

FREE TUTORIAL: Cutting Large Squares

or Don't Buy That Huge Ruler Unless You Really Need To!

Sometimes a project will call for you to cut large squares of fabric; larger, perhaps, than you have a square ruler for. But before you rush out and buy that super-enormous (expensive and fragile) ruler which you might not need again for a while, and is a challenge to store without damage, have a look at this tutorial and see if you can cut your fabric using rulers you already have. Anyone serious about patchwork will find a few rulers that are invaluable and that they use all the time. In my case these are:

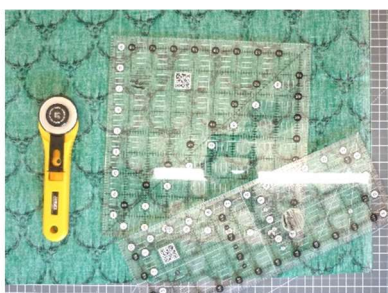
4 x 12 inch (or $4\frac{1}{2} \times 12\frac{1}{2}$ inch depending on the make) This ruler lives on a small cutting mat next to my machine constantly for small bits of trimming as I am working.

$9\frac{1}{2} \times 9\frac{1}{2}$ inch square This is the ruler I use most when it comes to squaring up blocks, combined with the long ruler below (and the following bit of know-how) you can cut/trim much bigger blocks square

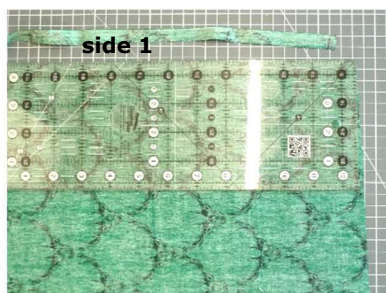
$6\frac{1}{2} \times 24\frac{1}{2}$ inch One long ruler is pretty much essential for any quilter – this one is long enough for cutting strips across the width of fabric (with a single fold) and you will find it useful for trimming finished quilts as well, so it is a worthwhile investment.

I would recommend that you choose one brand of ruler and stick to that. Every manufacturer prints the markings slightly differently – consistent markings will make your life easier. In this tutorial I have shown you two ways of cutting; the first where the square to be cut is narrower than the total width of the rulers used, and the second shows you how to cut a much larger square. Towards the end of this tutorial you will also find information on how to apply these methods to squaring up large pieced blocks and, of course, this useful bit of know-how can also be applied to trimming small quilts.

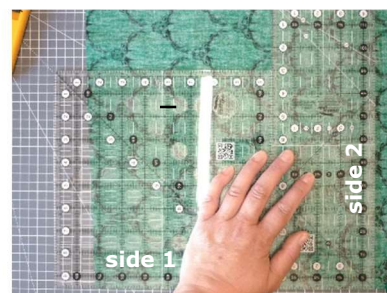
Below I am cutting a 12 inch square from a fat quarter of fabric (press fabric before cutting) this will work for all sorts of sized squares and rulers, but you will need to work out your own calculations based on the rulers you are using. Whenever possible make sure your long ruler is a bit longer than the sides of the square you are cutting.



I used my $9\frac{1}{2}$ inch square and $12\frac{1}{2} \times 4\frac{1}{2}$ inch ruler and a soft pencil for marking



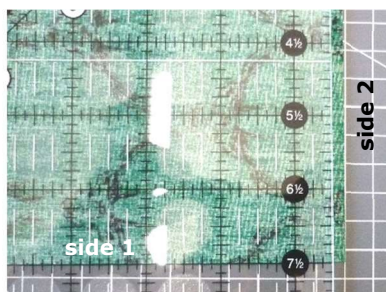
Trim off one side of the fat quarter to give a straight edge to work from and make a mark on this edge slightly longer than the square to be cut to allow trimming room



