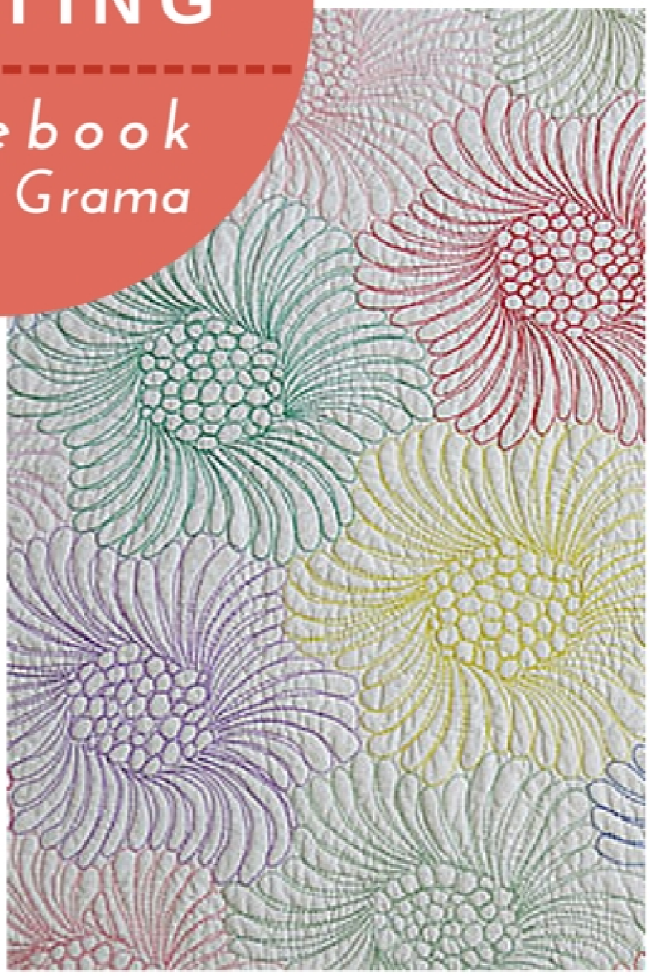
"No Stress" FREE MOTION QUILTING

free ebook

by Geta Grama



"You don't have to be great to start but you have to start to be great." Joe Sabah

Free motion quilting could intimidate a beginner quilter. But with the proper tools and a few tips, with practice and ambition, free motion quilting could become your new passion. Once you learn the basics, you will soon discover how wonderful it is to freely move the quilt under the needle.

In 14 years I have made many projects:
some were fun and easy and some were very challenging.
I have learned a lot from my own mistakes and now I am happy that you can learn from them too, without stress and countless hours of trials.
All I share here- big or little things, make my free motion quilting easier and faster. And FUN too.

The quotes included in this book are words of encouragement; I hope they inspire and help you start and improve your free motion quilting journey.

Let's start!

1. The Sewing Machine

For free motion quilting you need a darning (free motion) foot. You also have to drop the feed dogs.

The most important thing for a machine used for FMQ is the space under the arm- the bigger, the better.

My first machine was a Pfaff Select domestic machine.

Later I bought an industrial sewing machine ("Jack" brand, cousin of Juki, I suppose!).
It sews only straight stitches and my mechanic made some changes to it in order to attach a darning foot to it (borrowed from my Pfaff machine), you can see it in this picture.

The needles used on industrial machines are different than the ones used on domestic machines so that my mechanic also made some changes in order to use domestic topstitch and jeans needles (more about the needles on the next pages).

This machine was one of my best investments in quilting (I think it was no more expensive than the Pfaff machine). I bought it mainly for the large space under the arm, but it also has a few other great features.

You can see in these pictures how much of a quilt block can fit under the arm of my domestic Pfaff (7'') and how much can fit under the Jack's arm (10¼'').

While the difference in inches is not so big, in reality, when quilting, this difference is HUGE !!!

You can see in this picture that even a 100'' quilt (the whole quilt!) fits comfortably under the arm.

I keep my domestic machine for piecing and straight quilting with the walking foot and on the industrial machine I only free motion quilt.

In this way, I don't have to change feet when switching from piecing to FMQ, I don't have to change needles or continually adjust the thread tension.

Having two sewing machines gives you much freedom and saves a lot of time.

I know not many quilters can afford to buy two machines. But you don't have to buy both at the same time. If you are a beginner quilter, start first with a simple domestic machine. For basic patchwork and quilting you don't need a sophisticated embroidery machine that is very expensive. When (and if) you want to invest in a second machine, make sure it has different features than your first one.

