by Sandi Rosner

For a sweater to take shape in a form other than your basic rectangle, you'll need to add and/or subtract some stitches along the way. In the Winter issue, we explored a variety of ways to increase the number of stitches on your needles. Since most garment shaping requires the use of decreases as well as increases, in this installment, we'll look at different types of decreases.

Note: The instructions that follow assume you knit in the Western style, where the leading leg of your stitch sits in front of the needle. If you are an Eastern style or combination knitter, you will need to modify these instructions. Pay close attention to the detailed photos and compare them to your knitting to see how to arrange your stitches to achieve the desired effect.

Single Decreases

Decreases can lean to the right or to the left, and can be worked on either the right side (RS) or the wrong side (WS) of the fabric. For the purposes of this article, "right side" refers to the knit side of stockinette stitch; "wrong side" refers to the purl side of stockinette stitch. Most patterns are written so shaping decreases occur only on right-side rows, but you will occasionally be asked to decrease every third row or every fifth row, making wrong-side decreases necessary.

Phoca PDF

k2tog

Single decreases turn two stitches into one. The most commonly used single decrease is knit two together (k2tog). When worked on the right side, this decrease leans to the right. The wrong side equivalent is purl two together (p2tog). When worked on the wrong side, but viewed from the right side, this decrease looks just like k2tog. For these right-leaning decreases, the two stitches end up stacked with the left-hand stitch on top of the right-hand stitch.

Phoca PDF

p2tog

The remaining single decreases all lean to the left, with the right-hand stitch stacking on top of the left-hand stitch. The most commonly used in contemporary patterns is slip, slip, knit (ssk). To work this decrease, slip two stitches individually as if to knit them, then insert the left-hand needle into the front of those two stitches and knit them together through the back loops. By slipping the stitches you change their orientation, so that the leading leg of the stitch is behind the needle rather than in front. This allows you to stack the right-hand stitch on top without twisting the stitches.

Phoca PDF

The wrong-side version of this decrease is slip, slip, purl (ssp). Slip two stitches individually as if to knit them, slide them back to the left-hand needle, then reach around with your right-hand needle and purl them together through the back loops. The maneuver is a bit awkward, but the result is good.

Phoca PDF

ssp

There is a variation on the ssk often attributed to Elizabeth Zimmerman and Meg Swansen. Slip the first stitch as if to knit, then slip the second stitch as if to purl. Insert the left-hand needle into the front of those two stitches and knit them together through the back loops. Since you don't re-orient the left-hand stitch when you slip it as if to purl, it is twisted as it lies under the right-hand stitch. Proponents of this variation say the decrease is smoother, and a better mirror image of the k2tog.

Phoca PDF

k2tog tbl

The next left-leaning decrease is knit two together through back loops (k2tog tbl). Quick and easy to accomplish, this decreases leaves both stitches twisted. The WS partner for this decrease is purl 2 together through back loops (p2tog tbl). Purling through the back loop is always a bit awkward, because it requires reaching around behind the stitches with your needle.

