

Beginning Lace with washcloth projects

Lace is a technique that's often considered intimidating, but it's really not that difficult. Paying attention is the most important skill involved. The actual stitches are generally quite basic ones: knits, purls, yarnovers, and various decreases.

We'll work through the basics of lace, using some simple washcloth patterns to illustrate the concepts. Washcloths are a great way to try out lace patterns; they're small, they're useful, and almost any size will do, so gauge isn't a great concern.

Yarnovers

By its simplest definition, lace is a fabric with deliberate holes in it, forming a decorative pattern. When lace is knitted, those holes are formed by doing yarnover (YO) increases. Yarnovers are very easy, but there are confusing directions out there that make them seem harder than they actually are.

A YO is just a loop of yarn that goes over the top of the working needle. So that its orientation is the same as the surrounding stitches, which is generally the desired outcome, it needs to go up the front of the needle first and then down the back. The completed yarnover will look like this:



The YO needs to begin with the yarn in front of the needle; therefore, if the prior stitch ends with the yarn in back of the needle, the yarn should be brought forward between the needles, just as when switching from a knit to a purl. With the yarn in front, it is then brought over the right needle, so it is again in back, and a strand is crossing the right needle as illustrated above. Because the YO ended with the yarn in back of the needle, if the next stitch requires it to be in front of the needle, it should be brought forward between the needles, again just as when switching from a knit to a purl.

A YO is an increase; it forms 1 stitch where 0 stitches existed before. There are some directions which will tell you that a YO is formed by bringing the yarn forward, and then knitting the next stitch with the yarn still in the front. This is a correct method if (and only if) the stitches before and after the YO are knit stitches, but it is misleading, because it makes it sound as if the following knit stitch were part of the YO – that is, as if you were creating 2 stitches where 1 existed before. This can cause a very large problem when following a pattern: if you are knitting an additional stitch after every YO, you will run out of stitches before you reach the end of the row, and your stitches on the following row will not be correctly aligned. Also, this method simply doesn't work if the surrounding stitches are other than knits.

Because a YO is an increase, it is usually balanced by decreases so that the same number of overall stitches is maintained. Sometimes the pattern becomes temporarily unbalanced – that is,

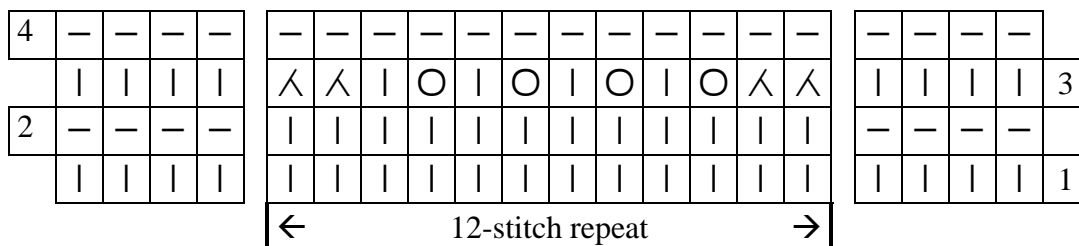
there will be more increases than decreases on one row, and then a later row will have more decreases than increases to return you to the original number. This sometimes causes alarm in new lace knitters who were not expecting their stitch count to change from row to row. If you're not sure whether this is supposed to be happening, count the overall number of increases and overall number of decreases on your row, and then you will know if, and by how much, your stitch count should change.

Charts

Many lace patterns include a chart, and some rely wholly on charts with no written-out directions. For those who have never worked with a chart, this can be one of the factors that make lace intimidating. However, once you understand how charts are interpreted, you'll see that they can be very useful in letting you see how the pattern comes together, and in keeping you on track.

It's useful to think of a chart as a roadmap to your knitting. What a chart shows you is a stylized picture of the fabric you're creating, much as a map shows you a stylized picture of the landscape. Just as a map contains a legend which explains the meaning of the various lines and symbols, a chart will contain a legend which explains how the symbols it uses relate to the stitches; knitting symbols are not quite standardized, so always check the legend to be sure you know what each symbol means on the chart you're using.

Charts always picture the right side (front) of the knitted fabric. Therefore, you read the chart in the same direction that you move across the fabric with respect to the right side of it. For RS rows, this means that you read from the right edge of the chart to the left edge. If you're knitting in the round, you only have RS rows, so this will apply to every row of the chart. If you're knitting flat, WS rows will be read from left to right – although you're moving across the side of the fabric facing you from right to left, you're looking at the back, so it's the same as moving left to right across front. Also, because stitches which are purled on the WS produce knits on the RS, and vice versa, most charts will use the same symbol for RS knits and WS purls, and for RS purls and WS knits. Charts are always read from the bottom to the top, which is the direction in which the knitting grows. In addition, for patterns in which the WS rows are all knits or all purls, many charts will show the RS rows only, to be concise.



