



# THE THREAD THAT BINDS

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## *or quilts!*

How can a quilter walk into a quilt shop without feeling like the doors to a candy store have just flung open? One can never have “too much fabric or too much chocolate.” If fabric is like a big slice of chocolate cake, then thread is the fudge icing on top!

In the past, quilts were stitched together by hand with plain cotton thread, in a choice of two fabulous colors—white or off white. Black thread was prevalent in Amish quilts, but for the most part, quilting thread choices were limited. Now you can stroll down the vendor aisles at quilt shows and see large booths devoted strictly to thread! Cotton thread still has a foothold in the quilting arena, but has lost much of its traction to modern polyester threads that promise colorfastness, strength, durability, and lint-free quilting.

If thinking about polyester conjures up images of John Travolta in a 1970s leisure suit, girating under a disco ball, then you’ve spent too much time watching old movies and not enough time in the quilt shop! Polyester has come a long way since the days of plaid pant suits. A wide array of poly thread is available—from variegated thread that looks like it was dipped in a rainbow to solids that are nearly indistinguishable from cotton thread.

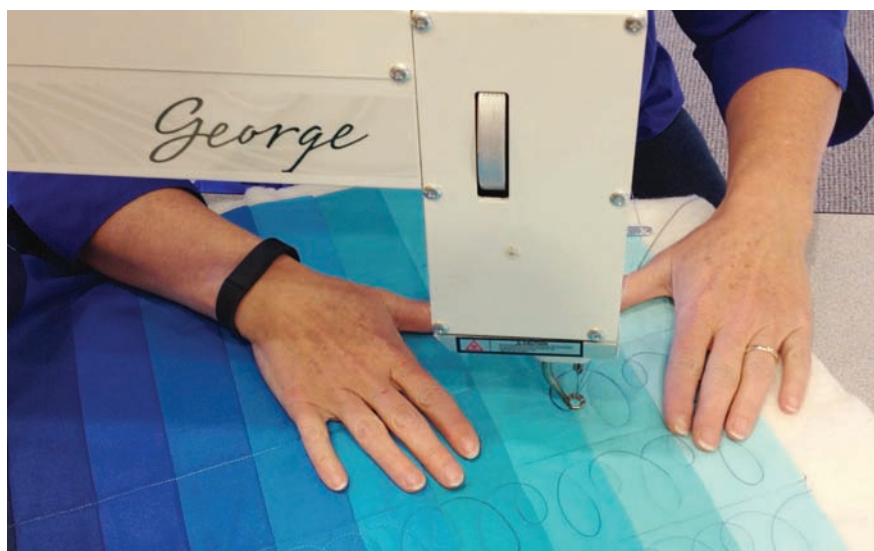
Quilting folklore holds that polyester thread will eventually cut through cotton fabric, leaving a quilt torn to shreds by the very thread meant to hold it together. While this may have occurred with some

early polyester fibers, today’s products are far superior. In fact, polyester thread is the smart choice for quilts that will receive lots of wear or will be washed often. Wet quilts are extremely heavy, and the strain that washing machine agitation puts on the quilt can easily snap cotton thread—especially lines stitched on the stretchy bias of the fabric.

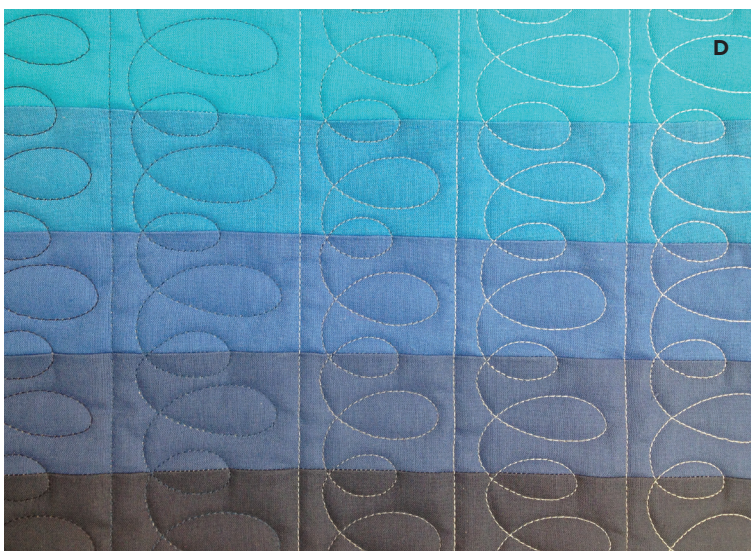
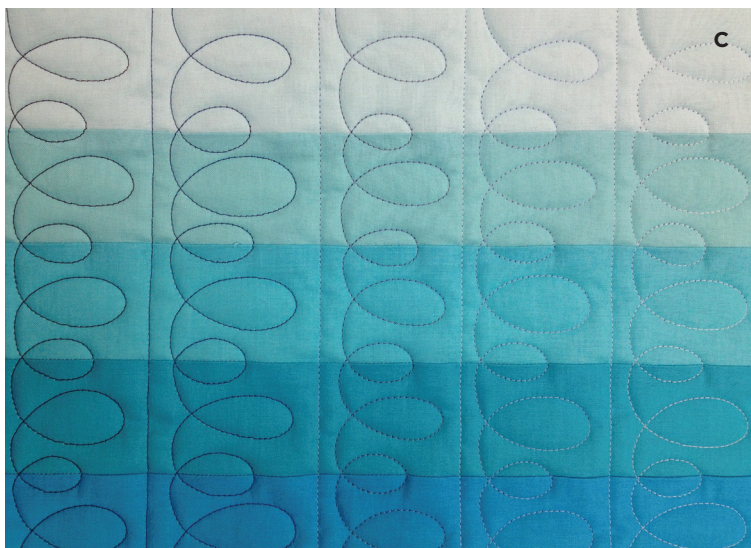
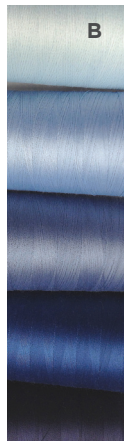
When deciding between cotton and polyester thread, consider the quilt’s intended use. If you find cotton thread more aesthetically pleasing and are not concerned about washing the quilt often,

