

Free-Motion-Quilting Advice for Beginners

Like every skill, FMQ requires time, patience and lots of practice. Don't be discouraged if you don't get it perfect right away!

A Few Things to Do Before You Even Start:

Build up arm strength. FMQ uses muscles we don't normally use, so if you're just starting out or haven't done it in a while, expect some pain. To lower the chances of that, you can do some exercises to build small muscles in the hands, forearms and shoulders, such as squeezing a [Finger Exerciser Grip Ball](#). You can also do warm-up exercises right before sewing.

Start small. Starting on a small piece that can sit flat on your table is a good idea. This will allow you to practice and learn without having to worry about managing bulk. Once you get comfortable, move on to larger quilts.

Begin simple. Start with simple patterns. Trace an inked pattern, or have fun playing with different fill stitches to see which ones come naturally to you. You can move to more complex patterns as you get better.

Draw the pattern on paper. Before you start stitching, use a pen on paper to draw the pattern you want to quilt. This will help set the designs in your mind, and also build up muscle control and memory.

Prepare little quilt sandwiches for warm up, practice and testing. Stitch on those for five minutes before you start working on the actual quilt. This will also help build muscle memory and test your machine settings (see below).

Get Supporting Equipment:

Things that can help better your grip:

Gloves to help control the motion. Different gloves work for different people. These are some options:

- **FMQ gloves** such as [Machingers gloves](#) or [Wonder Grip gloves](#).
- **Garden gloves** with sticky bumps on the palm. Some people cut the fingers off.
- **Disposable lab gloves.**
- **Playtex gloves.** Some people prefer to cut them up so they place their hands on them but not IN them. This allows to keep the hands free while still having the grip of the glove.
- **Fingerless bicycling gloves** also give the benefit of extra grip while keeping fingers free to manipulate the thread.

Purchase a bottle of glycerine at your local drug store. It's a clear liquid and relatively cheap. Put a few drops in your palm and rub your hands together. This will give you a good grip on your quilt and eliminate the need for gloves. The glycerine is safe for your quilt and does not leave any residue.

A **quilt halo ring**. It is weighted and tacky—easy to handle without tiring hands.

A **hoop**.

Things to help you see better:

Invest in **good light**.

Magnifying glasses. These will allow you to see well while sitting upright without having to crouch down.

A helpful tip if you use a knee lift:

Buy a **large pool noodle**, so as not to let your knee stretch for the knee lift. You can attach the large pool noodle to your knee lift with rubber bands, so that it reduces the distance between your knee and the lift.

Take Care of the basics:

Take **good care of your machine**.

Use the **correct needle** (people recommend top-stitch needles). Make sure it's not blunt or bent.

Use **good thread**.

Prepare Your Work Area:

Raise your chair a few inches, so that your elbows are above the table and parallel to it (at a 90 degree angle). Your chair should be higher than it is for normal stitching. If your hands are below the table, you will need to lift your elbows to move your arms, and that will strain your shoulders. They will ache, as will your neck and the rest of your body.

Make sure you have good light (see above), so that you can easily see what you're doing.

Make your work surface slippery.

- By using a teflon sheet.
- By applying several coats of Mr. Sheen spray (without getting any into your machine).

Arrange ways to carry the quilt's weight. This is especially important with big quilts. **Never let the quilt drag off the table!**

- If you have a special quilting cabinet, raise its back shelf to support the weight.
- If you don't have such a table, put extra tables, boxes, an ironing board or any other piece of furniture that is the same height as your sewing table behind your table. The **entire weight** of your quilt should be resting on something, and not dragging off the table. Even a loose corner can make a difference.

- Roll the sides of your quilt so it fits into the throat area of the machine. You can use [clips](#) bought at quilt stores, or large hair clips.
- Some people put ceiling hooks above their work area, with adjustable suspension and clips to hold the work up.
- If you can't arrange for any of the above, be ready to drape your quilt into your lap and up onto your shoulders.

Set your machine:

Lower feed dogs.

Lower the machine speed to half of what you normally use.

Lower stitch length.

Lower top tension.

Test First:

Once you have everything set up, it's a good idea to first test the settings on a small sandwich that is identical to your quilt (same top and back fabrics and same batting). Go straight, in curves, play around. See if everything is working the way it should.

When Free Motion Quilting:

Correct Ergonomics is important! Pay attention to your **posture**.

- Keep **shoulders DOWN**. If you notice yourself pulling them up, stop, breath, walk around.
- Your knees should be parallel to the floor and your table low enough to have your elbows parallel to the table, as mentioned above.
- Some people stick a note to the machine reminding themselves to notice **POSTURE**. Write a **Shoulders Down** note and attach it to your machine.

Switch legs. Some people like to alternate their feet as they sew (though that might not work for everyone).

Begin quilting in the middle of the quilt and work outwards.

Bunch your quilt around the middle, so that only the part you're sewing on is flat.

Quilt in small amounts of space, repositioning your hands and quilt often.

Keep your hands LIGHT on the quilt. If you push down hard it is like driving a car with the handbrake on because you are effectively stopping the fabric from sliding.

Keep movement fluid and don't set rigid rules for your quilting.

Remember that you don't need to hurry. **Going slow is OK**. Fast feet, slow hands.

Pay attention to where you look: keep your eyes on where you are **going**, not on where you are ("it's like driving a car. Keep your eyes on the road ahead, not on the steering wheel! You will get nice smooth lines and curves if you stop watching the needle go up and down, and instead focus your eyes just ahead

of the needle in the direction you are sewing, so you are constantly aiming at that pathway. Focus where you can see out ahead of the foot—not too far.”)

Remember to blink, so that your eyes don't dry out.

Relax!

- Breathe.
- Never hunch.
- Tell your machine you are the boss.
- If you're the kind of person who likes working with **music**, put some on to keep you relaxed and dictate tempo. Some people like to **hum**.
- Drink a glass of wine or two ;-)

Remember that stitch evenness improves when you relax.

Take Breaks. Stand every 20-30 minutes and stretch your back, hands on hips, stomach out. Shake out your hands, arms and shoulders with a range of motion exercises. Also flex back and walk around to stretch your legs.

Last but not least: **avoid comparing** your work to others! Everyone started somewhere. Play, experiment, and keep on practicing!