Phoca PDF

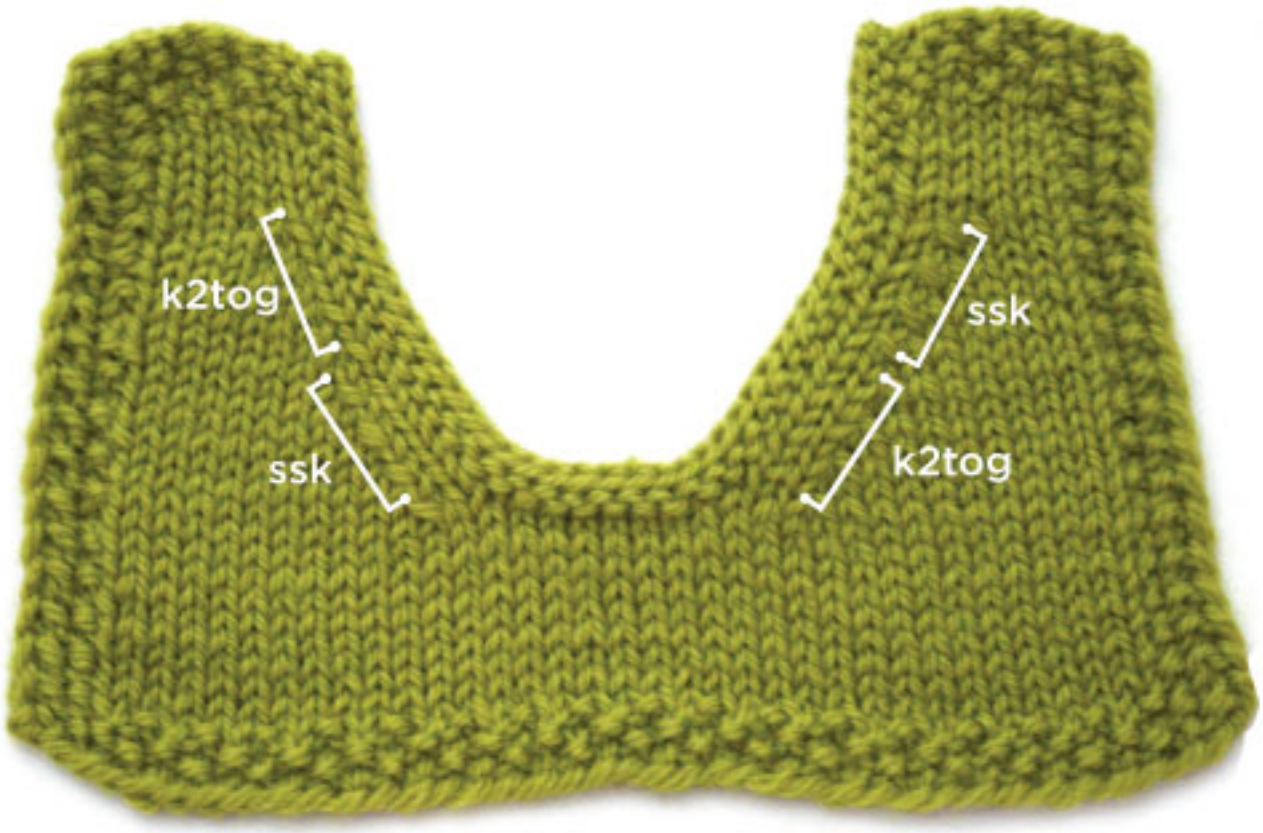
The left-leaning decrease most commonly seen in older patterns is slip one, knit one, pass slipped stitch over (sl 1, k1, psso). Not too long ago, this was the standard solution when a left-leaning decrease was needed to mirror the k2tog. When the slipped stitch is passed over the knit stitch, it tends to get a bit enlarged, stealing yarn from the preceding stitch and making the decrease more prominent. This decrease has largely been discarded in favor of ssk.

Symmetrical Decreases

A line of decreases can be a design feature in a garment. For this purpose, use mirrored decreases as shown in the two samples that follow.

You can use the decreases to emphasize a line, such as the curve of a neckline or the diagonal of a raglan, by working decreases that slant away from the edge. In the neck sample, the lower section has k2tog decreases at the left neck and ssk decreases at the right neck. To soften the line, work decreases which slant into the edge. In the upper section of the neck sample, ssk was worked at the left neck and k2tog was worked at the right neck.