I don't have enough words to recommend to you an industrial sewing machine (I saw Brother and Juki have similar machines). It's very robust (mine didn't need a repair in 5-6 years), speedier than a domestic machine and the large space under the arm is the best thing of all. You need a good mechanic that knows what changes are needed in order to attach the darning foot to it.

This machine is one of the reasons I enjoy FMQ so much, it really changed my sewing life!

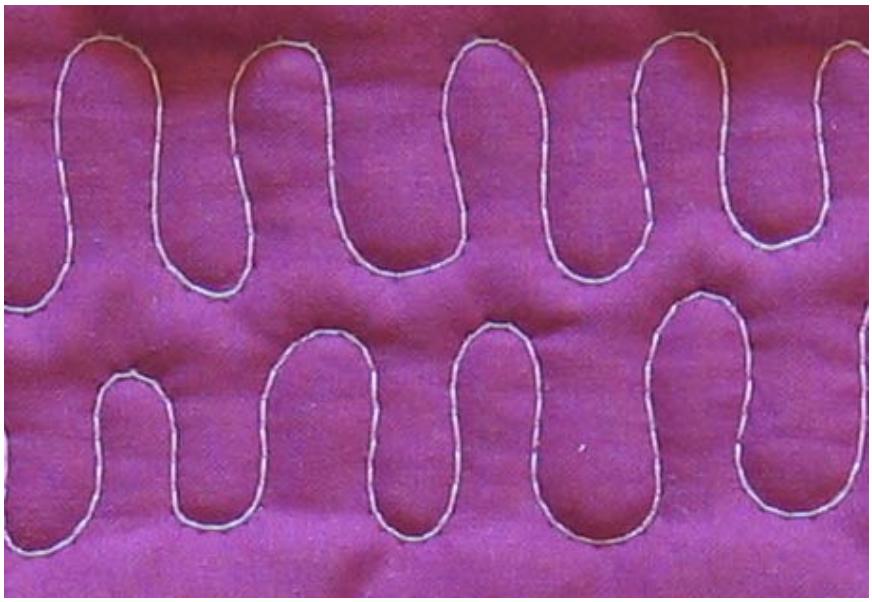
If you can't think of buying two machines, make sure you make the best choice and buy the machine of your dreams. I LOVE my old domestic machine: it is mechanical, sturdy, has only a few decorative stitches (anyway I don't use more than one or two). It wasn't a very expensive machine. I am afraid the new machines are different than this one: computerized, with many features that a quilter doesn't need and expensive. Maybe it is a good idea to try finding an old machine in good condition. And keep in mind that the space under the arm is the most important thing.

2. Know Your Sewing Machine

If you want to save hours and hours of frustration and keep your sanity, learn first how your sewing machine works. The biggest challenge is adjusting the thread tension. When working with the free motion quilting foot, you might need to adjust the tension of the top thread or bobbin thread.

If you are a beginner quilter, find someone to teach you how to do this - a friend, someone from the sewing machine dealer or from a quilt shop. You will learn a lot from your experience but it would be helpful to first understand all about the thread tension. Your ability to easily adjust the thread tension will grow over time, I am the proof: in my first months of quilting, I was spending as much as two hours in my desperate try to achieve the PERFECT tension.

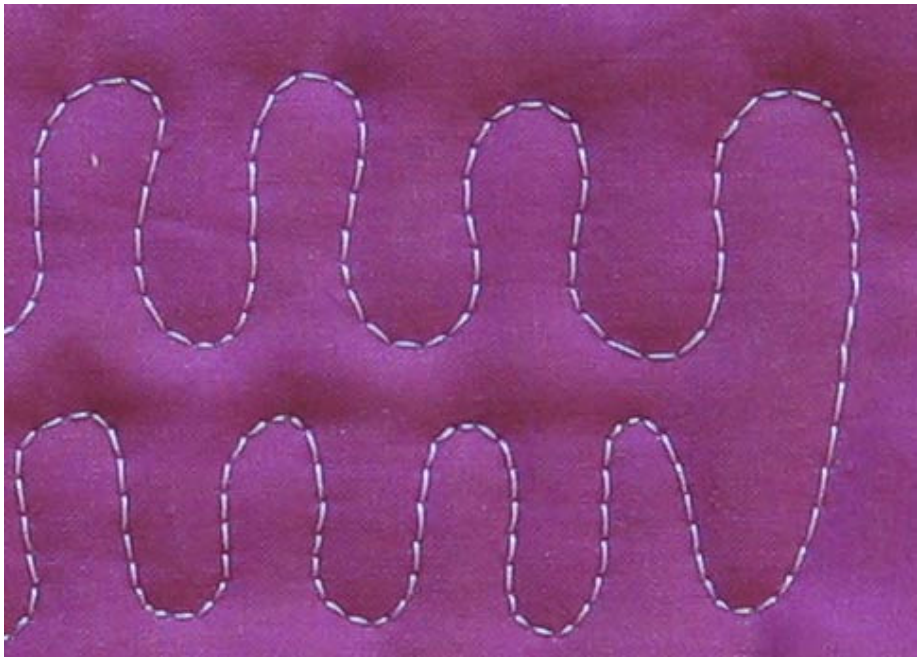
If you are a beginner quilter, DO NOT BOTHER so much with the perfection of your stitching. You may know very well what theory says about the perfect stitching but still you might not be so happy with the quality of your stitches. Perfect stitching comes with practice!



