

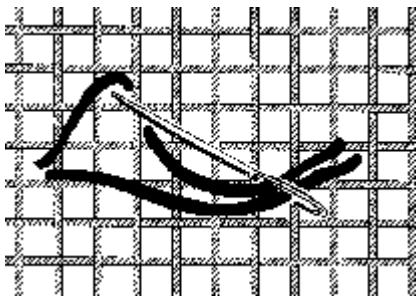
How to Railroad

Here's how to railroad.

Bring the needle to the front of the work where you want the cross stitch to start.

Anywhere you please, slip the needle point between the two strands. Then sink the needle to complete the leg.

See diagram:



Your two strands will be lying perfectly parallel.

What railroading does is eliminate the twist in the thread that forms the stitch. The twist in the thread is actually transferred further up the tail of the thread, however, so you'll have to let the needle dangle from the underside of your work pretty often to get rid of the twist.

Railroading also makes the surface of the work flatter, improves floss coverage, and maximizes light reflected by the floss.

Unfortunately, railroading adds time to each stitch. In an hour or so, it'll become automatic, though, if you care to invest the time in training yourself.

You don't have to railroad both legs of the stitch. You can do just the top one, if you like. This cuts the time by half, although once you learn how to do it, railroading doesn't take that much extra time. Some folks say that not railroading the bottom leg makes a noticeable difference because coverage is substantially reduced.

And you don't have to railroad every piece. Since it adds time to your work, you may want to railroad only on a piece destined for a competition or something you hope will become a family heirloom.

Those who stitch in competitions railroad all the time. Judges can tell the difference.

And if you're doing satin stitch or bargello or some other stitch which has long stitches, your work will definitely be better if you railroad. I also think railroading helps duplicate stitch work.

Hints for Duplicate Stitch

Making the Stitch

The duplicate stitch is a V shape--same shape as the Vs on the knitted item. Because I can't draw this in ASCII art successfully in html, on a scrap of paper, please draw yourself a V as a reference. Mark the bottom of the V with the letter a. Mark the upper left top with c and the upper right top with b. (Sorry about asking you to make your own diagram!)

To make the stitch, send the needle to the top at a. Go down at b and up at c (all in one motion). Then go back down at a. (In the same motion you can come back up at point a

in the next duplicate stitch, which is located to the left of the one you just did--if you're right-handed!)

Beginning and Ending Your Thread

You have the same problem with duplicate stitch as you have with Hardanger and bargello--with the added "bonus" of anchoring threads securely enough to ensure washing. (I wash this stuff by hand or alone on gentle cycle in the washer, incidentally.) The safest method is an away waste tail of about 3"; don't skimp, especially with RibbonFloss (which tends to unravel); you'll use it all. After you've worked several stitches, thread the tail into the needle and run it back under several stitches. Bring the needle out and over the last stitch run under and then go back the other direction. Take the tail over the last stitch run under (again) and go back the other way. Continue this until the 3" is used up. (Also called a Hardanger finish or a bargello tuck.) This may seem excessive (and you wouldn't do this more than once for Hardanger or bargello), but you'll be really unhappy when your stitching starts to come out after a wash or two. Better safe than sorry! End the thread the same way.

Metallics are especially difficult to work with, I think, so make a generous away waste tail and finishing tail. (Also work with short-ish lengths, as they can fray and look messy. RibbonFloss is especially susceptible to getting fuzzy.)

Figuring Out the Gauge of the Sweater

Most sweaters will not list the gauge, so you'll need to figure it for yourself.

Lay a ruler on the sweater. You'll see rows of Vs. Count how many Vs opening upward there are per inch. Your eyes may play tricks on you: you'll see rows of Vs tipped upside-down, too! Focus on the ones that are right-side-up, that is, opening upwards, as shown below.

VVVVVVVVV

In this row of Vs, there are 8 downward openings, but there are 9 upward openings. Supposing that this row of Vs represents one inch, the gauge is 9 stitch/inch because you're counting the upward-opening Vs.

Coverage

Unless you *want* a tweeded look with the sweater color showing through, consider it a requirement that you strip and moisten your floss. Don't be lazy about skipping this step; you will be very displeased with your stitched result if you do.

The number of strands to use depends on what gauge your sweater is (more on that below). For example, I did a "Drifter" sweater from Lands' End, which is 7-gauge, and I needed all six plies of the floss for coverage. Probably anything 7- to 9-gauge or less will require all six plies; anything less than 7-gauge will probably require more than six. You may have to do a few stitches and be prepared to rip them out if the coverage isn't what you'd like.

