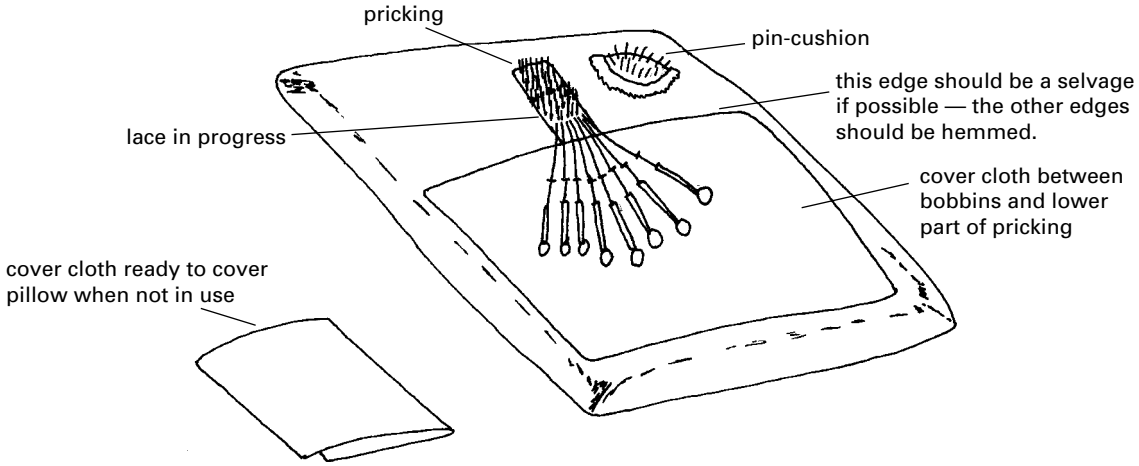
"Dressing" a Lace Pillow

© Jean Leader 2025



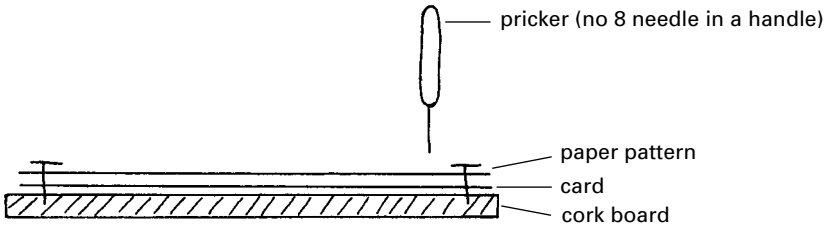
The pillow, a square or round piece of polystyrene (preferably high density) about 40 cm (16 in) across and 5 cm (2 in) thick, should be covered with a firmly woven dark cotton material. Avoid synthetic materials as these will attract dust and fluff. Cut a piece of material so that it is about 8-10 cm (3-4 in) wider than the pillow all round. Make a hem (with an opening) round the edge and thread either tape or elastic through it. Fit the cover over the pillow and pull the tape or elastic tight. (If you're in a hurry just pin the cover in place.) This cover should be removed and washed occasionally.

You will also need at least two cover cloths about 40 cm (16 in) square made of the same sort of material as the cover (they should be hemmed so no bits of thread can catch in the lace). One of these is placed over the lower part of the pricking and the bobbins lie on top of it. The other cloth is placed over the whole pillow when it is not in use so that the lace you're working on stays clean.

Making a Pricking

In order to make bobbin lace you need a pattern known as a pricking. This is a piece of card in which pin-holes are pricked. Instructions for making the lace tell you what stitches to work and where to put pins in which pin-holes. It is very important to have a good pricking — if it is inaccurate not only is it more difficult to make the lace but also the finished product will be poor.