The same thing for the length of the stitches – having stitches of the same length is really the last thing I worry about.

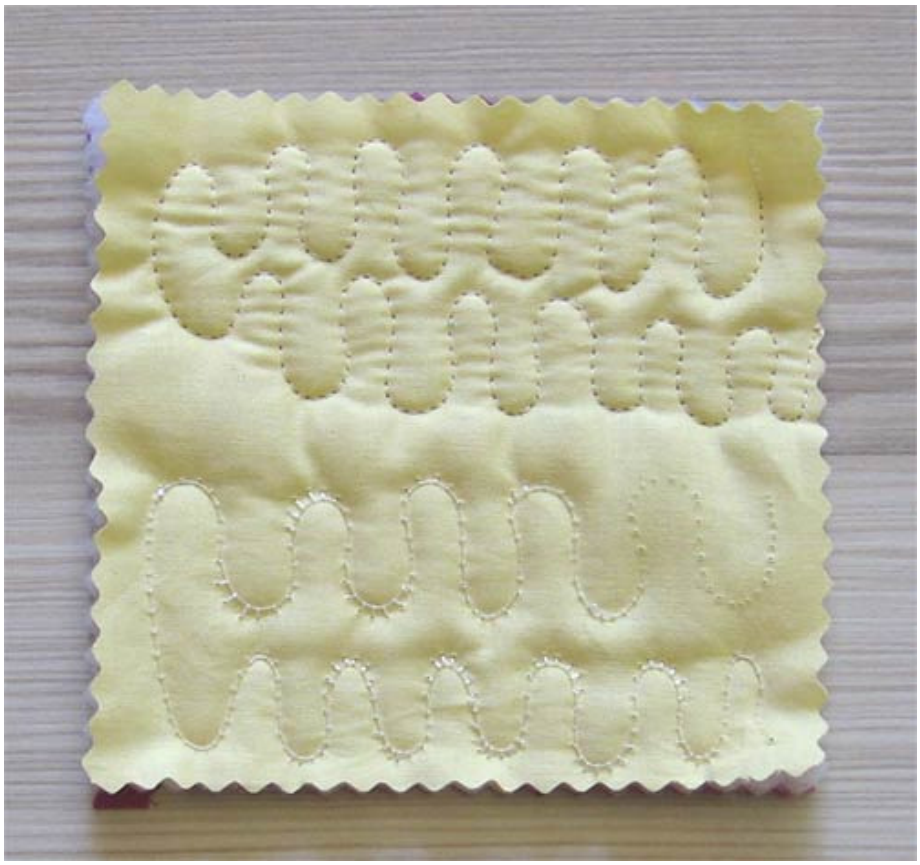
Here is a little help with thread tension.

In this picture:
- the top thread could be too tight, you have to loosen the thread tension;
- or the bottom thread could be too loose, then you have to tighten it.



In this picture the stitching is too loose; you have to tighten the top thread.

Don't be afraid to modify the tension setting; just do it in small increments.



One more example:
top thread too tight (the first stitching) and bobbin thread too loose (the second stitching).

You could learn a lot of things from the technical manual of your sewing machine, you just have to READ it!

Alos, care for your sewing machine.
Clean it often. **Oil** it according with the manufacturer's instructions.

It's a slow process but quitting won't speed it up.

3. Position of Hands While Quilting

This is the most important and helpful thing to me: I **don't** quilt with both hands on top of the quilt sandwich.

