

## *Lace Knitting Basics by Sivia Harding*

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Lace is not mindless knitting. It is mindful knitting, in the best sense of the word. Find some mental focus, a good light to knit by, and a few basic bits of knowledge, and you have the world of lace at your needle tips. There is a quiet, satisfying rhythm to lace knitting that can be very addictive!

People have a general misconception about lace knitting as being really hard to do - that to knit lace, you need extremely fine yarn, tiny needles and a pattern that makes you dizzy with its complexity. Let me dispel these notions once and for all.

Lace knitting can be easy or as hard as you like, as pleasingly simple as a row of eyelets on a baby's sweater or as complicated as the most gossamer Shetland shawl. You can knit lace out of absolutely any yarn, including super bulky. And even the most complex of lace patterns can be boiled down to simple elements that almost anyone can understand and knit.

### *Yarnovers*

Lace gets its look from decorative holes that are part of the knitted fabric. These holes are made with yarnovers (yo). How hard is it to simply wind your yarn around your needle once? That's how hard it is to make a yarnover. Yarnovers always begin at the front of your work, then go over the needle from front to back, like this:

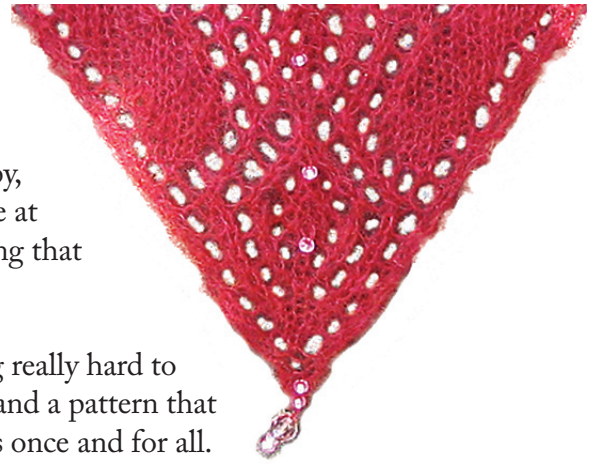


Yarnovers are always made this way, no matter whether you are knitting or purling, although when you are purling the yarn has a little farther to go because it has to come to the front of your work first. The yarnover creates a brand new loop that is counted as a stitch.

### *Single Decreases*

Unless you want your overall stitch count to increase, you need to balance each yarnover with a decrease. Each increase (yarnover) needs one decrease in order to keep the stitch count even. Single decreases decrease the stitch count by one (as opposed to double decreases which decrease the stitch count by two). There are two common single decreases in lace knitting, the same as in other types of knitting: knit 2 together (k2tog) and slip, slip, knit (ssk), which used to be called skp (slip 1, knit 1, pass slipped stitch over). The k2tog decrease leans toward the right like this (/); the ssk or skp leans toward the left. like this (\) These, by the way, are called mirrored decreases and are commonly used this way to balance the look and biasing tendencies of lace patterns. There are also purl decreases that lean to the right and left, but we won't cover those here because most simple knitted lace patterns rows are worked on the right side.

Here is a detailed how-to of the single decreases. K2tog is pretty easy - just knit two stitches together as one stitch. Simple.



Ssk is a slightly more mysterious process that is much harder to describe than it actually is to do. Start by transferring two stitches over to the right needle by slipping them one at a time knitwise (as if you were going to knit them). Now, put the left needle tip through the loops. (This puts both needle tips through the same loops, for just a minute.) Lastly, loop the yarn around the right needle tip and bring it through and out, which knits the two stitches together through the backs of the loops. Truly, it is as quick as a bunny to do this, even though it sounds complicated. Just try it once and you'll be convinced. Really.

If you really just can't get the hang of the ssk, then by all means resort to the tried and true skp, done as follows: transfer one stitch to the right needle by slipping it knitwise, then knit the next stitch. Now pass the slipped stitch over the knitted stitch. Not quite as elegant as the ssk, but it gets the job done.

