



How To Guide

Cross Stitch – Getting Started

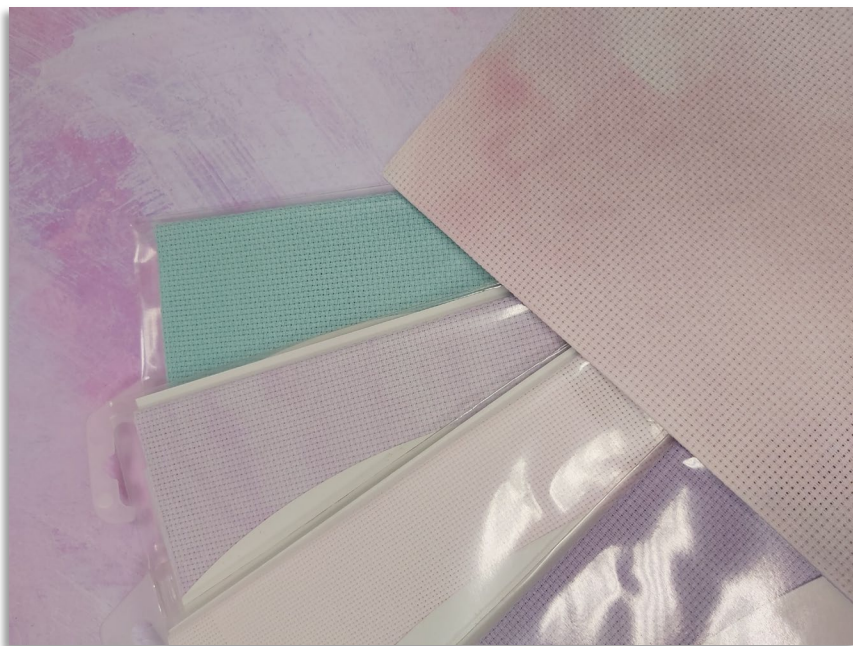
Pretty pixel art from needle and thread! Cross stitch is a creative and popular way to make gorgeous images from grid patterns. From simple, blocky images that have a cosy, handmade look, to much larger thread paintings with texture and shading, you can create a picture of almost anything. There's something for everyone, from beginners to seasoned crafters, with a multitude of kits, patterns and fabrics to explore!

Like most crafts, cross stitch can look a little intimidating to a beginner, so we've put together this How to Guide, to help you get started.



Fabric

There are two kinds of fabric most often used for cross stitch – aida and evenweave. Each has a different structure but share an essential characteristic for cross stitch: evenly woven strands. This weave makes a visible grid of threads, allowing you to easily and neatly create squares of colour. Cross stitch fabric comes in a range of colours, including solid colours, mottled colours and variegated from one colour to another. It also comes in a range of counts, which refers to the number of holes per inch, which affects the size of your stitches, and of the finished piece.



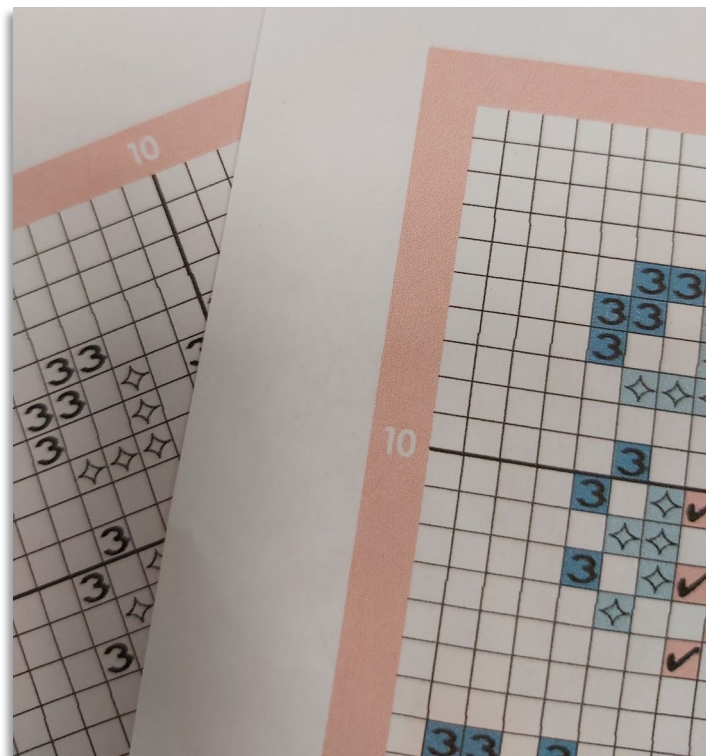
As a beginner, you will probably be starting with a kit which will include everything you need, so you won't need to make fabric choices at the moment. However, if you would like to learn more, please go to our guide on cross stitch fabric.