I keep on top only my left hand.

I keep the right hand under the quilt.

For me this position of hands is much more comfortable. I move the quilt around without difficulty and with no pain in my shoulders. I don't wear any type of gloves, I don't need them.

With the left hand I keep the quilt flat. I use the right hand to move the quilt.

I also use my left hand to move it around, but the right hand is mainly doing the job.

4. The Quilt Top and the Backing

If possible, starch all the fabric used in your quilt before starting to make the quilt. If you make a patchwork quilt, it will be easier to piece the blocks and your piecing will be more accurate. Other quilting techniques require starching the fabric too, so it is a great idea to have starch at hand all the time.

Starch the backing too, especially if it looks flimsy.

A starched top and backing will make your quilt sandwich stiff. It will be easier to baste it and to keep the layers flat while quilting.

5. The Batting

There are many batting types available for quilting, each one giving different look and texture to the quilt and quilting.
I found out that the easiest batting to work with is the cotton batting. The quilt top sticks nicely to it, leaving no room (almost) for creases.

"When you know better, you do better." ***Maya Angelou***

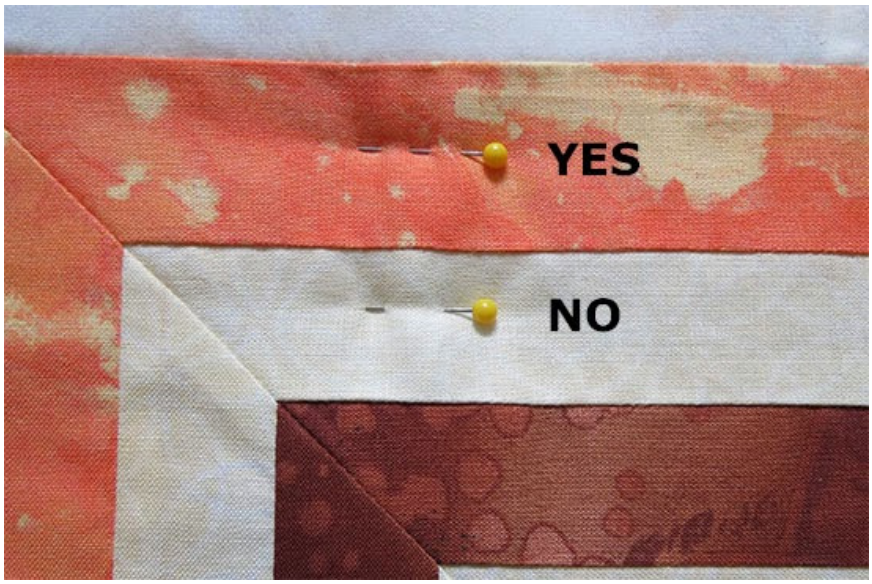
6. Basting the Quilt

I baste most of my big quilts on the floor and I found it is fast and easy. I use masking tape to secure the backing to the floor then I add the batting and the quilt top.

I use pins (instead of safety pins) to baste the quilt sandwich. I love using pins because I put them in quickly and I remove them quickly too.

Don't use pins on baby quilts! Or be careful to remove them all.

The pin basting is fast and easy. The pin goes all the way from front through the back. Try to keep the point of the pin in the batting, in this way the pins don't scratch your hands while working.



To be more effective the pining has to be done as in the picture.

The first way takes a little more time, but the pins are better attached to the quilt.

The second way is faster but as you handle the quilt, many of the pins will come out and this is very annoying. You have to pin again.

Also, it's better to catch less fabric, the pins will stay in place better.

The pins don't have to be long; just long enough to take two or three "stitches". Mine are 1.5'' long, but they are too long; shorter pins would have been even better.
Strong pins that don't curve easily and with sharp points are the best.

If the quilt is not too big I baste it on a table and I use clamps to stretch the backing fabric.

For small and medium quilts I use temporary adhesive spray to keep the layers together. It is a very fast and convenient technique, especially when the top contains appliqué pieces (as you don't have to pin through additional layers of fabric).

6. The Quilting Thread

A quality thread for free motion quilting is a must. But every machine is different and you have to find that thread. Test as many thread types as you can. If a thread keeps breaking, try another one. My machine loves Aurifil thread.

The sewing machine stitches best when using the same type of thread in the needle and in the bobbin.

