

TSIA RESOURCES

PUCKERING WHEN THREAD SKETCHING

(AND HOW TO AVOID IT)



PUCKERING WHEN THREAD SKETCHING (and how to avoid it!)

A Beginner's Guide to Stabilisers and Preventing
Puckering when Thread Sketching and Thread Painting

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This is a **beginner's guide**. The ebook is not intended to give a complete overview on the topic of stabilising fabric for thread sketching and thread painting.

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Puckering When Thread Sketching (and how to avoid it).

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The Key to Eliminating Puckering and Stabilisation Frustration

Watching your beautiful project warp and buckle during the stitching process is heartbreaking! You may have tried to resolve the problem, but are still seeking satisfactory results.

Throughout my career and development as a textile artist who focuses on thread sketching and thread painting, I have learned one vital thing:

Just like building a house, creating successful thread sketches and thread paintings — projects you are genuinely proud of — begins with foundations.

Once you have established a foundation, the fun of fabric and thread selection and stitching can begin.

Nevertheless, regardless of whether you intend working with or without a pattern or design, there are decisions to be made before you begin, most importantly:

- What are you making?
- What materials will be used to construct your project?
- Which stabiliser is most appropriate for the project?

The Lowdown on Stabilisers

With the vast range of stabilisers available, understanding their uses and working out which is best for your thread sketching and thread painting project may take a little time and experimentation.

But learning the basics will save you hours of frustration and heartache.

With experience, you'll develop an innate sense of what works for you, and what won't.



Keep an open mind. Realise that when taking your first steps in thread sketching, there will likely be some pieces that don't turn out quite as you hoped.

Be prepared to explore and experiment. Nobody can *definitively* say which stabiliser (weight, composition, or brand) to use in any particular situation.

Why?

Because everyone interprets instructions differently, makes different choices about fabric type or weight, thread gauge, or stitch density.

Begin with a small selection of stabilisers—e.g. light, medium, firm—and experiment with these.

Over time, you'll discover your favourites!

Different Types of Stabiliser

There are four basic types of stabiliser, categorised according to how they are removed (or not) from your work.

- Tear-away and Cut-away
- Water-soluble and Wash-away
- Heat-away and Melt-away
- Leave in place

Furthermore, each of these stabilisers often have several possibilities for how you attach or remove it from your work. These factors should be considered when selecting your stabiliser.

*At the end of this ebook, you'll find my **Stabiliser Reference Chart**, which gives a handy overview of the main types of stabiliser, and their uses.*

THE FOUR BASIC TYPES OF STABILISER
For thread sketching & thread painting

1. TEAR-AWAY OR CUT-AWAY
Excellent for use with woven fabrics, e.g. cotton, linen, silk.
Removed after stitching is complete by gently tearing or trimming it away from the stitching.

2. WATER-SOLUBLE & WASH-AWAY
Great for free-form shapes, or use as a topping to trace and stitch a design.
Removed by plunging into water, where the stabiliser will dissolve.

3. HEAT-AWAY & MELT AWAY
Useful when you can't use water-soluble stabiliser. Can be used on either side of the fabric. Different varieties either melt with heat, or turn brown and brittle, then brushed off.

4. LEAVE-IN PLACE
Provides permanent stability as it remains in place after stitching.
Available in fusible or non-fusible types and a variety of weights. Includes dressmaker's interfacing.

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Choosing a Stabiliser

There are several questions you need to ask yourself before beginning a project:

- **Purpose.** *What am I making?* For example, bed quilts are intended to be warm, soft, and cuddly, so a lightweight, flexible stabiliser is best. Bed quilts often don't use stabiliser at all — the top fabric, batting, and backing fabric offer sufficient support for a standard quilt.
- **Support.** Choose a stabiliser that gives your project sufficient support — not too much, nor too little. For most thread sketching and thread painting projects, a medium to heavy weight stabiliser works well — medium weight for thread sketching, firm/heavy weight for dense thread painting.
- **Stay or Go?** It's important to decide *before* doing any stitching whether you want to be able to remove, or partially remove your stabiliser. Thread sketching and thread painting, by their very nature, tend to embed the stabiliser firmly onto the back of your work, making it impossible to remove.
- **Fusible or Non-fusible?** Both fusible and non-fusible stabilisers have their uses. One of the advantages of fusible stabiliser is that it prevents the fabric shifting as you stitch. *Note: The 'sticky' or 'glue' side of fusible stabiliser can lose its 'stickiness' over time, so it's best not to purchase too much at once.*

- **Fabric Type:** If you're a beginner, high thread-count fabric, such as firm quilting cotton, cotton duck, batiks, canvas or non-stretch denim are often easier to work with than finer fabric (e.g. silk, sheers), fabric with a pile or nap (e.g. velvet or corduroy), or stretch fabric (e.g. stretch jersey or knit fabric). It's best to avoid these speciality fabrics when starting out — use high thread count, 100% cotton.

