

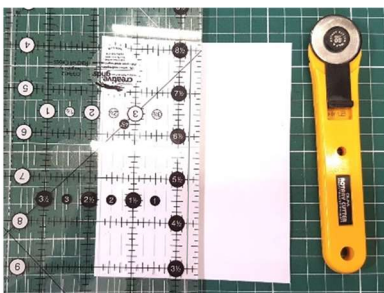
FREE TUTORIAL: Perfecting Your Quarter Inch Seams

Over the years students have asked 'why a quarter inch seam' to which the simple answer is 'because it is just enough'! Some patchwork patterns do not require an accurate quarter inch seam, and some will state that as long as you are consistent with your seams, the actual width won't effect the final outcome. However, many patchwork designs rely on an accurate and consistent quarter inch seam in order to get good results. In this tutorial I will show you various ways of achieving a quarter inch seam as well as a way of checking your seams before you launch into making that heirloom quilt. The consistent and accurate part is just down to practise – the more you do, the better you'll get.

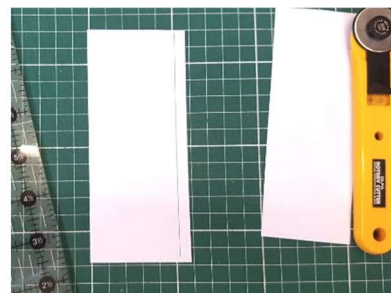
Setting up your machine for quarter inch seams: First of all we need a way to check what a quarter inch seam looks like, so get a piece of paper, a fine pen, a rotary cutter and a ruler (and a cutting mat of course). The paper doesn't have to be big – cut an A4 sheet into four quarters – you might want to have several pieces to practice on, paper won't blunt your rotary cutter!



Draw a straight line down the middle of the paper

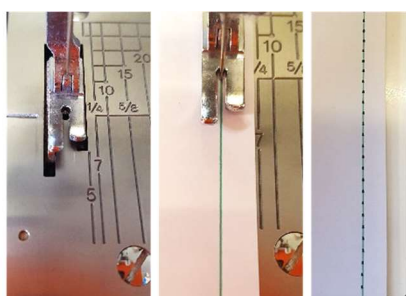
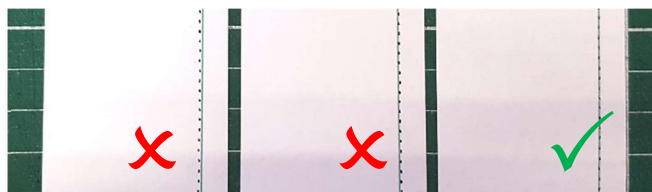


With the ruler and rotary cutter cut an accurate ¼ inch to one side of the line



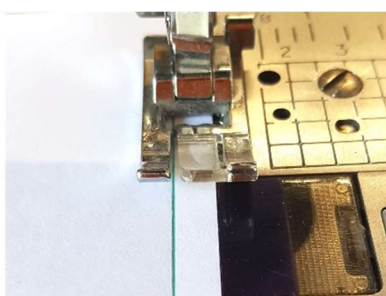
. You can now see what a perfect ¼ inch seam should look like

You can use these templates to test the set-up of your machine, start by lowering your needle slowly with the hand wheel so that it pierces the paper directly on the line – this will show you where the quarter inch should fall in relation to your foot/needleplate. For an initial test, stitch through the paper with your needle unthreaded (paper won't blunt your needle either) and check that your seam is directly on the line – fractionally to the right or left can make a big difference when you add up all the seams in a quilt. You might want to try several of the following methods until you find the one that suits you, and that you get consistent results from.



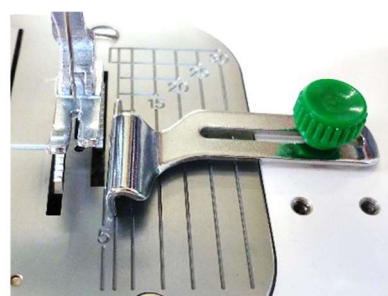
Eyeball it: needleplate

The very narrow straight-stitch foot I use for most of my piecing lets me see the markings on the needleplate at 5 & 7mm. I know that a ¼ inch is just short of 7mm (6.3mm in fact) so if I watch the fabric edges as I stitch a seam they need to travel along the needleplate just shy of the 7mm line. **Learn where a ¼ inch falls on your needleplate**