Another thing that improves coverage is a laying tool. A laying tool helps you control the fiber as you sink the needle so the plies don't become twisted. In my opinion, a laying tool is essential in duplicate stitch if you are using RibbonFloss or any other wide, flat fiber, as any twisting of these fibers reduces coverage substantially.

You may have to fiddle with the stitch--perhaps pull it up and pull it back down again--to get nice coverage. Some individual plies may need adjustment, too. Duplicate stitch isn't quick!

Blended Needles and Duplicate Stitch

There is no problem with blended needles if you're talking about floss.

My general advice toward blending floss and metallics is: this doesn't work too well. If you want to try a blend with floss, you might experiment with something like Candlelight; you might like the look of floss with Balger #16 or #32 braid, or even 1/8" braid. Don't even bother with blending filament!

My preference for a metallic look is RibbonFloss. It requires a laying tool and long tails to bury and is prone to fuzzies, but it's more pliable than Balger 1/8" braid and therefore easier to work with.

Is Duplicate Falling from Popularity?

There is some evidence that duplicate stitch is not as popular now (1996) as it was a few years ago (1994). Evidence: not as many duplicate stitch patterns published new, number of patterns turning up in mark-down bins, not as many patterns featured in magazines. Duplicate stitch has been around for years, however, and it's unlikely to go completely out of style.

How to Reduce Knots and Tangles in Your Work

Unlike railroading and using a laying tool, reducing knots and tangles in your work does not call for learning new skills....just for remembering to do some things.

Let the Needle Dangle

The first way to reduce knots each stitcher discovers automatically: let the needle dangle from the back of the work.

Turn the Needle the Other Way

Another way to discourage tangles is to counteract the unconscious twist we give the needle. Do this by twisting the needle in the opposite direction. If you're right-handed, it's likely you twist your needle clockwise. (Left-handers probably turn it counter-clockwise.) By looking at which way things untwist when you let your needle dangle, figure out which way you're turning the needle. Either as you pull the needle up or sink it, give it a quarter-turn in the opposite direction.

Moisten the Floss

Moistening the thread really works wonders for eliminating knots and tangles. I think it's the one single thing you can do to reduce these problems. Get yourself a hunk of clean sponge (I like an "artificial" sponge, such as is often found as a packing material). Moisten it and squeeze out almost all the water so that it's damp but not sopping. Put it in a plastic container like a little box or a film can. (You can also just lay it on a plate!) Pull out one strand of floss from the 6-strand length (this is called stripping) and run it over the moist sponge. You can do this as a single operation. Set the thread aside to dry (30-60 seconds in normal home humidity). You will see that moistening the thread is like ironing it. When it's flatter and straighter, it's less likely to kink up.

Don't stitch with moist floss! Let it dry first!

Note: I prepare all 6 strands of my floss at the same time, recombining them in whatever number I need (for me, that's usually 2). I'm careful to keep the same cut ends together so I can tell which way the grain of the thread runs and thread my needle with the blossoming end in the eye. I thread up the last of my prepared floss, I fix the next batch so it'll be dry when I'm ready for it.

Use Shorter Lengths

Stitching with long lengths also invites tangles. I know the books all say 15-18" lengths, but I've found that if I stitch with about 12" lengths, I have far less aggravation from uninvited knots. Using shorter lengths also means that I run out of thread before it starts to get fuzzy and produce stitches without sheen.

Another factor you might not have thought about is tension: -your- tension. When you stitch and you're all pent-up with stress, it's easy to get tangles and knots. Also when you hurry. The obvious solution is to relax and take your time. Have a cup of tea before you pick up your needle. Or, try this: as you breathe in, imagine you're gathering up all the tension into a ball in your chest; as you exhale long and deeply, pretend you're

sending all these troubles out of your body. Do this several times. I know it sounds kooky, but it works for me, and maybe it will help you, too!

How to Use a Laying Tool

A laying tool is something that improves the look of your stitches. It's especially useful in

- bargello
- duplicate stitch
- work which consists of satin stitches or other long stitches
- when using a wide flat thread, such as Rainbow Gallery "Flair" or Caron "Rachel" tubular nylon; or Rainbow Gallery "Patent Leather" - - great for Santa's boots and belt; or Kreinik metallic ribbon (1/8" and 1/16" widths)
- when working on a low-count fabric (such as 6-count)

What do you use for a laying tool?

