


WHY AM I KNITTING IT THAT WAY?

ESSENTIAL KNITTING TECHNIQUES AND WHEN TO USE THEM



Knitting patterns often include instructions to use a specific technique — but they often skip the part about *why*. Why are you using that cast-on? Why a particular kind of increase or decrease? This guide breaks down some of the most common techniques you'll encounter, with a focus on when and why you might use them. So you're not just following steps — you're understanding your knitting.

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INCREASES

KFB

Kfb stands for “knit front back,” and is worked by knitting first into the front leg of the stitch, then the back leg. Kfb turns one stitch into two, but can also be repeated in the same stitch to increase by multiple stitches (e.g. kfbf).

When to use it:

- When you need a **functional rather than decorative increase** (e.g. at the edges of necklines or armholes)
- When you don’t need mirrored or directional shaping
- **Anytime you don’t want to think too hard** about your increases!

Chart Symbols



What to watch out for:

- KFB leaves a small, purl-like bump where you worked into the back leg of the stitch
- Because of this, it’s not completely invisible and can disrupt a pattern slightly

Also written as: kf&b, k1fb

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M1L/M1R

M1L and m1R are **directional increases** that stand for “make 1 left” and “make 1 right.” “Left” and “right” represent the slant direction. They are worked by lifting the bar between stitches onto the needle and knitting into either the front or the back leg, depending on the direction. Because the stitch is created using yarn from the stitch next to it, **m1s tighten the fabric and leave no holes.**

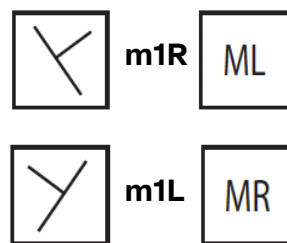
These increases can also be worked as purl stitches, written as m1Lp and m1Rp.

When to use it:

- For **symmetrical shaping on either side of a center stitch** (raglans, lace or chevron stitches, triangle shawls)
- For **balanced, directional increases** (thumb or heel gussets, at the edges of necklines and armholes)
- When you need **invisible increases**

What to watch out for:

- When working m1s on the wrong side of your work, **it's easy to mess up the slant direction!** If working stockinette stitch, a m1R on the right side will be a m1Rp on the wrong side; likewise, a m1L becomes a m1Lp
- When working m1s on either side of a center stitch, this center stitch will become smaller than the other stitches around it (as much of its yarn is fed into the new stitches). If working m1s every row, **this center stitch can become strained and slightly reduce the length of the fabric** over this line (but you can usually block this out!)

Chart Symbols

Also written as: M1 - very ambiguous, but indicates the pattern might not have a preference! Choose one direction and stick to it.

TUTORIAL**LLI/RLI**

Stands for Left Lifted Increase and Right Lifted Increase. These are **directional increases** worked by lifting one leg of the stitch from the previous row onto the needle and knitting it.

These can also be worked as purl stitches, written as PLLI and PRLI.

When to use it:

- For **balanced, directional increases** (thumb or heel gussets, at the edges of necklines and armholes)
- When you need **invisible increases**

What to watch out for:

- When working with less forgiving yarns (like cotton), I find that **this increase can leave small holes** where the tension was disturbed on the row beneath the increase

Chart Symbols

Also written as: incL/incR, LLinc/RLinc

TUTORIAL**A note about Lifted Increases vs Make 1s:**

Lifted Increases and Make 1s are mostly interchangeable. Some knitters feel that Lifted Increases are less visible than Make 1s, but I find this depends enormously on how the yarn behaves. I often prefer Make 1s because the new stitch is created using yarn from between stitches rather than disturbing the shape of the stitch in the row below. To know which one is better for a project, **test both types of increases on your swatch!**

DECREASES

SSK/K2TOG

SSK and K2tog are **slanted decreases**, the direct opposites of Make 1s and Lifted Increases. In their essence, they are both worked by knitting two stitches together (k2tog), which **decreases your stitch count by 1**.

K2tog places the left stitch on top of the right one, creating a right-leaning decrease. Ssk stands for “slip, slip, knit,” which is the action required to place the right stitch on top of the left one, which creates a left-leaning decrease.

These decreases can also be worked as purl stitches, written as p2tog and ssp.

When to use it:

- There are not many other common options for one-stitch decreases, so...basically, **anytime you need to decrease!**
- Use **ssk** for **left-leaning decreases**
- Use **k2tog** for **right-leaning decreases**



What to watch out for:

- **Ssk can sometimes look a little looser** or more uneven than k2tog. If you find you have this issue, try slipping the second stitch purlwise rather than knitwise

Also written as: Dec 1 (decrease 1) - very ambiguous, choose a direction and stick to it! Ssk is sometimes used interchangeably with skp (slip 1, knit 1, pass slipped stitch over), but this is technically a different decrease.

