

Tips and Tools of the Trade for Successful Free Motion Quilting

By Joanna Marsh of Kustom Kwilts and Designs

Are you looking to add some “pizzazz” to your pieced quilting projects? The quilting on a project can add drama and really make a statement in what might otherwise be an ordinary quilt. Let’s take a look at the basic steps to getting started on your journey into free motion quilting!

Supplies you’ll want to invest in (or at least research):

- Free motion foot-compatible to your machine
- Quality machine quilting thread
- Scrap batting (no smaller than 10” x 10”)
- Scrap fabrics (no smaller than 10” x 10”)
- Spray baste or safety pins
- Sketchbook and pens/pencils
- Quilting needles
- Disappearing ink pen (optional)
- Seam ripper
- Supreme slider by Pat LaPierre (smaller size)
- Stencils
- Chalk pounce pad
- Chalk for pounce pad
- Various rulers for quilting (1/4” thick)
- Ruler foot (if applicable)



Tools of the Trade: Drawbacks and Benefits

Tool	Benefit	Drawback
Spray Baste	Fast and more convenient than safety pins. More repositionable.	Can gum up your needles. It needs to be sprayed outside.
Disappearing Ink Pen	Great for marking.	The pens that disappear with heat can reappear in extreme cold. Pens that are “air” soluble will have markings that won’t last long the more humid the air is, but can reappear after washing.
Quilting Gloves	Provide you with an extra grip for easier movement of quilt sandwich.	Personal preference - they can be hot.
Supreme Slider	Allows for super easy movement of quilt layers, especially helpful on domestic machines/sit down longarms.	Can be expensive. Needs to be replaced over time and use and has to be kept clean.
Chalk pens/pad	Great tool that easily wipes/brushes away. Any residue left behind will wash away.	Excess vibration from the machine can sometimes jiggle your markings enough that they are no longer clear.
Quilting Rulers	Helpful guides that can be used in endless ways.	Will chip if the needle comes in contact with it. Can be expensive and needs to be replaced if it is damaged.

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Spray baste can be a quick and easy way to baste the quilt sandwich, but there are some things to remember before you use it. Spray basting must be done outside, in a well-ventilated area. The residue can gum up your quilting needle and lead to tension problems/skipped stitches, but this doesn't always happen. Joanna has found that a light coating of spray doesn't adversely affect the quilting, so keep in mind that less is more. Most spray baste is repositionable. Not all manufacturers of spray baste are created equal, so experiment with different ones until you find the one you love. Joanna prefers to use spray baste over safety pins because it is more convenient and saves time.



If you need a little more guidance for your “free motion” quilting, there is always the option of marking out a design in water soluble pen or disappearing pen. Some prefer to mark out their entire design and others may use it as a frame of reference. The blue water soluble pens have ink that sometimes reappears, even after removal and laundering. For marking quilts, Joanna tends to use Fixion pens that erase with the touch of an iron or chalk marking pens that easily wipe away. There are dozens of variations of fabric markers out there for you to try.



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Quilting gloves add the benefit of an extra grip while quilting.



Supreme sliders can be a quilter's most prized possession. The Supreme Slider temporarily "adheres" to your sewing machine table and helps the quilt sandwich to easily slide under it without much resistance. They are a little pricey, but worth their weight in gold. Joanna feels that the only drawback to Supreme Sliders is that once you start using them to quilt with, you won't ever want to quilt without one!

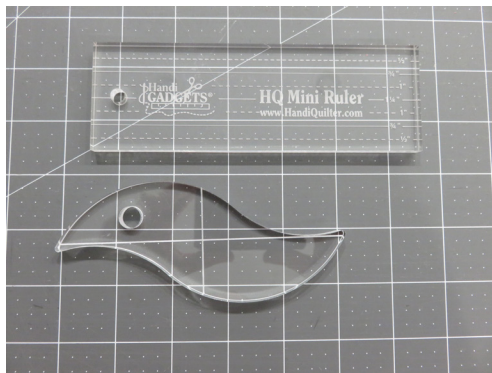


Chalk and pounce pads with the use of quilting stencils can be extremely helpful to beginning quilters. The stencil should be held stationary over the portion of the quilt that needs to be marked. Fill the pounce pad with chalk and then swipe over the stencil firmly, being cautious not to shift the stencil while swiping. If the stencil shifts, the markings will appear blurry and more difficult to follow as a guide. There are limitless quilting stencils available and can really help take your quilting to the next level.



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Quilting rulers are not just for long arm quilting machines. They are great resources for domestic machine quilting, as long as smaller rulers are used as guides. The larger the ruler, the more difficult it is to position and hold onto while quilting.

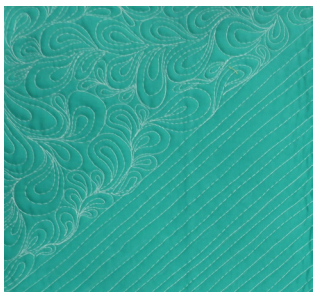


Before you practice some quilting motifs, prepare a few small quilt sandwiches. Layer one piece of fabric, about 11" x 11", a piece of batting on top of that and then place another piece of fabric, about 10" x 10" right side up on top of the batting. Pin in place (or spray baste). Set these aside so you have them when you're ready to practice. These are a good size to comfortably practice with. If your sandwiches are smaller than that, you may have some difficulty and much larger pieces may be difficult to maneuver under your machine while you're mastering your technique.

