On Your Way to the Masters

Blocking for the Master Hand Knitting Program – All Levels

Binka Schwan

Blocking is the process of using water to shape and size a piece of knitted fabric by influencing the individual fiber strands in the yarn, causing the fibers to relax so they can be reshaped. Blocking gives a permanent set until the piece becomes wet again, and it gives a finished look by evening out the stitches, balancing the fabric, and creating a smoother drape. Blocking makes seaming easier by flattening edges and creating equally sized pieces.

You must remember that blocking is not a cure-all. It will even out the fabric, but blocking will not correct tension problems in your knitting. Therefore, your knitting will affect the outcome of your blocking. Blocking is an extremely important component of all three levels of the Master Hand Knitting program. This article specifically discusses how to block the swatches and projects for all levels of the Master Hand Knitting program. Also, Leslie Gonzalez has developed a YouTube video that shows how to block swatches for the Master Hand Knitting program.

It is important that the yarn the knitter chooses for the MHK program is a fiber that can be readily blocked. Please refer to the "On Your Way to the Masters" article by Joyce Jones in the Summer 2017 edition of *Cast On*. She discusses appropriate yarns to consider in "Choosing Yarn for the Master Hand Knitting Program."

The Master Hand Knitting program evaluates blocking in three different ways:

Blocking and Care of Hand Knits Report

In Level 1, a report on blocking is required. This report is written prior to knitting and blocking the swatches and project. The requirements for this report are listed in the directions. The research required for the report will hopefully lay the foundation for blocking in all levels of the program. The report must include information on equipment needed, different methods of blocking, and how to block different fibers and stitch patterns. We also ask for information on how to care for handknitted items and a description of how the swatches in Level 1 were blocked.

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Blocking of Swatches

All levels require swatches and all swatches must be blocked. We expect all swatches to be blocked so the following criteria are met: The swatches should be symmetrical with parallel tops and bottoms. Swatch sides should be of equal length and should either be parallel or have the same slope. All corners should be square (90° angle) and not rounded. All edges should be straight. Cast-on and bind-off edges should not curl or be curved or wavy. Selvedges should not curl. On increase and decrease swatches the sides should have the same slope and be mirror images, but there should still be 90° angled square corners. Blocking pinholes, where the pins were placed, should not be detectable. Stitch patterns should have appropriate texture and ribbing should have appropriate elasticity. Stranded and other colorwork should not pucker. Lace should be aggressively blocked so that all yarn overs are open and of the same size, but at the same time the borders must be straight and squared.

Blocking of Projects

Projects are required in all levels of the program. All projects should be blocked to match the gauge and finished measurements of the pattern, and the blocking technique should be appropriate for the fiber and stitch patterns chosen. Remember that you can partially block a project while in progress so that you can see if your piece is turning out to be the correct length. And when pinning completed projects, pins should be placed cautiously so as not to disrupt the fabric.

Recommended Method for Blocking Swatches for all Levels of the Program

The recommended method for blocking swatches in the MHK program is wet blocking or immersion. This method will assure that the swatches can be blocked to the program standards stated above.

Equipment needed for blocking includes the following:

- Water bath container
- Spritz bottle
- Surface that can be pinned such as a blocking board or thick towel
- Rustproof pins
- Ruler for measuring swatches
- Measuring tape or yardstick for measuring projects
- Square measure for checking corners

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Wet-Blocking Swatches

Figure 1 shows swatches that are completely immersed in cool-to-room-temperature water. The swatches should be allowed to soak so that the fibers are completely saturated. This can take 15 minutes or so. If the swatch is dirty, contains a lot of lanolin, and/or if you have very hard water, add a touch of soap or detergent.



Figure 1

You would then remove the swatch(es) from the water bath and gently squeeze some water out so they are not dripping. Place the swatches on a towel and gently roll them in the towel to remove all the excess water. The swatches should be placed flat on the towel so creases do not occur in the swatch from rolling it. Once all the excess water has been removed, place the damp swatch on the blocking surface.

