

YOUR FREE READER'S COMPANION

The Blackwork Starter Pack

A companion to The Blackwork Embroidery Book · by Eleanor Ashcroft

Thank you for picking up the book. This is the companion I want you to keep beside the hoop: the fabric numbers that stop the guesswork, a plain guide to reading a chart, the tonal value scale that turns flat outlines into real shading, five borders you can stitch tonight, and a one-page stitch reference. Print it, fold it, keep it in your workbasket. Everything here is meant to be used with a needle in your hand, not read once and shelved.

Blackwork looks intimidating and is actually one of the kindest embroidery styles to learn. It is counted, so the fabric does half the work for you, and it is built from two plain stitches. Get the fabric right and learn to read a chart, and you are most of the way there already. - Eleanor

Fabric Counts - Aida vs Evenweave

Blackwork is counted-thread embroidery, which means you stitch over the threads of the fabric rather than following a printed line. So the fabric is not a background. It is your grid, your ruler, and half your accuracy. Two families of fabric matter to you.

Aida

Aida is woven in obvious little blocks with visible holes at each corner. You stitch one square at a time, corner to corner. It is the friendliest fabric to start on because the holes tell you exactly where the needle goes.

Evenweave and linen

Evenweave (and linen, which is evenweave with more character) has a smoother, flatter surface with no obvious blocks. Traditional blackwork is worked on this, usually "over two" threads, meaning each stitch spans two fabric threads. It gives finer, more elegant results and lets you do the small half-step stitches that fancy fillings sometimes need.

What the count number means

Count is threads per inch. The higher the number, the smaller each stitch and the finer the finished piece.

Fabric	Count	Stitch size	Best for
Aida	11-count	Large, easy	First samplers, tired eyes, children
Aida	14-count	The standard	Most beginners start here
Aida	16-18 count	Small, crisp	Detailed pieces once confident
Evenweave	25-28 count over 2	Fine	Traditional blackwork, shading
Linen	28-32 count over 2	Fine, characterful	Heirloom pieces

If you are just starting, use 14-count white or ivory aida. It is forgiving, widely sold, and every chart count in the book translates to it cleanly. Move to 28-count evenweave over two threads when tonal shading starts to call you, because the finer grid is where fillings really sing.

A quick note on needles and thread. Use a blunt tapestry needle, size 24 or 26, so it slips between threads instead of splitting them. For thread, one or two strands of standard six-strand cotton floss is plenty. One strand for delicate fillings, two for bold outlines and borders.

How to Read a Blackwork Chart

A blackwork chart is a grid. Each square on the chart stands for one stitchable unit on your fabric: one aida block, or two threads on evenweave. Lines drawn on the chart are the stitches you make. That is the whole idea, and once it clicks you will read charts like sentences.

- Grid lines are your fabric threads, not stitches. Do not stitch them.
- A line drawn along or across a square is one stitch. A diagonal line is one diagonal stitch.
- Bold lines usually mean the outline. Thinner or grey lines usually mean the filling pattern inside a shape.
- Heavier grid lines every ten squares are just counting guides, exactly like the lines on graph paper. They help you keep your place.
- Symbols, if a chart uses them, sit at the corners or centres of squares to tell you thread colour. Blackwork is often all one colour, so many charts have no symbols at all.

Find the centre of the chart (it is usually marked with a small arrow on each edge) and the centre of your fabric (fold it in quarters and pinch, or run a line of loose tacking stitches). Start there and work outward. Starting from the centre keeps the design square on the cloth and stops you running off an edge. Count twice, stitch once. Almost every blackwork mistake is a miscount caught three rows too late.

The Tonal Value Scale

This is the idea that makes blackwork special, so give it a minute. Because the whole design is one colour, you create the impression of light and shadow not with different threads but with density. Open, airy patterns read as light. Dense, closed patterns read as dark. A blackwork shape can shade from a pale grey to near-black using nothing but how much thread sits in a given area.

Think of it as a scale from open to dense.

