

Perfect Points Sampler: Ann's Thoughts on Precision Piecing

by Ann Johnson

Question: Do your blocks always finish the correct size?

The *Perfect Points Sampler* has several blocks of different sizes and many points to match! It is very important that each block end up the correct size for this sampler to go together well. Most of the blocks are 8" or 4" finished. Some odd-sized blocks have "frames" to make them fit.

To be honest, for the first 20 of my 22+ years of quilting, my blocks often finished slightly small, maybe a 1/16th or 1/8th of an inch and sometimes more! This was especially true of complicated blocks. When I discussed this with other quilters, many sheepishly admitted they had the same problem. I read, took classes and practiced. I squared-up blocks to make them all be the same size if I could; that doesn't always work. Finally, now my blocks are almost always the correct size. It's a miracle! I would like to share this journey with you and hear from you as well. It would bring me joy to know, after this quilt-along is completed, that I have helped some of you receive the gift of blocks that consistently end up the size they are supposed to!

Finished vs. Unfinished Size:

When I say a block ends up the correct size I am referring to both the unfinished and finished sizes. To clarify, when a block is completed (but not yet sewn into a quilt) its unfinished size is 1/2" larger than the finished size (when it is sewn into the quilt) due to the 1/4" seam allowance on each side. After you complete each block in the sampler, you will square-up (trim if needed) the block to the unfinished size stated in the instructions. In other quilts, if one block is too small, the other blocks may be trimmed down to the size of the smallest block. That won't work well with all the points and block variations in this sampler, so let's talk more about precision piecing.

Why 1/4" Seam Allowances Don't Always Work:

This is not quilting heresy! Many authors and quilting instructors have finally reached the same conclusion I did as I struggled with correct block size. It is crucial to understand two points for this to make sense. First, a seam allowance that is too large by even one or two thread-widths makes a difference when repeated several times across a block and/or quilt top. This is why blocks turn out too small. To achieve correctly-sized blocks requires subtle refinements in cutting, pinning, sewing, pressing and trimming.

The second concept is that the width of the seam allowance needed for a project varies with the type of thread and fabric you use; it can vary from project to project. Try to visualize that when you sew a seam, the fabric has to fold back over the thread. The thicker the fabric or the thread, the wider your seam will be. Often it is necessary to use a scant 1/4" seam allowance for the block to be the correct size. This is especially true for blocks, like ones in Lesson 5, with many seams and smaller pieces. A scant 1/4" seam means you sew along the side of the 1/4" line (on the side closer to the raw edges). This allows the fabric to fold back exactly on the 1/4" line. In the cutting section below, I give a cutting hint that makes it easier to use a 1/4" seam allowance and still have correctly-sized blocks.

How to Determine the Correct Seam Size:

Okay, this is the part many quilters skip. Believe me, it is necessary for the sampler. Please do the exercise before you start Lesson 1! Cut a 2" x width of fabric (WOF) strip of three fabrics you will use in the sampler and of which you have plenty. Sew the three strips together lengthwise for about 6"- 8" (you can cut that strip set off). Press the seams. Carefully measure the width of the strip set with a quilter's ruler. The finished width of the center strip should be exactly 1-1/2". The strip set should measure exactly 5". If they are not, sew a few more inches. Try a scant 1/4" (when you put the ruler on the fabric, the stitching will run along the edge of the 1/4" line on the side closer to the raw edges). If you wish, try the tip in the section on cutting below with another short set of 2" strips to see if it helps.

Once you find the size of seam allowance that measures correctly, cut that section and keep it next to you as you sew as a reminder. You need to find what works for you with your machine!

Other Piecing Suggestions for Correct Block Size:

I have tried several things. I discovered the 1/4" on my Bernina's 1/4" foot was under the edge and not at the edge of my presser foot. It worked to move the needle position to 1 (to the right) but that is not the best way for the machine to sew a straight seam consistently and I would forget to move it back if I sewed a decorative stitch (broke needles). I used thinner 2-ply

threads but worried about their strength and they were expensive. I sewed with a scant 1/4" all the time but it was harder to use my 1/4" foot.

I will now share with you the one hint I have read only one place that changed everything for me! I wish I knew who wrote it so I could thank her. Maybe it will work for you. If not, hopefully other members will have suggestions that will. For those of you who do not have a problem with block size, perhaps you can share your tips.

Cutting:

The one suggestion that made a huge difference in my piecing precision is this: cut each strip and section/piece one-two thread-widths larger than the ruler shows. Instead of having the edge of the fabric under the line on the ruler (or the edge of the ruler), I place the fabric's edge along side the line, extending the fabric by only one to two thread-widths. This adjusts for any problems with fabric folding over thread, the need to use a scant 1/4", etc. It works for me...I can use our well-priced, strong 3-ply Connecting Threads thread, the 1/4" presser foot on my machine and my blocks are always the correct size. You may want to try it if you are having problems with block size.

I do recommend that you only use one brand of rulers for a project. Another tip for precise cutting of all things related to triangles: cut bigger pieces than you need (based on the exact math for the triangle size). For example, a HST that has a finished size of 3" needs to be cut from a 3-7/8" square to allow for seam allowances. If you use this measurement, there is absolutely no room for any distortions or errors in cutting, pinning, sewing, and pressing. It is much easier and generally more precise to cut 4" (or larger) squares, make the HSTs and square-up to 3-1/2". Starting with a square or triangle that is slightly larger than needed and squaring-up to the exact size results in a precise triangle, and therefore "perfect" points, despite less than perfect piecing.

Pinning:

I told you everything I have to say about using a positioning pin in the tutorial. In general, if you are having piecing problems, try pinning. If pinning isn't precise enough, try a positioning pin. If your seam allowances at points are consistently the correct size, you may not need to pin when points are joined to straight fabric such as a border.

Sewing:

Practice until you achieve consistently correct size blocks. Use a 1/4" presser foot or seam guide placed on the machine. The CT tutorial *How to Sew an Accurate Quarter Inch Seam Allowance* demonstrates this (your seam size may be slightly different. Slow down if necessary. The individual lessons provide suggestions specific to each block.

Pressing:

Press, don't iron. Watch the CT tutorial *Pressing Tip* to see this demonstrated. Turn off the steam if you find it distorts your triangles. Consider substituting a cloth ironing board cover for your shiny silver one; the metallic surface causes distortion because it allows fabric to slide and doesn't allow it to dry well with the heat of the iron. Pressing seams in opposite directions helps seams "nest" for precise seam alignment when units or blocks are sewn together. The lessons for the *Perfect Points Sampler* supply pressing instructions illustrated with arrows.

I love my Big Board! It is not necessary but the larger size is wonderful for quilting! Consider buying one or making one to fit over your ironing board or sit on a table. Mine is on a sturdy 6 foot table with the leg risers to make it a better ergonomic height.

Trimming:

Squaring-up is very important. It provides straight, clean edges with which to join the block to other blocks. If a block is the correct size, only thin shreds will be trimmed off. Be sure to leave an adequate seam allowance for whichever seam size you use, especially at points.

Other Resources:

For a variety of helpful tutorials, go to: www.connectingthreads.com/tutorials/quilting_tutorials.html