

Struggles with Stripes

While some quilters (like me!) are drawn to stripes and tend to grab them up from the sale table, others shy away from stripes, unsure how to make the best use of them or fearful that they will do something wrong with them.

Good news--there is no wrong way to use stripes! They are a powerful addition to your stash, as the inherent design interest can do a lot of work for you. Learning how to evaluate the visual properties of stripes and learning a few tips for their use can lead to a long-term love affair with these directional fabrics that will keep you exploring possibilities for a long time.

The first step to learning to love stripes is learning the different personalities of striped fabrics. This is a rich category of designs that takes a little observation to appreciate. There are lots of ways to categorize stripes, and many fabrics will fall into more than one category.

The stripes on a striped fabric are either woven into the fabric or printed onto an already woven fabric. Printed stripes are much more common, but woven stripes can be richly colored and can sometimes contain ethnic designs such as Guatemalan and African woven stripes:



Of course, printed stripes can convey an ethnic feel as well:

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With woven stripes, the grain of the fabric is inherently the same as the stripe lines, because it is woven that way. With printed stripes, it is not uncommon for the stripe to be printed slightly off the true grain of the fabric. This means sometimes you will have to decide between cutting with the grain or the print. Unless it is drastically off, you will usually want to cut with the print rather than the grain.

Stripes can be either regular or irregular. Regular stripes have sharp, straight edges between the stripe lines and a regular, repeating progression of colors:



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Irregular stripes can have blurred edges as they move from one color to the next and the striped lines may not be perfectly straight:



Some stripes may be regular in their repeat, but have lines that continuously change directions, resulting in wavy stripes or, if the angles are sharp, the chevron stripe, currently very hot with modern quilters:



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As the stripes become more and more irregular, they become more difficult to recognize as stripes from up close, but from a distance it is clear to see that the major design elements run in one direction. These are sometimes referred to as directional prints, but they work in your quilt project as stripes unless they are cut into very small pieces:



Stripes can be predominately from a single color family:



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Or they can be multi-colored (pic 8):



While many stripes have a high value contrast, making the stripes visible from a long viewing distance, other stripes may have a lower range of values, creating a more subtle effect:



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Some wonderfully graphic and complex striped fabrics have been designed especially for use in borders. But don't get trapped into thinking these border prints can't be used in other parts of your quilt, because they can be used to create wonderful effects in kaleidoscope and other quilt designs:



There are many other potential ways to categorize and describe stripes. While most stripes fit into more than one category, some stripes are hard to categorize at all, and these are the ones I snatch up when they are on sale, or even at full price if I absolutely can't resist them. I rarely know what I'm going to be using them for, but they must be mine anyway!



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Plaids and checks are essentially stripes printed in both directions, so they are sometimes lumped together with stripes. Because the lines go in both directions, plaids and checks are more static than other directional prints, but often behave similar visually in our quilt designs. Some plaids have lines which are much more predominant in one direction than the other, and these behave even more like stripes.

Stripes are most commonly printed on the lengthwise grain of the fabric, that is parallel to the selvage. Striped fabrics can also be printed on the crosswise grain, going from selvage to selvage. Even more rare is the diagonally printed stripe, where the design runs with the bias--if you see one you like, get it because these don't come along often.

How much to buy, how much to buy? It is common to hear that you need to buy more of a striped fabric to account for loss in matching designs, and there is some truth in this, but not all stripes have to be matched. I buy a lot of half-yards because I make mostly multi-fabric quilts. When I run out of something, I just substitute something similar. But if I really like a directional print, I will buy a yard or two. If I think I may use it as a border, I will buy three yards. If it is in the clearance bin I will buy six yards and it will end up on the back of a quilt, where stripes can also look great.

Now that you have padded your stash with all those delicious stripes, you need something to do with them. I'm not saying you can't have a good time just petting them and telling them how beautiful they are, but you theoretically may someday want to sew with them!