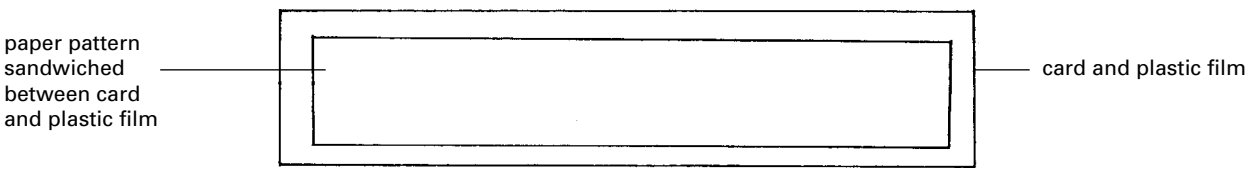
Cut out the paper pricking leaving a margin round the dots. Cut a piece of pricking card (brown so that the threads show up) the same size and use drawing pins to fasten both paper and card to a cork board at all four corners.



Now use the pricker to prick through each dot. Hold the pricker upright and make sure that it goes through the dot and not to one side of it. Check to see you haven't missed any dots by holding the pricking up to the light.

The first prickings you will use are very simple but as a pattern gets more complicated markings are added to make the pattern of pin-holes clearer. These markings should always be added with a pen which will not rub off on the lace. Special fine drawing pens are ideal — do *not* use pencil or ball-pen. It can be difficult to transfer the markings from the paper pattern to the card (lots of pin-holes close together can be confusing) but there is an easy way round this using plastic sticky-back film. Cut the card larger than the paper pricking and cut a piece of plastic film (preferably matt blue) the same size as the card. Stick the paper pricking to the card using something like Pritt stick, leaving a margin all round and then stick the plastic film on top being careful not to crease it or leave air bubbles. Prick as before.

If coloured film is not available copy the pricking on to coloured paper (choose a colour that will show up your thread well) and use clear plastic film.



Winding thread on the bobbins

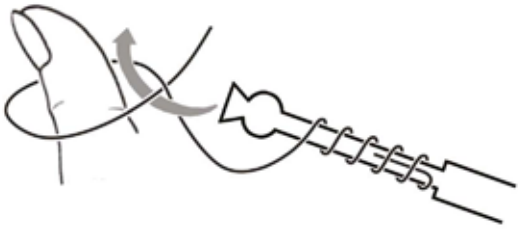
© Jean Leader 2025

Always wind all the bobbins in the same direction which is usually the one shown here.

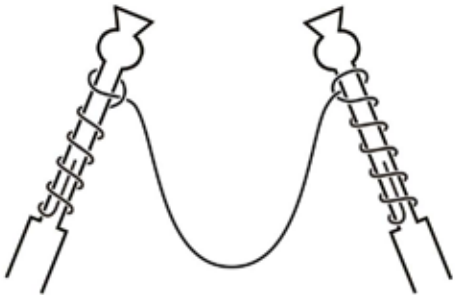
1. Hold the bobbin in your right hand, and holding the end of the thread against the bobbin, take the thread under the bobbin and back over the top towards you until the end is secure. Look down the bobbin from the top - the thread should be wound clockwise.



2. When enough thread is on the bobbin, make a hitch to stop it unwinding — hold the bobbin in your right hand and take the thread round your left thumb from front to back, bring the head of the bobbin up into the loop, remove yur thumb and pull tight.



3. Cut off enough thread for the other bobbin of the pair and wind it on in exactly the same way and make a hitch. Leave about 20cm of thread between the bobbins. The bobbins may look as if they are wound differently but that is because you are seeing the left-hand bobbin from the other side.



To lengthen the thread while working hold the bobbin in your right hand (with the thread slack) and turn the bobbin towards you as shown below on the left. To shorten the thread hold the bobbin in your left hand, lift the loop of the hitch with a pin and turn the bobbin towards you as shown below on the right.

