

Blocking for Blockheads

Hmmm...I think I mean Blockheads in the way that Jimmy Buffett fans are Parrotheads, Grateful Dead are Deadheads, etc. You have to wanna know how to block. But lots of people have different ideas as to A) what constitutes blocking and B) when you should block. Some people never block. I let the garment shape, the fibers, and the technique/stitch pattern I am using tell me what to do.

Blocking is a finishing of the knitted fabric that can be accomplished in several different ways and may be done before the garment is assembled or after, depending upon what suits the garment's construction, stitch pattern(s) and fiber. Blocking will even out and polish up your knitting. It can make the difference between a garment that looks "homemade" and a garment that looks professionally made.

Blocking can sometimes be used to compensate for a garment or garment pieces that came out too small, by wetting and then pinning the offending garment or piece(s) to a blocking board, stretching them to meet the proper measurement. A CAVEAT: This is not a replacement for knitting the garment at the proper gauge to begin with. And you may well end up by ruining the piece, especially if the difference between the actual measurement and the needed measurement is really glaring. And no, you can't make a bigger piece smaller by blocking. Let's not go there...

Got all that? OK. It's easiest to understand and remember the absolutes first, like NEVER and ALWAYS.

Here are the **NEVERS**:

- 1) Never block acrylics with heat. Why? Because they are basically spun plastic. Petroleum products, if you will. Plastic melts. Acrylics are "self-blocking." This means you machine-wash them and dry them on very low heat or lay them out flat. And the fiber is supposed to bounce back. Superwash wools are handled in the same way. From here on in, I will be discussing blocking of natural fibers only.
- 2) Never block ribbing, cables, or any kind of embossed or raised stitch pattern (there is a way to handle these—see below). I don't block garter stitch either.
- 3) Never move a damp piece once you have blocked it until it is totally bone dry. Handle all wet/damp knits as carefully and as little as possible.

Here are the **ALWAYS** absolutes for blocking:

- 1) Always block lace. Block the bejesus out of it. (Hopefully you will have made your lace project from a natural fiber and not an acrylic.) If you don't, the yarn-over holes will not open up.
- 2) Always block Fair Isle. I don't care how good a knitter you are and how smooth your Fair Isle is coming off your needles, you need to block a Fair Isle piece. Trust me, Alice Starmore blocks her stuff. I don't do intarsia, but I'd block that too.
- 3) Less is always more. When in doubt, don't. And other like-minded maxims.

EQUIPMENT YOU WILL NEED FOR BLOCKING

Steam iron

Blocking board--Here's a good picture of one.



Note the gridded cover, marked off in inches—makes it easy to pin to measurements.

These boards are usually at least as wide/long as a good-sized sweater. You can make your own by buying a piece of homeosote at your local Home Depot/Lowe's, covering it with an old blanket cut to size for padding and then covering all that with a pre-printed blocking cloth—[Patternworks](#) sells the printed cloth as well as an assembled blocking board, as do other mail order places.

Blocking pins—There are a variety of types: the two-pronged pins, T-pins, etc. Whatever you buy, sure they are rustproof!

Blocking wires—Wires are old news to machine knitters, but a fairly recent discovery by the handknitting crowd. The wires are used when blocking garment pieces and are threaded along each selvedge and then secured by pins onto the blocking board. Pinning alone can cause the selvedge to become wavy...wires keep the selvedge straight and eliminate that problem.

Cotton terrycloth towel or commercial presscloth to cover garment/garment piece

Spray bottle (for dampening)

Ruler

DIFFERENT METHODS OF BLOCKING

Steam blocking: This is generally done on wool and wool blends, such as wool/silk, wool/cotton. Here's how you do it:

On garment pieces, place piece(s) on blocking board; pin/wire to finished measurements (you'll find these in your pattern, either written out or on the garment schematic).

Heat up steam iron and set to the correct fiber, either wool, cotton or linen (don't forget to fill it with water!).

Place towel or pressing cloth over piece(s) to be blocked. Hold the iron over a section, allowing the steam to permeate through the towel into the knit; then move on to the next section, until the entire piece has been steamed by the iron. DO NOT iron it like you would a shirt, by moving the iron around.

Remove towel; leave piece(s) pinned to board until thoroughly dry. Don't even think about

handling it before then.

Now...if you are blocking lace that was knitted in 100% cotton, you can really manhandle it. Lace needs heavy blocking. If you have "points" on the lace pattern, make sure you pin each point and stretch the lace out good (I have a link at the end that gives good directions on how to block lace).

Cold water blocking: Pin dry pieces to blocking board as explained above. Fill a small mister with cold water and thoroughly dampen piece(s). Let dry.

This method is an excellent one to use on finished garments, such as Arans, where you don't want to press the cables and embossed stitches but you do want to finish the fabric. I prefer to handle Fair Isles and lace in a more strenuous manner, but you can never do any damage to a garment by using cold water blocking.

Form blocking: This involves slipping the damp finished garment onto a form that will shape it to its proper measurements. Sock knitters often use sock blockers (which are sock shaped and can be either wood or metal) to block their finished socks. They look like this:



Fair Isle garments block out beautifully on wooly boards. Here's a picture of one:



If you knit tams, you can use a plate to block the tam on. People who make felted hats will often either stuff the damp hats with paper or use a milliner's hat blocking form. Lace shawls are sometimes blocked on special frames.

Blocking Articles Worth Reading on the Internet

[Lace Blocking](#)

Oddly enough, as I finished writing all of this up and was looking for some good reference links, what should I find but my original post to the Knit List on blocking, written in 1997 and residing on someone's web site. I haven't changed my philosophy much.

[My Original Post on Blocking to the KnitList--1997](#)

[A KnitList Post on making a cheap blocking board](#)

Blocking Equipment Resources

[Patternworks](#)

[Halcyon Yarns](#)

Here's a little table that will give you some guidance.

Blocking Technique	Fiber	Garment Unassembled	Garment Assembled	Fair Isle	Intarsia	Cables	Raised Sts	St St	Lace
Steam pressing	Wool, cotton, silk, and combinations of these	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Cold water blocking	All fibers	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
Form Blocking	All fibers	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	No	Yes	Yes
Washing machine self-blocking	Acrylics and superwash wools ONLY	No	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes

Hope this helps!

Marilyn Roberts

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