Another method of removing excess water involves the use of your washing machine. You would still gently squeeze some of the excess water out before placing the items into the machine. Once they are in the washing machine, start the spin cycle and let the centrifugal force of the spin cycle do the work for you! The items will go through the spin cycle and all excess water will be removed. Since there is no agitation, rubbing, or stretching of the fabric during the spin cycle, the swatches will be damp, but the integrity of the swatch fabric will be maintained. Once the spin cycle is complete, you would place the swatch on the blocking surface for the next step of shaping and pinning. The method of using the spin cycle also works well for garments and shawls for your personal knitting.

With the swatch flat on the blocking surface, use your fingers to gently shape the swatch. Use the ruler and the square to make certain that the swatch is the correct

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shape. Pin the swatch to the blocking surface to ensure that all edges are straight and not turning under. All selvedges should be flat, the swatch correctly shaped, and the cast-on (bottom) and bind-off (top) edges straight. See Figures 2 and 3 for how you would position a ruler for side shaping and Figures 4 and 5 for bottom and top shaping. Figures 6 and 7 show how to make certain that the swatch is squared by measuring diagonally.



Figure 2

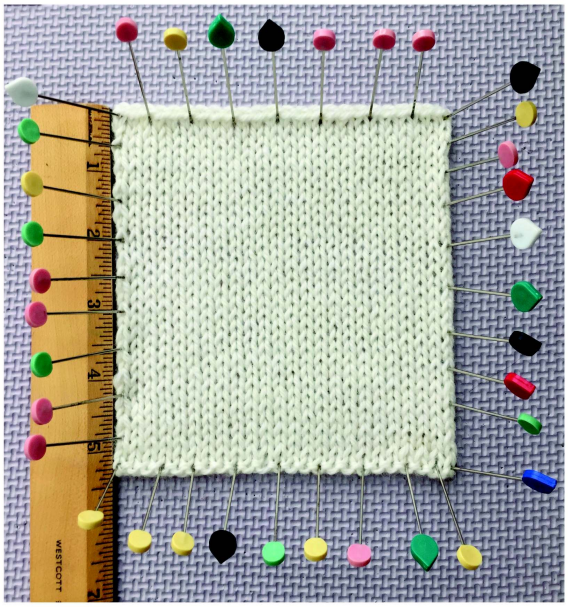


Figure 3

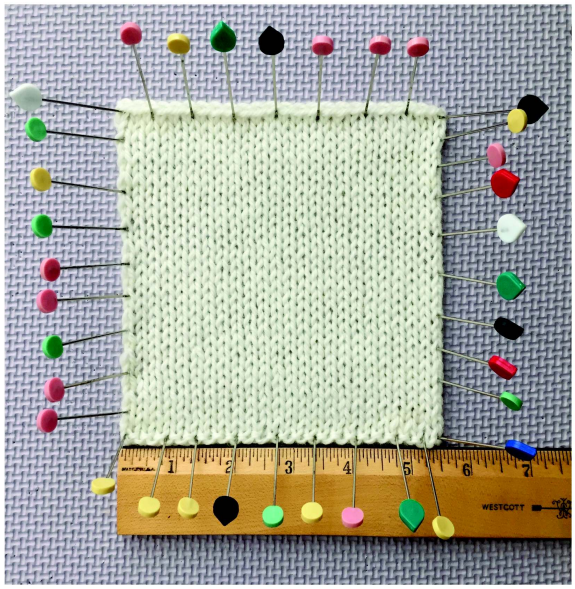


Figure 4



Figure 5

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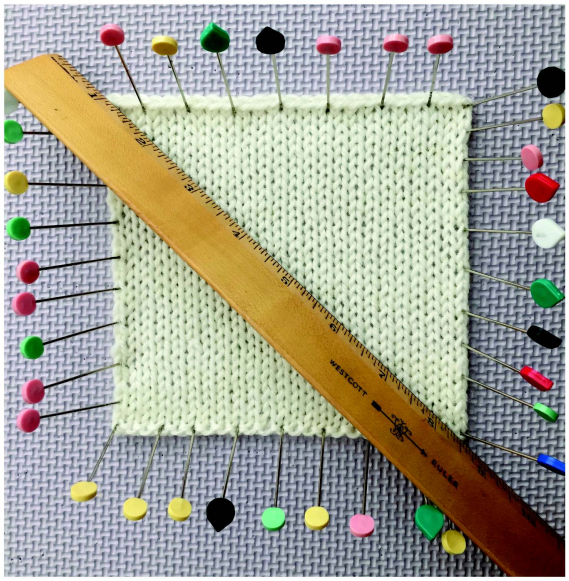