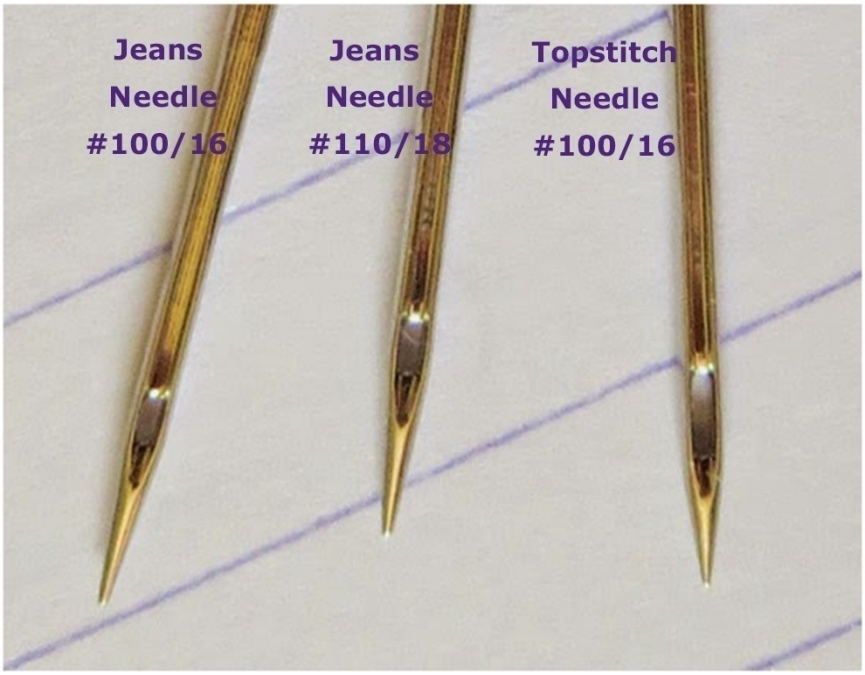
Honestly, I can't afford to use expensive thread in the bobbin (because that quality thread that my machine loves is not cheap at all) but if you do you will achieve a better looking stitching.

If you can choose between a thin and thick thread to work with in the bobbin, choose the thin thread. You will have fewer bobbins to wind.

Usually I quilt the whole quilt with the same thread, in a light neutral color - white, cream, beige, light gray; the main reason is that it looks great on light color fabric as well as on dark color fabric. When stitching with dark color thread on light color fabric it seems the mistakes are more evident).

Your best teacher is your last mistake.

7. The Needles



Years ago I started using topstitch needles for free motion quilting and it made a huge difference in my quilting.
One of the major frustrations when free motion quilting is thread breaking. You will LOVE or HATE free motion quilting, depending on how often your thread breaks.

On a few occasions, the topstitch needle wasn't of much help to me and out of necessity (and desperation) I tried a needle that is always in my drawer: the Jeans (denim) needle- this needle is AMAZING. I use the Schmetz brand and I am very happy with their quality.

See the difference between the needles: they have different eye and different point.
While the large eye of the topstitch needle is very important, I found out that the point of the needle is important as well.

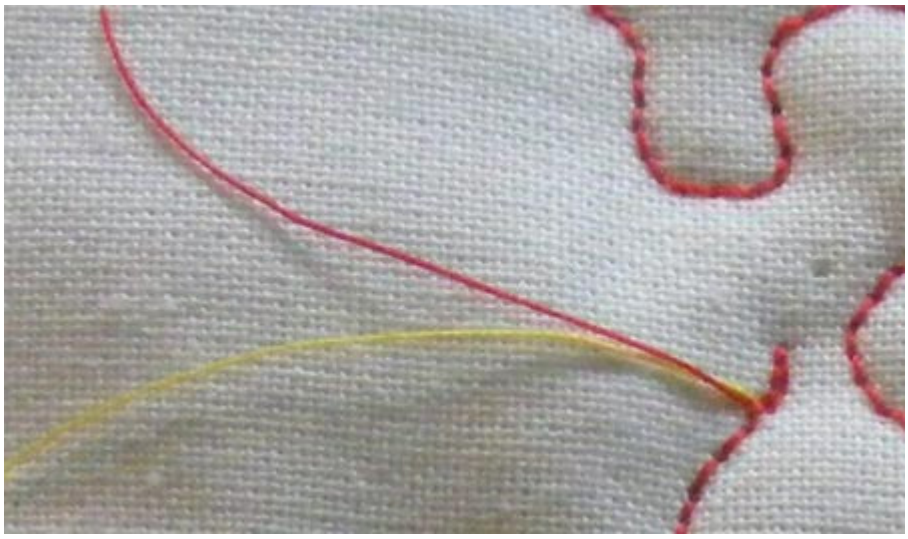
One more difference between the two needle types- the Jeans needle is available in the 110/18 size (sometimes you need the biggest needle), while the biggest topstitch needle is 100/16.