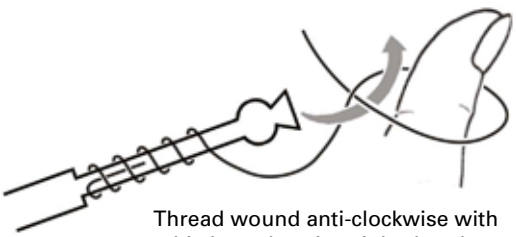


Lengthening bobbin thread

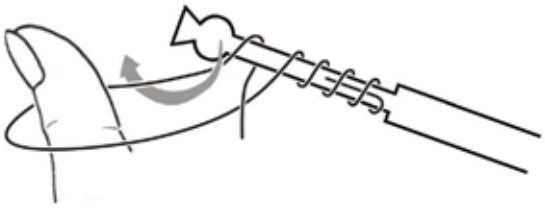


Shortening bobbin thread

If you find that your bobbins keep unwinding as you're working you've either made the hitch wrong (try again) or you've wound the thread on anti-clockwise in which case you'll have to make the hitch in the opposite direction using your right thumb as shown on the left below.
If you definitely made the hitch correctly snd it still slips, it may help to make a 'double hitch' — bring the head of the bobbin up through the loop for a second time before pulling tight as shown on the right below.



Thread wound anti-clockwise with hitch made using right thumb.

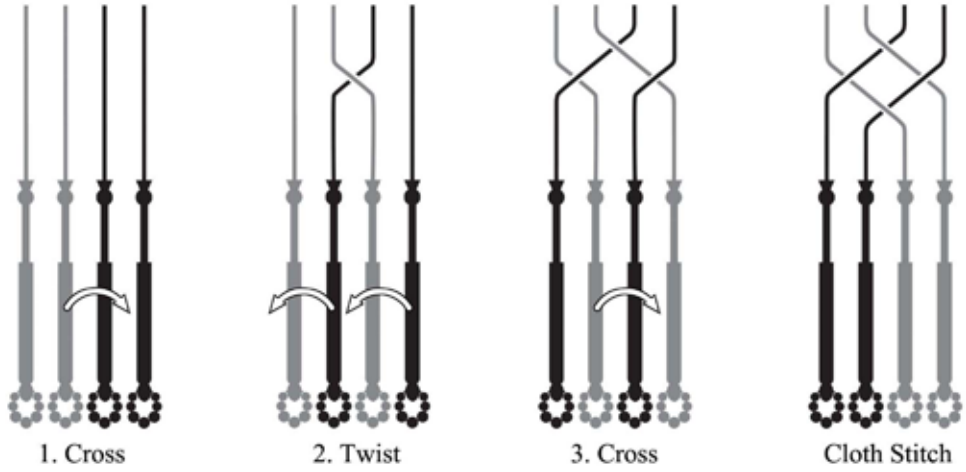


Making a double hitch.

