



*by Sandi Rosner*

Many knitters are puzzled when they come across this sentence at the end of a pattern: "Block to finished measurements." Do you really have to block your work? Should you block before or after assembling the pieces? What is blocking anyway, and how should you go about it? In this article, we'll take a look at the transformative process, using examples from this issue.

## **The Basics**

Yarn has a memory. It remembers being wound in a ball, and it remembers being wrapped around your needles. Blocking is the process of re-setting that memory with a little help from water, a flat padded surface, and a few sturdy pins. Water wipes the memory clean, and a new memory is formed as the piece dries.

As your knitting comes off the needles, the yarn is confused by the memory of being in a ball or skein and wants to revert to that former state. Ribbing and cable patterns vigorously contract. Stockinette stitch looks uneven. Lace patterns are rumpled and nearly unrecognizable.

Blocking relaxes the yarn and allows it to settle into its new configuration, be it a sweater or a pair of mittens. The surface of the piece smoothes out and small irregularities in tension disappear. Depending on the fiber you're using, the yarn may "bloom," developing a soft halo. Each stitch finds its place and the individual strands of yarn come together to create a cohesive fabric.

To make your knitting look its best, blocking is a necessary final step. Still not convinced? Take a look at these before and after photos.







Since water resets the yarn's memory, it follows that your normal blocking process should be no more elaborate than what you'll do when you launder the finished project. Whatever you do in blocking will be un-done by subsequent washing. If you're making an easy-care cotton pullover or superwash wool throw that you intend to machine wash and dry, then blocking will be no different than doing a load of laundry. For a delicate shawl or cashmere-blend sweater that you'll carefully hand wash, blocking is a bit more involved.

## Case Study

Let's use [Hawser](#), my sweater design in this issue, to demonstrate the blocking process. You can employ the same method with pretty much any other knit project with a few exceptions—we'll discuss those later on. Hawser is knit without seams, so blocking is carried out on the finished sweater. (Other designs might require blocking to be done before the project is seamed together, more on that later.) The yarn is a blend of merino wool and silk.

Block Hawser using the same method you would use for simply hand-washing a sweater. Follow the steps below (shown with [Lyssium](#)). Start by filling a large basin with warm water and a couple of drops of a no-rinse wool wash. Put the sweater in the basin and push it below the surface of the water, gently working the suds through the sweater and making sure the entire piece is saturated. Then leave to soak for about 20 minutes.



The next step is to remove the excess water from the piece. Use one hand to press the sweater up against the side of the basin while the water drains out. Use both hands to lift the sweater in a mass and gently squeeze until it stops dripping. In your own blocking adventures, take care to prevent stretching at this point—wet yarn can be both heavy and vulnerable, so don't pull the sweater from the water by the end of one sleeve. Use both hands to support the entire piece.



Next, spread the sweater out on a dry towel, roll the towel up around the sweater like a jelly roll, put the roll on the floor, and walk on it. The objective is to move as much water as possible out of the

sweater and into the towel. For a particularly thick design, I'll repeat this process with a second dry towel. Your goal is to end up with a damp sweater and a wet towel.



Now it's time to move on to a flat blocking surface. You can purchase a padded board specifically designed for blocking, but all you really need is a smooth, clean surface into which you can stick pins. I spread an old polyester tablecloth over a spare bed. (I've also blocked on a carpeted floor.) Some knitters prefer to block on a towel, but I find that a towel holds moisture, slowing down the drying. Place the sweater flat on the blocking surface, patting and smoothing it into shape. This is the opportunity to mold the new memory the yarn will retain. For Hawser, I pinched the cables a bit so they wouldn't flatten out. Using a yardstick to check key measurements (use the schematics for your sweater as a guide), I gently pushed and tugged the damp sweater until it was the size and shape I wanted, and then left it alone to dry overnight. Since it was summer in California when I blocked the sweater, drying time was not an issue. In cold or humid weather, I'll turn on a fan to

ensure good airflow over the piece.



The following morning, the sweater will dry and ready to go. Follow the same process when you hand wash a sweater.

