How do you mark fabrics when sewing? That’s the question I posed earlier this month, via this blog, Facebook, and Pinterest. It’s fantastic to see such a range of marking ideas for so many projects. Think beyond the washable pen and chalk.

Enjoy the selected responses below, plus a spotlight on one featured reader.

Here’s what you are saying:

Flexibility or Precision

“I use various methods of marking, yet my most used are clips and pins. I clip the ends of the dart legs and place a pin at the tip of each dart. I fold the fabric so the clips meet and rearrange the pins so that they go through both layers of fabric. Then, I sew the dart. Garment sewing is my focus. If a precise line is required, I’ll pull out the ‘ole tracing wheel and chalk paper. If I just need to find the center of a section, I’ll fold it in half and make a crease mark or place a pin. If the fabric is too loose to hold pins I may do some tailor’s tacks.”—Barbara Grace, Tempe, AZ
From the Back-to-School Aisle
“I use Crayola Washable Markers. They come in a variety of colors, and they always come out.”—Paula Hilson, Roseville, CA

Tools Match End-Use
“How I mark my fabric depends on the type of fabric and what I am marking. For joining dots or bust points, I will almost always use a thread tack, leaving long ends to pull out once I have sewn that seam or dart. I quite often use a powdered chalk in a roller to mark lines. I have considered using a wash-away marker but have not, as yet, purchased one. In rare situations I have used an ink pen. (I use hairspray on the ink before washing to get out any ink later.)”—Laila Lunn-Zaoral, Airdie, Alberta CA

Marking with Skill
“As my sewing journey has advanced, I have graduated to nips and iron-away pens, but I still often rely on chalk markers and tailor tacks.”—Victoria Hensley, Cincinnati, OH
Keeping Options Open
“I grew up making thread tailor tacks, and I still use them. If I cannot put a pin or pencil mark for quick reference, heat-erasable pens or chalk markers work well, too.”—Mary Green, North Richland Hills, TX

Fine Lines
“The way I mark fabrics depends on the project and the fabrics being used. I use a mechanical chalk pencil the most, because it draws fine lines and is easy to remove, plus the chalk comes in four colors. For other projects, I still like the fine point water soluble pens. My final choice is the heat-soluble pens, although I am careful what I use them on, because sometime the markings can come back even after being ‘removed’ by an iron.”—Kathy Binfet, Meridian, ID

Old Faithful: Tracing Carbons
“Back when I started sewing, I always used the tracing wheel and carbon paper. Since I started sewing again, I am using tailor’s chalk, water-soluble pens, and erasable pens. Just yesterday I pulled out my tracing wheel and carbon paper, trying to see what works and what doesn’t.”—Clovis Perkins, East Chicago, IN
Tiny Hotel Soaps
“I use the soap you get from hotels. They are small enough to control in your hand and usually have a nice edge. If the edge isn’t sharp enough, I thin it with a paring knife. The mark lasts a long time, but it comes out in the wash.”—Denise Fiegel, Benzonia, MI

Hand Quilting and Garment Making
“The way I mark fabric really depends on what I am sewing. If hand-quilting, I like a chalk pounce and template (either purchased or hand-made with template plastic). For sewing clothing or doll clothes, transfer paper with a transfer wheel is my preferred method. I like to use a pattern notcher for alignment marks. I use tailor’s chalk (usually for hems), and temporary fabric markers. Back in the day, I made X’s with a needle and thread to transfer dart marks from pattern to fabric, though not so much anymore. So many different ways for so many different projects!”—Judy Goble, Springfield, OR
Sew With Speed

“It’s probably taboo, but I like to make a small mark with a sharp lead pencil. I find chalk pencils too difficult to see. If I am concerned about the pencil mark being visible on the finished product, I’ll use a disappearing marker. (I have to make sure to finish sewing before it disappears.) Or, I’ll pull a small length of thread through at the mark”—Kathy Renz, Chalfont, PA

Marking on the Go

“I use a Ticonderoga #2 pencil. So far I found this to be the best method for me. It washes out and can be seen on most materials. The darker blues and blacks often show the pencil indentations long enough for me to finish my piecing. I saw this method once being used by a quilter who lived in an RV for ten months of the year, staying with her children for the other two months during the holidays.”—Barbara Walock, Farmington Hills, MI