- **Weight and Layers:** The weight of your fabric, and the number of layers you intend including, all have a bearing on your stabiliser choice. Collaged and layered backgrounds are often destined to be art quilts, wall hangings, or framed pictures. Firm to heavy stabiliser usually suits this type of project best, particularly if planning a lot of dense thread painting.

- **Embroidery Hoops:** The decision to use an embroidery hoop when thread sketching depends on what you're making, it's size and composition (i.e. fabric, layers, etc.), and personal preference. Hoops are useful when:

- Stitching lightweight, sheer or soluble fabric.
- Heavily embroidering a lightly stabilised or single layer fabric.
- Working on a small projects (although there are exceptions).

- **Stitch Density:** If you're planning a heavily thread painted design, it's essential to select a firm stabiliser that will prevent fabric pull-up and puckering as you stitch.

If you're unsure which stabiliser to use, do a small test piece first. This will prevent problems before they occur.

Five Approaches to Stabilising Different Types of Project

THREAD SKETCHING STABILIZER BASICS



CHOOSE YOUR STABILIZER ACCORDING TO PROJECT TYPE

1. THREAD SKETCH



LIGHT TO MEDIUM WEIGHT STABILIZER - Leave-in or Tearaway - or USE A HOOP

2. ART QUILT - LIGHTLY STITCHED

QUILT LAYERS MAY BE SUFFICIENT; OTHERWISE, USE MEDIUM-WEIGHT STABILIZER



HEAVILY STITCHED MEDIUM TO HEAVY WEIGHT STABILIZER

3. CRAFT PROJECT

MEDIUM TO VERY STIFF STABILIZER - DEPENDING ON REQUIRED RIGIDITY



4. THREAD PAINTING



MEDIUM TO HEAVY WEIGHT STABILIZER

5. LACY OR LIGHT



SOLUBLE or HEAT-AWAY STABILIZER or a HOOP

www.ThreadSketchingInAction.com

The Minimalist Thread Sketch



The weight of stabiliser you choose for general thread sketching will be guided by the amount of thread sketching you intend doing.

Appropriate stabilisers:

- Tear-away or Cut-away stabiliser.
- Leave-in place stabiliser.
- No stabiliser (or very light tear-away), plus a hoop.

The Art Quilt



Both the art quilts shown here (and below) have an appliquéd top, with added thread sketching (the second has considerably more embellishment).

They were both stabilised with low-loft batting and cotton backing fabric, as for regular quilt making, i.e. no 'stabiliser', as such.



Although this art quilt (detail shown at left) includes no additional stabiliser, care was required when stitching the bird's feathers. The very heavy thread painting, in amongst relatively light surrounding stitching, made puckering a real threat! (It was averted, however.)

The Craft Project



The stabiliser weight is critical to the success and usability of various craft projects.

However, the stabiliser you choose is very dependent on *what* you are making.

This little evening bag, comprised of many layers of heavily-stitched and embellished sheer fabrics, also incorporates a back fabric and medium-weight, leave-in stabiliser.

If your craft project requires rigidity, a craft-weight, firm (stiff) stabiliser would be more appropriate.

The Thread Painting



Thread painting projects require careful thought when it comes to stabiliser choice, as no two projects are ever quite the same.

Thread painting projects can be constructed in various ways:

- A single layer of top fabric, with firm stabiliser underneath, which may, or may not be fused together.
- A traditional ‘quilt sandwich’ construction (backing fabric, low-loft batting, and top fabric), plus an additional layer of firm stabiliser.

This heavily stitched thread painting of a Sulphur-Crested White Cockatoo required a very firm stabiliser. This project was designed, from the outset, to be mounted in a traditional picture frame, so I used a single layer of firm stabiliser, fusing it to the top fabric with Vliesofix.

Further considerations were that the top fabric is lightweight silk, and only the cockatoo is thread painted — the background remains totally unstitched because I didn’t want to deflect from the appeal of the luxurious silk, on which I’d printed the background colours.

Lacy and Light Thread Sketching



If your goal is to work lacy, light, or filigree thread sketching, especially free-form shapes like these leaves, then you simply cannot go past soluble stabiliser!

Soluble stabiliser has sufficient inherent strength to allow stitching, with or without other fabrics, but often with a single layer of sheer fabric, such as organza.

Create delicate, fly-away pieces to use as embellishments on other projects, or as individual creations.

In some cases, it may be necessary to use a hoop for added support as you stitch.

Once your stitching is complete, rinse out the soluble stabiliser in tepid water, ensuring you remove all the sticky gum, lay it out on an old towel or cotton cloth to dry, and *voilà!*, you have beautiful, delicate shapes in your hands.