A big needle (a #13 tapestry needle - - the kind you'd thread with yarn to sew together a sweater you knitted) works just fine, or you can use a trolley needle, toothpick, plastic hair roller pick, a stick from a "Pick Up Sticks" game, a small-gauge knitting needle (like you'd knit a sock on), or a skewer from a turkey-trussing set. You can also use a tekobari, a Japanese laying tool which is *very* sharp (read: dangerous!). Or, you can purchase a laying tool. A great one is the Perfect Stitch (Gripit Plus) - - wear it on your non-needle-hand thumb. I've also seen some gorgeous ones at stitch festivals made out of exotic woods, as well as some made out of metal.

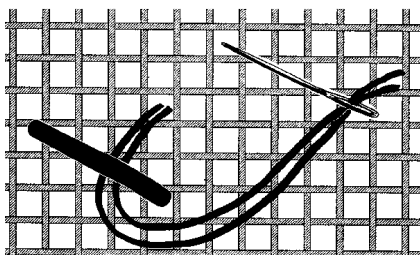
Some laying tools have sharp ends so you can use them as an awl. (Before you ask: to poke a hole in non-counted thread fabric preparatory to working an eyelet there - - laced bodices and merry olde England and all that.)

Note: A trolley needle is like a thimble, in that it fits over your fingertip, but instead of being flat for pushing needles, it has a sharp spike on the end. (Your one finger will look like Cat Woman's. In fact, in the recent Batman movie, the costume designer -did- use trolley needles for Cat Woman's fingernails!) This spike is dangerous, and a teacher once told me that she wears hers on her thumb to avoid accidentally poking herself in the eye (horrid thought!): if she wore it on her index finger and forgot it was there and reached up to scratch her eye, she'd be in a world of hurt.

For this reason, a trolley needle is not for me!!!

Here's how to use a laying tool.

Send the needle to the top of the fabric and pull the thread through all the way. Now bring the needle towards your navel so the thread comes out of the hole, lies on the surface of the fabric, and the needle points toward your body. Place the laying tool flat on the surface of the fabric, lying perpendicular to the thread and trapping the thread beneath it. Here's a diagram:



Hold the thread to the fabric surface by placing your thumb on the laying tool. (If you're right-handed, you'll be holding the laying tool against the fabric with your L thumb--or whatever finger you wish.)

With your RH, send the needle to the back of the work--STILL holding down the thread with the laying tool. As you pull the thread through, you will eventually reach the point where the laying tool is preventing your completely pulling the thread through to the back.

Now the tricky part.

Pull the thread the rest of the way to the back. As you do this, the laying tool will rise up from the face of the fabric and move toward the hole into which the thread is sinking.

As you pull the thread and slowly lift the laying tool, keep the laying tool still parallel to the plane of the fabric. This keeps tension on the thread, and the thread doesn't just twist any way it wants to as it goes to the back of the work.

Finally the thread will be pulled through as far as you can and the laying tool will be trapped beneath the stitch. Pull out the tool and finish pulling the thread all the way through to the back of the work.

Some stitchers use the laying tool to "stroke" the thread. This, they say, helps the plies straighten themselves out into a neat parallel alignment.

The tip of the laying tool also can be used to comb through the stands of floss to help them lie parallel. This is especially helpful when stitching with more than 2 plies, and I find "combing" more effective than "stroking."

To keep "ordinary" stitches from twisting--that is, stitches made with 2 plies of floss--I suggest railroading. It is quicker than using a laying tool. Railroading also "guarantees" that the plies will lie parallel, whereas stroking and combing or using a laying tool do not.

How to Thread Your Needle so You Stitch with the Grain of the Floss

Floss does have grain. Some stitchers can tell by pulling a strand (ply) between thumb and index finger; if you are "with" the straight of the grain, the floss feels smoother. Others run the strand between their lips, saying this skin is more sensitive than the fingertips. Still others can tell just by looking at the way the strand is twisted.

More power to them! I have to rely on the "blossoming end" method.

Make a U with your length of floss and hold the two cut ends between thumb and forefinger with about 1/2 to 3/4" sticking out. Gentle "tap" on the cut ends. One of them will "blossom" more than the other. Put this blossoming end into the eye of the needle, and you will be stitching with the grain of the floss.

This blossoming technique works on as few as 2 strands.

When preparing your thread by stripping and moistening, lay out the prepared strands with the blossoming ends at the same end. I lay my thread to dry over the arm of the couch, and I place the blossoming end toward me and the non-blossoming ends pointing toward the floor.

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