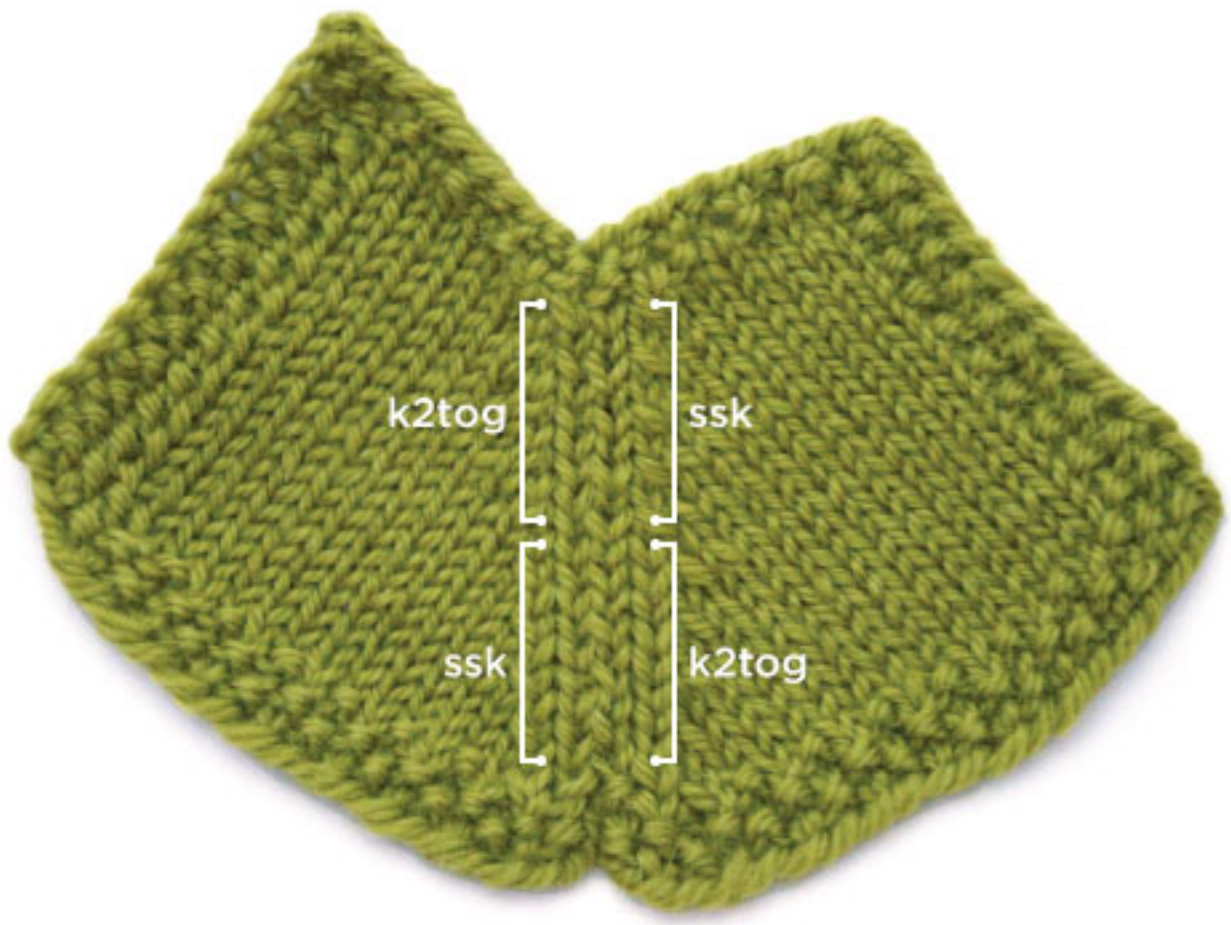
Phoca PDF



Decreases can be used to emphasize the curve of a neckline.

In the raglan sample, the lower half has k2tog to the right of the seam, and ssk to the left of the seam. The upper half has ssk to the right of the seam, and k2tog to the left. Again, decreases that slant away from the edge create a strong line. Decreases that lean into the edge are less obvious.

Phoca PDF



Decreases that slant away from the edge create a strong line.
Decreases that lean into the edge are less obvious.

Double Decreases

Double decreases reduce three stitches into one. They can lean to the left, lean to the right, or be centered.

The right-leaning double decrease is knit three together (k3tog). In this decrease, the stitch on the left-hand side is stacked on top of the other two stitches.

The left-leaning double decrease that mirrors k3tog is slip, slip, slip, knit (sssk). To work this decrease, slip three stitches individually as if to knit, insert the left hand needle in the front of these three stitches, and knit them together through the back loops. Because the orientation of the stitches is changed when they are slipped, the right-hand stitch can be stacked on top without twisting the stitches.