### *Double Decreases*

Double Decreases reduce the stitch count by two, which means that there are *usually* two yarnover increases to keep the balance within a lace pattern (there are notable exceptions). Double decreases also lean to the left or right. There are three, with one being by far the most common: sk2p, or spelled out, slip 1 stitch knitwise, k2tog, pass slipped stitch over the k2tog. You may rarely find the other two double decreases, but here they are: s2kp, and k3tog. S2kp has you slip 2 stitches knitwise, knit 1 stitch, then pass the 2 slipped stitches over the last one. K3tog is self explanatory.

There you have it... the basics of lace knitting! Now that wasn't so hard, was it? Believe it or not, these basics form myriads of knitted lace patterns, some simple and some exceedingly complex. But even the most complex can be broken down into the simple building blocks of knit stitches, purl stitches, yarnovers, and decreases.

### *Reading Your Lace Knitting*

Most knitters are able to find where they are in a fair isle or texture pattern because it is easy to look at their knitting and see where a color lines up with a color in the previous row (in the case of fair isle) or knit/purl stitches (in the case of textured knitting). You can spot mistakes quickly by seeing if the colors or stitches are lining up properly.

You can do the same with you lace knitting! Lace patterns have motifs that repeat just like stranded color patterns do. It does take a bit of practice to see the patterns emerging in the yarnovers and decreases, but not perhaps as much as you might think.

Note that you will have to LOOK at your knitting from time to time and compare it with the chart in order to ascertain whether it is really lining up, just as you would stop your color stranding from time to time as you knit and take a look to see if everything is lining up as it should. This is called reading your lace knitting.

### *Charts*

In a knitting chart, one square equals one stitch. Charts are read from the bottom to the top row. Also, the convention is to read right side charts from right to left, and wrong side charts from left to right.

Once you bring yourself to get comfortable with reading charts, your lace knitting gets a jump start for speed and accuracy. Chart reading gives you an immediate visual connection with your knitting, and you

can see right away when something is not matching up, and spotting mistakes becomes much easier too.

There are two different schools of chart writing. One way of charting portrays knitting the way it looks from the right or public side of the work. In this type of chart, the same symbol is used for a knit stitch on the right side and a purl stitch on the wrong side (for stockinette stitch). The other type of chart shows what you actually do in your knitting - if you are knitting the stitch, the knit symbol is used; if you are purling the stitch, the purl symbol is used, no matter on which side of the work these stitches occur.

My charts are of the second type, which I feel takes less thinking to decipher, especially for the wrong side rows. What you see is what you get.

### *Rhythm*

When you get the hang of a lace pattern, or get to the point where just a glance at the chart now and then is sufficient to keep you on track, you can develop a rhythm in your knitting that is soothing and even hypnotic. Some knitters will say the cadence of stitches out loud or to themselves until their hands learn it: yarnover, knit 2 together, yarnover, ssk... Other knitters are more visual and will quickly memorize the picture of stitches on the chart.

I call this the “learn” and the “burn”. It is a very nice feeling to “burn” on a lace pattern, your hands almost moving by themselves. It is an art to design lace patterns that have this capability for rhythm.

### *Lifelines*

Lifelines can increase your confidence, I have heard. I can offer some tips on using them that I have heard from other lace knitters but can't speak from experience as I don't use them personally.

Lifelines are smooth knitting yarn or dental floss that is run through the stitches on a plain knit or purl row after a pattern row that you are sure is correct. The stitches are moved to the cable part of a circular needle, which gives an extra bit of room in order to pass a tapestry needle threaded with yarn or floss through the stitch loops. Leave plenty of slack yarn or floss so your knitting can be stretched to its full width without the lifeline puckering, and you might want to tie the ends together so it doesn't come out. You want to avoid running the lifeline through stitch markers as they won't be able to advance from row to row after being attached! Consider using white yarn or floss so the color won't run in your final piece, and you might want to leave it in until after blocking, just to make sure to catch any dropped stitches in your piece.