### **A Word About Lace**

The process for blocking a piece of lace is a bit different. Most openwork patterns look best when they are stretched, opening up the holes and revealing the flow of the design. A good blocking



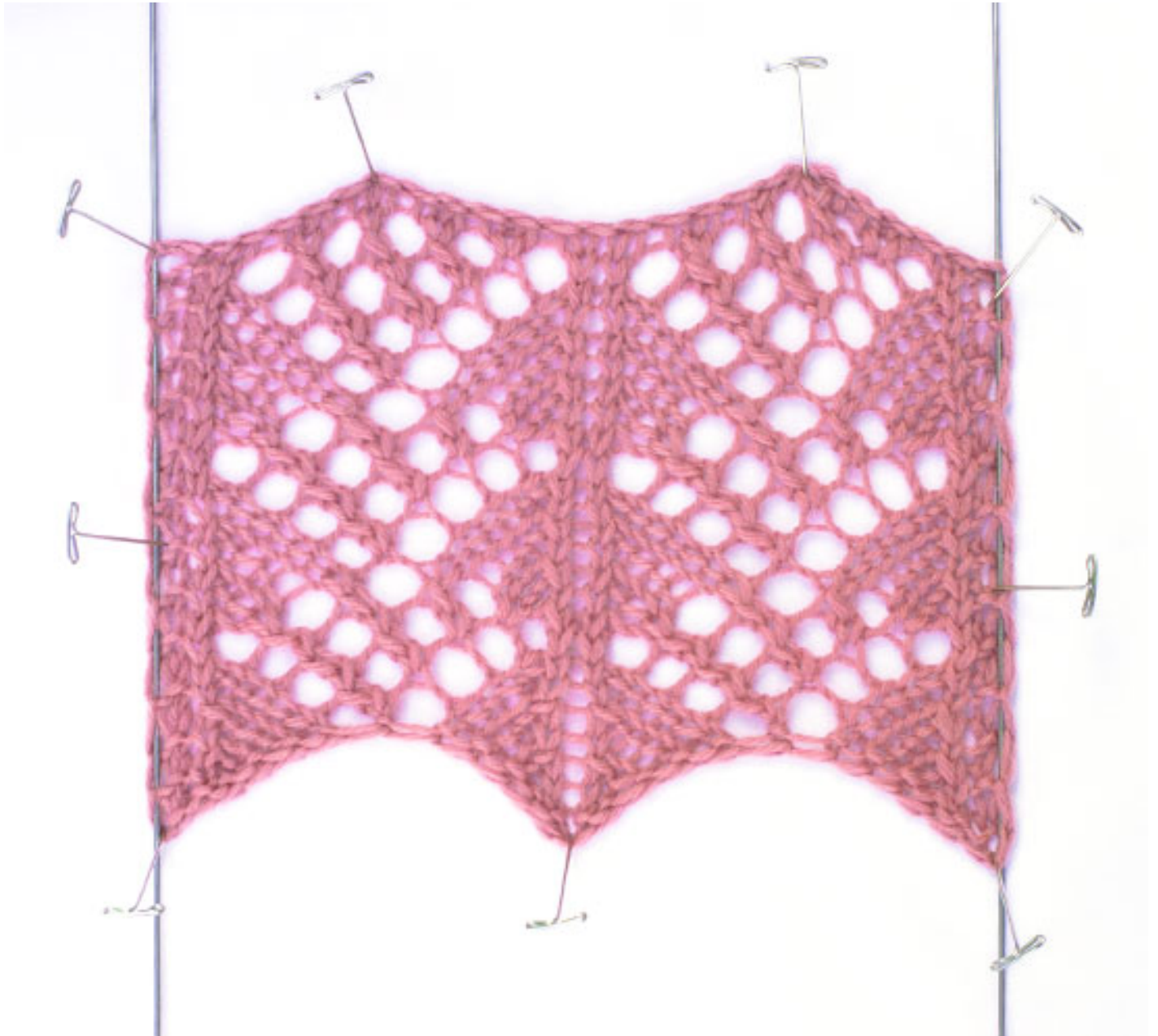
changes lace so much, it's almost magic.

To block a shawl like Henna Markkanen's [Periphery](#) you'll need long blocking wires (these come in both rigid and flexible styles) and pins. Make sure the latter are long and rust-proof with large heads that won't get lost in the knitting. I use inexpensive T-pins.

