #5.
- Trim as in step 4.
- Press. Flip (diagram L). Press.

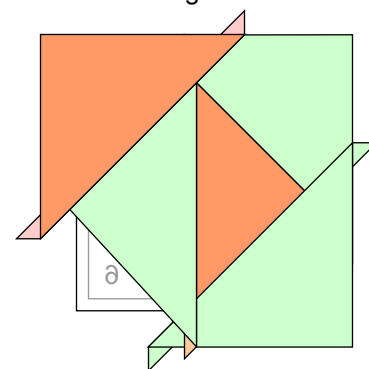


Diagram L

8. Place the fabric for piece #6, right sides together, over fabric piece #4.

- Align the fabric along the trimmed edge of fabric piece #4.
- Flip the fabric over and hold it up to the light to check it.
- Pin from the printed side.
- Stitch along the line between pieces #4 and #6.
- Trim as in step 4.
- Press. Flip (diagram M). Press.
- Press entire finished block.
- Use a ruler and rotary cutter to trim away all excess fabric around the block. **Remember** – do not cut away the seam allowances.
- **Optional:** Baste around the finished block from the right side. This keeps the fabric in place when joining blocks. Basting can be removed later or left in.

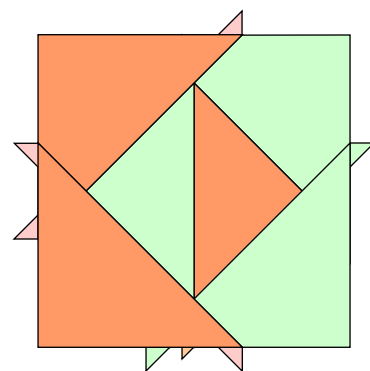


Diagram M

Sewing Blocks Together

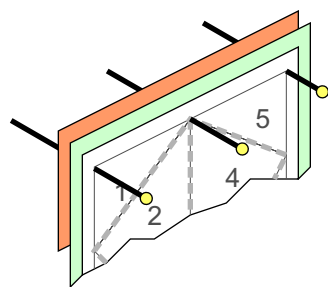


Diagram N

1. Place two blocks right sides together.

- Place a pin at each end of the seam and at all matching points. (Vinyl-coated paper clips can be used instead of pins.)
- Push the pin straight through to the back in a horizontal position, then check that it comes out on the matching line/point on the other side. Reposition the pin until it is exactly in place (diagram N). This ensures perfect, accurate piecing.

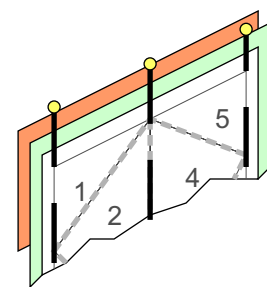


Diagram O

- Now push the point down and through the fabrics in a vertical position (diagram O).

2. Stitch the seam slowly from one edge to the other as you would do in normal piecing, removing the pins just before you get to them.

3. Press seam as is. Press the seam to the side. **Note:** Think of the finished layout of the blocks to determine which direction to press seams so that they abut. When pinning rows together before sewing, if you happen to find a seam pressed in the wrong direction, simply press it again in the direction you want.

4. Sew the rest of the blocks together in the same manner.

Removing the Paper

If you used paper as your foundation, fold it back along each stitching line and crease it.

It is easier to remove the paper pieces in reverse numerical order. Begin to tear each piece gently starting from the middle of each seam.

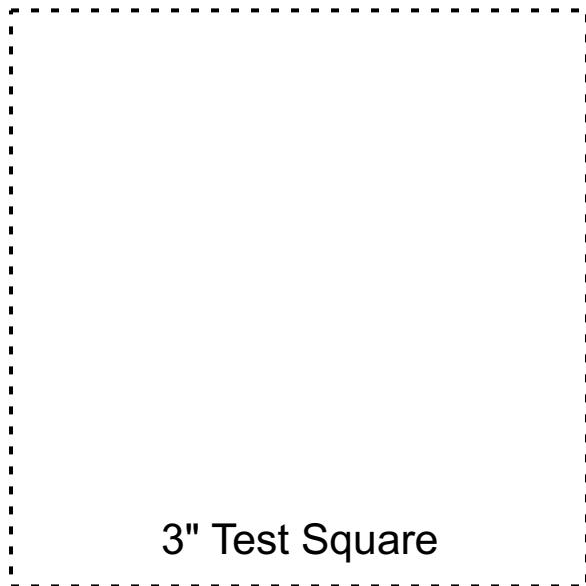
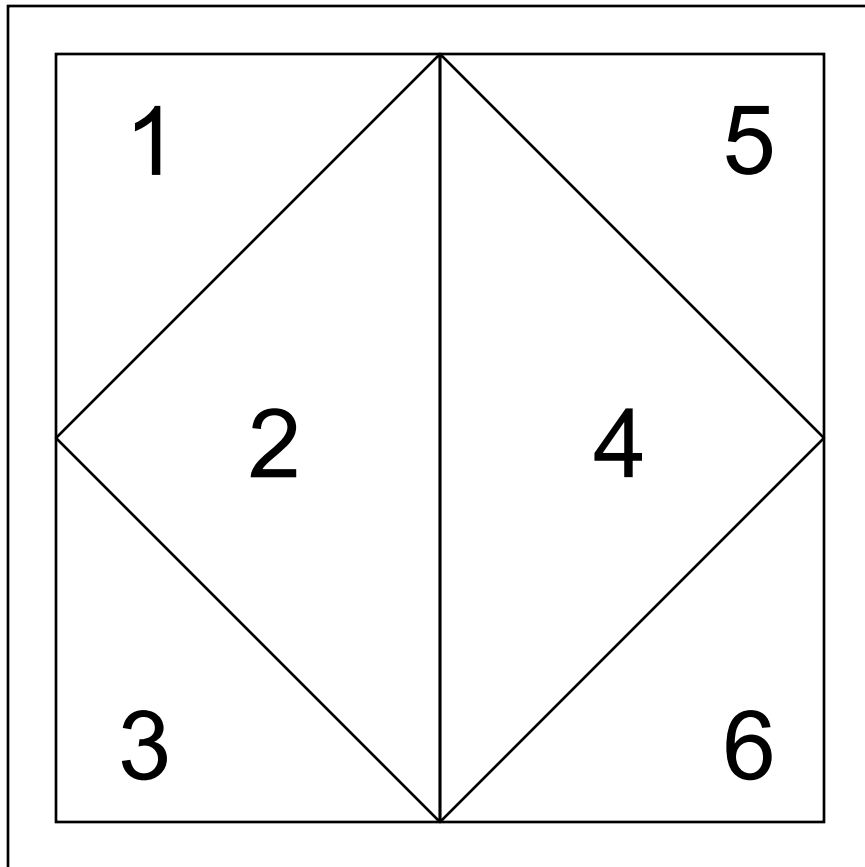
Scoring the paper with a pin will help make removal easier, so will dabbing it with a wet cotton swab.

Finishing the Quilt

Follow the instructions which come with the quilt pattern to finish your quilt.

Foundation Paper Piecing Template

Practice Foundation



3" Test Square

When printing from the PDF Templates file, set Page Scaling to "None". Print patterns at "100%" or "Actual Size". Do not select "Shrink to Fit" or "Fit to Printable Area" options. Once printed, measure the Test Square to make sure it is the specified size.