How often you put lifelines in your work is up to the knitter. At first, you might want to put them in every few rows.

### *Gauge, Needle Size, and Swatching*

Lace does not depend on gauge in terms of fit because you are not making a garment where a specific gauge **MUST** be achieved in order to get a good fit. Gauge is still important, but more of a subjective decision when it comes to lace.

What you are looking for is a lace that looks balanced and pleasing to your eye and balanced. Do the yarnover holes look huge compared to the size of the yarn? Do the garter or stockinette sections read as what they are supposed to be, or is the fabric knit so loosely that it could be lace in itself?

These are individual judgements. What you think is perfect lace may not be perfect for someone else, and that's fine. Go by your feelings - you will usually just know when it is right, or at least right enough to proceed. If not, then try again with a bigger or smaller needle.

If you find the perfect needle for your yarn, but your swatch tells you that your finished piece will be significantly smaller or larger than the pattern sample, you can sometimes adjust the size of your piece by adding or subtracting widthwise and lengthwise repeats. Some shapes are more conducive than others to adjustment.

In any case, do swatch your lace before you begin, and do block your swatch.

I am a lazy swatch blocker, so I usually just knit a few inches of my final piece, then leaving it on its circular needle, wet it in the sink with a bit of Eucalan or dish detergent, press in a towel to dry, then stretch it to its fullest extent widthwise and lengthwise (while retaining its proper proportion) and pin. When it is dry, unpin your swatch and judge whether it is pleasing or could use some adjustment. This is a good test if you have handpainted yarn that you want to use in a lace pattern, too. Some lace patterns are wonderful with handpainted yarns, some are not, and all handpainted yarns are different from one another. Swatching is necessary to see whether your particular combination works well together.

But, in general, don't worry about the stitches per inch as much as the look of your blocked lace.

## *Blocking*

I like to block my lace pretty severely, really stretching the piece out to its fullest extent widthwise and lengthwise while still maintaining the proper proportion. I find that this dramatically improves the drape and gossamer quality of the final garment.

There is no art to blocking lace, really, but as you do it more, you get a feel for how much a particular garment wants to be stretched.

I block my garments on a clean carpet. Some prefer to block on a spare bed or a piece of insulation. Whatever you have to block your garments on, start with a gentle washing of the piece in lukewarm water and a bit of Eucalan or dish detergent. Rinse if necessary, then press in a towel gently to dry.

I generally start blocking the top or center of the garment first (depending on the shape I am blocking) and anchor that area first. If I am using pins, I use lots of them, and anchor them as well as I can, as these pins will be pulled the most. If I am using blocking wires, I thread the wire(s) through every couple of stitches close to the edge and anchor the wire with pins. If I am using nylon fishing line, I thread it through every couple of stitches and pull taut, anchoring the ends with pins.

If I am blocking from the center out, as for instance a circular shawl, I run blocking wires or fishing line at intervals like equal pieces of a pie and stretch the piece from the center out, as evenly as possible. Then the outer circumference can be pinned or blocked with wires or line.

If I am blocking from the top down and it is a triangular or Faroese scarf or shawl, I pull the center down first and anchor it, then proceed alternately and as evenly as possible to right and left of center, until I am back at the top edges.

If I am blocking a rectangular stole, I start with one short end, then run wires or line down the long edges and stretch lengthwise and widthwise, keeping the proportion true. I end with the second short side. After the first “stretch”, I get a tape measure and make sure that measurements of all sides or edges match. Keep adjusting until everything measures up. Let dry.

There is a magic moment when your piece is unpinned from its blocking spot and raised up off the floor or bed... it comes alive! What was once a pile of lifeless knitting has acquired a personality! This moment takes my breath away every time... I hope all of you have many happy blocking experiences too.

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