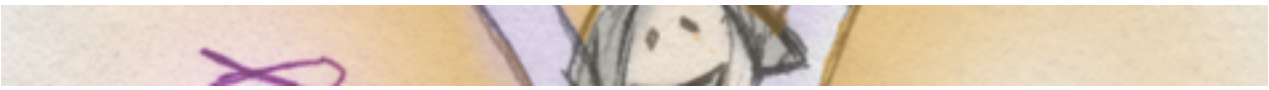

by Kay Gardiner and Ann Shayne

Another batch of good questions and good solutions from the Problem Ladies!

Knitting Literacy: Reading Your Work

Dear Problem Ladies:

Why do I keep losing stitches all the time when I'm working on the February Lady Sweater? It really bugs me and I don't want to use a lifeline or stitch markers either. Don't even mention them, as all my so-called friends keep doing.

Annie

Dear Annie:

We are not your so-called friends. We are your real friends, and we are telling you that this perplexing situation presents an excellent opportunity to improve your skill at reading your knitting.

Remember when you were a new knitter, and after a while you started to notice that a knit stitch, from the wrong side, looks like a purl stitch, and a purl stitch, from the wrong side, looks like a knit stitch? Remember how that blew your mind? That was an early instance of reading your knitting. By now, after all the stitches you've knitted (and lost track of), you should be able to look at your knitting and see whether you've dropped a stitch somewhere, or whether you've knit two of them together (two very likely causes of missing stitches).

To fix that naughty February Lady Sweater, and to do it without lifelines or stitch markers, you need to diagnose what you are doing that causes stitches to be absent when you expect them to be present. Are you knitting two stitches together? Are you dropping stitches without noticing it? Are you forgetting to make an increase at the appointed edge or interval? If you look carefully at your knitting, in good light and in a calm, deliberate, cuss-free manner, you should be able to see whether any of these things has occurred. Look. No, *look*. You are a knitter, not a man standing in front of an open refrigerator.

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It is easiest to notice such anomalies in a field of plain stockinette, where any irregularity, even the absence of a “make one” at the beginning or end of a row, will catch your eye. If the stitch pattern is textured, or it’s a section with a lot of increase/decrease shaping, it may be more difficult to detect mistakes. In areas of lace or cables, check each repeat or cable section across the row, to make sure it has the correct number of stitches—especially in “background” areas. If it doesn’t, you’re onto something, so keep looking for the mistake further below in that section. The basic strategy is to divide your knitting into recognizable sections and thereby conquer.

But maybe you don’t feel like using forensic methods on your knitting, or your eyesight is fading fast enough already. Here’s what we do. We count our stitches every few rows, especially when working a part of the piece in which the stitch count is changing often. When we discover a discrepancy, and the mistake that caused it doesn’t immediately jump out at us, we just pull out the needles and rip back to a row where the stitch count was correct. Which, since we’ve been counting frequently, won’t be too many rows back. Putting stitches back onto the needles is a skill unto itself, and you get good at it with practice.

At such moments, it is cheering to remember that in knitting, we can always go back to a place where all was right with the world, and start again. Wouldn’t it be nice if life were like that?

The Chronic Challenge of Weaving in Ends

Dear Problem Ladies:

Why do I stink so much at weaving in ends? On my new seamless sweater, the places where I wove in my ends are either all wadded up and tighter than in other parts of the sweater or there are bits of yarn peeking out, making the sweater look sloppy. Any tips?

A Reader

Dear Reader:

Although weaving in ends is a skill that is needed on every project, many how-to-knit books overlook it. For starters, it’s always easier to hide woven-in ends in the bumpy texture of the purl side of the fabric. They will be nearly invisible if the purl side also happens to be the wrong side of the garment. If there’s no purl side, as in seed stitch or ribbing, for example, you should still weave into “purl bumps” on the wrong side of the fabric.

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When weaving in and out along a row of bumps, take care not to pull the yarn tightly. Emulate the tension of the knitting, and if in doubt, pull on the fabric a little to add slack to the weaving strand before clipping the end. While some knitters make sure the ends are secure by weaving them back along the same row of purl bumps, this leads to a thick and inflexible spot in the fabric. It's not necessary. We recommend weaving only once.

In a garment knitted in springy wool yarn, the weaving should be invisible on the right side of the fabric. If the garment is in reverse stockinette (and therefore all the purl bumps are on the right side), hide the yarn ends on the wrong side by duplicate stitching onto the wrong side (which is stockinette stitch).

In fancy stitch patterns, especially lace, hiding the ends can be tricky. But, to paraphrase Julia Child, nobody sees what you do in the kitchen. In other words, we do not rule out using Scotch tape. Anchor the ends as neatly as you can, by any means necessary.

When knitting a fine yarn on big needles, or with a slippery yarn like bamboo or silk, it's harder to hide the weaving. One trick we've seen experienced finishers use is to split the plies of the ends, and use a regular sewing needle to embed the ends in the yarn of the garment (instead of between the stitches, as is normally done). Weave the split plies into different rows of the knitting, and they will be less visible, especially on the right side.

Gauge Changes: Quick Fix or Apocalyptic Problem?