Understanding Your Pattern

In cross stitch, your finished piece will be made up of individual squares of colour, created by individual stitches (crosses, where one “leg” crosses diagonally over the other). For aida, each square of your fabric (four holes, one in each corner) is a stitch. If you are using evenweave, you may choose to stitch over two squares, but you will follow the pattern in the same way. You copy the pattern, which will be constructed of coloured squares, to recreate the design on your fabric. Usually, the stitches will share holes on the fabric, so they sit closely next to each other. Patterns will either use the colours to match the thread colour on the pattern, or symbols to represent the colours, or a combination of both. A guide to which thread colour matches which symbol will be included with the pattern. The pattern will look like a grid covered in small shapes and/or colours, a little like a paint-by-numbers guide. It should also let you know how many strands of embroidery thread to use for each colour.

The pattern will usually be larger than the finished cross stitch, simply so you can see the instructions and the colour changes – a pattern to scale would probably be too small and detailed to read clearly. It is important that the colour placement is clear, as this will enable you to stitch the design as intended.



Getting Started – What will I need?

Fabric

Some cross stitch fabrics are softer than others, but they will all generally soften as you work with them, particularly if you are stitching in hand (without a hoop or frame). It is a good idea to iron any creases or wrinkles from your fabric before you begin – you may need to iron your piece again, after you have stitched it, but beginning with crease-free fabric will help your stitches to lay flat and look uniform. You can dampen the fabric before ironing, or use steam to help press out the creases, but be careful with hand-dyed fabrics as they may not be colour-fast.

If your fabric edges are raw (unfinished), it may be helpful to use masking tape, machine a zigzag stitch, or to fold them over and stitch them down, to prevent excessive fraying. This is particularly important if the piece is large and you will be working on it for some time, as repeated handling could cause fraying which begins to threaten your stitching area.

Frames

Before you start, if you have selected a hoop or a plastic clip frame, lay the fabric over the inner part and then push down on the top part, trapping the fabric between the two. It is then easy to tighten the fabric, to create an even tension, by gently easing it down on all sides. Wooden scroll frames work a little differently, as your fabric is stitched or clipped to each side, and then one or both of the bars is twisted, rolling the excess fabric onto the bar or bars and creating tension in that way.





Fabric in hoop – front



Fabric in hoop - back

It is perfectly possible to stitch “in hand”, i.e. without a frame or hoop, but this would probably be more appropriate for an experienced stitcher, as it is important that the tension on the fabric is even across the weave, or your stitches may become distorted and look untidy.

Thread

The cotton or silk floss most commonly used for cross stitch comes in six strands and, normally, you will be advised in your pattern instructions how many of the strands to stitch with. Generally, the higher the fabric count, the fewer strands you use for stitching. It is important to pay careful attention to your pattern, so that you don't use too many or too few strands – too many strands will make it difficult to force your needle through the fabric holes, too few may result in a faded, patchy look to the finished design. Additionally, if you are working with a kit, you may run out of thread if you use too many strands. Lengths of thread can be cut into more manageable lengths for stitching, a good estimate is 40-50cm, but as you become more experienced you will know what length works best for you.



6 stranded cotton floss



The 6 strands of floss separated

And also...

Needles: Cross stitch needles are available in a range of sizes – sizes 22 and 24 are the most popular and will be perfect for stitching on most counts of aida and evenweave. You might also find it useful to have a chenille needle, which has a sharper point than a cross stitch needle, making it easier to put backstitching on top of your cross stitches.

Scissors: a pair of small, sharp scissors are a must for a cross stitcher.