Alternatively, lacy items can be worked using heat-away stabiliser. Some interesting and unique effects can be created with soluble and heat-away stabilisers.

How to Avoid Puckering When Thread Sketching

If you've ever experienced the disappointment of watching your work pucker as you stitch, you'll understand the tears and frustration that can result.

In the previous section, we explored how to choose a stabiliser. But in addition to those considerations, there are some further simple steps you can take to ensure that any risk of puckering is minimal or non-existent.

- **Thread Selection:** What type and gauge of thread have you chosen? For most beginner projects, 40-gauge polyester or rayon thread is the easiest to use. It's perfect for both thread sketching and thread painting.
- **Your Sewing Machine:** Is your machine in good working order and set up for free motion stitching?
 - Have you fitted an appropriate (and sharp) needle? Machine embroidery needles in the size range 75/11 - 90/14 combine well with 40-gauge thread.
- **Stabiliser:** Have you chosen and tested a stabiliser?

These steps are all important in preventing puckering and pull-up. But once you've considered them, you're good to go!

Securing the Layers

Before beginning any stitching, secure any layers of your project carefully. Layers that shift under the needle as you stitch may lead to puckering, bubbling, or a lumpy appearance.

There are several methods for securing your work:

- **Pinning:** For small to medium-sized project, pinning securely all over is a good option. To make removing the pins as you go easier, use flat-head quilting pins. These also make stitching close to pins (without removing them) much easier.
- **Basting:** Hand or machine basting helps secure large areas and layers of fabric. Basting is appropriate for most projects, regardless of size or composition. Remove the basting stitches once you've finished stitching.
- **Fusing:** Fusing is an effective alternative in many situations, because it frees you from having to worry about pins or basting. Keep in mind, however, that fusing adheres layers together permanently. They can't be 'unfused'! Light fusible web, such as paper-backed Vliesofix, or non-paper-backed MistyFuse make suitable choices for fusing fabric layers.

Stitching Your Project

Just as preparation contributes to a trouble-free project, plotting your stitching journey across its surface will, too. Here are my tips for helping you plan your stitching:

- Begin as close to the centre of your design as is practical.
- Work evenly across the surface of the project, rather than working one area heavily, then moving onto another.
- Lightly stitch the main elements of your design first, adding the detail later.

Note: As with all 'rules', there are exceptions to these principles, too. Sometimes beginning in the middle of the design is impractical. In that case, do your best to start away from the edges and aim to cover the entire design lightly before engaging in any dense thread painting.

Stabiliser Reference Chart

The chart (on the following pages) describes removal methods and notes on usage for each type of stabiliser, along with further notes on weight and colour.

Stabiliser Reference Chart

STABILISER TYPE	REMOVAL METHOD	NOTES & USES
TEAR-AWAY	Remove after completing your stitching by carefully tearing around the edges of the stitching. Take care not to pull on the stitching more than necessary.	With a paper-like consistency, it will tear in all directions, making it easy to remove. Excellent for use with woven fabrics, such as cotton.
CUT-AWAY	Remove after completing your stitching by carefully cutting away the stabiliser with a small pair of scissors. Embroidery or needle-nose scissors are suitable for this.	Take care when cutting close to the edges of stitching to ensure you don't nick the top fabric of your work. Helpful when working with both woven fabrics and stretch fabrics.
WASH-AWAY and WATER-SOLUBLE	Water-soluble stabiliser resembles plastic film, fine non-woven cloth, or soft paper and is available in various weights. Remove after stitching by soaking in water to dissolve the stabiliser or washing. Ensure that you remove all the sticky gum with several clean, cold-water rinses.	Useful when you want to completely remove the stabiliser from your work. Your fabric must be washable. Also helpful when stitching a sketched design to avoid drawing directly on the fabric. Draw the design on the stabiliser, which is then used as a 'topping' and removed later. Water-soluble stabiliser is also useful for confetti quilt designs. Tulle is often layered over the confetti fabric pieces. Still, water-soluble stabiliser makes an excellent replacement if you prefer not to use tulle.
HEAT-AWAY	Remove by ironing—heat from the iron dissolves the stabiliser. Usually resembles plastic film that melts away when ironed. Also available as a stiffer, woven fabric that, when ironed, will crumble, and can be brushed off.	Most heat-away stabilisers have a rough surface that grips the fabric, preventing slippage. Use it to stabilise fine or delicate fabrics or as a topper for materials with a pile or nap. Like soluble stabilisers, you can draw on the surface of most heat-away stabilisers. Again, this is a good option if you want to outline a design but avoid drawing directly on your fabric.