Dear Problem Ladies:

If I were to leave a sweater nearly finished on the sticks for oh, let's say, approximately six months, do I need to re-knit a gauge swatch to see if my knitting has changed or can I pick it up again and just go at it?

Lisa

Dear Lisa:

Funny story—the Problem Ladies find themselves a little too familiar with this situation! One of us picked up a half-finished sweater (we won't say how long it had been sitting half finished) and after a few rows discovered that the gauge was looser in a noticeable way. Said Lady simply ripped back to where she had started, changed the needles to a smaller size, and carried on. Still, it was a bit unsettling to discover that one's own gauge was inconsistent. So while we don't think you need to knit a new swatch; you do need to do a frank appraisal of your gauges, before and after, for this

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project. In most cases, changing to a needle one size larger or smaller will even out the gauge. However, a significant change in one's gauge can indicate iron-poor blood, too much or too little sodium, or a sign of the Rapture. In these cases, consult your physician and/or spiritual adviser.

The Solution to Every Problem: Go Shopping

Dear Problem Ladies:

I have a beaded scarf pattern written for sportweight yarn, but I would like to use a DK weight. I'm not worried about an overall size difference, but how do I know what size beads will fit on this yarn?

Mary Beth

Mary Beth. Honey. We're going to go out on a limb here and say you should take your DK weight yarn with you to the bead store. And remember, the size bead you'll need will depend on whether you're stringing the beads on before knitting (single thickness) or into a finished stitch (double thickness). Bring your beading needle or crochet hook and try before you buy.

Marriage Advice

Dear Problem Ladies:

How do you react to a husband who's a little wigged out by your proclivity to freeze potentially moth-infested yarn? Mine is now opening the freezer nervously, expecting alpaca to bounce out at him.

Liz

Oh, Liz, you must be a newlywed. Congratulations on your nuptials! The way to cure a husband of such a silly aversion is to freeze something more alarming than alpaca. Here are some suggestions for things you could place in a plastic bag or other transparent vessel, right next to the Rocky Road:

a. Departed hamster awaiting burial.

b. Souvenir placenta.

c. (If a or b are unavailable) “variety meats” such as tripe, heart, or liver.

We feel pretty confident you will hear no more about the alpaca.

Yikes, Stripes!

Dear Problem Ladies:

I am log-cabining and want to do stripes on the strip that runs perpendicular to the strip onto which I’m knitting. What’s the best joining method? (Please don’t suggest that I knit it, and then sew it on.)

Amber

Dear Amber:

Amber, we’re with ya. There’s no crying in baseball, and no sewing in log cabin. We suggest two options to get your stripes properly perpendicular.

Technique 1: Use a three-needle bind-off.

Knit the perpendicularly striped patch (PSP) separately. Decide which edge of the PSP you want to attach to the other log cabin block. Using a circular needle, pick up the stitches along that edge of the PSP in the edge bumps of the garter ridges. Return to the other log cabin block. Using a second circular needle, pick up the stitches along the edge of the log cabin block where you want the PSP to attach. Be sure to pick up the same number of stitches on both pieces of knitting. Then, with right sides facing, work a three-needle bind-off.

Technique 2: Attach the PSP to the existing blanket as you knit.

Using a circular needle, pick up the stitches along the edge of the log cabin block to which you are planning to attach your PSP. Using a second circular needle, cast on for the PSP. Knit the last stitch of every right-side row together with one of the picked-up stitches of the log cabin block. Keep going until your PSP is the size you want, picking up additional stitches on the log cabin block if you need more.

When to Use a Lifeline

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Dear Problem Ladies:

I am determined to finish a lace project. After casting on and ripping out five times, I'm wondering if I should start to use lifelines.. Do you use them? If you do, what is the best way to go about them? And will I ever finish my lace stole?

Grimly Determined Lace-Knitter

Dear Grimly Determined:

When the Problem Ladies were younger and newer to lace, we used lifelines. After all, they're a simple, straightforward way to allay anxiety. Setting one up is easy; you simply thread a tapestry needle with a long strand of smooth, contrasting yarn like crochet cotton (just check to make sure it's colorfast—you don't want it bleeding all over your project), and run it through every stitch on the row just below the stitches on your needle; then just leave it there. Repeat this every few inches, so that if you mess up, you can rip back down to the lifeline, load the lifeline stitches back onto your needle, and carry on.

In the real-life Fog of Knitting, however, the Problem Ladies don't use lifelines. They are one of those things—like vacuuming your refrigerator coils—that make all the sense in the world, but people rarely think of doing until it's too late. The good news is that lifelines are not really necessary if you are willing to use your brain while you are knitting. We generalize here, but a lace shawl is usually knit in a stitch pattern that repeats every X stitches across the row. There will be some border stitches at either end, but the main part of the pattern is a repeat that repeats over and over, and it is always the same number of stitches. So, instead of counting to two hundred and something (or more), all you need to do is count to ten (or whatever number of stitches is in the repeat) over and over as you progress across the row. If you can't do all of the yarn overs and decreases that you need to do in that ten-stitch section, something is amiss and you need to figure it out right now. A bonus of working in this way is that you get a lot better at working lace patterns, because you start to notice when things Just Ain't Right, and fix errors on the spot. Then you don't need a lifeline anymore. The row of stitches that is on your needles right now *is* your lifeline.

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