
Case Study: Raggedy Stitches

Weaving some magic



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The Customer

Raggedy Stitches is a company, store, and website (<http://www.raggedystitches.com>) where the owner—Michelle Pearson—sells and showcases her unique quilting and doll making designs. I met Michelle in April 2007 when I attended a two-day quilting workshop that she ran in my small community in the southwest of Western Australia.



The Challenge

During the workshop, Michelle demonstrated all the techniques before we applied them to our own projects, so we didn't need to refer to the pattern instructions.

I was so inspired by Michelle's designs that I purchased one of her quilt kits, which included all fabrics required for the project as well as full instructions. A few weeks later I had some time to start working on the kit. That's when I discovered that the instructions were very hard to follow, especially for someone like me who hadn't quilted in some years. A beginner not familiar with the terminology would have been flummoxed.

It's not that the instructions were incorrect—they were just hard to follow, and, in parts, difficult to understand.

When I got stuck, I contacted Michelle and she helped me out. But I was concerned that someone buying her kits from the store or over the internet might not feel they could contact her, might be in a different time zone that precluded phone calls, or might not have attended a workshop to realise how approachable and helpful she is.

*Aim:
Make the
instructions
clear*

I discussed my concerns about the instructions with Michelle and offered to rework and reformat those for this project. My aim was to make them clearer, more readable, and to separate the steps from the notes, definitions, and tips that were scattered throughout the five loose—and unnumbered—pages of documentation.

With some trepidation, she agreed to let me 'weave my magic' on her project...

Problems with the Current Situation

Some of the issues I identified in the project's instructions included:

- **Steps and notes were mixed together.**
It was hard to identify WHAT to do next. Some of the notes were definitions which were useful for a beginner, but an intermediate or experienced quilter would want to skip over them.
- **Multiple steps in a single paragraph.**
This meant it was easy to miss things (people tend to read the first part of a sentence or paragraph, but not the second or third or later parts.)
- **Cutting instructions were difficult to understand.**
The layout of the cutting instructions made it hard to determine what cuts to make. I had to go slowly when I read them as sometimes I wasn't sure whether I was cutting a main piece, or cutting smaller pieces from an initial cut.
- **Sizes of pieces were confusing.**
Large figures were used for 1/2 (for example). This meant that something like 2 1/2 " was often difficult to read. Added to that were the instructions to cut two of something and you have something like [two 2 1/2 "]. Each time a reader has to stop and think about what that means, they get frustrated and less inclined to keep going.
- **Not all steps were parallel in structure.**
For example, some sentences or actions started with an imperative verb (e.g. Pin); others with a gerund (e.g Pinning).
- **Pages were not numbered.**
One of the first things I did when I looked at the original instructions was to pencil in the page numbers on each loose page.
- **Pages had no identifying information.**
The pages weren't stapled together, so if I mislaid a page I may not remember what project it belonged to if I later found it.
- **Few pictures or diagrams.**
Except for the colour photo of the completed piece and a diagram of the binding, there were no other pictures, line drawings, or diagrams. I would've liked these for each major step so I could confirm I was on the right track.
- **Definitions were not in a central place.**
Definitions were incorporated into the main steps as part of the narrative.

Each time a reader has to stop and think ... they get frustrated and are less inclined to keep going

Examples

Cutting instructions: Before

Cutting:	
<i>Assorted 3" Scraps/Squares:</i>	Trim the Assorted 3" squares/scraps to 2" square.
<i>Background Fabric:</i>	Cut one 8 1/2" Strip Crosscut one 12 1/8" rectangle for Appliqué Block From the remaining fabric cut two 3 7/8" strips Cross cut from <i>each</i> strip the following: Four 3 7/8" squares Cut each of the 3 7/8" squares in half to yield 16 setting triangles Two 3 1/8" square Cut each of the 3 1/8" squares in half to yield 8 triangles for corners. Three 2 1/2" squares
<i>Co-coordinating Fabric Strips:</i>	Trim each strip to 2 1/2". Cross cut from each strip the following: One 25" x 2 1/2" Strip (Tote Back) One 8" x 2 1/2" Strip (Tote Front)

Sewing Instructions: Before

<i>Assembly</i>
Front Pocket: Arrange the assorted 2" squares into ten 4-patch units. Pin and sew the squares according to your layout, taking care to abut your seams properly. Press all seams well. Lay the 4-patch units, 'on-point', into 2 rows of 5 blocks. On-point is to have the squares form a diamond shape, sitting next to one another with the diamond points touching. With the large background triangles, arrange them to form the setting triangles, leaving the remaining smaller background triangles as the four corners at each end of the rows. Pin and sew in diagonal rows, ensuring seams abut well. Press seams in one direction, and trim up 4-patch on-point rows to measure 4 5/8" x 21 3/4". The rows will be too long for the pocket front, so you will need to trim away one end of each one. To do this, align one long edge with a horizontal line on your cutting mat, and using your ruler, place it so it intersects the last 4-patch diamond unit in the row, through the centre. Move the ruler to allow a 1/4" seam (so that the ruler now sits in the second half of the diamond). Your strip should measure 19 5/8", trim the end, you should be removing about 2 1/8". Repeat for other strip and put aside.

The Solution

I tackled this project in a series of stages:

- Document layout
- Page layout
- Cutting instructions (editing and layout)
- Sewing instructions (editing and layout)

Document Layout

These are some of the things I did to the overall document layout:

- **Added a header and footer.**
This included the title of the project, a copyright statement, and a "page x of y" statement.
- **Added a list of terms.**
I suggested to Michelle that she add to this list, and recommended that she made it a separate file that she could print and add to every kit she produced.
- **Added a Prerequisites section and a General Advice section at the front.**
Again, these could be separate documents that went out with all projects.
- **Shifted the copyright statement to the beginning.**
I thought it was important for Michelle to assert her intellectual property rights to the project design up front. This statement was previously at the very end of the last page.

