

BLOCKING KNITS - WHAT YOU NEED TO KNOW

By Mary-Anna Louise Kovar

WHY BLOCK?

- Swatches should be blocked before measuring to ensure your finished garment matches your swatch gauge. This is particularly important when the finished item will be washed. Block the finished garment using the same technique used for the swatch.
- Blocking evens out the stitches and lessens rolling of the edges. This is particularly important with color-work.
- Blocking cleans oil from hands, pet hair and over dye from the piece.
- Blocking brings garment pieces to the right size and shape which is particularly important for sewing seams or picking up stitches along edges.
- Wool, hemp, linen and cotton will soften with blocking.
- Silk blooms and becomes more drape-y.
- Fuzzy fibers often have sizing applied to make it easier to spin and knit. This sizing needs to be removed to allow the knit fabric to bloom.

WHEN DO YOU BLOCK?

- Anytime a garment needs to be seamed it should be blocked first. This will make it easier to find the correct stitches to use for seaming. Weave in ends after blocking.
- Lace, colour-work and patterned knits should always be blocked to define the shape.
- If a garment is to be washed, it should be blocked.

HOW TO BLOCK

- Soak the item in lukewarm water and wool wash for at least 15 minutes. Wool wash cleans the fibre, removes scents and does not need to be rinsed. Do not agitate or handle the knit fabric roughly. Handle carefully when the item is soaking wet as the knit fabric can overstretch and fibers may actually break.
- Remove excess water by rolling the fabric in a towel and pressing or stepping on it. The wet item may be spun in a front-load washer if it has a SPIN ONLY cycle at low rpm. Any pieces with long ends or with stitches on holders should be put into a lingerie bag. Make sure stitch holders rust proof. Do not wring or twist.
- Lay flat to dry on towels, a sweater dryer, or a blocking mat.
- Some fabrics can be machine dried but remember that the dryer adds wear and tear and can shorten the life of the fabric. In addition wool will felt, cotton will fade. Silk, rayon and viscose are fragile. You cannot go wrong with air drying.
- Dunking and towel rolling is good for all knit fabrics.
- Hemp benefits most from machine washing and machine drying. This will soften the knit fabric.
- Linens benefit from machine washing and air drying.
- Be careful when stretching out the knit fabric: cotton and silk will not bounce back if stretched; rayon can be fragile; wool will stretch out and remember the shape when dry; you may or may not want to stretch ribbing.
- Use rust-free pins to hold stretched shape for drying.

MATS, PINS AND BLOCKING WIRES

Blocking mat - Use a commercial blocking mat, interlocking floor mats made of foam or layers of towel.

Use lots of pins to prevent uneven edges.

Blocking wires do a good job with long even edges. You can also use string and/or guitar strings but these must be colorfast and rust proof.

BLOCKING PARTICULAR ITEMS

Socks:

Lay socks flat; sock blockers are not necessary as most sock yarns no longer felt.

Mittens:

Lay mittens flat to dry. You may need to put them on your hands to shape them and you may want to scrunch the ribbing to ensure it is stretchy when dry.

Hats:

Use balloons to block toques, beanies etc; blow up the balloon inside the wet hat for correct sizing. Place the "ballooned" hat on a vase or narrow bowl to dry. Use plates or similar items to block tams and/or berets. Make sure not to stretch the ribbing. This is why it is best to blow up the balloon inside the wet hat.

Scarves and shawls:

These items benefit most from the use of wires for both curved or straight edges. Thread the wire carefully to avoid splitting or pulling the yarn.

Garments:

Garments with multiple pieces should be blocked before seaming. Stretch and pin the pieces to the specified schematic measurements. One-piece garments should be pulled into shape and dried flat. Sometimes "stuffing" may be useful. Garments with color-work and lace usually need to be stretched.

MAN-MADE FIBRES - Acrylics etc:

Results of blocking are not usually as good as natural fibers but fabrics are still improved by blocking. These fabrics can also be steamed. A garment steamer works very well. Keep the steamer head at least an inch away from the fabric. Be very careful if you use a steam iron. Touching the fabric with the steamer head or the iron can "kill" the fabric and it cannot be restored.