STABILISER TYPE	REMOVAL METHOD	NOTES & USES
FUSIBLE	Fusible stabilisers remain in place after stitching is complete. They are not removed.	Useful for fusing layers of fabric before thread sketching or thread painting, or for keeping your fabric layers secure. Fusible stabilisers have an adhesive on one side that will soften and stick to the fabric when ironed. There are several types—fusible interfacing and fusible stabilisers (available in various weights), and some that resemble fine fabric or mesh. Fusible web, although lightweight, is also often used as a stabiliser. Fusible web may be paper-backed or resemble delicate gossamer, with no paper backing.
NON-FUSIBLE	These stabilisers either remain in place or are carefully removed by tearing or cutting away close to your stitching. Refer to the relevant manufacturer's instructions for use.	Non-fusible stabilisers do not have an adhesive coating on the back. Available in various weights, they are suitable for many project types, from crafts and quilting to dressmaking.
WOVEN and NON-WOVEN	These stabilisers either remain in place or can be removed according to how you wish to use them. Refer to the manufacturer's instructions for use.	Your choice of woven or non-woven is a personal decision. However, non-woven stabiliser generally has a very smooth texture which is useful when working with delicate fabric. The non-woven composition prevents any 'pattern' from the weave showing on your fabric top.
INTERFACING	Dressmaker's interfacing is usually left in place on completing your work. It is available in: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Woven and non-woven • Fusible and non-fusible • A variety of weights, from very fine to very heavy. 	Interfacing makes a very economical alternative for many thread sketching projects.

STABILISER TYPE	REMOVAL METHOD	NOTES & USES
STABILISERS for STRETCH, KNIT, PILE or NAP FABRICS	<p>These stabilisers either remain in place or are removed. Refer to the manufacturer's instructions for use. Available in:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Cut-away • Leave-in • Fusible and non-fusible • A variety of weights <p>Each one has been developed for a specific purpose (e.g. for use with stretch, knit, or nap fabric).</p>	<p>Stretch fabrics are less stable than woven fabrics, often pulling out of shape very easily. So choose a stabiliser specifically designed for the fabric you are working with. These stabilisers will not tear or break up on the back of your stretch or knit fabric, so they will hold the stretch fabric nicely in position. Both fusible and non-fusible varieties work effectively with stretch fabrics. Some are designed specifically for working machine embroidery on stretch fabrics and can remain in place on completion. These are useful when doing machine embroidery or thread painting on, for example, a T-shirt or sweatshirt.</p>
NYLON MESH	<p>Several types of mesh stabiliser are available, both non-fusible and fusible. Depending on the brand and kind, they can remain in position or be removed. Refer to the manufacturer's instructions for use.</p>	<p>The mesh provides a stable backing, particularly when working with stretch or knit fabrics. For extra stability, two layers of stabiliser can be layered behind your work, laying one on the diagonal at 45° to the other.</p>
WEIGHT	<p>Varieties:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Craft-weight: heavy, stiff • Firm: stiff • Medium: softer, more pliable • Fine: very soft, sometimes translucent 	<p>Selecting the best weight for your project is essential. Always aim to match the weight of your fabric and stabiliser, e.g. Lightweight or fine fabric usually needs a lightweight stabiliser. Heavy fabric or a project requiring rigidity (e.g. a handbag or fabric sculpture) is best matched with a heavy, craft-weight stabiliser.</p>
COLOR	<p>Variations:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • White • Black • Beige (some brands) 	<p>Having a choice of colour (light/dark) is handy if you want to tone the colour of your stabiliser to your project.</p>

One Final Point

Keep in mind that everyone, no matter how long they've been thread sketching and thread painting, experiences problems at one time or another, be they issues with puckering, tension, fraying or broken thread, damaged needles, and so on.

It happens to us all!

Be patient. Keep practising.

Most of all — relax and enjoy the process!



Additional Resources

Books

I have a selection of books available for anyone interested in thread sketching, thread painting, art quilting, or even writing your own arts and crafts books.

Find out more at:

<https://www.threadsketchinginaction.com/books-catalogue/>



Courses and Resources

Explore the range of resources and online courses available from TSIA (Thread Sketching in Action).

For more information, visit:

<https://www.threadsketchinginaction.com/>

About the Author

Deborah Wirsu is an Australian author, artist, musician, and business owner with over 30 years experience in the arts and crafts world, and 15 years of running online businesses, including the highly successful Thread Sketching In Action.

She is a 4 x Amazon Best Seller and has written and self-published seven non-fiction books in the arts, crafts, and online business fields.

Deborah's strong background in creative arts and business, combined with her teaching experience, authorship, positivity, and *'leave no person behind'* attitude have earned her a dedicated following among her fans.

Deborah has qualifications in Creative Textiles, Freelance Journalism, Editing and Proofreading, Music, and (curiously) Medical Administration. She is also a Certified Business and Entrepreneurship Coach.

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