Phoca PDF

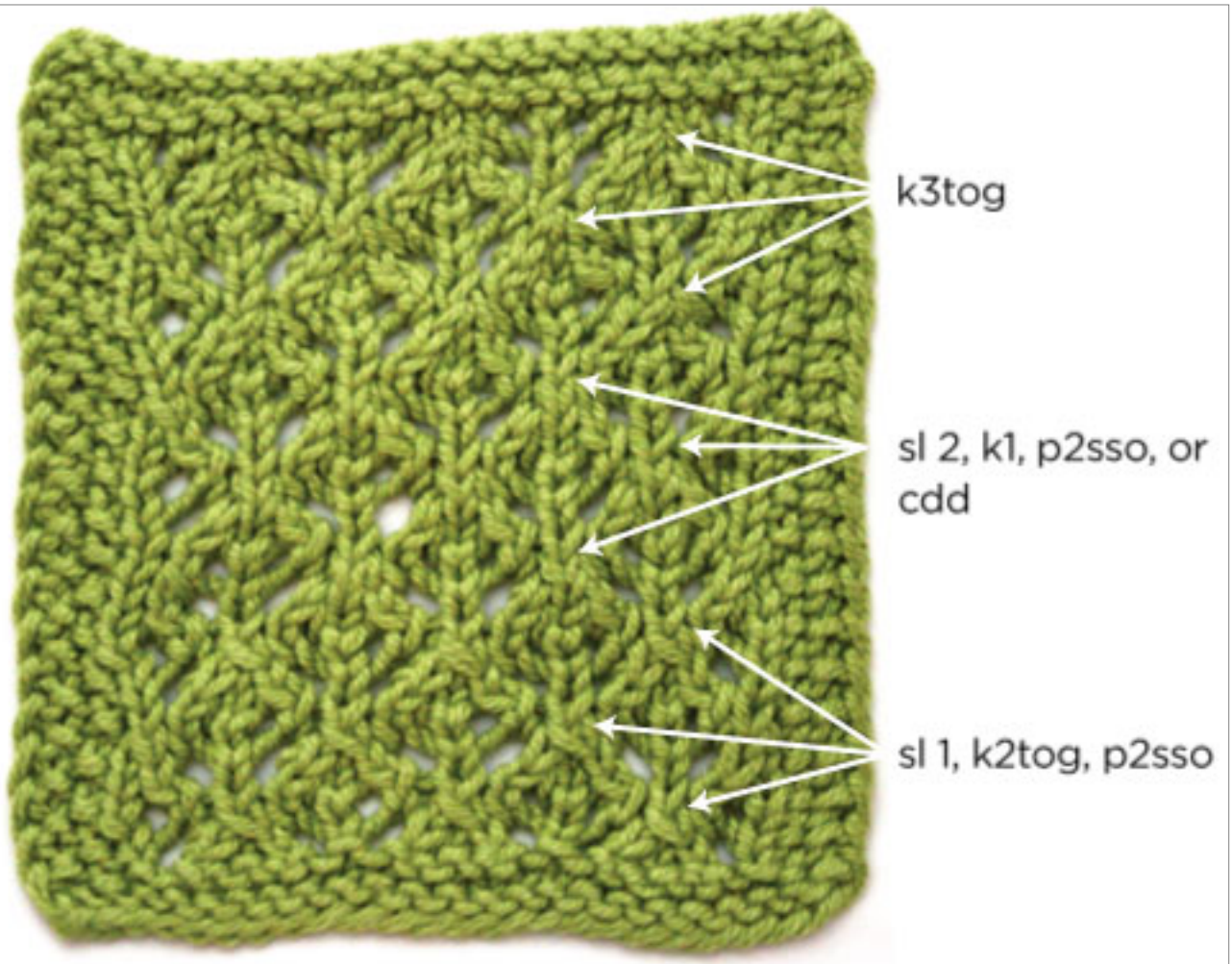
sl 1, k2tog, psso

Another left-leaning double decrease is slip one, knit two together, pass slipped stitch over (sl 1, k2tog, psso). While the right hand stitch ends up on the top of the group, the center stitch falls to the bottom, emphasizing the two outer stitches coming together in the center.

s2kp2 or cdd

The centered double decrease is slip two, knit one, pass two slipped stitches over (s2kp2, or cdd). To work this decrease, slip the first two stitches together as if you were going to knit them together, knit the next stitch, them pass the two slipped stitches over the stitch just knit. This decrease stacks the center stitch on top, emphasizing the vertical line of the decrease.

Phoca PDF



Double decreases are most frequently used in lace patterns.

The three different types of double decrease are most frequently used in lace patterns, where the choice of decrease can have a huge impact on the appearance of the fabric. The lower portion of this swatch uses the sl 1, k2tog, psso decrease. Notice that the top of each diamond shows a strong diagonal lean to the left. The center section of the swatch is worked with a s2kp2 decrease. The vertical line up the center of each diamond is the strongest element in this section. At the top of the swatch, the k3tog was used. This section shows a strong diagonal lean to the right.

Knitter's Choice

With such an array of options, how do you choose? Most patterns will tell you which decrease to use, but you need not feel limited by the designer's choices. While you are making your gauge swatch, play with different decreases to see how they look in your yarn and stitch pattern. Use the

decreases that give you the look you like best. It's all about knowing the options and making the choice that pleases you.

Right-Leaning Single Decreases

Knit Two Together

Purl Two Together

Left-Leaning Single Decreases

Slip, Slip, Knit

Slip, Slip, Knit Variation

Slip, Slip, Purl

Knit Two Together Through the Back Loops

Purl Two Together Through the Back Loops

Slip, Knit, Pass Slipped Stitch Over

Right-Leaning Double Decreases

Knit Three Together

Purl Three Together

Left-Leaning Double Decreases

Slip, Slip, Slip, Knit

Slip One, Knit Two Together, Pass Slipped Stitch Over

Slip, Slip, Slip, Purl

Centered Double Decrease

Centered Double Decrease

Download a handy pdf with Decoding Decreases and instructions for all of the decreases.

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 knittinginwinecountry.blogspot.com.

Phoca PDF