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CAST-ONS

Long-Tail Cast-On

Starting by making a slip knot that leaves a long tail of yarn, the tail and the working yarn are then twisted around the needle in a way that keeps each stitch separate from its neighbours. This cast-on is **one of the cleanest and easiest to execute**.

When worked with two different colours of yarn, the Long-Tail Cast-On can create a delightful edge detail, such as on the [Calidum Mitts](#).

When to use it:

- On **stable edges**, particularly those that will have stitches picked up from them later
- When you just need to cast on a quick swatch
- **With ribbing that doesn't require a ton of stretch**, such as sweater hems

What to watch out for:

- It **can be difficult to judge the length of tail needed**, especially for longer cast-ons. My favourite method to counteract this is to take two strands of yarn (using a center pull ball, take one strand from the center and one strand from the outside) and make the slip knot with both. Then work your Long-Tail Cast On as usual, but both yarns will be “working” yarns - and when you get to the end, just break one of the yarns. Having one more end to weave in beats redoing a 300-stitch cast-on any day!
- This cast-on is somewhat flexible, but **not suitable for areas that need a ton of stretch**, like sock cuffs

Similar alternatives: If you're looking for something a bit stretchier but with a similar look, try the German Twisted Cast-On (also known as Twisted Long-Tail Cast-On, Old Norwegian Cast-On, Elastic Long-Tail Cast-On).

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Crochet Chain Provisional Cast-On

This is a **temporary cast-on** worked using a crochet hook and scrap yarn. Then, using your project yarn, knit into these stitches. Later, this first row can be picked back up and the crochet chain unravelled, leaving all those stitches live on your needle.

When to use it:

- When you want to **pick up stitches seamlessly** (e.g. at the shoulder of a top-down garment)
- **When you can't decide** what sort of edging you want - knit the rest and decide later!
- When you want to **graft two pieces invisibly** (e.g. for a tubular cowl)
- When you want to **match cast-on and bind-off edges** (cast-on and bind-off edges can look very different, and one way to get around this is to bind off your provisionally cast-on edge)

What to watch out for:

- **Make sure your scrap yarn is smooth and not fuzzy** - this will make it easier to unravel later
- The crochet chain will only unravel in one direction - **mark the end of your chain with a knot or stitch marker** to know which direction to pull later

Similar alternatives: There are many different ways to work a provisional cast-on, each with a slightly different application. For two-way knitting, check out Judy's Magic Cast-On ([Matau Hat](#)) and the Turkish Cast-On ([Stripe Tease Socks](#)).

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Cable Cast-On

A sturdy, structured cast-on where each new stitch is made by inserting the right needle between the last two stitches on the left needle and drawing up a loop.

When to use it:

- When you want an edge that's **firm and stable** — especially helpful for button bands, hems, or edges that need to hold their shape

- When you're **casting on in the middle of a row or project** (like for underarm stitches in a sweater)
- Great for **adding stitches** while knitting, not just at the start
- Ideal for **edges that will be seamed**, since it gives a clean, strong base

What to watch out for:

- **Less stretchy** than other cast-ons
- Can be very **slow** to work

Similar alternatives: The Knitted Cast-On is worked similarly but creates a slightly softer, stretchier edge.

[TUTORIAL](#)**Tubular Cast-On**

A **stretchy, professional-looking cast-on** that creates a seamless, rounded edge, used especially for ribbing. Unlike other cast-ons that create a firm or obvious edge, the tubular cast-on rolls gently into the ribbing, giving a high-end, finished appearance. There are multiple ways to work a tubular cast-on.

When to use it:

- Cuffs, hems, hat brims, **anywhere you knit ribbing!**
- When you want your ribbing to have a **very stretchy edge**
- When you want a **clean, “factory” looking finish**

What to watch out for:

- It takes **longer to set up than most cast-ons** (often starting with a provisional cast on)
- Works best for 1x1 ribbing, but **can be adapted for 2x2 ribbing** with an extra setup step

Similar alternatives: The Tubular Cast-On has an equivalent bind-off.

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BIND-OFFS

Standard Bind-Off

If a pattern just tells you to “bind off,” this is what you’ll be using. Knit two stitches, pass the first stitch over the second, and repeat.

When to use it:

- This bind-off is **suitable for most projects**
- Anywhere you want a **firm, tidy edge**
- Ribbing that doesn’t require a ton of stretch, like sweater hems

What to watch out for:

- It can be **tricky to match this bind off to the tension of your knitting**. If you find you’re struggling with this, try going up or down a needle size depending on if you’d like your bind-off to be tighter or looser
- **Doesn’t have much stretch**. Avoid this bind-off for sock cuffs or other stretchy areas

Similar alternatives: Almost any bind-off can be a good substitute for this one, depending on the needs of your project.

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Jeny’s Surprisingly Stretchy Bind-Off

A **highly elastic bind-off** created by adding **reverse yarn overs** between stitches as you bind off. These yarn overs add extra slack to the stitches being passed over, resulting in a **very stretchy edge**. Developed by Jeny Staiman and popularized in the online knitting community, it’s now a go-to for knitters needing a stretchier alternative to standard bind-offs.