The Jeans needle is especially useful when quilting over the fusible raw edge appliqués or through many layers of fabrics …

… or when quilting with very thick thread (in this picture I used 12wt thread).

8. How to start the quilting stitching

I bring the bottom thread to the top.
Holding both threads securely, I start taking 3-4 tiny backstitches then I stitch forward.
I end the stitching in the same way.



I always try using the same color of thread in the needle and in the bobbin (in these pictures I used two colors for better understanding of this explanation).

And I like using the same color for the fabric on the back of the quilt. In this way if I can't get perfect stitches, the mistakes will not be very noticeable.

To avoid mistakes like this, I check the back of the quilt sandwich from time to time to make sure that I have good stitches on the back too.

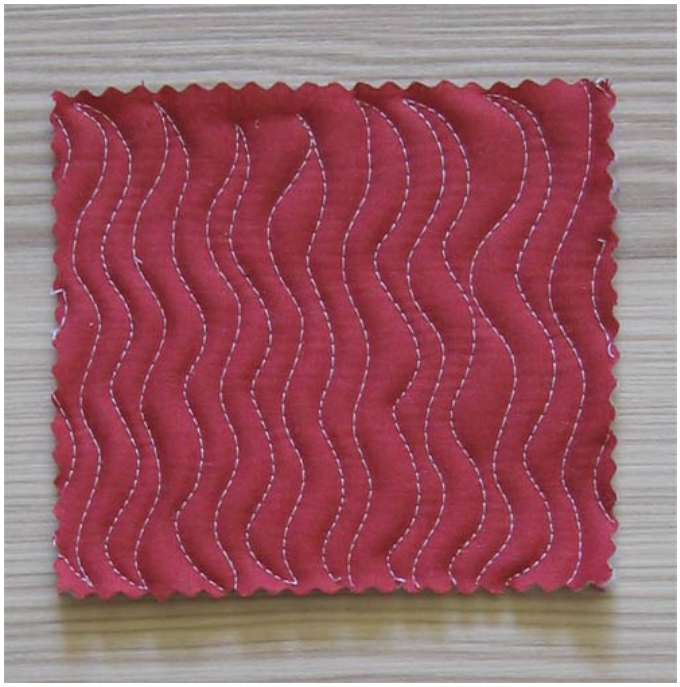
Some quilters like using a busy fabric on the back but I prefer to see the quilting.
If there are fabrics with busy patterns on top, the quilting will look nicer on the back than on the top.

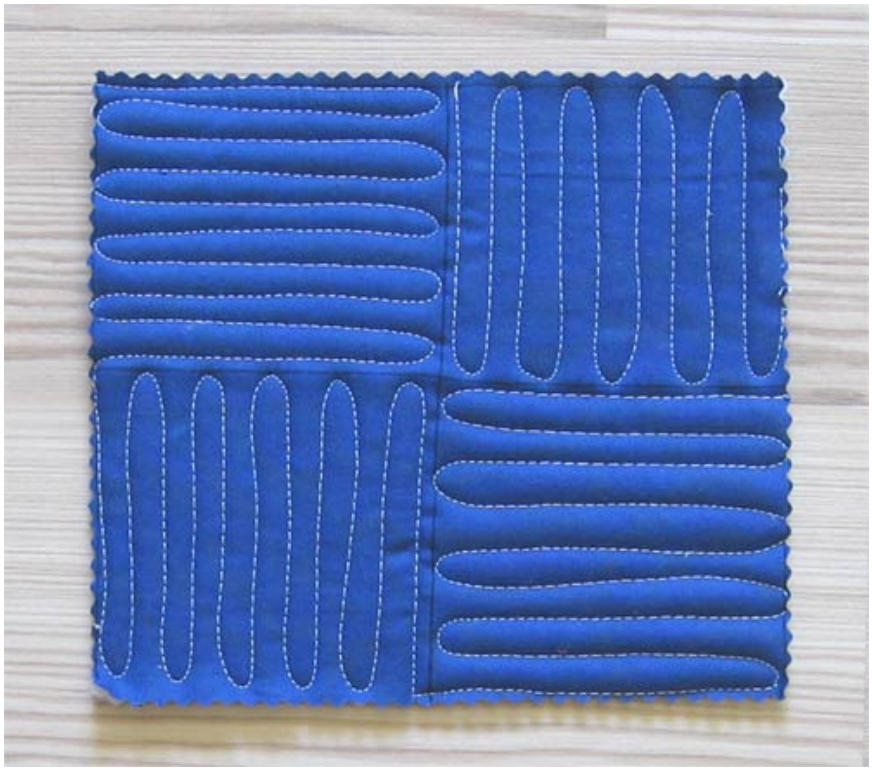
Strive for progress not perfection.