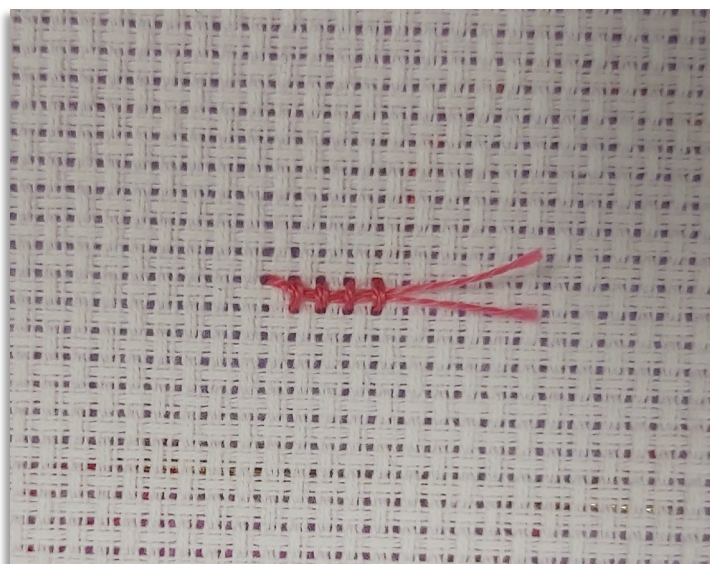


Beginning to stitch

When starting your new cross stitch project, you might find it easiest to begin stitching in the middle. The pattern will show you with arrows where that is, and you can find the centre of your fabric by measuring, or by folding it in quarters before you put it into your frame or hoop. Making sure you have enough room for your design on your fabric is, obviously, one of the most important things to consider before you begin. No one wants to start at the top of the design, stitch away for hours (or, worse, weeks or months), only to find that you can't fit in the lower part as you have left too much space at the top. Once you've been stitching for some time you will probably be able to judge by eye where the design will fit, and then you can start at any area of your pattern (for example, a corner), but starting from the centre is great for those of us who want to be sure.



The best way to anchor your thread when you start working is to position the end under the stitches you are making. The diagonal stitches create straight lines at the back of the work, making it easy to stitch over the thread end.

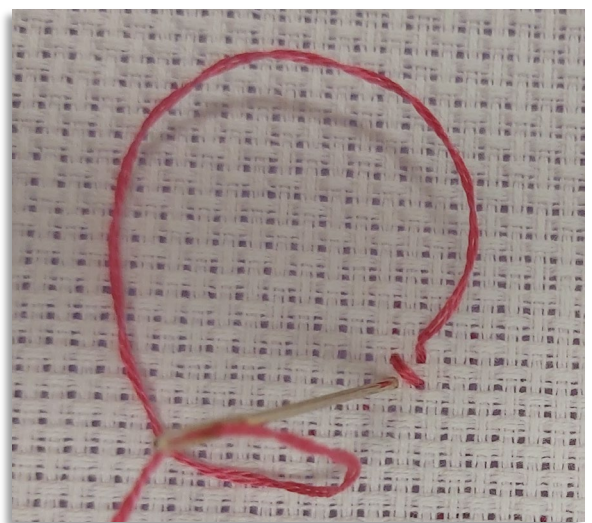
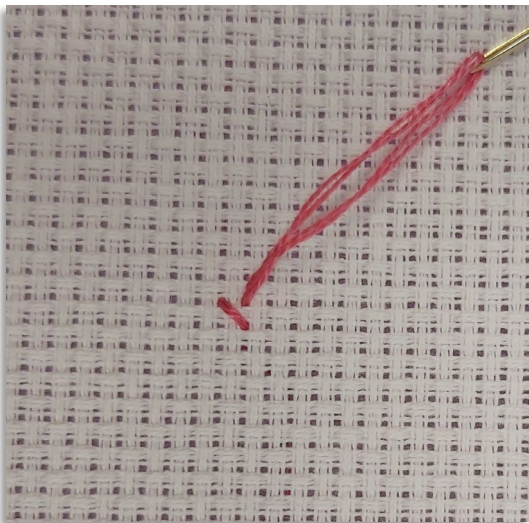
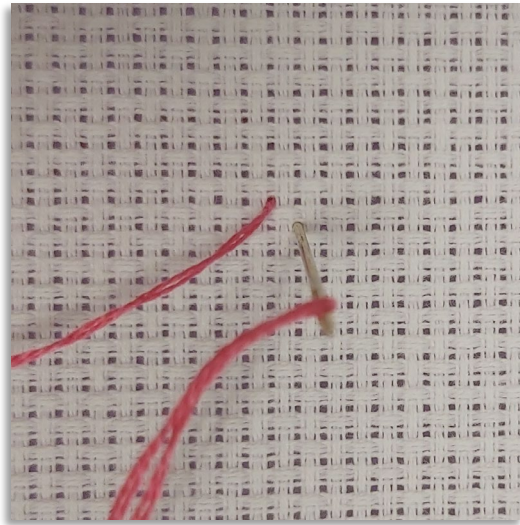


