

CGI.M2.L01.2: Colourwork – Fair Isle Stranding - Knit and purl rows

Fair Isle essentials

Fair Isle may use many colours in a design, but traditionally only two colours are used in any one row so it isn't quite as difficult as it looks. In addition to choosing a pleasing combination of patterns, careful selection of colours enables the knitter to create beautiful designs with crisp, clear motifs and repeating patterns in horizontal bands.

Fair Isle patterns are worked in stocking stitch from charts, using colours or symbols to indicate colour changes. Once the basics have been mastered, it is easy to design your own patterns (see Tips below).

Yarns

For good pattern definition, a fine Shetland wool is traditionally used being warm, light and durable. Other yarns will of course work, and fun effects can be achieved using thicker and even some textured yarns. Very slippery yarns can, however, be more challenging as there is no "fuzziness" to hold the stitches in place and it can be difficult to maintain an even tension.

Holding the yarn

The simplest way to begin with Fair Isle is by simply picking up and dropping each colour as required. (There are quicker methods but this one will get you started with the principles).

Colour-changing

When changing colours the yarn not in use (the "float" or "float yarn") is carried across the wrong side of the work by "stranding" or "weaving in" to avoid constantly breaking off and rejoining the yarn.

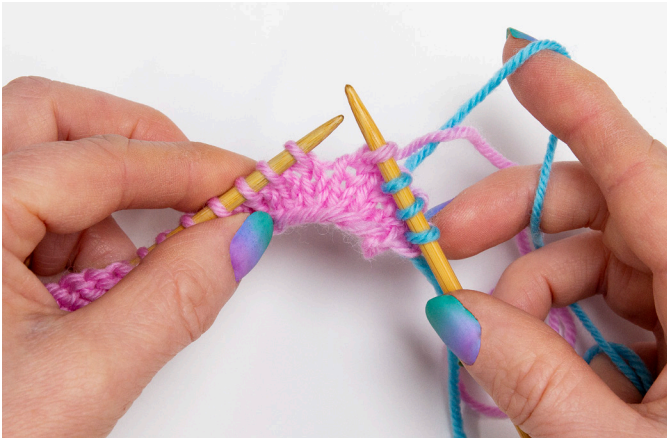
Stranding

This method works well where colour changes are frequent (no more than 4 or 5 stitches apart). It gives a less dense, lighter fabric and uses less yarn than weaving in.

Knit row



1. When you reach the first colour change in your pattern, join in the new yarn (B) by knotting the new yarn onto the existing yarn and pushing the knot up close to the existing yarn. Leave a 10cm (4") tail of yarn B as you will be undoing this knot later and using it to darn in the ends. Don't cut off yarn A.
2. Knit in B until the next colour change. To return to yarn colour A, lift yarn A, taking it under yarn B (yarn B lays over the top of A).



3. Knit with A until the next colour change. Make the next stitch by bringing up colour B from below yarn A (yarn A now lays over yarn B).



4. Repeat this process, changing yarns according to the chart until the end of the row. When you have completed the row, gently stretch out the stitches. On the back of the work you should see the colour changes. The loose strands carried behind the work are the 'floats'. Check these floats for any puckering, very loose stitches or pulling in. If the fabric is pulling in or the floats are very loose, you may need to take back the row and re-knit it as otherwise it will spoil the tension and look of the finished fabric.

Purl row

On purl rows as with knit rows, lift the new colour from beneath the working yarn at each colour change so that the old yarn lays in front the new yarn as it faces you.



1. Purl until the first colour change. At this point note that yarn A is coming from a stitch on the LH needle (the last stitch that was worked in that colour).



2. To bring this colour (A) into use, lift the yarn from beneath, under the current colour (B). Yarn B lays over A at the front of the work.

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3. Purl in A until the next colour change.



4. For the next change, pick up the next colour (B) and take it across the front of A, keeping both yarns at the side of the work facing you.



5. To change back to colour A, leave B at the front of the work, lift A and take it across B to work the next stitch. Note that in doing so, yarn A anchors B in place.



6. Repeat this process, changing yarns according to the chart until the end of the row. At the end of the row check that when the fabric is slightly stretched, the floats are not pulling the fabric in.

TOP TIP

- At the end of each row, gently pull the fabric across the width to ensure there is enough give and the floats are not pulling in too tightly. If they are puckering the fabric or have very little give, it's best to take back the row and re-work.
- Depending on the thickness of the yarn, consider weaving-in if a colour change extends over 4 or more stitches (see lesson 2.01.3).
- If there is a long stretch of colour (as a guide, over 12 stitches depending on the yarn) you may wish to consider an intarsia technique for that section
- Stranding does create quite a dense fabric so allow for this when choosing your garment size
- Blocking will help to smooth out stitches in colourwork but take care to make floats as evenly tensioned as possible