9. Examples of Free Motion Quilting

Straight versus Curved

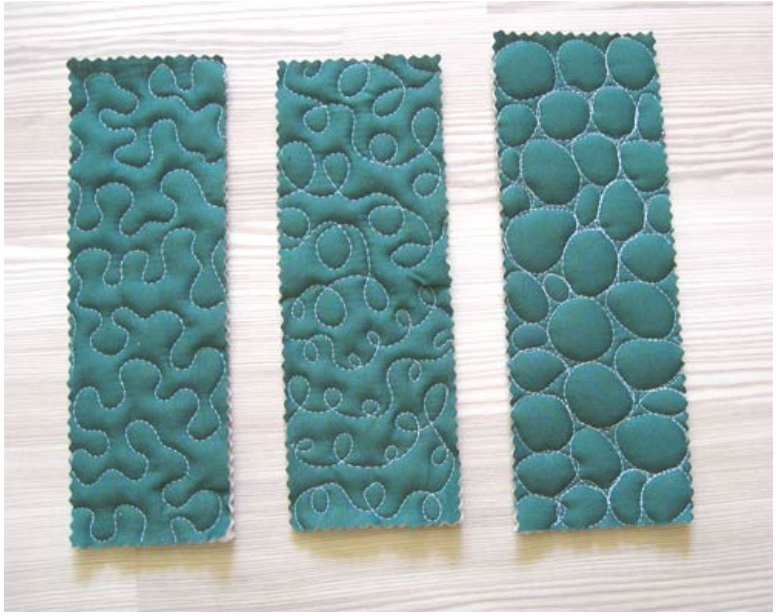
Stitching curves is easier than stitching straight lines!





Beautiful texture can be achieved using the same pattern for stitching, but stitched in different directions.

I don't like to transfer designs on fabric so I often free motion quilt without a pattern. One of the easiest ways is to stitch spirals following the shape of the patch you are stitching on.



There are many voices that say the stippling (to the left in this picture) is overused. I will never be bored by stippling. A busy pattern made with busy fabric doesn't need a fancy quilting- stippling is perfect for that.

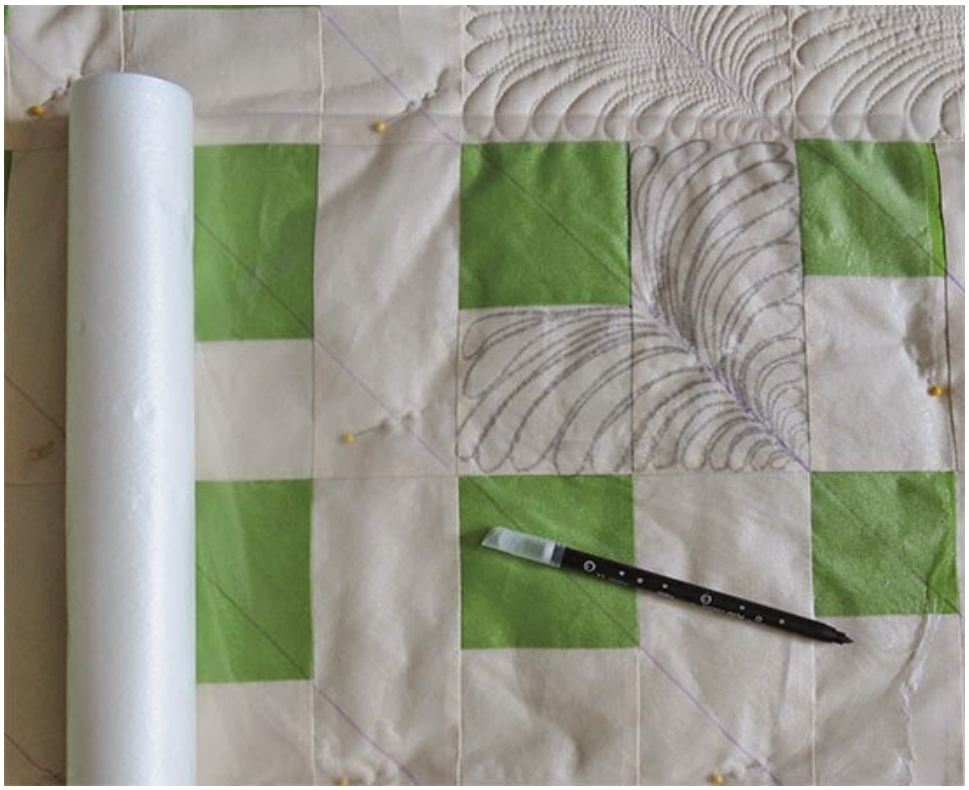
On my blog there is a tutorial on how to quilt feathers on hexagons. Using the same approach, feathers can easily be quilted on any other shape.