- | knit on RS, purl on WS
- purl on RS, knit on WS
- YO
- ∧ k2tog

Above is the chart for the first pattern, a feather-and-fan cloth. This pattern has a 12-stitch repeat for the center of the cloth, with a 4-stitch garter stitch border on each side. You will work the first border section once, work the repeating section as many times as specified, and then work the ending border section. You can see that the row numbers start at the bottom of the chart. You can also tell from the numbering that this pattern will be knit flat, because the row numbers are on alternate ends of the chart, indicating that RS rows (odd numbers) are read beginning at the right edge, and WS rows (even numbers) are read beginning at the left. Notice how the chart uses alternate symbols to indicate knitting on the RS and knitting on the WS, for the garter stitch border, and the same symbol to indicate knitting on the RS and purling on the WS, for the first two rows of the repeat section, which are stockinette. When you knit this pattern, try to see how this translates into the fabric you're creating – look at the knitting from the front side, and see how the rows look different in the garter stitch section and the same in the stockinette section.

Not everybody is comfortable with or enjoys working with charts, so all of the charted patterns in this handout will also be presented as written-out directions. However, even if you use the written-out directions to knit, try to see how the chart relates to the finished product.

Keeping your place

There are two aspects to keeping your place when knitting lace: keeping your place in the knitting, and keeping your place in the pattern.

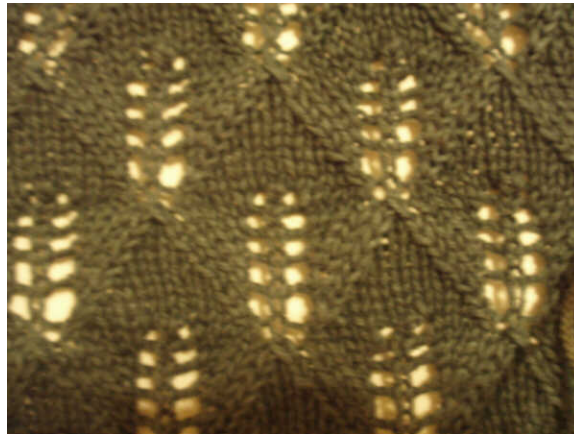
For keeping your place in the knitting, using stitch markers between repeats can be helpful if the pattern has a regular repeat; even if it doesn't, placing a marker at set intervals, such as every 20 stitches, can be helpful by breaking up the amount of counting you need to do to check yourself. In addition, if your pattern has plain rows between patterned rows, use these as an opportunity to count back, making sure you have the right types of stitches in place. Because lace can be hard to get back on the needles if you have to rip, you may want to use a lifeline. This is a piece of thin, smooth thread or yarn (unwaxed dental floss works really nicely), threaded through all of the stitches on a row you know to be correct; thread it on your tapestry needle, and pass through each of the stitches on your needle, letting the lifeline rest in the bottom of the stitches; be sure not to go through your stitch markers if you're using them, and be sure not to knit your lifeline into the stitches when you work the next row. Multiple lifelines can be left in place as you work; they'll pull right out at the end, when you're sure everything is perfect.

For keeping your place in the pattern, there are many methods. For charted patterns, marking the chart is helpful. Lines can simply be crossed off as they're worked, although this can create an issue if you have to rip back and therefore have to work the marked-off lines again. There are various non-permanent methods of marking, such as using Post-It notes or removable highlighter tape; some people like to use a magnet board to hold the chart, and a magnetic strip to mark the row. For uncharted patterns, some people find it helpful to write each line on a separate notecard, and flip the cards as rows are worked. There are, of course, many additional methods, and you can do whatever works for you.

Pattern 2: Fern lace cloth

Fern lace is another traditional Shetland lace pattern. With its interlocking diamond-shaped leaves, it is a pretty pattern, and is particularly well suited to the beginning lace knitter because it offers numerous internal cues to help keep you on track. Here is the chart of a single repeat, showing only the RS rows (WS rows are purled) and a picture of the resulting fabric:

	○					∧					○		19	
	○				∧		∧					○		17
	○			∧				∧				○		15
	○		∧					∧				○		13
	○	∧							∧			○		11
∧					○		○						∧	9
	∧				○		○						∧	7
		∧			○		○				∧			5
			∧		○		○		∧					3
				∧	○		○	∧						1



There are several things to note here. First, see the spine of knit stitches between the YO pairs – this central stitch will align on each row, giving you a strong cue that you are in the correct place. Second, see the strong diagonals formed by the slanted decreases, which will make it apparent where the next decrease needs to occur. Third, as you go from the bottom half of the leaf to the top, the center stitch of the stockinette triangle will be aligned with the spine formed in the lower half. Finally, as one leaf stacks on top of the next, the center stitch of the new leaf's spine will arise from the double decrease which formed the tip of the previous leaf. By watching for these cues as you knit, and being aware of which part of the picture each stitch is forming, you will make yourself aware of mistakes almost immediately, while they are still very easy to repair.

