

# STICKS & STONES



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Does the title remind you of a ditty from your childhood? The “sticks and stones” in this article won’t break your bones—they may be just what the doctor ordered for your quilt.

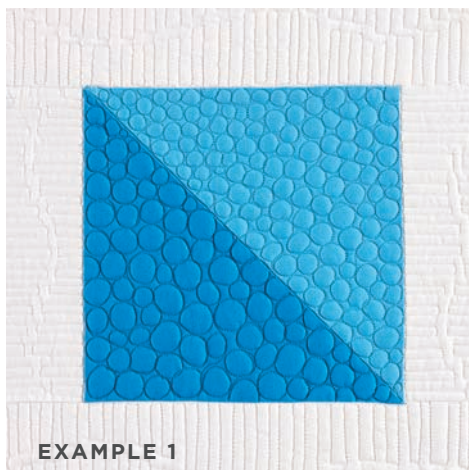
In our quest for the perfect quilting design it’s easy to be enamored with filigree and flourish when all we really need is sleek and simple. Straight lines and circles fill the bill!

These two design elements can create striking contrast while also adding depth and texture to your project. However, too much of a good thing can dilute its impact and turn your project into a ho-hum quilt. I’ve stitched out a variety of samples using circles and lines to show you how to use these basic shapes to make your quilts pop!

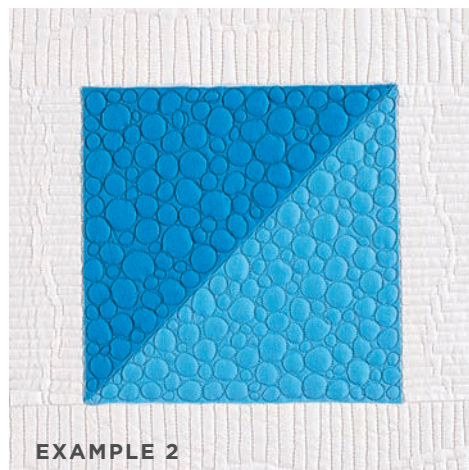
In *Example 1*, I tried to quilt circles of approximately the same size throughout

each triangle. That becomes difficult near the points. It’s also hard to place the circles randomly when they’re the same size. Soon they may begin to neatly line up with one another or create unusual and sometimes uncomfortable spaces when they’re all the same size. This sameness makes the block pretty boring!

In *Example 2*, the circles are random sizes. This one small change in the design execution makes the block feel more alive. The “stones” look more natural while those in *Example 1* seem more artificial. Little stones fill in between the big ones like gravel in the bottom of a river.



EXAMPLE 1



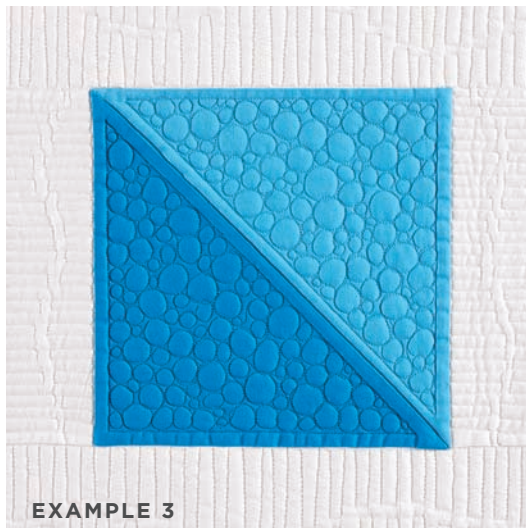
EXAMPLE 2

In *Example 3*, I added some straight lines for contrast. It's surprising what six lines can do for a design! In the first example, same-size circles filled each triangle completely all the way to their joined seam. That made the block very homogenous, and the two triangles lost their individual personalities. By adding a frame around each triangle with straight lines, the fabric patches gained back their individuality.

