How to Read a Knitting Pattern

By Nancy Simet

New knitters, looking at a pattern and wondering how many stitches to cast on, often wonder where that information is hiding. Published patterns do follow a logical sequence and present a lot of preliminary information before you get to the casting on. Note that patterns posted free on the internet can be written by anyone, experienced or not, and written any way they want, so you take your chances with them; many are poorly written and incomplete.

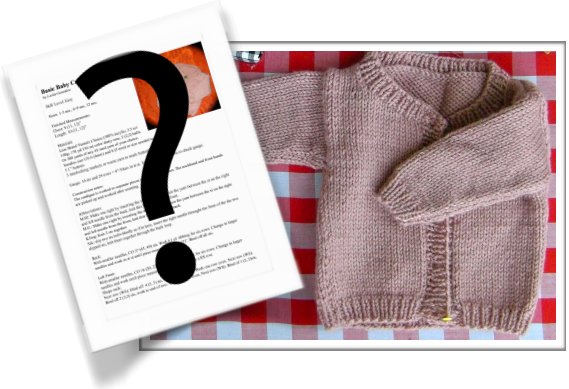
Patterns start with the name of the pattern and the designer. In newer patterns, this is followed by skill level. This is not a value judgment by the designer but follows definite criteria, which are listed here: http://www.craftyarncouncil.com/skill.html. Note the list of topics on the right on this web page; there's a lot of useful stuff here.

The finished measurements are the measurements of the item, not your body measurements (unless it specifically says "to fit a chest measurement of"). Garments are normally sized to have 2-4" of ease, which is extra fabric to make it fit comfortably and not be binding. So if a sweater measures 40", it will comfortably fit a person with an actual chest measurement of 36-38". Zero ease will produce a close-fitting garment, and negative ease (garment smaller than your measurements) will be tight-fitting. If you prefer a loose fit, then you want about 6" of ease. Wondering how much ease to choose? Measure your favorite sweater (preferably one knit in the same weight yarn).

The materials section tells you what supplies you'll need, including which yarn and needle sizes were used to knit the prototype. If you wish to substitute yarns, choose one with a similar fiber content and the same yarn weight – that is, substitute a worsted weight yarn for another worsted weight yarn – and buy the number of yards called for in the pattern. Needle size is a suggestion only – we all knit to different tensions, so you may need to go up or down several needle sizes to get gauge. Look at the gauge given, and note which stitch pattern it was achieved in, and use that stitch pattern for your gauge swatch ("in St st" means "in stockinette stitch"). Matching stitch gauge is much more important than row gauge, as it determines how big around your garment will be. I know, you're dying to cast on this fancy new yarn and get started, but if you skip the gauge swatch, you are likely to knit either a tent or a doll sweater instead of a sweater that will fit you. Take the time to do this!

Next, special abbreviations will be given, so look here if you find a mystery abbreviation in the directions. Stitch patterns will then be explained, so if the directions say to work 2" in seed stitch and it doesn't say how, look for it in this section.

Then you get to the directions, where you will finally find out how many stitches to cast on. The first two rows listed will be labeled as RS (right side) or WS (wrong side). Some patterns start with a wrong side row, so pay attention. If your item is knitted in the round, all rows will be right-side rows, and rows will be called rounds. "Work even" means to continue along in pattern without increasing or decreasing. Read an entire paragraph before knitting, to make sure you don't miss a direction for "at the same time" – for example, parts of the neck and armhole shaping may be worked on the same row. When you bind off, you should bind off in pattern, working the next row of the pattern instead of knitting every stitch, since the bind off also creates the last row of knitting.

A good pattern will have schematics at the end, detailing how wide and long various parts of the garment are. Here is where you can check to see if the measurements are right for you, or if you'll need to do some adjusting. I have short arms, so long sleeves are always too long for me, but I can decide from the schematics just how much length I need to remove. Also note that women's garments assume a size B cup measurement. If you are more endowed than this, the garment will likely rise at the front hem, since some length is used up as the garment extends outward to go over the chest. My favorite book for altering for a good fit is Amy Herzog's *Knit To Flatter*.

I hope this clears up some confusion about patterns. Happy knitting!