

STEEKS

Cutting the Edge

by Eunny Jang

From the late nineteenth through the middle twentieth century, masterpieces of stranded color work—Fair Isle sweaters, stockings, and caps—were handknitted with fantastic speed by knitters of the Shetland archipelago in northern Scotland. In addition to their considerable skill and experience, Fair Isle knitters often employed a shortcut that today’s color-work knitters can find just as useful: steeking.

What is a steek?

A steek is a column of extra stitches used to bridge two edges of knitting. Steeks let you knit an entire sweater in the round without reverting to knitting flat (back and forth in rows; Figures 1 and 2). Steeks can be worked between the right and left fronts of a cardigan, the front and back edges of an armhole, and/or the sides of a neckline. Openings are created by cutting along the center of the column of stitches—and sleeves, neckbands, and buttonbands are picked up along the cut edges. In preparation for cutting, the steek can be reinforced (but it can sometimes be left as is). When the garment is complete, the cut edges are trimmed and neatly tacked down on the wrong side of the garment, creating a tidy facing. Although steeks are most often worked in color patterns, if you prefer knitting in the round to working flat, you can use them in solid-color sweaters as well.

Why use steeks?

Circular knitting is desirable for several reasons. For many knitters, the knit stitch is faster to form than the purl stitch, and having the right side of the work always facing the knitter makes it easy to see the color pattern. When you don’t switch to flat knitting, gauge remains consistent. Seams are minimized or eliminated altogether; and very little finishing is required. The many ends of yarn that result from color changes in Fair Isle patterns can be hidden within a steek, eliminating the need to weave them in later.

What about unraveling?

The thought of cutting into knitted fabric is counterintuitive at best. Doesn’t the knitting unravel as soon as it is cut? Not when the circumstances are right. Steeking capitalizes on the reluctance of knit stitches to unravel from side to side. You can further secure the cut edges by choosing a “sticky” yarn (hairy animal yarns such as traditional Shetland wools felt

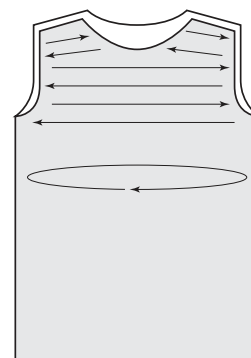


Figure 1. Circular to flat knitting

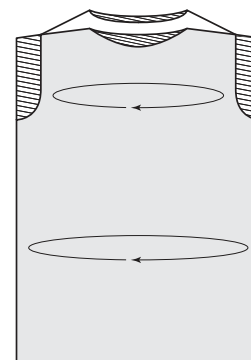


Figure 2. Circular knitting with steeks

so readily that the slight friction created in the knitting process mats the hairs together and discourages unraveling). You can also work frequent color changes and use a tight gauge within the steek, and/or you can use one of several reinforcement methods, such as sewing or crocheting.

How to work a steek

Although there are as many ways of working steeks as there are knitters, some general principles are useful:

1. The steek itself—the bridge of extra stitches—may be composed of as few or as many stitches as the knitter feels comfortable with, typically between six and ten stitches. More stitches should be used in high-stress areas and with slippery yarns, while fewer can be used in lower-stress areas and with yarns prone to felting.
2. The steek is flanked by one border stitch on either side, which separates it from the body of the sweater. This border stitch, always worked in the background color in any given round, provides a guideline for picking up stitches for sleeves and bands, as well as for seaming.
3. The steek stitches should be worked in a stitch pattern with frequent color changes, for example, a 1×1 vertical stripe (Figure 3) or a check pattern (Figure 4). Stripe-patterned steeks provide a useful visual guide for reinforcing and cutting.
4. Whether you use an even or odd number of steek stitches, you cut the steek along its true center. With an even number of stitches, the steek will be cut *between* the two center stitches. For example, you would cut between the fourth and fifth stitches of an eight-stitch steek. With an odd number of stitches, you would cut *through* the center stitch. For example, you would cut through the fourth stitch of a seven-stitch steek. Odd numbers are necessary for crochet-reinforced steeks, which are worked over the center three stitches of the bridge, while other securing methods are more easily applied to an even number of steek stitches.
5. Reinforcement, if any, should be applied as close to the cutting site as possible.