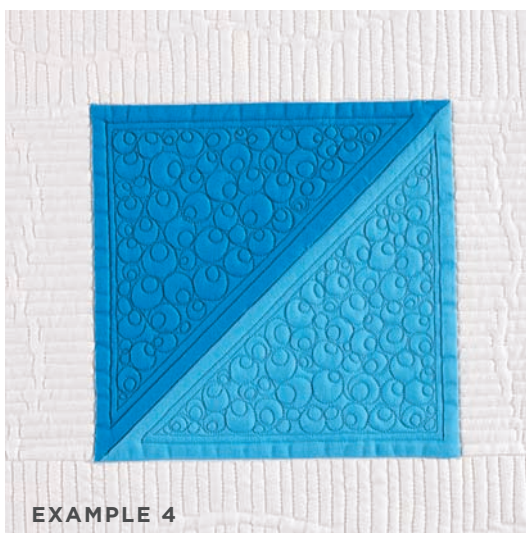
In *Example 4*, I added a second frame inside the first, and also varied its distance from the other line to keep things interesting. I also quilted "bubbles in the bubbles" for even more texture. When you modify your master design, don't get hung up on making sure every single shape includes the modification. It isn't necessary for every single big circle to have a small circle inside it.

Many quilters bristle at the thought of using plaid fabric in their quilts because an off-grain plaid can detract from an otherwise-perfect quilt. However, you can get the wonderful effect of plaid without piecing in a single patch.

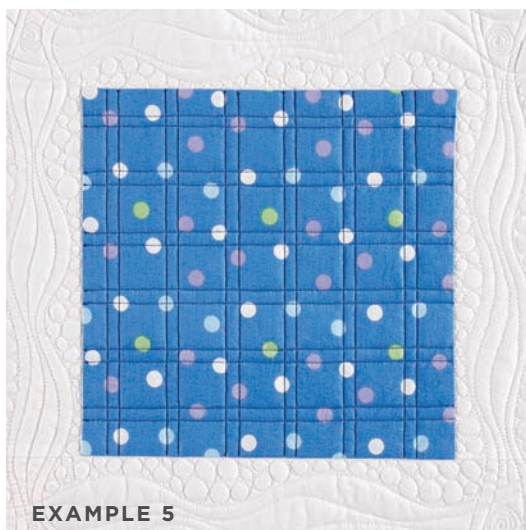
Examine the plaid quilting in *Example 5*. The line spacing creates 1" squares separated by 1/4" spacers—similar to a tile floor with grout lines! If you've ever laid tile, you know that the secret to success is to start in the center of the room and work out to the edges. This ensures that you'll have an even border around the room if you have to cut your tiles to size. This same principle applies to plaid quilting. Make a reference mark in the center of your block, and work out from there in each direction toward the edges.



EXAMPLE 3



EXAMPLE 4



EXAMPLE 5

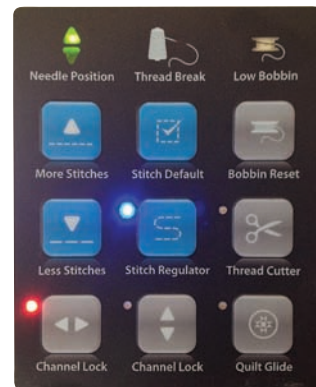


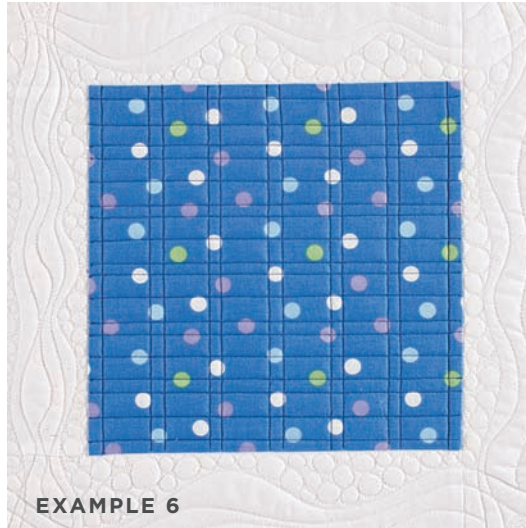
PHOTO A

I love a built-in feature on my longarm machine called "channel locks" as shown in *Photo A*. My freehand lines aren't perfectly straight, so when I want perfection, I love that the push of a button means my lines will be straight as an arrow!

