



Quilting Terms, Plain and Simple

The words that show up in patterns, tutorials, and shop talk — said the way one quilter would say them to another. A companion through your quilting journey.

A

Term	What it Means
Acrylic ruler	A thick, clear plastic ruler used with a rotary cutter for precise straight cuts. Comes in several sizes.
Allover quilting	Stitching that covers the whole quilt surface without following the block shapes or the fabric design.
Applique	Fabric shapes cut out and sewn (by hand or machine) onto a background fabric for decoration.

B

Backing	The bottom layer of a quilt — one piece of fabric, or pieced, covering the back.
Basting	Temporary long stitches, pins, or spray that hold the three layers together before you quilt.
Batik	Fabric dyed with wax-resist patterns. Tightly woven, so it takes a fine needle — and it frays less.
Batting	The middle layer that gives a quilt its warmth and loft — cotton, polyester, wool, or a blend.
Bearding	When batting fibers work their way up through the quilt top. More common with polyester, and with a needle that's too big.
Bias	The diagonal of the fabric (45° to the grain). It stretches, so handle bias edges gently.
Binding	Strips of fabric sewn around the raw edges of a finished quilt to enclose them.
Block	The basic unit of a quilt top — usually pieced or appliqued, then repeated to build the design.
Bobbin	The small spool underneath that holds the bottom thread. It makes the underside of every stitch.
Border	A frame of fabric sewn around the outside of the quilt top.

C

Chain piecing	Sewing one unit after another without lifting the presser foot or cutting thread, then clipping them apart. Fast for identical units.
Charm square	A precut 5" square.
Cornerstones	The small squares set where sashing strips cross.
Cutting mat	The self-healing mat you cut on. It protects the table and keeps the rotary blade sharp.

D

Directional print	A fabric with an up and a down. Watch which way it faces when you cut, or half your blocks will be sideways.
Dog ears	The little triangle tips that stick out past a seam after you sew triangles together. Trim them off — they add bulk.
Double-fold binding	Binding folded in half lengthwise before it's sewn on, so the edge gets two layers of fabric. The usual way.

E

Echo quilting	Quilting lines that follow the outline of a shape, one after another, like ripples.
English paper piecing (EPP)	Hand piecing where each patch is basted around a paper shape, then whipstitched to its neighbors. How hexagons get made.

F

Fat eighth	Half a fat quarter — about 9" × 21".
Fat quarter	A quarter yard cut as roughly 18" × 21" rather than a narrow strip across the full width — friendlier for cutting big pieces.
Feed dogs	The little teeth under the needle plate that pull the fabric through as you sew.
Finished size	How big a piece is once it's sewn in, with the seam allowances hidden. Patterns usually give you this number.
Flying geese	A rectangle unit with one big triangle in the middle and two small ones at the sides. Twice as wide as it is tall.
Foundation paper piecing (FPP)	Sewing pieces onto a printed paper pattern, in numbered order, then tearing the paper away. Gives very sharp points.
Free-motion quilting	Quilting with the feed dogs dropped so you can move the quilt freely and stitch curves and custom designs.
Fussy cutting	Cutting a piece so a particular part of the print lands exactly where you want it.

G

Grain / grainline	The direction of the weave. Straight of grain runs parallel to the selvage; crosswise grain runs across it.
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H

Half-square triangle (HST)	A square made of two triangles — one of the most common pieced units there is.
Hand quilting	Stitching the layers together by hand with a running stitch, usually in a hoop or frame.
Hanging sleeve	A fabric tube sewn to the back so the quilt can hang from a rod — for a show, or a wall.

J

Jelly roll	A bundle of precut strips, usually 2½" wide by the width of fabric, rolled up.
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L

Layer cake	A bundle of precut 10" squares.
Loft	How thick and puffy the batting is. High loft gives a fluffy quilt; low loft lies flat.
Longarm quilting	Quilting the layers on a large frame-mounted machine — by a professional, or on your own longarm.

M

Marking tool	Whatever you use to draw a line you intend to sew or cut — chalk, a hera marker, a washable pen. Test it on a scrap first.
Mitered corner	A 45° angled seam — how binding corners are turned for a clean finish.

N

Needle-turn applique	Hand applique where you tuck the raw edge under with the needle as you stitch.
Nesting seams	Pressing two seams in opposite directions so they lock together where they meet. It's how points line up.

O

On point	Blocks set on the diagonal, so they read as diamonds instead of squares. Needs setting triangles around the edges.
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P

Patchwork	Sewing small pieces of fabric together to make a larger design.
Piecing	The act of sewing fabric pieces into blocks, and blocks into a quilt top.
Precut	Fabric a shop has already cut to a standard size — charm squares, layer cakes, jelly rolls, fat quarters.
Presser foot	The machine part that holds the fabric down against the feed dogs.
Pressing	Lifting the iron and setting it down, rather than sliding it around. Sliding stretches the piece out of shape.

Q

Quarter-square triangle (QST)	A square made of four triangles, cut so the outside edges stay on the straight grain.
Quilt as you go (QAYG)	Quilting each block or section on its own, then joining them. Lets you finish a big quilt on a small machine.
Quilt sandwich	The three layers stacked and ready to quilt: top, batting, backing.
Quilt top	The decorative upper layer — pieced blocks, applique, or a single whole cloth.
Quilting cotton	Medium-weight woven cotton, the standard quilt fabric. Holds a crease, behaves under a rotary cutter.

R

Raw-edge applique	Applique where the edge is left unturned and simply stitched down. Faster than needle-turn; it softens with washing.
Rotary cutter	A round-bladed cutter used with a ruler and a self-healing mat for accurate cuts.

S

Sampler quilt	A quilt where every block is different — the traditional way to learn a stack of new blocks at once.
Sashing	Strips of fabric set between blocks or rows to frame them and give the eye some room.
Scant ¼" seam	A hair under a quarter inch — a thread or two. It leaves room for the fold of the seam, so blocks finish the size the pattern promised.
Seam allowance	The distance from the seam to the raw edge — ¼" in quilting.
Seam ripper	The little hooked blade for taking out a seam. Every quilter uses one. It is not a failure.
Selvage	The tightly woven finished edge running down both sides of the yardage. Trim it off before you cut.
Setting triangles	The triangles that fill in the edges and corners when blocks are set on point.
Squaring up	Trimming a block or a finished top so it's truly square and the right size before it goes on.
Stash	The fabric you already own. It grows.
Stitch in the ditch	Quilting right along a seam line, so the stitching all but disappears.
Strip piecing	Sewing strips together, then cutting across them to make units. Much faster than piecing each square.

T

Template	A shape in plastic or paper used to trace or cut pieces accurately.
Tension	The balance between the top thread and the bobbin thread. If stitches look loose on one side, tension is off.
Thread weight	How thick the thread is — the bigger the number, the finer the thread. 50wt is the usual for piecing.

U

UFO	Unfinished Object — the quilt in the closet you'll get back to. Everyone has one.
Unfinished size	How big a piece is before it's sewn in — the finished size plus the seam allowances. Usually ½" bigger than finished.

W

Wadding	Batting, if you're reading a British pattern.
Walking foot	A presser foot that feeds all the layers evenly — the one you want for straight-line quilting.
Whole cloth quilt	A quilt made from one large piece of fabric, where the quilting itself is the design.
Width of fabric (WOF)	Selvage to selvage — about 42" of usable cotton off a 44" bolt. Most cutting instructions start here.

Y

Y-seam	A seam where three pieces meet at a corner, so you stop at the ¼" mark and pivot. Fiddly, and worth learning.
Yardage	How much fabric a project needs. A yard is 36" long by the width of fabric.