Working Your Stitches

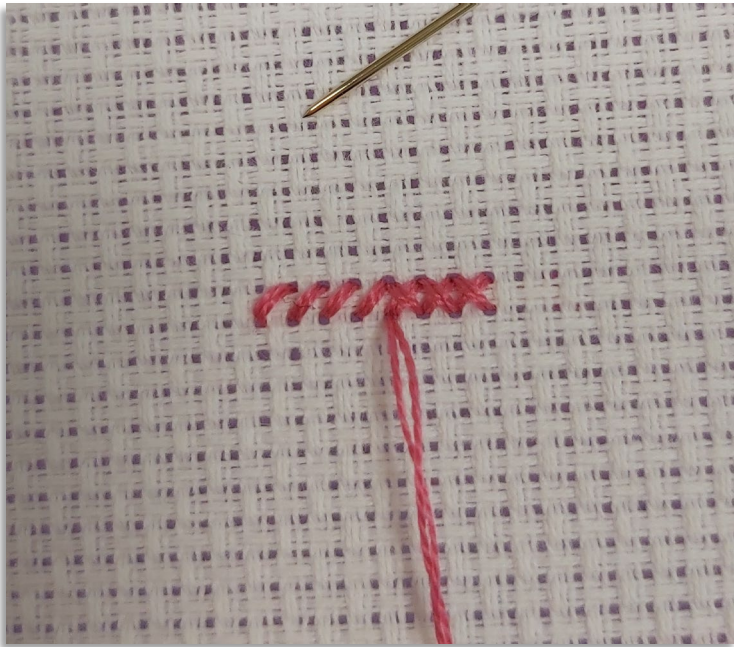
Working cross stitches is relatively easy – indeed, many stitchers find it calming and relaxing. You don't have to decide on where to bring up your needle to make your stitch, or the size of the stitches you want to work, as these are decided by the grid on the fabric you are working on.

Let's assume, for simplicity, that you are beginning on aida, so that you are stitching into each hole in the fabric grid.

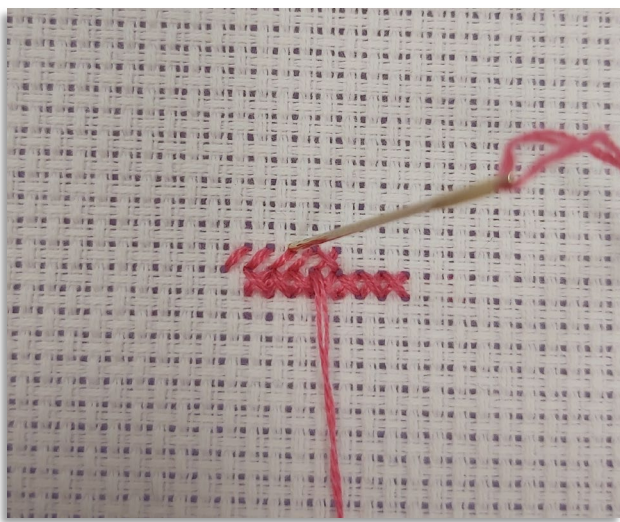
1. Bring your needle out of one corner of the first square.
2. Insert your needle into the opposite corner to create a diagonal line.
3. Bring your needle out at a corner you haven't used yet.
4. Insert your needle into the opposite corner, creating another diagonal line to cross your first one.



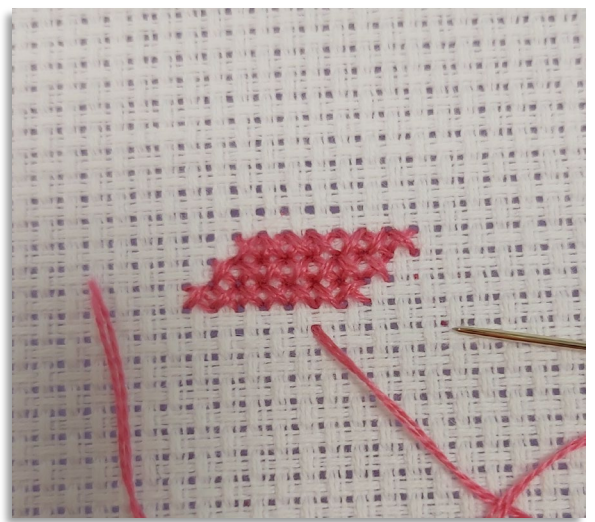
You can either continue like this, completing one stitch at a time, or you move across a row or area, stitching all the bottom legs of your crosses, and then go back and complete each stitch with the top leg.