### THREAD AND BATTING ARE IMPORTANT, TOO!

Since quilting shapes are meant to provide texture and depth, thread color and thickness should be considered. Matching thread in a thinner size (50- or 60-weight) hides many wiggles and imperfections in your quilting. Batting with a little loft is best for creating design definition—I prefer Hobbs washable wool or a batting blend of cotton and polyester.

“...you can get the wonderful effect of plaid without piecing in a single patch.”



The plaid design in *Example 6* is an uneven plaid—there are more lines in one direction than the other. This pattern is useful for blocks that are not exactly the same length or width. You can camouflage the discrepancy in the measurements by first quilting the  $\frac{1}{4}$ " spacer bars. In my example each  $\frac{1}{4}$ " spacer bar section is about 1" apart. That 1" section can be a little wider or narrower if necessary; the eye will not see that small variance because the spacers are farther apart. Once the  $\frac{1}{4}$ " spacer bars are quilted, then the other lines are added by “splitting the difference” between the spacer bars—whatever it happens to be—with a line right down the middle.

I quilted parallel lines in the block divisions in *Example 7*. The lines go in opposite directions inside the smaller blocks to make the light bounce off those areas differently. This technique makes the fabric seem like it has a nap due to the way shadows fall on the lines. While I kept my subsections very large on this sampler to suit its overall style, you could divide your patches into even smaller squares before adding the parallel lines for more texture.

I used a combination of straight lines and wavy lines and only quilted them in one direction in *Example 8*, but I still kept the line spacing varied to mimic a plaid. This is just one idea for a filler you can use inside your plaid spacer bars. You could also use circles, waves, or stars—let your imagination fly! Since my sampler blocks were filled with lots of straight lines, I had fun adding curved lines and circles to the border for whimsy and contrast. While my samplers have a modern feel to them, these “sticks and stones” work on traditional quilts just as well. Give them a try on your next project!

# “PLAID” QUILTING

Plaid quilting patterns are a good choice for busy fabrics where a traditional design will not show.

If you are quilting on a traditional sewing machine, you may find it helpful to physically mark your complete quilting lines since you'll need to stop occasionally to reposition your fabric. Use a marking tool with a sharp, narrow point. Since your line spacing is important in plaid quilting designs, it's easy to get off if your marking tool leaves a wide line.

Choose a ruler that will reach completely across your block to keep your lines as true as possible. Most rotary cutting rulers include  $\frac{1}{8}$ " tick marks along with solid lines every  $\frac{1}{4}$ ". If your lines will be closer than  $\frac{1}{4}$ ", it's helpful to mark that line with contrasting fluorescent tape. You can see how I've marked my longarm ruler with the tape in *Photo B*. Check the notions wall in your favorite quilt shop for this product.

If you're quilting on a stand up frame, you won't need to mark every single line if you have a longarm ruler and expanded base for your machine. The ruler will allow you to guide the machine and position each line in relation to previously quilted lines. If you have channel locks, it's even easier. However, you will still benefit from adding a few reference marks so that you don't get lost. Use a marking tool to add a dot along the edges of your block where you want each line to begin (*Photo C*). If you're using channel locks, just position your needle above your starting mark, then engage your lock. Secure your beginning thread tails and then stitch to the other end of the block.

One problem quilters encounter when lines meet each other in quilting is pleats or folds where the lines meet. To prevent this using a longarm ruler, use just enough downward pressure

on your ruler to keep it in place. Add "ruler grippies" or glue small sandpaper dots to the underside of your ruler to keep it from slipping. If you are using channel locks, you won't need a ruler to keep your lines straight. As you approach a previously quilted line, use your fingers to gently smooth the fabric just in front of the line if necessary.

Your fabric can also shift as you quilt each line. Some experts advise that you quilt every other line in opposite directions to help prevent this. However, with this technique I've found that my lines and intersections look much better if I start each line from the same side. For me, that means quilting left to right across a block with each line, cutting thread and starting over again on the left. I then quilt from the top of the block toward me in the same manner. This produces the best stitch quality and tension as well.