When to use it:

- Anytime you need a **super stretchy edge** (e.g. sock cuffs, crew-necked sweaters)

What to watch out for:

- **Can look a bit ruffled or cause the edge to flare** if worked too loosely
- **Doesn't look as clean as other options** like the Tubular Bind-Off

Similar alternatives: Tubular Bind-Off, Icelandic Bind-Off, Elizabeth Zimmerman's Sewn Bind-Off

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Tubular Bind-Off

A **stretchy, professional-looking bind-off for ribbing**, equivalent to the Tubular Cast-On. The Tubular Bind-Off rolls gently into the ribbing, giving a high-end, finished appearance. It is often worked as a variation of Kitchener Stitch to graft knit stitches with knit stitches and purl stitches with purl stitches.

When to use it:

- Anytime you need a **super stretchy edge** (e.g. sock cuffs, crew-necked sweaters)
- Anytime you work ribbing

What to watch out for:

- **It can be tricky to get the same tension** as in the rest of your ribbing; don't pull too tight or the edge won't stretch!
- Works best for 1x1 ribbing, but **can be adapted for 2x2 ribbing** with an extra setup step
- This is a sewn bind-off, so you will need a tapestry needle.

Similar alternatives: Icelandic Bind-Off, Elizabeth Zimmerman's Sewn Bind-Off

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SEAMS

Kitchener Stitch

Kitchener Stitch, also called **grafting**, is a technique used to join two sets of live stitches together with a tapestry needle. When done correctly, it makes an **invisible, seamless join**. Essentially, Kitchener Stitch creates a new row in between the two pieces grafted together.

This stitch is named after Lord Herbert Kitchener, who promoted seamless sock toes for British soldiers during World War I to prevent blisters from bulky seams. While Lord Kitchener almost certainly wasn't the one to invent this stitch, the association with his name helped spread and standardize it among knitters in Britain and allied countries during the war.

When to use it:

- Anytime you want to **seamlessly connect pieces with live stitches** (shoulder seams, sock toes, joining two halves of a tubular piece)
- If you need to **perform emergency surgery** on your knitting, it's possible to cut out a section of your knitting and seamlessly graft on a new one using Kitchener Stitch
- Can be worked off two needles OR a single needle
- The Tubular Bind-Off is worked using Kitchener Stitch

What to watch out for:

- When grafting two pieces that were knit in the same direction (such as the front and back shoulder seams of a bottom-up garment), **the graft shifts everything over by half a stitch**. This isn't noticeable on plain stockinette fabrics, but can disturb textured or colourwork stitch patterns.
- It can be **tricky to get the tension right**, but this is key for ensuring a seamless join.
- **Requires both pieces to have live stitches** on needles at the same time.

Similar alternatives: Three-Needle Bind-Off, Russian Grafting, Mattress Stitch

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Three-Needle Bind-Off

A technique that **joins two pieces of knitting together while simultaneously binding off the stitches**. It uses three needles: two to hold the live stitches from each piece and a third to knit and bind off the stitches together, creating a flat, strong seam.

When to use it:

- Joining two pieces together
- When you want to **prevent a seam from stretching out** (e.g. shoulder seams on sweaters)
- When you want to **avoid sewing a horizontal seam**

What to watch out for:

- It **creates a visible seam** on the outside of the garment
- **Requires both pieces to have live stitches** on needles at the same time
- Has **no stretch**

Similar alternatives: Russian Grafting, Mattress Stitch, Kitchener Stitch

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Mattress Stitch

A seaming technique used to sew together two finished pieces of knitting, particularly along vertical seams (like the side seams of a sweater). Using a tapestry needle, an extra piece of yarn is passed under the bars between adjacent stitches, pulling the pieces together so the seam disappears into the fabric.

When to use it:

- On garments knit flat
- Vertical seams that cannot be grafted together (e.g. the side seams of a sweater)
- On any bound-off edge that needs to be attached to another piece

What to watch out for:

- Unlike Kitchener Stitch, where the stitches must line up automatically through grafting, it's easy for the seam to start drifting. You may find it useful to pin pieces together before sewing to ensure even distribution of fabric
- With textured stitches or colourwork, make sure the pattern lines up consistently at the seam

Similar alternatives: Whipstitch, Backstitch

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A FINAL WORD

These are just a few of the many techniques you'll encounter on your knitting adventures. There are practically as many variations as there are knitters! My philosophy is that as long as you're getting a result you like, you're doing it right.

Understanding the *why* behind your knitting techniques gives you more than just finished projects — it gives you confidence. When you know how and why to choose the right cast-on, increase, or bind-off for the job, you're not just following instructions — you're building skills that make every future project smoother, more intuitive, and more enjoyable.

The next time you cast on, I hope you feel equipped to make choices that work for you and your knitting.

