

Tech Tip Tuesday: Swatching buttonbands

I'm beginning a new series here on the blog called **Tech Tip Tuesday**, which will focus on technical tips that can make our knitwear and knitting more beautiful and efficient.

Let's begin with something I'm working on now - a buttonband for a cardigan - Dark and Stormy. Having read a lot in Ravelry project pages as well as in the pattern itself, I came to two conclusions: 1. the Shawl Collar instructions are not helpful, and 2. the ratio of stitches picked up on the bands in the pattern were off. I concluded that I was going to need to redo the pattern, because, let's face it, the collar and bands are the most important finishing for a cardigan sweater.

I consulted two of my favorite sweater knitting design books, [Knitting Pattern Essentials](#) by Sally Melville, and [Knitwear Design Workshop](#) by Shirley Paden. Each of these books has a wealth of information; while some of it overlaps, there are also unique features, and sometimes these knitting mavens disagree. Shirley seems to like to separately knit collars and buttonbands, while Sally strongly urges knitted-on ones. Shirley provides some good detail on shawl collar construction, while Sally provides numerous pick-up ratios for various bands on various stitch patterns at the various points on the bands and collar. [See my review of Knitting Pattern Essentials.](#)

I followed a lot of the instructions in Shirley's book beginning on p 235 (for horizontal shawl collars), which I won't duplicate here. Instead, let's focus on the button band. I swing with Sally on this one - I am not going to separately knit a button band and collar and then attach it - instead, I want to pick up stitches and knit.

Onto to testing the button band approach. This is enough knitting that I don't want to find out after I knit the whole thing and blocked it that the ratio was off. What can I do?

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This is my sweater swatch. At 9 inches by 7.5 inches, it's large enough to see how the fabric feels, and will be perfect as a test for my button band, which will also let me test out some buttonhole sizes. I knit up the side of the swatch in the 1x1 ribbing in a needle size one size smaller than I used for the body of the sweater, using a 5 stitches for every 6 rows ratio that Sally Melville recommends for single fabric ribbing against a stockinette background. She has a plenitude of ratios for all kinds of situations, which, in my mind, is worth the price of the book right there. Here's the swatch after knitting and blocking. In this case of Miss Babs Yowz! superwash wool, blocking entailed soaking the swatch wet for about 20 minutes, throwing into the dyer until damp, and flat drying from there to bone dry.



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And focusing in on the band itself and the various stitch sizes of each buttonhole:



The swatch is laying perfectly, with just a hint of pulling together, but after hanging ought to even out. The ribbing is firm without being stiff.

What about the buttonholes. Here's the button I am using:



I did three different sizes of buttonholes - 3-stitch, 4-stitch, and 5-stitch. I always want the buttonhole to be slightly smaller than the button, but *how much smaller* is difficult to tell ahead of time. While the knitting was on the needles, I thought the 4-stitch one worked the best to my rule of thumb - use the smallest size hole that I can get the button through easily - but blocking can change that. After blocking, I found that the 5-stitch one worked, as did the 4-stitch one, but the 3-stitch one was too difficult to use. My initial guess was correct, but it could have been

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wrong!

Let's review what I learned through this exercise: the correct ratio of rows to stitches on the front bands, the correct size of needle for the buttonband, and the correct size of buttonholes. Combined with the information from Shirley's book on shawl collar construction, I can knit the last bit of this sweater with confidence, and not have to reknit later!