Figure 6

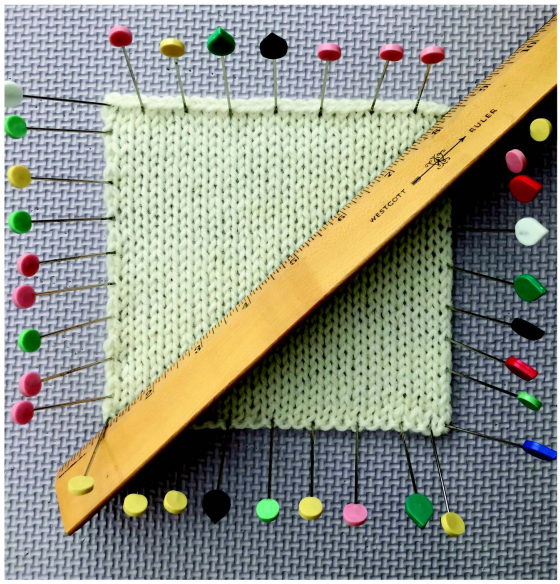


Figure 7

If the swatch starts to dry, it will be more difficult to shape. Use the spritz bottle to keep the swatch damp as you work with it.

Most blocking pins that are commercially available are rust-resistant and not completely rustproof. If you intend to purchase blocking pins, make certain you understand the material the pins are made of. If there is a scrape on the pin that removes the rust-resistant coating, that pin can leave rust marks on the swatch. Rust marks cannot be removed from the swatch; so if there are rust marks, those swatches will need to be reworked. Pins should always be placed between stitches and between rows. The pin should not be placed within a stitch or directly into the yarn, piercing it. The result will be pin pulls and pin holes. Neither is acceptable in the MHK program.

Make certain that you allow the swatch to dry completely before removing it from the blocking board. Store the swatches in a cool dry area. It is recommended that if you are blocking many swatches at once, tag them so that you understand which swatch is which. We have seen many mis-tagged swatches because of this. We also recommend that they not be stored in the sheet protectors of the binder but placed in the sheet protectors just before sending them. If stored in the sheet protectors for a long period of time, they may need to be reblocked.

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All stitch pattern swatches should still be immersed in the water. For example, in Level 1 the garter and stockinette swatches start with ribbing. Remember that there are stitch patterns that should not be stretched, and ribbing is one of them. While the swatch is still damp, gently position the ribbing and allow it to take its natural shape (see Figure 8).



Figure 8

Cables need to “pop” from the reverse stockinette stitch background; so when blocking any cable swatches, make certain that the entire swatch is not stretched so much that the cables are flattened. Lace patterns need to be aggressively blocked so the yarn overs are open and even. Note that even though you are concentrating on “opening” the lace pattern, the entire lace swatch needs to be squared as shown in the previous figures. There should be no scalloping of edges. An example of how NOT to block a lace swatch is shown in Figure 9. You can see that the seed stitch edges in this swatch are not pinned correctly and scallops are occurring. Many more pins are necessary to make certain that the borders are correctly blocked and no scalloping occurs. The swatch will dry with these scallops and will have to be reblocked to make all edges straight.