Whichever way you choose to stitch, it is really important that you work all your crosses in the same direction – i.e. all your bottom legs going either bottom left to top right, or top left to bottom right, and all the top legs in the opposite direction. This will ensure that all your top stitches will be leaning in the same direction, which will make your completed piece look much better than if the stitches are crossed in both ways.



Stitches all crossed in the same direction



Stitches crossed in different directions

When you've done some cross stitch practice, you might prefer to work sections in a way that saves the most thread, rather than carrying large lengths across the back when working in rows. This will require some planning but can save noticeable measurements of thread, which is useful if you have a limited supply of certain colours. Sometimes planning out your sections in advance is worth it anyway, just to make sure your stitches work out correctly.

Everyone makes mistakes, and you are likely to need to undo work at some point. As your stitches are essentially little loops, this is fairly easy as you can use your needle to gently pull the thread back through until you get to the correct place. Be careful unpicking stitches made from darker thread on a lighter background as fibres can be left behind that affect the overall look of the design – tweezers might be helpful in removing any left-over fibres

Once you've started, you can start weaving in your ends underneath the stitches already completed. Remember to stick to similar coloured thread just in case it shows through ever so slightly on the front side, though you can often get away with weaving lighter shades under the back of stitches in a darker shade.

Keeping tension in stiffer material can be a challenge – make sure you're adjusting the fabric in your hoop regularly, although with stiffer fabric you can worry a little less about puckering caused by tight stitches. The quality of the hoop can affect how easy it is to get a good tension in your fabric, so make sure you are choosing a hoop that is suitable; thicker and sturdier hoops may be better for cross stitch projects.

Cross stitch patterns can look quite complex and it can be easy to lose your place with so many shapes and repeated rows. Some people find it easier to cross out or highlight stitches on the pattern as they are completed, keeping track of placement, and showing which sections are left. Alternatively, it is possible to do this electronically with some patterns, where they are loaded into an app on your phone or tablet.

Finishing

You might find that it is best to leave lighter threads until the end after you have completed all other sections, to avoid lighter colours getting dirty or being affected by darker threads. Most threads can leave fibres behind, and you will touch the hoop constantly while you work; the longer lighter threads are in the hoop, the greater the chance that the colour will be affected.

Some designs have small finishing touches to complete the piece, these are easiest to work once the cross stitching is done. You will often find backstitching used as an outline, french knots used for small decoration or detailed, defining features such as eyes. It is best to leave these stitches until the end where possible, so that they are not damaged whilst you are still working on your cross stitching.

You may like to wash your piece before displaying it, especially if you've been working on it for quite a while and it is showing signs of your day-to-day life – excuse the tea stains! Only do this if your fabric and threads are colour-fast – hand-dyed fabric and threads can run and stain in water. If you are going to wash it, tepid water is best, never hot, as you don't want to damage or shrink your fabric. Use a gentle detergent for a deeper clean; specialist washing liquids are available, but a small amount of washing-up liquid works just fine too. To remove excess water, lay out two white towels and place the design between them, roll up the whole thing tightly and gently squeeze. Never wring out your work as you could distort the stitches. If the fabric is pulled in one direction, the grid might distort, causing your stitches to become misaligned. You can gently adjust the fabric before it dries to correct this.

After washing, you might like to iron. Keeping the pieces between the towels, gently iron on a cool to medium heat, checking every so often, until the fabric is completely dry. Wait until everything cools to start framing or finishing – warm fabric is more likely to distort again!

To complete your project, you could frame your work, or keep it in the hoop in which you stitched it. There are a huge number of options for displaying your work, for ideas please see our “How to Guide on Finishing your Needlecraft Project” [here](#), and our blog post “What shall I do with my completed cross stitch?” [here](#).



As you become more experienced, with more completed projects under your belt, you will begin to find which cross stitch processes suit you best. While there might be ways that are considered the “correct” way to do cross stitch, you will probably find that there is a way that feels right for you. For example, backstitching is often best left until the end, but you might find you prefer to cross stitch a section at a time and then backstitch it too. That method can save on thread, and also may stop you feeling overwhelmed at the amount of backstitching left at the end of the project.

As with all other crafts, cross stitch is an artistic hobby, and is meant to be enjoyed. Many stitchers love it because they find it relaxing and calming. Following instructions might help to perfect your pieces, but it is always best to work in the way that is most fun and rewarding for you. You might even find that what you create is even better when you follow your instincts and do your own thing! So, grab your thread and start stitching – we can’t wait to see what you make!

If you find any of these instructions unclear, or just need a little extra help, don’t hesitate to email us at sales@woolwarehouse.co.uk or give us a call on 01926 88 28 18.