

In a binding...

Happy National Quilting Day!

Among the things on my "to-do" list this weekend are finishing the binding on Recess and making the binding for George and Roadshow.

For some mysterious reason, I get asked about my bindings when I go someplace. Yes, the first question is often whether or not I really, truly, always, not-just-for-fun-and-pictures use that many binding clips. Yes, I do!



But that's getting a little bit ahead of myself.

Maybe it is curiosity about what that binding might be hiding inside that quilt, as though removing the binding would be like looking behind the Wizard's curtain. But since I'm asked and since I just did the binding for Brocante, I took some pictures so that I could show you my "modus bindingus." I won't call it a tutorial because that might suggest that I know what I'm doing, that I'm some sort of expert. Hardly. Some are better than others -- that often depends on how much of a rush I'm in -- but most days, I do a pretty nice binding. At least that what the quilt judges and appraisers have said.

When it comes to binding, I start thinking about that as soon as I start thinking about the fabric I'm going to use in a quilt. Sometimes I know from the beginning which fabric I'll use and other times, I don't have a clue. I don't -- and/or can't -- make up my mind until the quilt top is finished and quilted. The only things I am pretty certain about are that the binding will be narrow and that it will be contrasting -- maybe a little, maybe a lot. It depends on the quilt. The right binding finishes a quilt perfectly, adding something without detracting. But a binding that is too light, too dark or too busy can mess up the whole quilt.

If I had to explain how I think about the binding, it is like this -- the center of the quilt is the picture, the borders -- however many there are -- are the mat, and the binding is the frame. They're all parts of the finished piece.

So here goes.

Bias vs. straight of grain. I like both. Both are terrific. Both work beautifully. There are advantages and disadvantages to both. Knowing how to do both provides all sorts of design options, especially if you're working with stripes and plaids. I usually do a bias binding because... well, I don't know. I think it is just what I learned to do first and I like it. When I first learned to make quilts, I didn't know how to put a mitered corner on the binding and I didn't like the log-cabin-style-stacked binding so I made a lot of quilts with curved corners. Those only worked with bias binding so I got used to making bias binding.

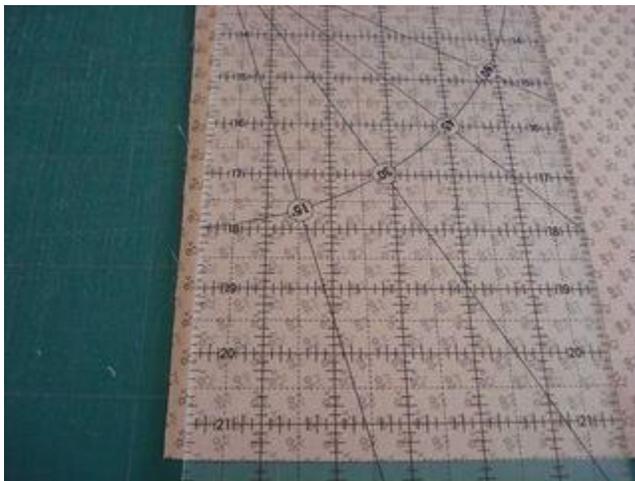
So unless there is a reason to do a straight of grain, I usually make bias binding. I'm a creature of a few habits.

I don't like that continuous bias binding technique. There I said it. I get much better results with cutting the strips and sewing them together. And I do it more quickly. Don't get me wrong, lots of quilters like and use the continuous bias binding. I might be a little envious that it works for them and not for me, but probably not enough that I am going to practice it. I'm kind of stubborn and stuck-in-my-ways about things like that. So this is what I do.

I press and lightly starch the fabric I'm using for my binding. I press the whole piece flat, the full 42" width. I do not press it with a fold. After it is pressed, I fold it so that the selvages are matched up and the fold is smooth and there aren't any ripples.