then select cotton thread with a long staple that has been mercerized. This will help reduce lint buildup in your machine, which can increase tension problems. Choose polyester when you want to wash the quilt often since this thread will not absorb moisture like cotton. It also leaves very little lint residue to clog up your sewing machine.

In addition to choosing between polyester and cotton thread, quilters now have a choice of thread thickness. Thread weight becomes a design element just as much as fabric color or even the



Audition your thread and quilting designs on a sample before stitching on your quilt.



thread color. Unfortunately, the standards for measuring thread are not universal.

Over the years, thread was manufactured in different countries, and each developed its own measuring system. The French developed Denier for continuous filament thread; the English created Cotton Count as a unit of measure for their threads, and over time, as the metric system gained popularity, the Metric Count developed. Eventually thread producers created a more consistent measuring method called Tex, but not every manufacturer uses this system to identify their thread. Therefore, quilters cannot easily compare a “40/3” thread from one company to a “40 wt” thread from another, since both could be using different measuring standards.

While you can find conversion charts that provide formulas to translate one sizing system to another, it can be quite complex. Once you become familiar with your favorite thread company’s measuring method, you may be able to determine whether “40 weight” thread is indeed thicker than a “60 weight” thread simply by studying the thread itself.

Your best bet may simply be to trust your eyes when comparing one thread to another. Take a look at the three spools of thread in *Photo A*. They are all very similar in color, but vary in manufacturer and thread weight. The cone on the left is a 30 wt thread from Superior Threads, the center cone is a 40 wt thread from Fil-Tec, and the cone on the right is a 60 wt thread from Superior Threads. You can see a distinct difference between the 30 wt thread and the other two threads. However, the distinction is less noticeable between the 40 wt and 60 wt threads.





E

If you want your thread to make a bold statement on your quilt, choose thicker thread. Select thinner thread when the piecing design is more important, or when you're simply trying to create texture.

Thread color also plays a significant role in your quilting. High contrasting thread will make your quilting design become the most prominent element in your quilt. Matching or blending thread will highlight the texture your quilting creates without drawing attention to the thread itself. Choosing thread one shade darker than the fabric can add depth and warmth to a quilt. It can also make that section of the quilt recede into the background. Moving one shade lighter than the fabric will create highlights and can make that section of the quilt appear to move to the foreground.

The photos illustrate how thread color impacts the quilt. The spools of thread in *Photo B* are all the same weight. They progress in value from light to dark. I've

stitched a simple design across fabric strips that also range from light to dark (*Photos C and D*). Notice how each thread color disappears in some of the strips, but makes a bold statement in others. In other fabric strips where the thread color is only a shade or two off from the fabric color, the thread seems more luminous, or makes the fabric feel richer with more depth.

Use this same process with variegated thread such as those in *Photo E* to understand how both the color progression and color interval impact your quilting. When the colors within the variegation have high contrast and are thick like the thread in *Photo F*, your thread will quickly bounce from adding highlights to adding dark sections in your quilt. With busy

fabric this may work. If your fabric reads as a solid, however, the contrast may be too strong. A very light blue section of thread that falls in a dark blue section of the quilt can look like a stray thread. If the variegations are too far apart, your quilting design will feel disconnected and splotchy. The thread pictured in *Photo G* shows a much more subtle variegation that will blend across many colors.

Audition thread color and thickness by puddling some of the thread across your quilt. This will give you a good idea about color choice, but may not help you decide whether the thread thickness is right for your project. When you piece your next quilt, sew narrow strips of your fabric together to test your quilting thread color and thickness. Quilt across the colors as I have done in the photo on page 76. If you intend to use the thread for background quilting or specific designs, be sure to try these techniques on your sample as well. You might change your mind once you see the finished test. Or you may simply fall in love with your choice. In that case...start quilting!



F



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