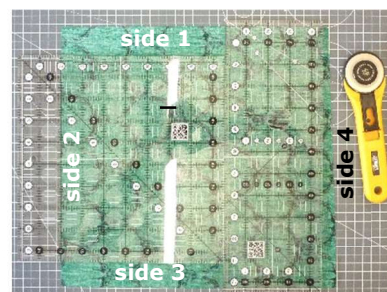
With the two rulers held tightly together, lined up on the cut edge I cut the second side at right-angles to the first, again slightly longer than the square to be cut to allow for trimming

To work out where to line up the square ruler on the first cut edge (so you can cut the third edge parallel to it) subtract the width of the long ruler from the size you want the fabric square to finish to, for example in this case: $12 - 4\frac{1}{2} = 7\frac{1}{2}$ inches

So I lined up the $7\frac{1}{2}$ inch marks on the square ruler on first cut edge and pushed the longer ruler tightly against it, then cut the third edge



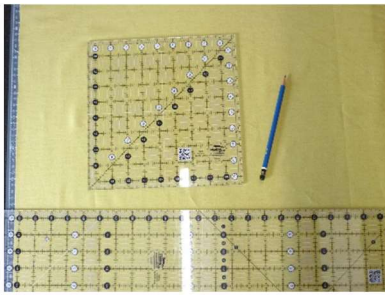
Working out where to make the third cut. Double check your first corner is a right-angle – this is very important!



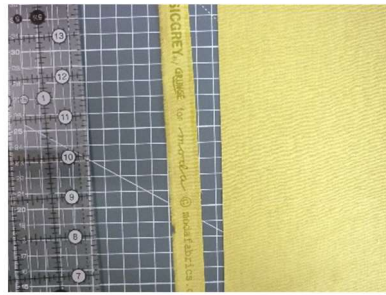
Cut the fourth side the same way as the third – line up the square ruler on the second side and cut parallel to this

Although the photos included in this tutorial show these squares being cut right-handed, both these methods will work for left-handed cutters. If in doubt, perhaps looking at the photos in a mirror might help it to be clearer?

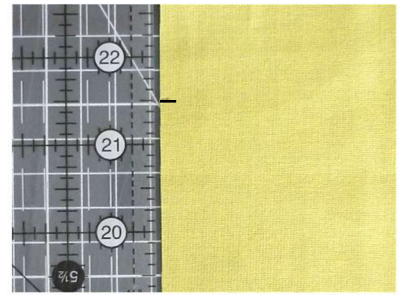
On the following page I am cutting a 21 inch square from a metre of fabric (press fabric before cutting)



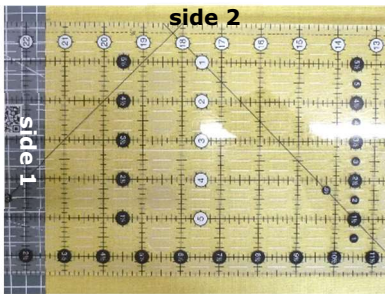
To cut a 21 inch square, I used my 9½ inch square & 24½ inch long rulers plus a soft pencil



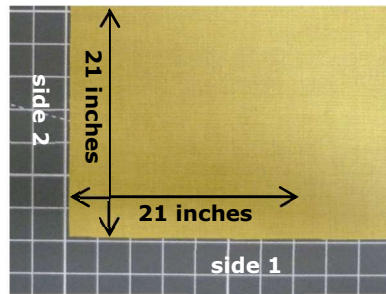
Start by cutting the selvage off one side of the fabric to give a straight edge to work from



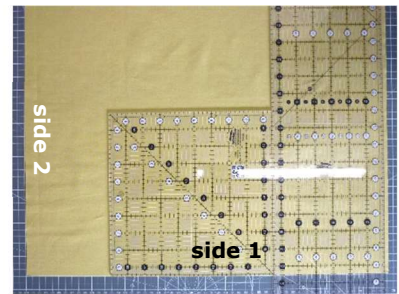
On this cut edge I marked a line a little longer than the square I want to finish with