The next step is to cut off the selvages and square up the crosswise edges so that they are square and at a 90 degree angle to the fold and the now-selvage-less edge.



This is all done so that the edges are straight and even – which will result in nice straight 45 degree angles when I cut the bias strips.



The fabric is then opened up flat and folded at a 45 degree angle as shown. You can use your ruler to measure the angle of the fold -- though this is one of the times when the lines on your rotary mat will work perfectly well.

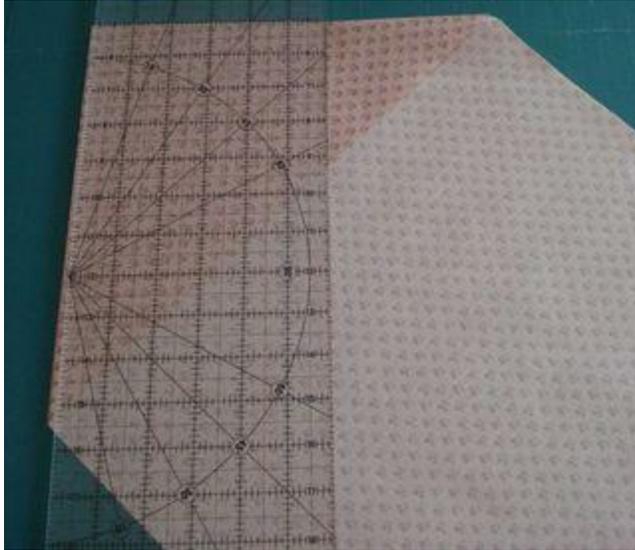


Then fold the fabric down, matching up the folded edge.

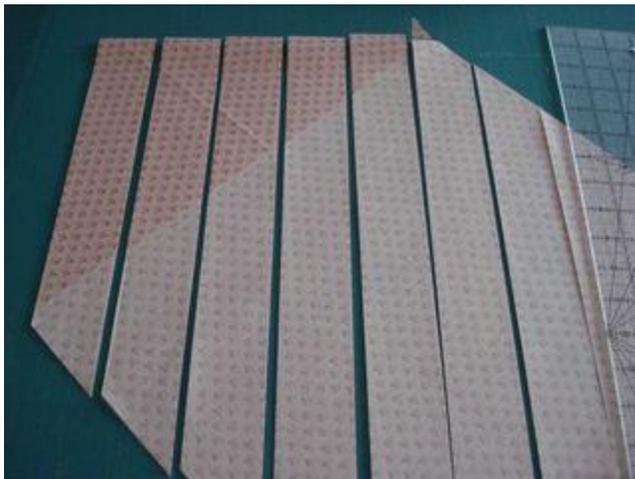
If you're working with a larger piece of fabric -- three-quarters of a yard or more -- the piece will be folded again so that it is about 15" to 16" wide. It makes cutting the strips a whole lot easier.

Note: Well, duh. I just remembered something that might help with this part. A couple of years ago, Heather Peterson ~ Anka's Treasures ~ did a tutorial about cutting bias strips and she included a terrific diagram that shows this fabric folding technique. [Quick and Easy Bias Cut Binding Tip](#) is the post and click for the diagram where you see **Bias Cut Binding Houndout**. While I learned how to do this kind of folding years ago, Heather's diagram is the best one I've seen for actually showing how it's done.

The benefit of folding the fabric this way is that you wind up with lots of long strips instead of lots of short strips.



Use a rotary cutter to cut off the folded edge.