Where to place a steek

To incorporate a steek into a garment knitted in the round, cast on the number of stitches you plan to use for the steek wherever there will be an opening in the finished sweater: at the center

front of a cardigan or jacket, and at the beginning of armholes and front and back necklines.

Plan to begin and end each round in the center of the first steek, that is, at the center front of a cardigan, or, for a pullover, at the side, where it will eventually fall in the center of an armhole steek. Hiding the join within a steek disguises the jog in the pattern that circular knitting creates, and eliminates the need to weave in the many yarn ends that color changes create.

Working a steek for the center front of a cardigan The steek stitches that bridge the center-front edges should be cast on with the body of the sweater, as the first few and last few stitches of the cast-on round. For example, if your pattern calls for 180 sts, and you are adding an 8-stitch steek, cast on 188 sts. For even-numbered steeks, the beginning of the round will fall at the center of the steek, with an equal number of steek stitches straddling the join. For odd-numbered steeks, the center stitch will be the first stitch of the round.

Begin the round by working the steek stitches in a checked or striped pattern (four sts in our example), place a marker, and work the first round of the sweater proper until you reach the steek stitches at the opposite end (the last four sts). Place another marker and work the remaining steek stitches in the steek pattern. Continue to work the sweater as established until you reach the beginning of the neckline shaping. Then bind off or place on holders the steek stitches, along with the other stitches that form the base of the neckline. On the next round, cast on for a neckline steek as explained below.

Working a steek for an armhole opening If you're working a pullover, cast on the number of stitches called for in the sweater pattern (steek stitches aren't added until it's time to shape the armhole). Begin the round at the side of the sweater. Place a marker for the other side "seam," and work in the round until you reach the armholes. Before casting on for the steek, put the stitches that form the base of the armhole, the ones you would bind off in flat knitting, on a length of waste yarn. For example, if you would normally bind off four stitches on the first row of armhole shaping for the front and back, then work the last round before shaping begins to four stitches before the end of the round. Place the last four stitches of the round and the first four of the next round (eight stitches) onto a piece of waste yarn. Because steeks are often narrower than the stitches over which they're formed, the held stitches may form a slight pouch.

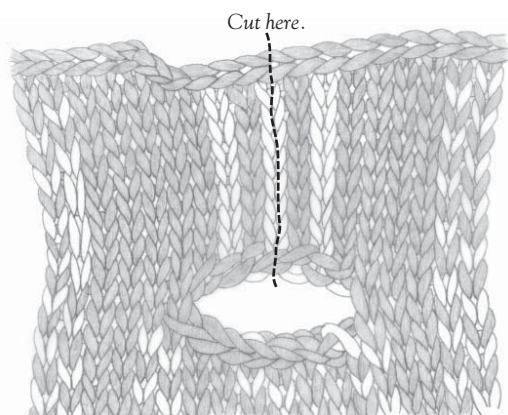


Figure 3. Striped steek with odd number of stitches

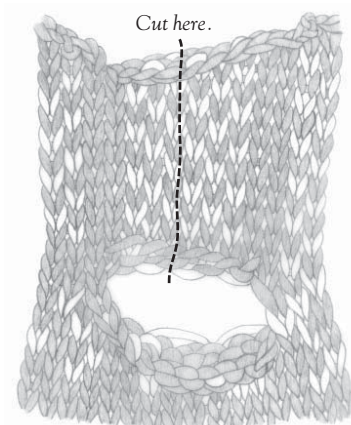


Figure 4. Checked steek with even number of stitches

Waste yarn is the best choice for holding unused stitches because rigid stitch holders may distort the gathered knitting.