Variety of Marks

“I use a variety of methods, depending on what I’m working on. Heat-soluble pens are really handy but they do have their limitations. They are not friendly when working with dark fabrics and sometimes the fabric just doesn’t want to let the ink into it. On dark fabric, in particular, heat-soluble pens often discolor the fabric, so you need to be careful! I do like the Clover Air Erasable Pen with an eraser on one end. But again, that doesn’t work all that well on dark fabrics. I have a variety of chalk pencils, both the mechanical variety and ones that you sharpen to a point manually. For small marks these are really nice, especially the mechanical ones, as they can be very precise. However, sometimes the ‘lead’ in these can be really hard, making it difficult to get a good chalk transfer. It is nice having a variety of colors to go back and forth between, depending again on the color of the fabric being marked. I have used pounce pads and quilt stencils with mixed results, but admittedly haven’t used them a lot, so I probably need more practice. Sometimes I simply insert a pin to mark a location. When I need to stop sewing to create an opening for turning, I’ll use two pins closely spaced as my stop point. Occasionally I’ll use a Hera marker, my finger, or an iron to press a mark. In the end, I think my favorite way to mark fabric is using the Clover Triangle Tailor’s Chalk in blue. It’s always reliable and easy to apply, stays put, is not hard to ‘erase,’ and can be seen on most fabrics.”—Cyndy Knighton, Kent, WA

Soap Bars

“When bath soap gets too small to use, I let it harden for a while and then use it to mark my quilts. I generally do just a diagonal cross-hatch with the triple zigzag stitch on my sewing machine, so a few dashes this way and that way with the soap is enough. The soap brushes off easily, and any small remaining marks will disappear with the
next wash.”—Del Hersey, Toronto, Ontario, CA

July’s Reader Spotlight:
Gina’s Answer
“I don’t believe there is a single answer for marking fabric; it depends on the fabric and the project. I probably have more marking tools than scissors!
Sometimes the best way to mark an appliqué on wool, for example, is to cut the design on freezer paper and heat-set it, then stitch or cut around the paper’s edge. A ‘sticky stabilizer’ used for machine embroidery works similar to freezer paper, but it is stronger and reusable.
I have also marked a quilting design with a permanent ink pen onto Press ‘n Seal. (Purchase Press ‘n Seal in the food storage area of a grocery store.) Sew over the marked lines and tear away when complete.
I have also used 1/4″ quilters tape to establish a cross-hatch design. Stitch along the line of the tape, then use an attachment for your sewing machine foot to work across the project at the desired intervals.
Would you believe Crayola Washable Markers? If you don’t mind washing the quilted project before using/gifting, they make GREAT easy-to-see lines. Test your fabrics before using (particularly with the washable markers, but that’s good advice when using any marking tool).
My collection of traditional marking tools are in a small 3-drawer plastic stack. In one drawer are the chalks: tailor’s chalk, Clover Chaco-liner (in pink, white, blue, and yellow), Quick Swipe chalk pouncer/refill and the Chubby Crayon by Miracle Chalk.
In another drawer are various pencils: Sewline mechanical fabric pencils (in white, black, and pink), water-soluble marking pencils (in silver, white, yellow, and blue), clean-erase quilting pencils, graphite and soft lead pencils, PLUS a variety of erasers and sharpeners.
Don’t forget fine-tip permanent ink textile markers, in an array of colors. I like to ‘touch up’ an errant stitch—on the quilt top/back or on machine embroideries.
Old-fashioned, but still useful, is a sliver of plain bar soap, or tracing paper and a tracing wheel.
Sitting beside my sewing machine are my favorite blue or purple water-and/or heat-soluble markers.
I personally AVOID using the popular Frixion pens. Do you know that the lines will reappear if the quilt is very cold? I have heard of quilters who have shipped a quilt for a competition, only to find that it was disqualified when all the quilting marks reappeared after being in an airplane cargo area. Yes, they do disappear again when heated with an iron, but at a show, you do not have that option.
What types of sewing do you find requires the most marking?
Just about every quilt project requires some kind of marking—cutting/piecing half square triangles, outlining English paper pieces and Dresden plate templates, matching center points on units, appliqués, or the final quilting. On craft projects, I’ll mark placement of handles, buttonholes, pleats, darts, etc. Some fabrics are difficult to ‘see’ the right vs wrong side. I lightly mark a wavy line on the ‘wrong side.’

Since you have quite a marking tool collection, can you comment on which favorite tools hold up over time?
Pencils (in various styles/colors) and rolling chalk markers.

Which projects do you sew the most? (garments, accessories, quilts, home dec, etc.)
Today, I am mostly a quilter and maker of small organizational and giftable projects. Years ago, I sewed clothing. One of the reasons I like quilting is that ‘one size fits all!’
Thank you, Nancy and your staff, for all the inspiration and ideas you share with us!”—Gina Milano, Bellevue, WA

August Share Your Insight Question
August Question: Share your experience with appliqué.
Submit your answer by Aug 16, 2017, using the form below, to be considered for our August Reader Spotlight. Disclaimer: We may contact you to verify your answer. Your contact information will not be used for any other reason. Your submission to Nancy Zieman Productions, LLC, including contact information, gives us the right to modify, use, distribute, reproduce, publish, and display the submission indefinitely in all media, means, and forms without any payment to you. You hereby represent that you haven’t copied the content from a book, magazine, newspaper, or other commercial source.

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