

FREE CUT PIECING: Drawing with your Rotary Cutter

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The name truly describes this technique! I love it. One can draw so many designs, from classic quilt blocks (that will not look classic, but askew) to organic forms, to abstract designs. Basically one stacks up fabrics, slashes through the stack with a rotary cutter, rearranges the pieces and sew them back together. The idea is simple, but every new design presents new issues. Every time I think I've learned enough to write about the technique, I learn something new! So I'm writing from where I am and trust you will use this as the starting point to follow your own path of discovery.

Advantages to this technique:

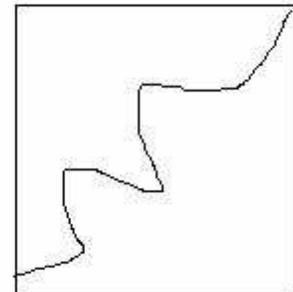
- a spontaneous way to work.
- minimal design time
- no precision seam allowances required when making the units. Your seam allowances should be between 1/4" and 1/8". Tighter curves need the smaller seam allowance.
- can be a fast way to work depending on what you decide to do.
- a design will be uniquely your own - an original rather than a copy of someone else's work.

Possible drawbacks:

- one creates "opposite" blocks which you may or may not want. I usually want them and if I don't have time to sew the "unneeded at this moment" blocks I'll just pin the stack together for a future work. I often use opposites blocks as labels.
- It's hard to work large unless you design in blocks no larger than your cutting surface. But that's true in all quilt designs and probably why we usually design in blocks rather than try a bed sized landscape in one unbroken unit.

Some basic guidelines:

This technique is based on the fact that curves that match each other will fit together. The pieces can be cut together at the same time or can be sliced to match. Straight lines and gentle curves are easier to piece than deeper curves. You can piece deeper curves, it's just harder. A student proved this to me by piecing this 6" block!



You need good cutting skills to draw well with a rotary cutter. Treat yourself to a new blade. Always keep your fingers behind the blade when free cutting and **always** close your cutter after making a cut! All fabric in your stack must face the same way. I like them face up. Many designs will require that you use hatch marks to piece them together. I use a hera (a Japanese marking tool that dents natural fibers) , but chalk also works well.

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How many fabrics should be in a stack? This depends on your fabric and the complexity of your cuts. If you're making straight cuts, 8 will work, but if you're cutting deeper curves, 4 might be better. Some slippage and distortion will occur when cutting and that's exacerbated by a larger number of layers.

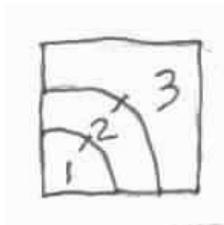
How many units do you need? The number of fabrics you stack will yield that many units, BUT half will be opposites. If you are cutting yellow petals in a green background, you will get half that way and half green petals in a yellow background.

Those might be great units somewhere else, perhaps as leaves. For some designs you want everything.

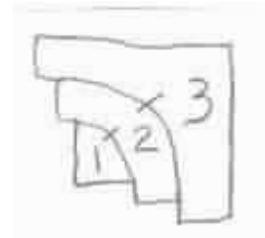
It's sometimes helpful to stack fabrics in a multiple of the number of pieces into which you plan to slash. For example if you plan to slash your stack twice, into three stacks, stack 3 or 6 fabrics for optimal mixing and matching.

Note that we are not allowing for seam allowances. This has a number of implications. Your units will shrink up from the original fabric size depending on how many seams there are. Your unit can also change radically in shape depending on how many and where the seams are.

This

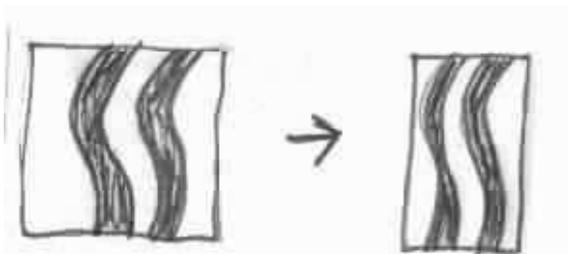


changes to this.



