

fibers

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Gauge Swatches

Some of us knit as if we were wannabe Jedi Knights, hoping the force will be with us, but not really knowing whether what we're making will fit or not. This leads to a closetful of scarves, shawls and baby blankets, and nothing much with sleeves or noticeable shape.

So it's not unusual that I heard it again just the other day -- "I'm so discouraged... I spent all that money on yarn, and wasted all that time and my sweater doesn't fit."

I couldn't stop myself from asking, though I know the answer before the words got out, "Did you make a gauge swatch?"

"No -- I used the yarn the pattern called for and the needles they said to use, so I didn't bother. It's a waste of yarn, anyway."

Well, in fact, we *all* make gauge swatches, only some of us *call them* sweaters. Wrong gauge is probably the biggest single reason that garments don't fit, and it always amazes me that anybody has the time and energy to knit 18 skeins of yarn into a size 48 garment while aiming at size 36 -- but the same person doesn't have the time to knit up a 4" x 4" square to find out whether or not her needles are the right size.

My question is, how much time do *you* have?

Our swatches will begin with the information on the yarn label. First, find the place on the label that looks like a like graph or chart, or maybe has two knitting needles crossed and numbers underneath. The numbers under the needles or hook indicate the needle size recommended for the yarn. The numbers on the graph or chart indicate the number of stitches in one inch, or more commonly, in four inches.

To make a swatch:

Find the recommended gauge for 4" and Cast On (CO) that number plus 4 stitches. If the gauge is supposed to be 20 stitches to 4", you would cast on 24 stitches. If the gauge is 4.5 stitches to 1", you would cast on 22 stitches ($4.5 \times 4 + 2 = 22$).

Knit for 3 or 4 rows, then begin to work in stockinette stitch, keeping a 2 stitch border of garter stitch. Once you get past the 3 or 4 rows of garter stitch, it looks like this:

(RS) Right side rows: K (knit)

(WS) Wrong side rows: K 2, P (purl) to the last 2 stitches, K 2

Work for about 4 inches, then continue in garter stitch for 3 or 4 rows more and BO (bind off).

Force yourself to resist the overwhelming temptation to measure your gauge after 3 rows of stockinette, while it's still on the needles! Instead, lay your bound-off square flat (-- no! Not on your knee! Flat on the table!) and place your ruler on top of the swatch. If your tension is correct, the flat section of knitting inside the border should measure 4" in each direction. If it's smaller, your tension is greater than required, and you need to make another swatch with a bigger needle. If it's bigger, use a smaller needle.

You may find that you have the right number of stitches but your rows are off a bit. This is easy to take care of in most patterns, by knitting a few more or a few less rows, so it's not usually necessary to worry about it, but you will know that you need to pay attention to lengths and not just to row count if you want everything to be the right length.

When you find the needle that gives you the proper gauge, you have my permission to begin your garment, and may the fit be with you!

Friday Night Market

Free Technique Class, July 22, 2005