Value	Look	How you get it
1 - Lightest	Pale, airy	Small motif, lots of empty fabric between repeats
2 - Light	Soft grey	Simple filling, wide spacing
3 - Medium	Balanced	Standard filling at its normal spacing
4 - Dark	Heavy	Add a second element inside each unit, or use two strands
5 - Darkest	Near-black	Dense, closed filling with little bare fabric showing

Two levers control value. First, the pattern itself. A little diamond outline is light. That same diamond with a cross inside it is darker. Fill every gap and it is darker still. Second, thread weight. One strand reads lighter than two of the same pattern. To shade a shape, keep the lightest fillings where the light would fall and the densest where the shadow deepens, and let the values step gradually between them. Squint at your work now and then. If you can see the light and dark reading across the shape with your eyes half closed,

the shading is working.

Five Beginner Border Patterns

Borders are the best possible practice. They are repetitive, so your counting gets steady, and they teach the double-running stitch path better than anything. Work each one over a row of squares on your fabric and repeat it sideways. Here are five, easiest first.

1. Running dashes

The simplest border there is. Stitch two squares, skip two, stitch two, all along a line. Then come back the other way and fill the skipped gaps. That return journey is double-running stitch in miniature, and this border teaches the rhythm of it.

2. The step

A little staircase. Go two squares across, one square up, two across, one up, and keep climbing. On the return pass you can mirror it downward to make a zigzag ribbon. It looks far more advanced than it is.

3. Square chain

Draw small squares side by side, each sharing a wall with the next, like a row of little boxes holding hands. Two squares wide and two tall is a good size. A clean, architectural border that suits samplers.

4. Diamond run

A row of open diamonds. Up two and over two to a point, down two and over two, over and over. Leave them open for a light border, or drop a single stitch or a tiny cross in the centre of each for a heavier one. This is your first taste of using value in a border.

5. Woven ribbon

Two wavy lines running parallel, half a step out of phase, so they read as an over-and-under weave. Stitch the first wave all the way along, then the second beneath it offset by two squares. This one looks intricate and is really just the same wave stitched twice.

Stitch all five as a practice band down a scrap of aida before you commit to a real piece. By the fifth you will have counting, turning corners, and the double-running return path in your hands.

Stitch Quick-Reference

Blackwork rests on two stitches. Learn these two and you can work almost any chart in the book.

Holbein stitch (double running)

This is the classic blackwork line, and the reason the work looks identical on both sides. You make it in two journeys.

1. First pass: work a line of evenly spaced running stitches. Stitch one square, skip one, stitch one, skip

one, following the path of the design.

2. Second pass: turn around and come back along the same line, filling every gap you skipped with a stitch.
3. The two passes meet into one continuous, clean line with no bulky back. Coming back through the very hole you left, not beside it, is what keeps it neat.

Use Holbein for outlines, borders, and any design meant to be reversible or delicate.

Backstitch

The quicker outline, worked in a single journey. Good for outlining filled shapes where the back will not show.

1. Bring the needle up one square along your line.
2. Take it back down at the start of that line, then up again one square ahead of where you came up.
3. Each new stitch reaches back to meet the last, so the line is solid with no gaps.

Backstitch is faster than Holbein and looks the same from the front. The trade is a messier, bulkier back, so save it for pieces where only the front is seen.

The rule of thumb

Reversible or fine work, use Holbein. Speed, and the back will be hidden, use backstitch. Fillings inside shapes are usually built from short straight and diagonal stitches following the chart, and they behave like either of these two depending on the pattern.

That is the whole starter pack. Do not aim for a masterpiece first. Stitch the five border band on a scrap, then work one small filled shape - a leaf or a simple heart - and watch a plain outline turn into something with light and shadow in it. That first shaded shape is the moment blackwork stops being a chart and starts being yours. When you have stitched it, I would genuinely love to hear how it went, and in a note or two I will tell you how a quick word from you helps this book reach the next pair of hands.

Stitch slow, count twice,

Eleanor Ashcroft