Begin by washing and towel drying the shawl just as you would a sweater. Be sure your blocking surface is large enough to allow you to fully stretch the piece in all directions.

Thread rigid blocking wires through the straight top edge of the shawl, weaving the wires in and out through every third stitch or so. It may take more than one wire to cover the entire distance. Lay the wire(s) on your surface in a straight line and secure with a pin at the center top of the shawl. Work your way down one wing, stretching the knitting down the wire and placing just enough pins to keep the wire straight. Finish with a pin at the corner of the shawl. Repeat on the other wing.

Now stretch out the bottom point of the shawl, making sure the center line is at right angles to the top edge. Pin the point. Work your way along the sides of the shawl, stretching, shaping and pinning the points along the scalloped edge. Have lots of pins on hand; you'll want a pin for each point.



Don't be afraid to stretch the piece. Unless you are working with a particularly fragile yarn, it can take a lot of pulling. In general, the more you stretch, the better the lace will look.

Use a yardstick to check your measurements. You want the shawl to be symmetrical, with the

same measurements on either side of the center line. Adjust pins as needed until you are happy with the shape you've made. This shape will be imprinted in your shawl's memory as it dries, so take the time to get it right.

It shouldn't take long for your piece to be thoroughly moisture free; lace dries fast. When you remove the pins, you'll find the yarn no longer tries to spring back to its pre-blocked formation. Every point and scallop will stay in sharp relief.



**Assembly Required**

What about sweaters that are knit in pieces? Should they be blocked before they are sewn together?

Opinions vary. Some knitters find that the curling edge of their unblocked knitting makes it difficult to sew a tidy seam. Others feel that the pieces go together more easily if they are carefully blocked to the schematic measurements in advance.

I prefer to block after the pieces are sewn together. I don't have any trouble sewing up curly edges, and the pieces fit together just fine if I've knit them correctly. I like blocking the sweater to shape as a whole.

I will block before assembly if I need to pick up stitches along the edge of a lace panel. [Holli Yeoh's Peking](#), from our Spring 2013 issue, is one such example. For a design like this, picking up stitches for the side panels is easier and more accurate if the lace panels are blocked first.

Try both ways and decide for yourself. It is your knitting, and you can do whatever produces a result that makes you happy.

### **What About Pressing, Steaming or Dry Cleaning?**

I've seen blocking instructions that involve a damp press cloth, a tailor's ham, and an iron. Remembering that every time you wash the sweater you'll erase whatever blocking you've done before, I really don't see the sense in this. You can't see what you're doing through a pressing cloth. And will you repeat this process every time your sweater needs a bath?

I do steam block, particularly if I want to get a good gauge measurement on a swatch without taking time for the whole wash and dry process. I lay the piece out on my blocking surface, hold my iron so it hovers over the piece without touching, and pump out lots of steam. The steam should thoroughly infuse the knitting. You'll often see the swatch visibly relax as the steam does its work. Then I use my hands to pat and smooth the surface of the piece until it is cool.

If you are working with cotton or linen and feel like a light pressing will improve the appearance of the piece, feel free to iron your knitting. Just take care not to flatten any textural elements like cables or bobbles. I avoid letting an iron touch the surface of other fibers.

If you intend to dry clean your sweater, give it an initial blocking following the instructions for hand washing given earlier in this article. Your cleaner should be able to restore the sweater to this shape after each cleaning. Personally, I don't dry clean my handknits. I briefly worked at a dry cleaner many years ago, so perhaps I just know too much. I can't bear the thought of my sweaters tumbling around in a vat of chemicals with other people's dirty clothes. But it's your sweater. Do what works best for you.

Blocking is like running a brush through your hair before you head out to face the world. It is the finishing touch that makes your sweater look great. After all the hours you've invested in the knitting, don't skimp on this final step. It can be the difference between a sweater that looks homemade and one that looks handmade.

*Sandi Rosner is a knitter who wears many hats: designer, technical editor, writer and teacher. She loves the little details that elevate a knitting project from homemade to handmade. Follow Sandi's blog at <http://www.knittinginwinecountry.blogspot.com>.*