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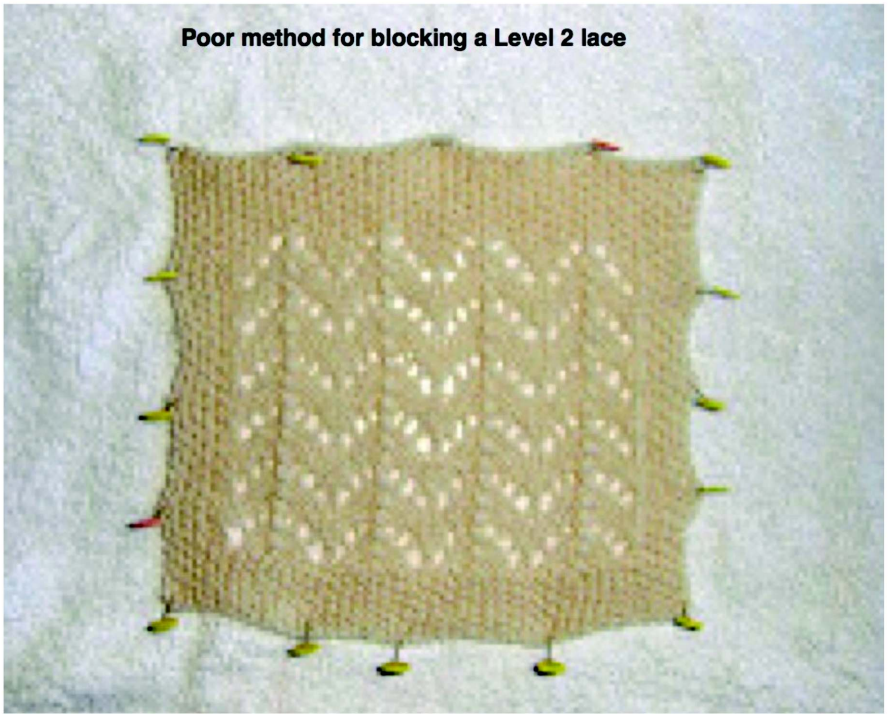


Figure 9

Figure 10 (on the next page) shows the swatch pinned correctly so that the lace is blocked open, enhancing the stitch pattern. The seed stitch borders are blocked square, with all edges straight, even, and all corners are at a 90° angle.

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Correctly Blocking a Level 2 Lace Swatch

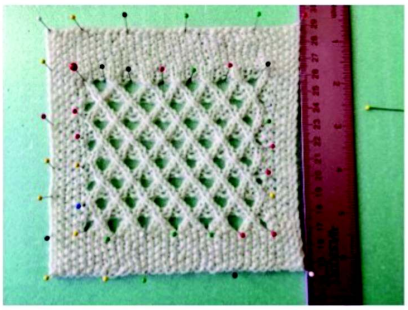
Unblocked swatch

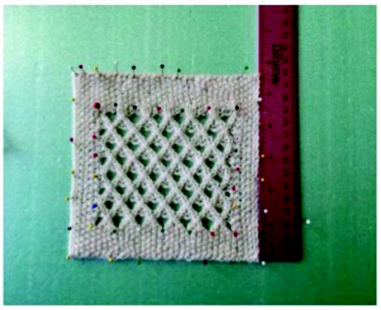


Block the center lace first, taking care to open the lace. Be sure the top, bottom and sides of the lace are straight.



Use a straight edge to block the outside borders straight.





Allow the pinned swatch to dry completely.

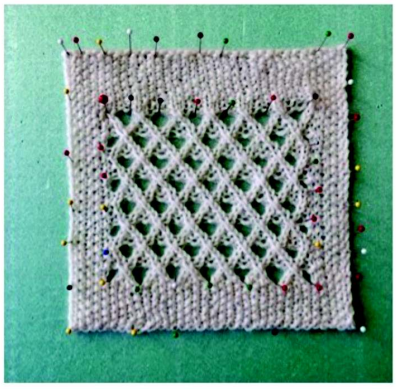


Figure 10

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The Master Hand Knitting committee expects to see your best work. And blocking is a very important part of the program. Blocking finishes your swatches and your projects. As stated before, blocking helps to even out the stitches, improve the drape of the fabric, and make seaming the pieces together easier. Blocking can help make your knitting look handmade rather than homemade.

References

Gonzalez, Leslie. "Blocking Swatches for the MHK Program."
Schwan, Binka. "Blocking of Hand Knits." *Cast On* August-October 2008.

Figure Legends

Figure 1. Swatches soaking in water bath.
Figure 2. How to measure/square right selvedge.
Figure 3. How to measure/square left selvedge.
Figure 4. How to measure/square cast on edge.
Figure 5. How to measure/square bind off edge.
Figure 6. How to measure/square right diagonal.
Figure 7. How to measure/square left diagonal.
Figure 8. How to pin ribbing swatch.
Figure 9. Incorrect pinning of lace swatch.
Figure 10. Correct pinning of lace swatch.

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