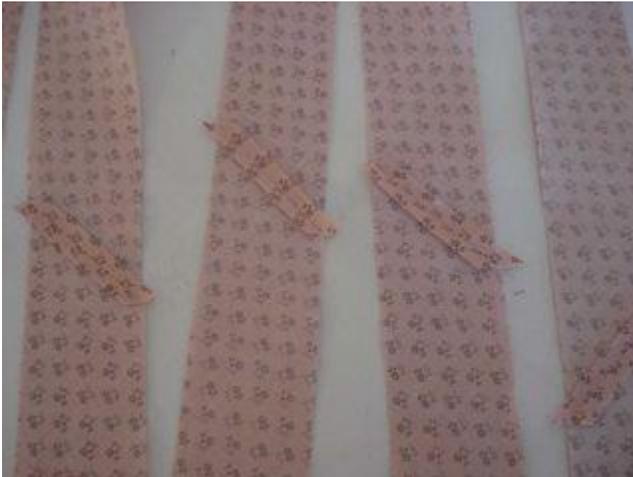


Cut strips to the desired width -- these were cut at $1\frac{7}{8}$ " wide. (Trust me, it isn't nearly as scary as it sounds.) I cut until I hit the corner -- it would be on the lower right -- or until I think I have enough strips to make a long enough binding strip for my quilt top. And no, I never mind making more binding than I need -- better too much than not enough, right?



Using a scant 1/4" seam allowance, the strips are joined to make one really long binding strip.

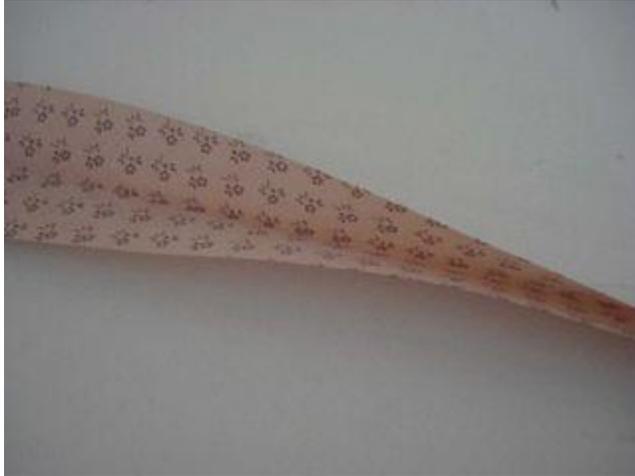
Note: Whether you use a straight of grain binding or a bias binding, the binding strips should – **must** – be joined using a diagonal seam. Not doing so makes every seam junction in the binding thicker and lumpier than the rest of the binding. The goal is a smooth, even binding that looks **and** feels the same way all the way around the edge of the quilt. Even when the binding is cut on the crosswise grain using a stripe fabric, the strips should be joined with a diagonal seam. Matching up the stripe isn't that hard, it just takes a little practice – seriously, if I can do it, anybody can.



Seams are pressed open. Always. No exceptions.

Por quoi? Because if you don't press the seams open, the finished binding is thick, lumpy and bumpy every place there is a seam junction. If you're worried about the stitches showing or pulling apart, use a finer thread and a smaller stitch.

Trim all the triangles along the edges of the binding. It doesn't matter if they're trimmed before or after the binding is folded just so long as they are trimmed off before you attach the binding to the quilt top. They just get in the way.



Using an iron – no, finger pressing isn't enough – align the edges of the binding and fold the binding strip in half. Press flat.



This is where starching the fabric at the outset can make a huge difference. It makes the pressed binding strip crisp, smooth and flat, which makes stitching the binding onto the quilt top much easier. (And it shrinks the fabric if you use press with steam.)

Pinning the binding to the quilt top. Hold onto your chairs... I don't pin my binding. When I pin the entire binding to the quilt top, I tend to get it too tight in places and too loose in others. I want to be able to adjust it as I go along. But... **but** I do loosely pin the binding in place so that I can make sure I don't have a seam in the corner. Sometimes it happens anyway but loosely pinning the binding to check the seam position helps. That said, if you get the best results when you pin the entire binding, that is what you should do.

I forgot to take a picture of my stitching the binding on one of the straight edges so let it suffice for me to tell you that I use a Bernina walking foot with the needle moved over to the furthest right position. From the edge of the presser foot to the needle, I have a scant-ish $\frac{1}{4}$ " seam allowance that works well for the bindings I've cut at $1\frac{7}{8}$ " or $1\frac{3}{4}$ " wide.



