



Getting Started with Block Printing

Block printing is one of the oldest methods for applying design to fabric and it's so satisfying!

Historically blocks were intricately carved out of wood and painstakingly stamped onto swaths of fabric. Think of the ancient textiles from the artisans of India.

We're going to go the simple route and carve on an easy carve, rubber block, but I promise it will still feel magical if you come at it with an adventurous spirit.

You don't need a lot to get started, heck you can even print with a potato if you want. I think the magic is in using repeating pattern to create a more dynamic effect from a simple shape.

I recommend you use a fabric ink rather than a textile paint, because we're using knit fabrics and we want the ink to soak into the fabric and not sit on top. I also really like the look I get with transparent inks, a bit vintage and worn.

Block printing on knits is not a precise thing (especially not at first), so give yourself some grace and room to create something lovingly handmade...with a hand-done feel.

Ready?

What you need to get started

Tools/Equipment

- cutting tool like an exacto knife
- linoleum carving set (optional, you'll want this if you are choosing to do a more complex block. I use Speedball lino cutters set)
- cutting board or cutting mat for cutting and carving out the block
- cookie sheet or sheet of glass or plexiglass (out of an old picture frame?) for rolling out the ink
- brayer or small trim paint roller (you could even use a foam paint brush, but it's slower)
- baren (optional, but I find that if I am printing a big piece of fabric the baren helps me get better prints and is less tiring)
- batting or old blanket to place under the fabric when printing, this helps get a better print
- paper to sketch out your design and work out your repeating pattern
- pencil
- sharpie for sketching on rubber easy carve block
- an iron to set the ink
- ruler
- an apron

Materials

- rubber easy carve block (I use Speedball speedy carve, but you can even create a block out of a potato!)
- *wooden blocks and superglue (optional, to attach to the block for ease of printing...takes the place of the baren)
- fabric ink (I use Jacquard Textile Color, but any textiles or fabric ink will work)
- fabric to print (be sure you have scraps to test your print on)

Carving your block

1. Sketch your design onto your paper using a pencil, be sure your design will fit on your block! Simple shapes make really fabulous repeating patterns. You can go as simple or as complex as you choose!

*If you choose to attach a wooden block to the back of your printing block, trace the wooden block onto your paper before you begin to sketch out your design and sketch within that shape. You want the wooden block to completely cover your printing block.

Once your sketch is complete, flip the image over, on top of the block, and either use a spoon or a pencil and press (or scribble) all over the back of the image to transfer the pencil line of the sketch onto the block. Trace the image on the block with a sharpie.

Alternatively, you can sketch right onto your block and go over your final lines with a sharpie. Just remember, your image will be reversed when you stamp it.

- Practice carving on a rubber carving block with the tools to get used to how they work. Each tool makes a different type of line.

Some Tips:

Be sure to carve away from your body

Keep your non-knife wielding hand behind the knife

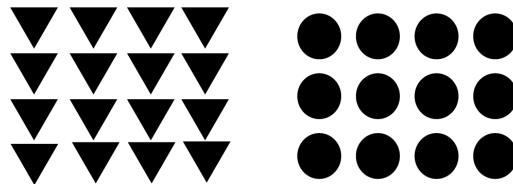
Apply even pressure as you carve, go slowly and smoothly

Turn the block rather than your hand

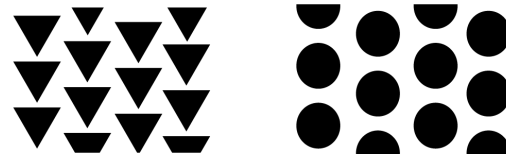
You'll carve away what you don't want in your print (I like to shade everything that I want to remove when I sketch on my block)

- Decide if you want your design to have the negative or positive space printed. You can either cut away the lines of your design (a negative space print), or you can carve out the background (a positive space print).
- Carve your block.
- Consider if you want a repeating pattern and if so, what does that look like?

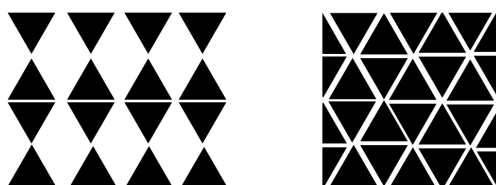
Full Drop



Half Drop



Mirror Drop



Printing with your Block

1. Lay down your batting or wool blanket underneath your fabric (both good fabric and scraps for testing).
2. Place a tablespoon or so of the ink on the plate or cookie sheet and roll it out with your brayer or trim paint roller until it starts to make a squelching sound (you know that sound your paint roller makes when your painting your walls, that sound).
3. Then roll the ink onto your block until it's evenly covered.
4. Carefully place your inked block onto your fabric. When printing a repeating pattern use a ruler to help you line your pattern up.
5. Once placed, don't move it around! Press firmly on the back of the block, using either a brayer or the heel of your hand.

Apply even, firm pressure, straight down. Gently rock in a circular motion to ensure a good print.

6. Before printing your good fabric, do a print on a scrap and check to see if you need to carve more of your block and to get a feel for how much ink and pressure you need.

If I am doing a repeating pattern, I also like to print on paper a bit as I'm working out my repeating pattern.

Finishing Up

Wash all the tools with warm, soapy water and let dry.

Once dry, iron your fabric with a hot iron (be mindful of the fabric content and it's needs) to set the ink.

Make something awesome to wear!!

Resources - Books

Block Print Magic: The Essential Guide to Designing, Carving, and Taking Your Artwork Further with Relief Printing by Emily Louise Howard

Print, Pattern, Sew: Block-Printing Basics + Simple Sewing Projects for an Inspired Wardrobe by Jen Hewett

Print Workshop by Christine Schmidt