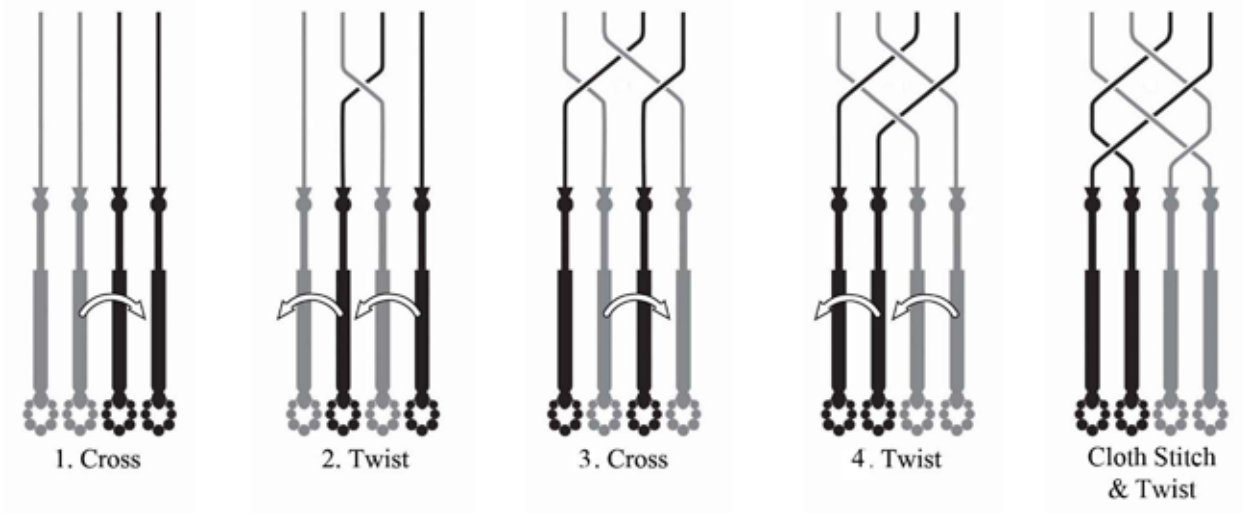
Basic stitches

© Jean Leader 2025

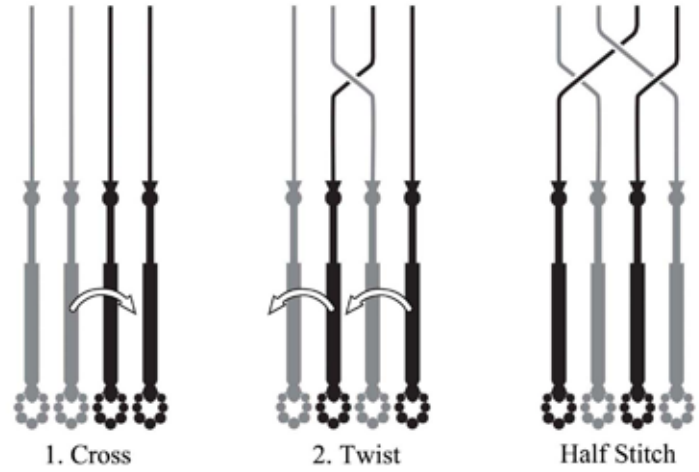
Cloth stitch



Cloth stitch and twist



Half stitch



Alternative Names for stitches

Half stitch: *1/2 st, hs, gauze stitch*
Cloth stitch: *cs, cl st, whole stitch, w st, linen stitch*
Cloth stitch and twist: *double stitch, dbl*

Some other alternative names

Pairs hung inside one another: *pairs hung open, across the pin, rainbow style*
Pairs hung side by side: *pairs hung in order*
Temporary pins: *support pins*

Stitch Sampler

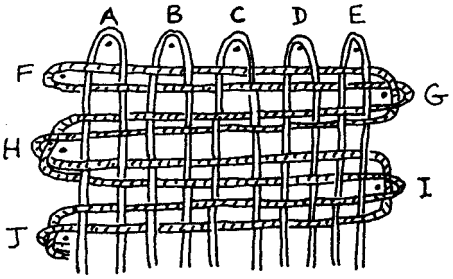
© Jean Leader 2025

For this sampler you will need six pairs of bobbins wound with DMC Special Dentelles 80 or a similar weight of thread. Five pairs should have about a metre of thread on each bobbin and the other pair about three times as much. This pair will be the 'weaver' or 'worker' pair and it will be easier to see what is happening if it is wound with thread of a different colour from the rest.

Traditionally brass pins were used for lacemaking because they did not rust but they can still become tarnished. Nowadays nickel-plated or stainless steel pins are usually used. Look for medium pins about 26 mm long and 0.65 mm in diameter.

Fasten the pricking to the pillow with a pin at each corner. Place a cover cloth over the lower half of the pillow leaving about 2 inches of the pricking showing. Put pins in holes A, B, C, D, E and F and hang one pair of bobbins on each of these pins. The pair on F is the 'weaver' pair. The pairs hanging straight down from A, B, C, D and E are known as passive pairs.The pair on F is the 'weaver' pair. The pairs hanging straight down from A, B, C, D and E are known as passive pairs.