Note: I was experimenting with a new batting here – the Tuscany Silk – and I think the 2nd needle position on the right would have been better. The finished binding is full but the edge of the binding is a little bit further over than ideal.

Start stitching about 5" to 6" from the end of the binding strip using whatever seam allowance you've chosen to use for the width strip you've cut and the batting you're using. As the binding strip is being attached, it should get a teeny tiny bit of a pull -- not enough to make it actually stretch but just enough that it is being eased.

Be careful not to pull the binding too much as that will result in the edge of the quilt top pulling in when the quilt is finished. But if you lay the binding flat without any tension can result in having the finished binding be a little "bigger" than the edge of the quilt top. And that means a greater chance of a quilt top with a wavy edge and a quilt top that won't lay flat. The tension will offset some of the shrinkage in the batting when the finished quilt is laundered.

Stitch to within the seam's width of the corner – a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ " or the same distance as the width of your seam allowance.



With the needle in the down position, turn the corner to see if you are where you should be.



My picture showing the back-stitching seems to be missing... so imagine that I have back-stitched to the edge of the quilt top and binding. Leave the needle in the down position and raise the presser foot.

Note: Some folks don't back-stitch and it probably isn't completely necessary. I have never read anything that gave me a good, definitive answer on why it was or wasn't necessary so this is one of those places where I think you do what feels right to you. I do it because I get better results with the finished miter when I have that part stitched down, it seems to make the corner and fold a little more secure.



Yes, that is my seam ripper there.

I use that to keep the fold smooth, it also helps me from getting too much binding in the fold in the corner. With the presser foot in the up position and the needle in the down position, I fold the binding for the corner miter and then use the seam ripper to bump that fold right up against the needle. The flat of the seam ripper is kept flat with the plate of the sewing machine. I then lower the presser foot as I am sliding the seam ripper out.

I'm not sure why doing this works for me but it does. Simply put, anything that helps me from getting too much binding in the corner – a situation that results in a clumpy, gloppy corner – is a good thing.



Stitch across the fold and continue stitching until you are approximately 8" to 10" from the starting point.

Joining the strips. The goal here is to join the ends of the binding in such a way that it would be almost impossible – if not completely impossible – to find the seam joining the two ends of the binding strip.

By no means is this the only method, the best method or even a good method, this is just the method that works for me.



The starting end for the binding is on the right, the finishing end of the binding is on the left. Lay the starting end flat and overlap the finishing end. Cut the finishing end straight across at a point approximately 2" to 3" **from the shortest corner of the starting end**. Longer is always better – having to trim a little more later is easier than having to stretch the binding a little bit. Or a lot of bit.



Place the finishing end of the binding strip **inside** the starting end of the binding strip as shown. Keep them smooth and flat -- as though they were going to be stitched down.



Using a pencil, chalk or Pigma pen, make a mark on the finishing end of the binding strip right next to the cut edge of the starting end as shown. If you look closely, you'll see the $\frac{1}{4}$ " diagonal mark on the binding made with a brown Pigma pen.

Note: These strips have been pulled apart just a tiny amount to show the line. It is small – it's all that is required. And yes, it helps to make the mark on the diagonal because that is the same direction you'll be using for the cutting and seam lines.



Using the mark as the guide for both the direction and placement of a second line, draw a line 1/2" away from the mark as shown. This 1/2" is the seam allowance – 1/4" for each end of the binding.

The line will be on the side of the mark closest to the cut end, **not on the side of the attached binding.**



Cut the binding strip on the drawn line. Remember the carpenter's adage -- measure twice, cut once. Before cutting, make sure the line is on the right side of the mark **and** that it is 1/2" from the edge of the starting end of the binding.



Pin the two ends together. And yes, make sure one or both of the ends haven't gotten twisted around. Been there, done that.