The first big decision point is whether the quilts will be used in a more casual manner, or in a more formal manner. Striped fabrics used casually means that there is not a lot of effort put into making sure that the stripes are perfectly on grain and matched up from piece to piece. Striped fabrics used formally means that care is taken to make the stripe land precisely where you want it and that it continues uninterrupted into the next piece. This is a spectrum from very casual to very formal, not just two choices. As a general rule, irregular stripes play nicer with the more casual styles. Keep in mind that if you go just "a little bit casual" it can look like you just weren't trying too hard--but it's your quilt and you make the rules.

Casually cut stripes and plaids can give a very folk art feel to a piece, and it is easy to find examples in antique quilts. Stripes used casually can also create a sophisticated modern art feel.

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This modern use of stripes is also commonly seen in the work of Joe Cunningham (<http://www.joethequilter.com>).

More formal use of carefully matched stripes can create amazing secondary designs, as the eye is led through the quilt from line to line. At the far end of the formal spectrum we get to fussy cutting, where a precise part of the striped design is isolated. This can create kaleidoscopic effects as well as transform a traditional block into something that looks new and fresh. Mickey DePre (<http://www.itsafiberlife.blogspot.com>) is using a lot of stripes in her pieced hexies. Jinny Beyer (<http://www.jinnybeyer.com>) designs many border prints and has used them in extravagant and innovative ways. And Mary Mashuta (<http://www.marymashuta.com>) is the queen of striped fabrics (see resources).

There is no part of a quilt design that is immune to the charms of stripes. When faced with a quilt block, get in the habit of asking yourself where a stripe could be substituted to enhance the design. Jinny Beyer is probably the master of this and her book **The Quilter's Album of Patchwork Patterns** is rich with ideas. Half-square and quarter-square triangles pieced from a single strip of striped fabric create wonderful secondary designs that can be substituted in any square in your pieced block.

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Appliqué designs are equally adaptable to stripes. They can add shading and depth to appliqué patches, or simply move the eye in certain direction, making the viewer's eye

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see what you want them to see. Striped fabrics can be used effectively in the appliqué pieces:



The background:

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Or both!

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Sashings take on new life when cut from striped fabrics. These are usually cut perpendicular to the stripe, but for an extra challenge (and extra zing), consider cutting them parallel to the stripe. Striped sashings tend to result in a fairly energetic design, so keep it in mind to add spark to a set of blocks that are not just wowing you or for extra energy in a sampler quilt.



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Stripes of all kinds work great in borders. I love a pieced border as much as the next quilter, but stripes can give a look very similar to a complex pieced design with a fraction of the work, creating a stunning frame for your quilted work. If purchasing striped fabric specifically for borders, especially really wide stripes, you may need to open it up to count that you have enough repeats across the width.



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Striped fabrics in borders can be cut either parallel or perpendicular to the stripes with great effect.

Parallel (lengthwise):



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Perpendicular (crosswise):



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Borders can be mitered for a more formal effect or butted for a more casual look.

Mitered:



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Butted:



Striped fabrics are a go-to for me when selecting binding fabrics. They always look great and can easily incorporate many different colors from the body of the quilt when it

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is difficult to choose just one color to finish your amazing new design. Stripes can be cut parallel to the stripe or on the bias for different effects. Stripes cut the length of the stripe can be difficult to keep on grain, and I rarely use them for binding, as they can make the binding look distorted and uneven. Who needs that? Plaids and checks also work great for bindings, but almost always need to be cut on the bias to look good.



Repeating a stripe used in the body of the quilt for the binding automatically creates a unified look:

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Some quilts use stripes as a support player, providing a nice contrast to other print styles:

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In other quilts, stripes are the star player, the whole reason for making the quilt:

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These reminded of books on display at the bookstore:

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And these look like fancy bowties:



And who can resist flowers?

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The woven stripes from Guatemala are used to create illusions of overlapping.

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Once you get bitten by the striped bug, it's too late to get vaccinated. Start collecting and playing and don't look back!

Resources:

Stripes in Quilts by Mary Mashuta, C&T Publishing

Stripes and Plaids by Sandra Hatch and Sue Harvey, House of White Birches

Plaids and Stripes by Roberta Horton, C&T Publishing

Razzle Dazzle Quilts by Judy Hooworth, That Patchwork Place