Using the long ruler lined up on the straight, cut, edge to ensure a right-angle, cut the second edge to the same length as the first (in my case 21½ inches)

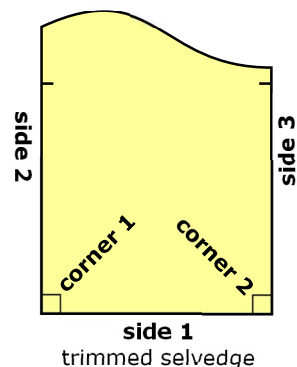


I use the markings on my cutting mat (the only time I do!) to check I have a right-angle at this first corner. Mark the exact size you need from this corner using your ruler

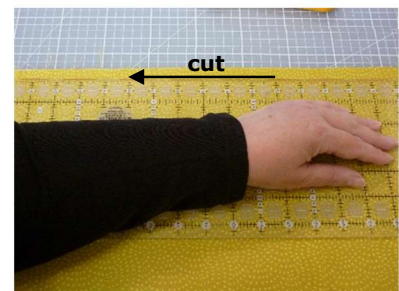


By clamping the two rulers together (with your hand) and lining them both up on the first cut edge you can cut the third edge square to the first

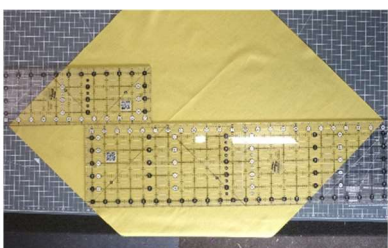
With these first three sides cut accurately, and the two corners perfect right-angles, you should be able to mark your finished size on sides 1 and 3 and find the line between them is at right-angles to the two opposite sides and is the correct length



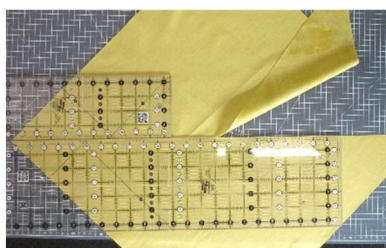
Tip: To combat the dreaded ruler wobble scenario when reaching to make long cuts, where-ever possible set your fabric up so you can place your entire forearm on the ruler and use your weight to hold it in place while cutting across. It takes some practise but it is worth getting the knack for the sake of accurate cutting



I then had to cut this particular square in half diagonally which meant cutting a line longer than my longest ruler. I reached for my 12 inch ruler and clamped the two together with my hand as before. This then gave me a continuous cutting line so I could line it up on the opposite points of the square. I started cutting on the edge of the long ruler, careful not to move either. Once I was about half way I stopped and, holding the short ruler in position firmly, I slid the long ruler along it so I could finish the cut.



Using two rulers to make a continuous line from point to point

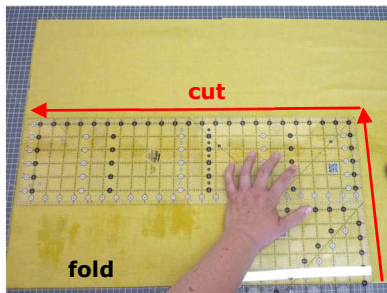


Cut to half way (approximately) then slide the long ruler along the edge of the short one

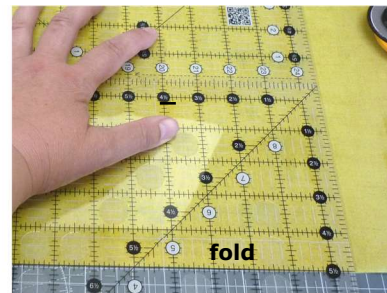


Remove the short ruler and complete the cut

This method is also useful when trimming long edges on a quilt. If you are lucky enough to have (beg, borrow, steal) three long rulers, you can hold these tightly against each other using a hand on each join, and make a continuous line about 60 inches long which gives you an excellent idea of where to start trimming. You can then slide the rulers along each other to extend your cutting line as I did above, just make sure you hold the first ruler firmly in place when you slide the second.