Using a scant 1/4" seam allowance, join the ends of the binding strips and press the seam open. Finger pressing is fine... hot iron pressing is almost always better.



When pressed and folded, the joined ends should look flat and smooth.



Trim the little triangles and then finish stitching the binding.

Now just a few more steps...



I like to press the binding as though I were pressing a seam before I start hand-stitching it down. This serves two purposes – it gives me a nice sharp edge where the binding is attached to the quilt top and it seems to make folding the binding strip over the edge of the edge of the quilt top a bit easier.



It works particularly well in the corners with the miter. The fold is smooth, sharp and flat.



I also give the seam a quick press on the back side. It flattens the batting just a little bit and that helps with the fold-over, and it lets me make sure I haven't gotten any folds or puckers in the backing when the binding was attached.

Now about those binding clips... for a 35" x 35" quilt of this size, you'll need approximately 12,039 binding clips.

Or a dozen. Which is still too many for some of you.

I love hand-stitching down the binding. While I've seen machine-stitched bindings that I really liked, I prefer hand-stitched bindings.

The goal here is to have the finished binding be the same width on the front as it is on the back. The binding should also be the same width all the way around the quilt top. In a perfect world, the folded edge of the binding will be just over the line of stitching attaching the binding to the quilt top. Because of the different – thinner – batting I tried with this quilt, the binding on this quilt was just a skosh over that.

I stitch bindings down with a Size 9 straw needle. I used to use a Size 10 but I was bending them and that made them very wicked looking. They worked, they just looked odd. I use a 50 wt. cotton thread in a matching or blending color, whichever I have.

When it comes to the actual stitching, the stitching shouldn't show. In that theoretical perfect world, the edge of the binding would look as though it was just laying on the backing without any visible stitching. But sometimes the slight tension of the thread means that you can see where the tacks in the stitches are. Am I going to cry about this? Not!



Just so you know, the stitches don't have to be this small. I have no idea why mine are but they are – they're less than 1/8" apart. I know! That's just nuts! But when I sit and stitch a binding, this is just how they come out.



Did you know that miters should be stitched down on the front and back? That's something I learned from an AQS judge.

It's easy to do. Working on the backside of the quilt, I just stitch up to the corner, then I stitch down the fold inside the binding. I get the thread back to the corner and fold the miter. I stitch up the fold on the back of the miter to the corner, then put the needle through the front, coming out at the corner right next to the fold in the front. I stitch down the fold on the front to the inner corner of the binding. Depending on how well the corner looks, I will either put the needle through to the back of the quilt or stitch back the

way I came, stitching down the folds a second time in the opposite direction. It takes about a minute to do and it really does look nice.

One last thing – batting. The batting I'm using can affect the width of my binding strips and the width of my seam allowance. First, binding width. This is somewhat of an aesthetic consideration -- I like the way narrower bindings look on quilts that will be finished with a thinner, more old-fashioned feeling batting. E.g., Mountain Mist Blue Ribbon, Cream Rose, White Rose or Hobbs Heirloom 80/20 Cotton Blend. And with a few exceptions, I also prefer a narrower binding on small quilts – the smaller the quilt, the narrower the binding.

The batting used will also affect the width of the seam allowance – using the same width binding, a thicker batting will need a smaller seam allowance to completely enclose the batting and have the fold cover the stitching line. If your goal is to have the binding be the same width on the front and the back, switching battings may require an adjustment of your seam allowance. When I have used a different batting than I usually do, I machine-baste a few inches of binding and then check to see how well the binding folds to the back. If I have to adjust my seam allowance, it is easily done without having to remove too much stitching. I do enough of that already.

And there you have it.

Just so you know, there are days when using the zig-zag stitch on my sewing machine to finish the binding seems like a really good idea. Or Steam-A-Seam! That would work.

And after reading all of this, you won't hurt my feelings if you think so too