*Assert your
intellectual
property
rights*

Page Layout

For the page layout, I:

- **Adjusted the page margins to gain more 'white space' around the text.**
This is for readability and 'scanability' of the text.
- **Made clear headings for each section and sub-section, and indented the material below these headings.**
Clear headings combined with indentation are easier for the eye to scan.
- **Applied a sans serif font.**
This gives the document a more modern look. A sans serif font is quite appropriate for short documents, particular those that are broken up with tables, headings etc.
- **Added colour to the table header rows.**
I checked that this colour also prints well in black and white.

*Headings +
indentation
+ 'white
space' =
easier for the
eye to scan*

Cutting Instructions

With the cutting instructions, I edited the content and changed the layout:

- Rearranged the Cutting Instructions into a table.**
 I created a first column and added a hint for the quilter to cut out little swatches of fabric and tape them in to this cell; the second column is for the main cuts of the base fabric; the third column is for all the cuts from this main cut.
 I also added light border lines within a fabric section so that the reader can see what goes with what.
- Made the numbers clear.**
 I clearly identified how many of something they have to cut or make by putting that number in UPPER case.
- Converted all fractions to real fractions.**
 I also removed the excess space between the number and the fraction—this space is not required with real fractions.
- Made critical words bold.**
 I had been caught on at least one hidden "each" in a paragraph so I wanted to make the instruction clear to others.

Example: After

Cutting instructions

Hint: Cut small swatches of each fabric and tape them to this sheet.

Fabric/Swatch	Main cuts	Subsequent cuts
Assorted 3" scraps/squares	Trim each of the assorted 3" squares/scraps to 2" square	
Background fabric	Cut ONE 8½" strip	Crosscut ONE 12½" rectangle (appliqué block)
	From the remaining fabric, cut TWO 3¾" strips	Crosscut from <i>each</i> strip: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> FOUR 3¾" squares, then cut each in half to yield 16 setting triangles TWO 3¾" squares, then cut each in half to yield 8 corner triangles THREE 2½" squares
Co-coordinating fabric strips	Trim each strip to 2½"	Crosscut from each strip: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ONE 25" x 2½" strip (tote back) ONE 8" x 2½" strip (tote front)

Sewing Instructions

For the sewing instructions, I:

- Converted the long narrative instructions and notes into a table.**
 I made a 'pseudo' checklist—instead of using numbered steps (which can be daunting when they get to more than ten), I added a column for the quilter to tick off each step as they do it.
- Separated out the notes from the step.**
 Experienced quilters can work through the "Do this..." column and may never need to read the notes for a step.
- Made the instructions parallel in structure.**
 Almost every step now starts with an imperative verb (Pin, Press, Baste, Sew, Draw, Arrange, etc.), to make it clear what the quilter is to do next.
- Made important information obvious.**
 I made sure that anything that was really important was at the beginning of the step and/or written in UPPER case.
- Removed frames and text boxes.**
 The section on binding used these; I put the steps and accompanying diagrams into a table.

Use checklists

Example: After

Assembling the Quilt

Front Pocket

4-patch units (side rows)

✓	Do this...	Notes
	Arrange the assorted 2" squares into TEN 4-patch units.	
	Pin and sew the squares according to your layout, then press well.	Make sure you abut the seams properly.
	Lay the 4-patch units 'on-point' into TWO rows of FIVE blocks.	'On-point' is where square blocks are turned to form diamonds. These diamonds are then lined up so the top and bottom points touch.
	Arrange the triangles.	The large triangles are the setting triangles; the small triangles are the corners at the end of each row.
	Pin and sew in diagonal rows, then press.	Make sure you abut the seams properly. Press all seams in one direction.
	Trim the 4-patch on-point rows.	Each should measure 4 $\frac{1}{4}$ " x 21 $\frac{1}{4}$ ".
	The rows will be too long for the pocket front, so you will need to trim away ONE end of each one.	To do this: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Align one long edge with a horizontal line on your cutting mat. Place your ruler so it intersects the last 4-patch diamond unit in the row through the centre. Move the ruler to allow a $\frac{1}{4}$" seam (the ruler should be in the second half of the diamond). Your strip should measure 19$\frac{1}{4}$". Trim the end. You should remove about 2$\frac{1}{4}$". Repeat for the other strip and put aside.

The Implementation

This editing and restructuring work took about four hours. However, I was very familiar with the content because I had just finished about 20 hours creating the project from the instructions. Any subsequent projects would take longer, especially if I hadn't created the project first and encountered first hand the problems with the instructions.

I forwarded a PDF of my revamped instructions to Michelle, and suggested she test them with her next workshop group.

The Results

Michelle's response speaks for itself:

*"... bloody
brilliant ..."*

"... thank you so much for what you did with the ... pattern... I thought what you did with the format was great! I can definitely see where my pattern can be confusing for people to follow, so thank you for making that clearer to me. I thought the suggestion for having a "terms" page was bloody brilliant... I have to wonder why I never came up with such a great idea myself! I also like the way you have listed the general advice section at the start of the pattern. The format in which you have set out the pattern is much more readable and easy to follow than the way I have been setting out my instructions so far. You have done me a HUGE favour and pointed out so much to me and made me realise how confusing I have been writing my patterns for people to follow... I really appreciate all the work, time and effort you put into re-formatting my pattern!" (June 2007)

What's Next?

If you would like me to weave my magic on your project or instructions to make them more readable and usable, then contact me.

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