The largest piece I am confident to cut with these rulers is 24 inches square, but because my cutting mat isn't that big I use a slightly different process: by pressing a fold in the fabric I can use a combination of the previous methods – clamping the rulers together and lining one of them up on the fold I can cut to 12 x 24 inches – unfolded to 24 x 24 inches

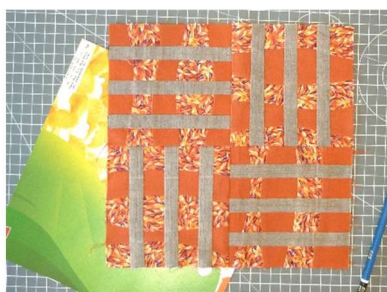


This is useful information on cutting over-sized pieces of fabric from yardage. Squaring up oversized blocks or small quilt is slightly more complicated, but still entirely achievable. The reason for the slight variation in method is that when cutting squares from fabric it generally doesn't matter where you start as long as your fabric is big enough, whereas with a pieced block you want to make sure you don't trim off too much on any one side and leave yourself short on the other sides – you need to make sure of the overall shape before you start cutting.

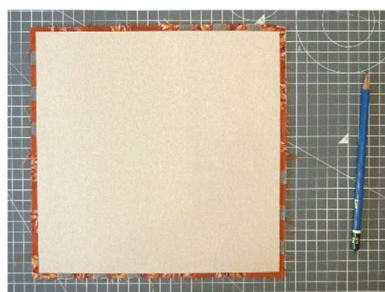
If you have lots of blocks to trim, perhaps now is the time to consider buying a ruler of the appropriate size since there is no denying that using this method is much more fiddly – ideal for the occasional large block, but you would not want to trim a hundred half-square-triangle blocks this way! When you are trimming blocks I would always advise that you use a ruler slightly larger than the size of the block – it is quite hard to trim an 8½ inch block accurately with an 8½ inch ruler – trying to line up on the edge of a ruler is much more difficult than looking through the ruler and lining up the markings. Don't ask me why this should be so, but it is, that's why I use a 9½ inch square ruler – most of the blocks I trim are smaller than this (between 4½ and 8½ inches square).

When trimming a block larger than 9½ inches square I would first make a paper or card template the size of the trimmed block. Cereal packets are great for this – large area, readily available and easy to cut with a rotary cutter. For larger blocks, or one offs, use the blank side of wrapping paper or brown paper. DO NOT use newspaper – you may find newsprint transfers onto your work. The template can be made in exactly the same way as you would by either of the methods shown in this tutorial, depending on its size.

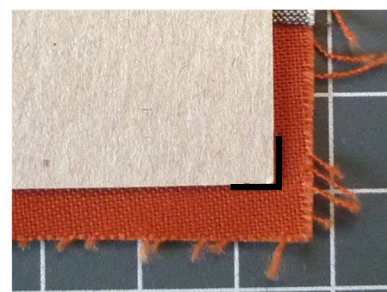
NOTE: Always press your blocks just before you trim them – even if you have pressed them previously – the fabric will relax over time, and you want each seam to be as crisp as it can be.



Block in need of trimming plus the card template I made to the trim-size and a soft pencil for marking



Centre/position the template on your block and decide which edge you are going to cut first.



With a pencil, or fabric marking pen, mark the four corners of the template on your block



Remove the template and check you are happy with position of the corners on the block



Using a rotary cutter and ruler, cut on the marks at each end of the first side.

At this point I would rely on my rulers to make sure each corner is a right-angle and proceed with cutting the other three sides.

If you are in any doubt – once you have trimmed the first side, go back to the methods shown earlier to ensure accurate cutting of the other three sides.

All this might seem a very long-winded way to trim a block, but it is essential that blocks are cut accurately to size or they will not fit together correctly in the finished quilt. It is worth taking the time to get things right at this stage – it will save you much heartache later on!