ADDITIONAL NOTES FROM “KNITTY”

Wool and other animal-hair fibers are built of protein. Each 'hair' of wool is a system of overlapping scales. The scales hold air inside the fiber. That's why wool is so warm. Also, wool fibres can absorb a ton of water without feeling wet because of its structure. Wool is strong and has a lot of memory - it springs back to its original shape after it has been stretched. However, wool is weaker and more prone to breakage when wet.

BLOCKING WOOL: Three basic ways to block wool garments.

1. Wet-blocking

Wet the pieces of the garment. If you have heavy cabling, you may want to press out the excess water using towels - NEVER WRING - wool is fragile when wet and you can damage the fabric this way! Pin them out to the desired dimensions and let them dry, sometimes over several days.

2. Steam-blocking

Pin the pieces out to desired dimensions, wrong side up. Set your iron to a steam setting. Float the iron over the surface of the fabric WITHOUT TOUCHING, forcing the steam through. Let the fabric cool and dry.

3. Pin/spritz blocking

Pin the pieces out to the desired dimensions. Using a spray bottle, spritz each piece until damp - but not soaking. This is best for fine-gauge wools.

Wet-blocking is easiest for adding length. A bulkier gauge sweater which hasn't relaxed enough during steam-blocking can be lengthened and re-proportioned with wet blocking.

SPECIAL FIBRE CONSIDERATIONS

Cashmere is extraordinarily fine, hence its legendary softness. It's more fragile and less elastic than wool, and gets weaker when wet. Just pin to dimensions, spritz until damp, and let dry.

Merino - Depending on the denseness of the fabric, the pin/spritz method is the way to go. With heavy cabling? I would wet-block, but very carefully.

Alpaca gets weaker when wet. It has less memory than wool, and has a tendency to stretch out of shape, getting bigger. The weight of water in the garment while wet-blocking would make accidental fabric stretching more possible. I would pin the pieces out dry, and then get them pretty wet by spritzing, and then do any reshaping.

Mohair is weaker when wet. Pin & spritz. When all done, a good brushing will pull the halo up, soft & fuzzy.

Linen - Spun from the long fibers of the flax plant, this ancient fiber is one of my favorites. Linen is unique among fibers in that it is stronger when wet. Use the 'whap' method to add length to a linen garment: get it soaking wet, and then 'whap' it against the side of the tub/shower a few times. My favorite linen blend is also machine washable. It gets stronger and softens up over time. Wet-blocking is the way to go with linen.

Cotton - Quite weak when wet, and inelastic -- has no memory, which is why store-bought cotton sweaters tend to stretch out of shape. If you put a lot of structure in your cotton knitwear [and knit to a half-stitch tighter gauge] you'll overcome these tendencies! I steam-block most cotton knits.

Silk - Filaments of silkworm cocoons, this is the only fiber that involves killing the animal that produces it [at least for reeled, Bombyx silk]. Vegan knitters beware. There are non-silkworm killing silk fibers out there, however. 100% silk garments can grow since silk is inelastic and has little memory; I personally find silk best in a blend. Silk is very fragile when wet, so wet blocking is NOT

recommended. Pin out to required dimensions, spritz, and let dry.

100% Human-made fibers. Be very careful with heat & steam - you'll kill your knitting! Kill meaning remove all structure and turn it into a limp pile of fabric. Try wet blocking and air dry. If needed, finish very carefully with steamer.

Blends - Go the safest route - pin out, spritz and let dry - unless its primarily wool with a touch of human-made or heavily cabled, then wet-block.

What about fluffy fakes? And things like Chamonix, or Binary/Eros? Novelty yarns get blocked on a case-by-case basis. Non-wearables need not be blocked, unless it gets very out of shape, or looks like it needs it. I would not use heat. I don't like the smell of melting knitting, not to mention scraping the stuff off my iron. Pin out and spritz.

Feathery yarns - I have wet-blocked by actually hand-washing in baby shampoo and blow-drying for fluffiness but your mileage may vary. When adding fluffy/furry trims to another fiber garment, block the garment pieces before you add the funky trim - the furry stuff might not survive the blocking that the garment might need.

Last of all, some yarns cannot get wet without falling apart - Berrocco's Chinchilla has produced horror stories for many of my acquaintances.