And this.

shrinks to this.



If

you only slash from side to side or top to bottom, your units will shrink in height or width, but other cuts will produce other

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kinds of distortions. These distortions turn out to be inspiring. This leads to a really important aspect of this kind of work:

Don't worry about how the outside edges of your unit look. The thing to concentrate on is this: Does your unit press flat? We are going to add more fabric to outside edges in either straight or curved seams. Often the distorted edges tell us what kinds of curves to cut next.

How can we tell what the finished unit will look like? And where we should start and stop our seams? When I first started sewing like this, I just lined up the outside edges of the blocks and sewed. That's OK with large, gently curved pieces, but with smaller pieces and tighter curves, I was getting units that looked like potato chips! Betty Ives gave me the clue. Before sewing, shift the pieces over one another the depth of the less than 1/4" seam allowance and look at the outside edges. That's where to start and stop sewing! For every curve, use a hatch mark and a pin. I usually sew with the concave (stretchy) piece on top. Offset for the noted difference at the outside edge, carefully sew to the hatch mark/pin. Then offset for the noted difference at the other end, and carefully sew from the hatch mark to the other edge. Karen K. Stone calls this the Zen of curved piecing. If you see bubbles happening, stop, sink the needle in the fabric, lift the presser foot and smooth the fabric back. Be sure to keep your fabric edges together as you sew. I do stretch the bias edge a little to sew these seams. Sew as slowly as you need to to get smooth curves and flat seams. The acid test? Does your block lie flat when pressed? If not check your offset and seam allowance. For tighter curves, you may need to go close to an 1/8". The seam will still be strong because it's on the bias. Do not clip curves because it's dangerous to clip such a small seam and because you shouldn't need to.

When free hand slicing, pieces will be interchangeable within their own stack. If you need a piece from a different fabric, use the piece you don't want as a pattern.

Another way to work is by slashing a paper pattern and using the pieces as templates. I have done this when I haven't wanted the "opposites", but most often use this technique for more complicated designs. Make a duplicate (or copies) of your pattern and number the pieces to help you put your puzzle back together. Be sure not to cut up your master drawing!

These guidelines will make more sense after you try your hand at this.

Let's start with a dramatic and useful block.

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The Quarter Circle Block (as seen on page 2)

1. Make a stack of 3 or 6 fabrics at least 13" square. Press. Place a 12 1/2" ruler on top of the stack and slice around the edges.

1.



2.



2. Slash as

illustrated on page 2.

3.

3 .If you need more control, hold the fabric from behind the rotary cutter. I cut with my right hand and hold my fabric from behind with the left. (I needed one hand to take the picture.) Always keep your fingers behind the blade.



4. 4. The result.



5. Mix and match your fabrics. It's wise to pin the stacks that you're not sewing

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together and be careful not to turn fabrics over if it's hard to tell front from back (as with batiks).

5.

6. Mark one hatch mark for each curve..

6.



7. Overlap the pieces by the less than 1/4" seam allowance. Note the differences at the edges of the block. You can mark the difference or just eyeball it.

7.



8. With right sides together, place a pin at the hatch mark. Lay the concave (stretchy) piece on top and offset the ends by the amount you noted earlier.

8.



9. Sink your needle into the fabric and then manipulate the fabric with both hands to line up

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the edges and smooth the seam out from the beginning to the pinned hatch mark. I stretch the bias edge a bit if I need to. Keeping the edges together, sew a smooth seam to the pin. Sink your needle and then reposition your fabric and hands and sew to the end point. (The picture only shows one hand, but use both).



10. This unit can be squared up at this point and be used to make lots of graphic and classic patterns or it can be further slashed into other designs.



flat as blocks sewn all on the straight of grain. They can be a little wavy or puffy. People laugh when I say these bumps will quilt out, but they do. Use cotton, or even better, wool batting which allows you to block your quilt to shape much as you can block a wool sweater. Enjoy your exploration of these techniques!



It is hard to get these units to lie as

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