Now you're ready to cast on for the first armhole steek. Over the held stitches, cast on one stitch in the background color as the right border stitch, then the steek stitches (usually six to ten), then one for the left final border stitch. For all steeks, the long-tail cast-on is the quickest, least bulky way of casting on the extra stitches. When working with two colors, treat one strand as the tail and the other as the working yarn.

Work across the sweater body to the next set of armhole stitches—the four stitches before and after the next side marker. Place the stitches on waste yarn, and cast on as before for the second armhole steek. Continue knitting in the round, working any armhole decreases that your sweater pattern calls for while you maintain a striped or checked pattern over the steek stitches. On the last row, bind off all steek stitches.

Working a steek for a neckline opening A neckline steek lets you shape both sides of the neck while continuing to knit in the round. To place a steek at the neckline, work to the neckline bind-off. Bind off or place on a holder the stitches that form the base of the neckline; then cast on the extra stitches as for armhole steeks. You don't need to add a border stitch at the neckline, the last stitch at each edge of the sweater's neckline will form the border stitch. When working in Fair Isle, decrease stitches from the main fabric on either side of the steek, right up against the neckline edge, working *ssk* decreases at the right edges and *k2tog* at the left to maintain pattern continuity.

Reinforcing and cutting steeks

There are several methods for reinforcing steek stitches before cutting, each appropriate to different circumstances. All of them require good light; patience; a small, sharp pair of scissors; and steady nerves.

Unreinforced The traditional steek, worked in sticky Shetland wool in a garment with a very dense gauge, calls for no reinforcement at all. The friction you create as you knit will mat and felt the fabric very slightly, stabilizing the area to be cut and minimizing fraying. Simply cut carefully down the center of each steek, working in a very straight line and snipping just a few threads at a time.

Crocheted Crochet steek reinforcements firmly bind together the sides of two adjacent stitch columns to hold the cut ends securely in place. The method is ideal for sticky or smooth ani-

mal fibers still at relatively dense gauges: the applied binding adds security even to yarns that don't felt readily, but it relies on a firm base fabric to stay in place. Crocheted steeks are not suitable for plant fibers or for superwash wools, since the base fabric must have some natural cling.

Regardless of how many stitches are used in the steek, a crocheted reinforcement is worked only on the three center stitches. Picture the two legs of the V formed by each knit stitch. For a crocheted steek, a line of single crochet binds together each half of the center stitch with the near half of the adjacent stitch. The left side of the steek (with the right side of the work facing) is worked first, from bottom to top. Then the right side is worked from top to bottom.

Begin by turning your garment sideways, so that you're looking at the steek with the cast-on edge on the right-hand side and the steek itself lying horizontally. Using a crochet hook of the same or slightly smaller diameter than the working knitting needles and a contrasting strand of the knitting wool, start at the cast-on edge and insert hook into the adjoining halves of the left-flanking and center stitches in the first row of the steek (Figure 5). Yarnover and draw a strand of the reinforcing yarn through the two stitch halves (Figure 6). Yarnover again and draw the yarn through the loop, creating a single crochet stitch. Move on to the next pair of stitches above in the steek (or to the left as you look at the steek sideways). *Insert your hook into the adjoining pair of "legs" in this pair, yarnover and draw up a loop (Figure 7). You'll now have two loops on your hook; yarnover and draw yarn through both loops, then move onto the next pair of stitches in the steek. Repeat from * to the top edge of the steek; your steek should look like Figure 8. Cut the working yarn, and pull it through the last crochet stitch to fasten off. To work the right half of the steek, turn the work, start at the bind-off row, and work single crochet through the adjoining halves of the right-flanking and center stitches in the same manner, back down to the cast-on edge.

When completed, the lines of crochet should slant neatly away from the center cutting site, rather like an open book. Gently pulling the two lines apart will show a ladder of the base knitting—actually the purl bumps of the center stitch. Cut carefully between the crochet lines, taking care not to snip into the crochet itself. The cut edges should be neat and very secure.