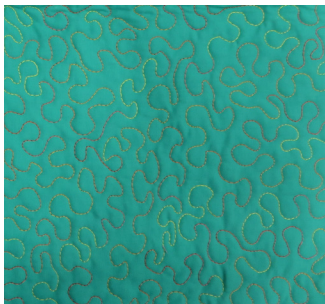
Get a sketchbook or scratch paper and practice some of what you plan to quilt. Even if you aren't an artist, this is a good way to visualize how you will physically quilt the design. Also, paper is much cheaper than fabric and thread - so it's a money saver to practice your quilting doodles prior to cranking up the machine.

Start with basic designs:

- Organic Straight lines



- Stippling

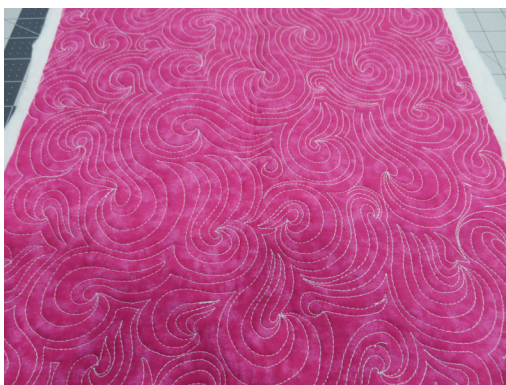


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- Loops



- Swirls



- Pebbles



Practice drawing these without lifting your pen or pencil from the paper. Then, once you're able to draw these fairly quickly, try doing a combination or two like swirls with the addition of pebbles. You can also play with size and scale on all of these. The smaller you quilt the motifs, the denser the quilting will be (and the stiffer the quilt). Once you begin to quilt, practice one motif at a time until you master it. You will find that you will have to practice that motif less and less and eventually it will just come naturally to you. Then, move onto the next motif. The more motifs you practice, the better and more diverse your quilting will be.



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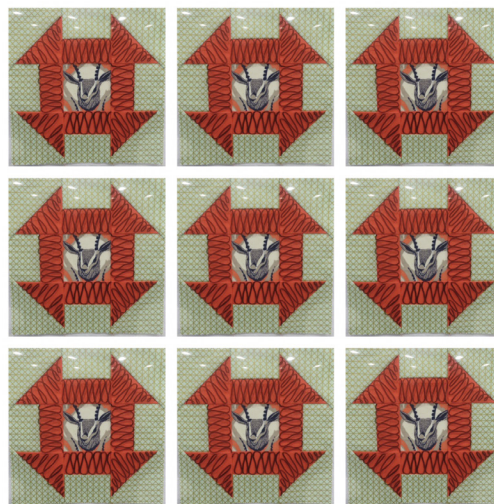
It is important to relax while free motion quilting. If you are tense or nervous, it will show in the quilting. Relax your shoulders and stretch before you start. Keep in mind that you are practicing, so there is nothing to be tense about. Give yourself room to quilt. If you work on a small table that has lots of clutter, clear the spaces so you can focus on the quilting without being distracted by other objects. The more you practice, the more you will improve. Keep the first sample piece you quilt and check your progress the more you practice. You should be able to see marked improvements over time! The more frequently you can practice, the more it will have a lasting effect. Ten minutes a day will stick with you more than an hour every 2 months.

Monitor the consistency of the stitch length you are producing while free motion quilting. Try to keep the stitch length consistent without varying back and forth between long stitches and very short stitches. To do this, move the quilt sandwich under the needle at a consistent pace and quilt with the same speed. If you are moving the fabric too slowly, the stitches will be very short and close together. If you move too quickly, stitches will be excessively long. This is a sample of inconsistent stitch length and jerky movements during quilting. You may need to adjust the speed with which you quilt and the speed you move your fabric until you find a happy medium.



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Selecting a quilting design/motif is half the battle of quilting. You can audition quilting designs before you even turn on the machine. All you need is a sheet of template plastic and a dry erase marker. Sketch your design on top of a block and you can better visualize what the quilting design will look like on your quilt. It's a good idea to take pictures when you do this so that you can easily compare different designs and better determine which design fits the overall plan for the quilt. Another great tool for visualizing the overall look of your quilt is photo apps on smart devices. Joanna uses Framtastic (a free app) with a 9 photo grid. By inserting the same block with your quilting design traced over the top of it in all 9 spaces in the grid, this will give you a fairly complete idea of what your quilt will look like when it's finished.



Don't be afraid to see what other quilters are doing! There is a wealth of inspiration available on Pinterest, in various quilting books, YouTube, magazines, etc. There are even video tutorials of step by step quilting methods to help you improve your free motion quilting skills. Keep in mind that when you begin free motion quilting, it probably won't look pretty. But with a little time and practice, you will be mastering new techniques and really adding a WOW factor to your handmade items.