Pattern 3: Snowflake cloth

I selected the snowflake lace pattern to show one of the peskier symbols in charting: the “no stitch” box. No other symbol causes so much consternation – what does it mean? Does it mean to slip a stitch? How do you work this? Here the answer: *Ignore it*. Don’t do anything to any of your stitches – just skip over that box and go to the next one that has actual instructions in it. It’s really that simple.

If it doesn’t mean for you to do anything, why is it there? It’s there because the chart is wider at some points than the actual number of stitches you have in your current row, usually because there are unbalanced increases or decreases in another row. It’s a spacer, like the black squares in a crossword; by including it, the chart writer can give you a chart that more closely mirrors what you’ll see in your knitting.

Here are the written instructions for a single repeat of snowflake lace, and a picture:

- Row 1: k1, [YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, k1] 2 times
- Row 2 (and all WS rows): purl
- Row 3: k1, [k1, YO, k2] 4 times
- Row 5: k2tog, YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, SK2P, YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, SSK
- Row 7: k1, [k2tog, YO, k1, YO, SSK, k1] 2 times
- Row 9: k1, [k1, YO, k2] 4 times
- Row 11: k1, [k2tog, YO, SK2P, YO, SSK, k1] 2 times



If this were charted out with the right edges aligned, it would look like this:

					λ	○	Λ	○	λ		λ	○	Λ	○	λ		11
		○				○				○				○			9
					λ	○		○	λ		λ	○		○	λ		7
				λ	○	λ		λ	○	Λ	○	λ		λ	○	λ	5
		○				○				○				○			3
					○	λ		λ	○		○	λ		λ	○		1

This makes the design appear to be a border, with a jagged edge, which is very misleading; this pattern as knitted is basically rectangular. No-stitch boxes can be used to space out the shorter lines so that shape is maintained. However, if the lines are simply centered, and the no-stitch boxes applied to the ends, it looks like this:

■	■		λ	○	Λ	○	λ		λ	○	Λ	○	λ		■	■	11
		○				○				○				○			9
■	■		λ	○		○	λ		λ	○		○	λ		■	■	7
■	■	λ	○	λ		λ	○	Λ	○	λ		λ	○	λ	■	■	5
		○				○				○				○			3
■	■		○	λ		λ	○		○	λ		λ	○		■	■	1

That’s a little bit better, but still misleading. The oval of YOs which forms the snowflake in the bottom center is apparent, but the YOs in the top half appear to be stacked, which is not really what happens, and you can’t see the snowflakes in that portion at all. Instead, we’ll chart this

with the no-stitch boxes interspersed in the chart, so they're above and below the extra stitches in the longer lines, and that looks like this:

	∧	■	○	∧	○	■	∧		∧	■	○	∧	○	■	∧		11
		○				○				○				○			9
	∧	■	○		○	■	∧		∧	■	○		○	■	∧		7
∧	○	■	∧		∧	■	○	∧	○	■	∧		∧	■	○	∧	5
		○				○				○				○			3
	○	■	∧		∧	■	○		○	■	∧		∧	■	○		1

Much better! Now we can see not only the bottom center snowflake, but also the two half-flakes on either side, and the two snowflakes in the top half staggered over three stitches. This chart is much more informative now, and a real help to the knitter instead of a confusing mess.

Here is the pattern for this cloth:

Cast on 45 stitches, and knit 4 rows garter stitch.

Work the following chart the desired number of repeats (6 to 8 is suggested).

All WS rows: k4, purl to last 4 stitches, k4

																	11
																	9
																	7
																	5
																	3
																	1

← Repeat three times →

- | knit on RS, purl on WS
- YO
- ∧ k2tog
- ∧ SSK
- ∧ SK2P (slip 1 knitwise, k2tog, pass slipped stitch over new stitch and off)
- ∧ SK2P on all repeats but last; on final repeat, SSK

Knit 4 rows garter stitch, and bind off.

Written directions for the chart-averse:

- Row 1: k5, [YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, k1] 6 times, k4
- Row 2 (and all WS rows): k4, purl to last 4 stitches, k4
- Row 3: k5, [k1, YO, k2] 12 times, k4
- Row 5: k4, k2tog, [YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, SK2P] 5 times, YO, SSK, k1, k2tog, YO, SSK, k4
- Row 7: k5, [k2tog, YO, k1, YO, SSK, k1] 6 times, k4
- Row 9: k5, [k1, YO, k2] 12 times, k4
- Row 11: k5, [k2tog, YO, SK2P, YO, SSK, k1] 6 times, k4