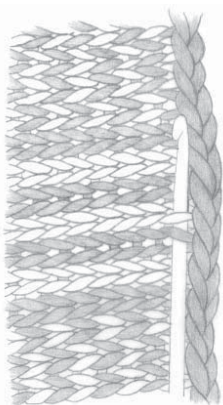


Figure 5

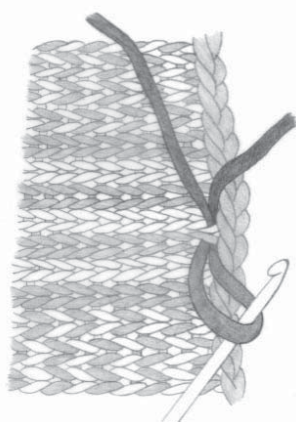


Figure 6

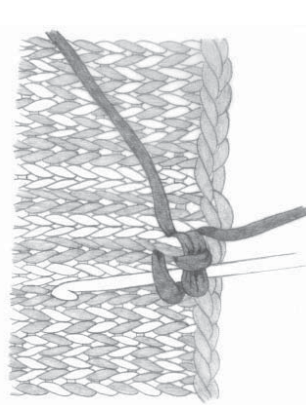


Figure 7

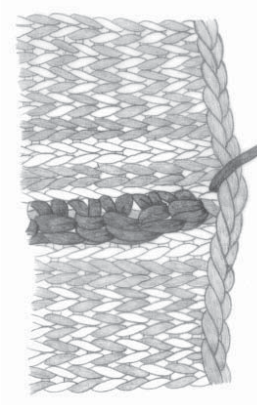


Figure 8

Sewn When you use a very-slick-plant or synthetic fiber, sewing is the only way to ensure that a steek will not unravel. Because sewing stitches have no elasticity, some of the flexibility inherent in knitted fabric is lost when you use a sewn reinforcement. Save this method for when crocheting will not provide enough security.

For both handsewing and machine sewing, stitch as close as possible to the cutting line, within one-half or one whole stitch on either side. When you handsew, backstitch with very small stitches that split both the knit stitches and floats (the strands of unused color on the back of the fabric). When you machine sew, set the machine for a small stitch and move in a very straight line down either side of the cutting line. For either method, make as many passes as you deem necessary, though one is almost always sufficient.

Picking up and knitting from a steek edge

Once the steek is cut, you can pick up stitches just inside the cut edge, along the purl channel between the border and body stitches, and work button and neckbands. In a drop-shoulder sweater, the sleeve stitches can be picked up around the armhole between the border and body stitches and the sleeve worked down to the cuff. Figure 9 shows a stitch being picked up at the edge of a steek; notice how the needle picks up the bar between the border stitch of the steek and the first stitch of the body, both of which were worked in the background color. In shaped sweaters, the sleeves may be knitted separately and sewn in along the line created by the border stitch. In every case, the steek flap will naturally fold

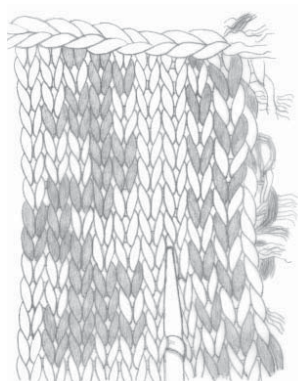


Figure 9

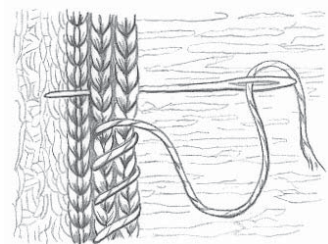


Figure 10

to the wrong side along the pick-up or seam line. Once all finishing work is completed and the sweater has been washed and blocked, the steeks should be finished neatly by trimming away any frayed ends and tacking down the flap with a simple whip-stitch or blanket stitch (Figure 10).

With every washing and wearing, the facings will full a little more, eventually creating a durable, hard-wearing finish on the inside of the garment. ∞

EUNNY JANG spins, knits, and writes in Rockville, Maryland. Visit her blog, www.eunnyjang.com.

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