Cloth stitch



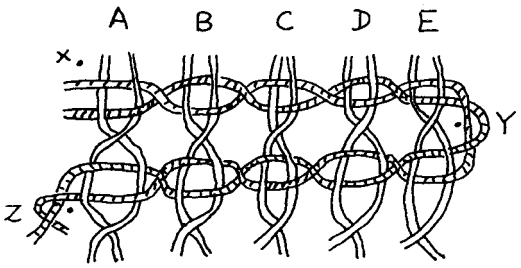


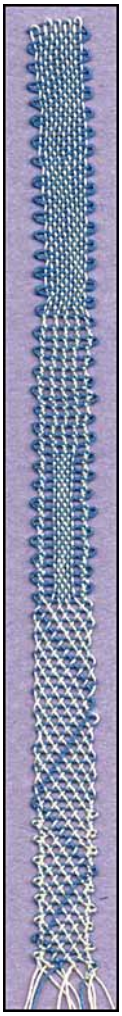
twist weaver pair twice at end of each row (right over left, right over left)

1. Use the weaver pair to work cloth stitch with each of the pairs hanging from A, B, C, D and E in turn. Work in the centre of the pillow moving the passive pairs from right to left as they are worked.
2. After working cloth stitch with the pair from E the weaver is twisted twice (see diagram above) and pin G is put in to the left of the weaver pair. *The pin should slope slightly outwards and backwards*. Hold the weaver pair and gently tension the passive pairs. Do this at the end of each row. *Always handle the bobbins and not the thread*.
3. Work back with the weaver through the pairs from E, D, C, B and A. The steps which make up the stitch are the same whether the weaver is working from left to right or right to left. Again work in the centre of the pillow and move the pairs across as they are worked.
4. After working cloth stitch with the pair from A, twist the weaver pair twice and put in pin H (*sloping slightly outwards*) to the right of the weaver pair. Ease down the passive pairs and then work back to the right (towards pin-hole I) with the weaver pair.
5. When the weaver reaches the right hand side, twist it twice, put in pin I (to the left of the weaver pair) and work back to the left.
6. Continue in this way until you feel reasonably confident about working cloth stitch. You will see that what you are making looks like a piece of woven cloth — hence the name cloth stitch.

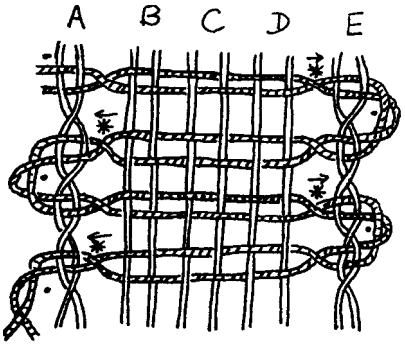
 © Jean Leader 2025

When you feel like a change try working cloth stitch and twist instead of cloth stitch.





1. With the weaver pair on the left work cloth stitch and twist with the passive pairs hanging down from A, B, C, D and E. When the weaver pair reaches the right hand side it will already be twisted once (as part of the cloth stitch and twist stitch just worked) and you will only need to twist it once more before putting in pin Y. In order to make this stitch look neat you will have to hold the weaver firmly at the end of each row and gently pull rather than ease the passive pairs into place. Remember to hold the bobbins and not the threads. Notice that all the passive pairs are twisted.
2. Work back to the left in cloth stitch and twist, give the weaver one extra twist and put in pin Z before gently pulling the passive pairs into place. Continue working like this for a short distance.
3. Cloth stitch and twist stitch is more often used to give a firm edge to a piece of lace rather than worked over a large area as above. Try working cloth stitch with a cloth stitch and twist edge .



Where there is a star (*) you will need to twist the weaver pair. Where there is no star the weaver has just worked cloth stitch and twist with the edge pair so it is already twisted but where there is a star it has just worked cloth stitch and so a twist must be added (but to the weaver pair only).