Eyeball it: wide foot

The wide, zig-zag foot on this sewing machine has a quarter inch marked on the clear acrylic section between the toes (yes that is really what they are called!) Again I watch the fabric edges and as I stitch they need to travel directly below this mark to achieve a ¼ inch seam. **See if your foot has a similar mark and practise working to it**

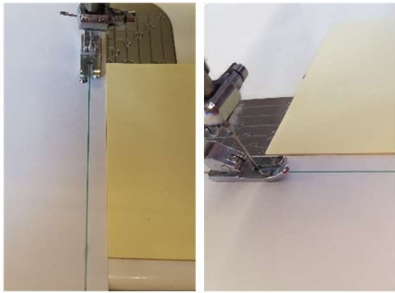


Seam guide: attachments

There are several universal seam guides on the market which will fit most sewing machines. They attach to the left of the needle and can be adjusted to different seam widths. AVOID the magnetic ones unless you are using a hand-crank machine. The idea is that you stitch with the edges of the fabric just against the guide to get perfect seam. It takes practice*

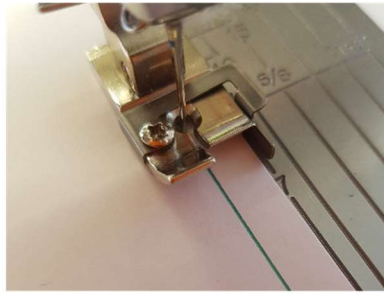
* For more information on purchasing and using seam guides, contact my colleague, Helen Howes, who has the biggest and most comprehensive sewing machine parts website in the world:

<http://www.helenhowes-sewingmachines.co.uk/index.html>



Seam guide: sticky notes DIY

You can make your own seam guide by using a pile of sticky-notes (you know the ones; peelable, used on office documents!) Use your ¼ inch seam template to work out where to position them, and make sure they are stuck on straight to help you guide the fabric through. The advantage of these is that they are cheap and easily removed.



Quarter Inch Foot

I can't say I have ever taken to these – some people swear by them, some swear at them! They are like an ordinary foot with a built in seam guide (that metal plate to the right-hand edge). Even if your machine was supplied with one – check it for accuracy with your template before trusting a whole quilt to it and again, PRACTICE



Moving the Needle Position

Many modern electronic machines have this facility which makes setting up whichever method you choose for ¼ inch seams much easier. Once you have set up the machine and run a test piece to your satisfaction, make a note of the settings on the template & store them with the machine so you can reset it again next time you turn the machine on

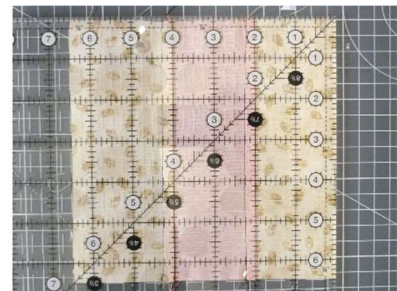
Now you have your machine set up in a satisfactory way, it is good to check your settings by stitching a test piece. It may seem obvious but remember that you need your two pieces of fabric to line up perfectly at the edge before you start sewing – pin the layers together to make sure they stay together and pull out the pins before they get close to the needle. For more information on cutting fabric to accurate sizes, see my tutorial: <https://www.littlepatchpockets.co.uk/patterns/tutorials/handyhints.html>



Cut three pieces of fabric: 2½ x 6½ inches – cut from your scrap box, but make sure it's cotton



Stitch them together on their long edges to make a square & press the seams to one side*



Measure the square – it should be exactly 6½ x 6½ inches (see below for troubleshooting)

If your square is wider than 6½ inches: your seams are narrower than ¼ inch – you will need to check and adjust the settings on whatever method you are using and re-test

If your square is narrower than 6½ inches: your seams are wider than ¼ inch – you will need to check and adjust the settings on whatever method you are using and re-test

* Good pressing is as important as accurate seam widths – there is no point in making perfect seams if you don't then get your pressing right. You need to press the fabric tightly against the stitching so the front is smooth with no fold or tuck at the seam. Start by pressing the seam in the correct direction on the back of your piece (a pattern will often state which direction to press a seam, if it doesn't then the general rule of thumb is to press the seam towards the darkest fabric so it is less likely to show through). Turn the block right side up and push the edge of the iron against the seam to ensure there is no tuck in the fabric – work your way all the way down the seam pulling gently on the fabric as you go.

This may all appear to be a time consuming way to check, and test your seam widths, but if a pattern calls for a consistent ¼ inch seam you will often find that the block, which includes several cross seams and intersecting seams, will not fit together properly without them. This is a useful skill and well worth practising until you are confident with your seam width