Here is the tutorial:
http://cadouri-din-inima.blogspot.ro/2013/07/how-to-quilt-hexagons.html

10. Auditioning Different Quilting Motifs

Not sure what quilting motif would look best on your quilt?

Place a piece of sealing wrap (or any other transparent material) onto the quilt sandwich.



With **water soluble marker** start doodling different motifs on the sealing wrap. Because it is transparent, you see how different motifs would look on your quilt. It's easy then to choose the favorite one.

Once you have made your decision, remove the sealing wrap and quilt as usual - only through the quilt sandwich.

11. Other Tips

Why is it harder to quilt large quilts?

It could be hard to quilt large quilts even on a machine with a generous space under the arm. If the quilt hangs off the edges of the table you work on, this will cause difficulties in moving the quilt around. When this happens, the quality of your quilting suffers.
So this is the golden rule for easy free motion quilting: **regardless of the size of the table you stitch on (I use a small one), you must keep the whole sandwich on the table at all times.** To achieve this, surround your sewing table with additional tables.

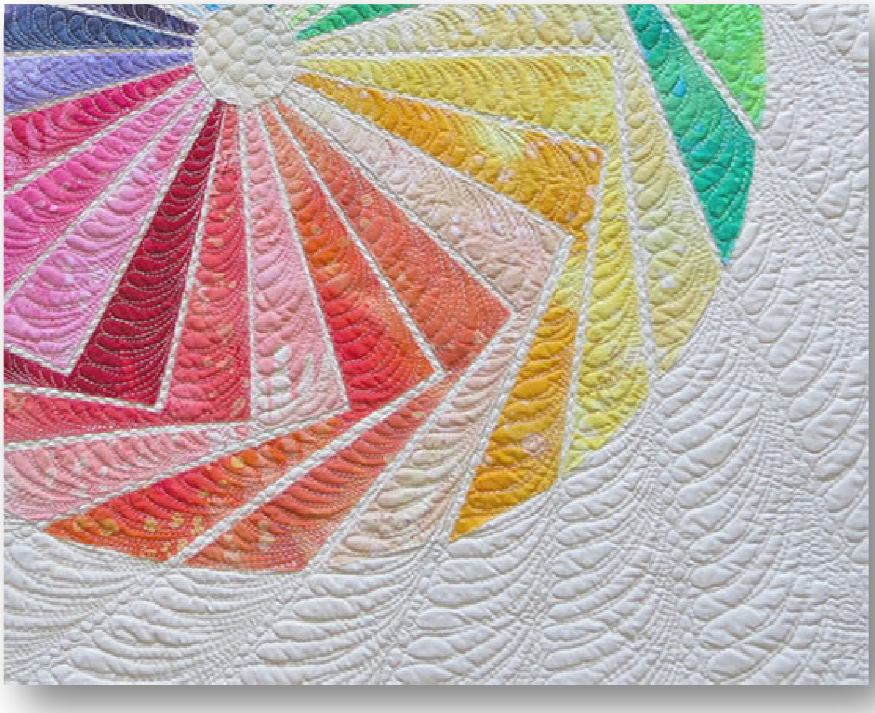
If your sewing machine fits into a cabinet and there is a large flat area to work on, this is a tremendous help.

I always start quilting in the center and I never roll the quilt to make it smaller while quilting. I just place half of the quilt under the arm of my machine and I quilt on a small area at a time.

A last thought

Start practicing on small quilt sandwiches, no larger than a letter/A4 page.

If you don't have major problems quilting them, there is no reason you could not quilt a queen/king size quilt.



IMAGINE DARE EXECUTE ENJOY!
Have fun free motion quilting!
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