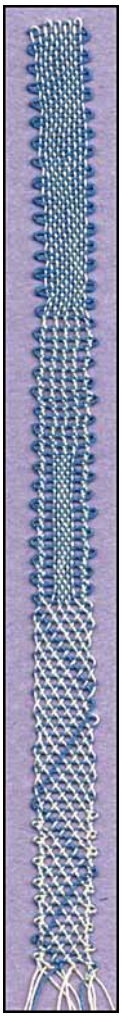
Running out of Thread

This is something all beginners worry about! If a bobbin is running out of thread, wind thread on a spare bobbin (a single bobbin, not a pair) and fasten the thread to a pin behind the work. Place the new bobbin beside the one which is running out, twist the two threads together lightly and fasten the bobbins together with a rubber band (or a safety pin through the spangles). Work with them as one bobbin for a short distance (1–2 cm). Then discard the old bobbin by putting it to the back of the pillow (it can be cut off later). Once the lace has been removed from the pillow these ends can be cut off close to the work (no need to darn them in as they are already overlapped).

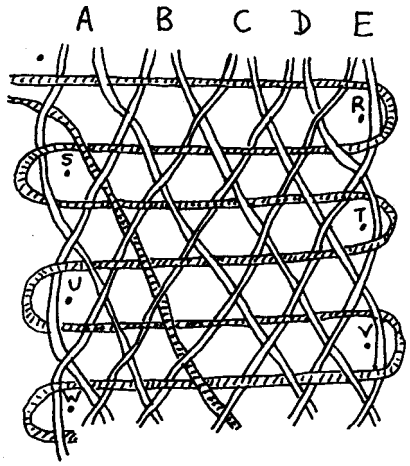
Always try to think ahead and replace a bobbin where it will show least e.g. in an area of cloth stitch or at the footside.

Half stitch

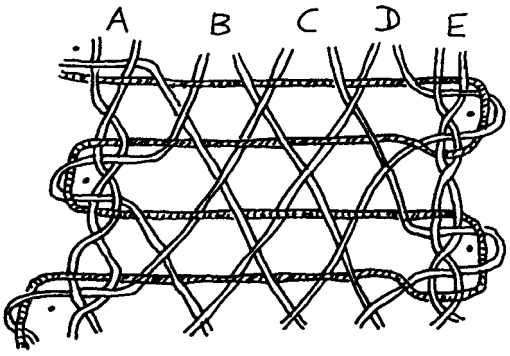
© Jean Leader 2025



In both cloth stitch and cloth stitch and twist stitch the bobbins stay together in pairs as they were hung on at the beginning of the work (if they haven't you've made a mistake somewhere.) But this is not the case with half stitch so it's easier to get muddled and more difficult to see where you've made a mistake. However, it's worth taking trouble with it as the result is very attractive.



1. With weaver pair on the left work half stitch through five passive pairs to the right. You will see that after each stitch the 'weaver' pair is different. The right hand bobbin is the same each time but the left hand bobbin has come from the pair with which the 'weaver' pair has just worked a stitch.
2. At the end of the row give the 'weaver' pair an extra twist (it already has one twist from the half stitch just worked) and put in pin R. Notice that all the passive pairs are twisted. Work back to the left through the five passive pairs. At S again give the weaver one extra twist before putting in the pin.
3. Continue working to T, U, V, W, etc. You will see that one bobbin from the original weaver pair is travelling back and forth across the strip while the other bobbin is moving diagonally across the strip. If you get something wrong this pattern will be disrupted.
4. Try working a section of half stitch with cloth stitch and twist at the edge. This gives the lace a much firmer edge so that it will withstand use better. Don't forget to add an extra twist to the 'weaver' pair before putting in the edge pins.



5. When you are ready to finish the sample tie the pairs of threads in reef knots and cut off the bobbins. Then you can take out the pins.