

Introduction

Several highly skilled knitters have told me, “I can’t read charts. I just don’t get it, and I never will.”

It’s easy to understand why so many knitters give up trying to learn to read charts. Aside from the revised edition of *Principles of Knitting*, I own exactly **one** knitting book that uses **two whole pages** to describe how to read a chart. Most of the rest, which take up about three feet of shelf space, don’t use charts at all, and those that do spend exactly one page to teach knitters how to use them.

Such a high-level overview (and let’s face it, that’s all such an approach really is) is akin to trying to learn French from a book with a bunch of short stories in English on the left-hand pages and the same stories in French on the right-hand pages. The book doesn’t say it explicitly, but the underlying message is “This is all you need to learn French. And if you can’t learn French this way, it’s all your fault!”

Most of us don’t learn anything this way, let alone a skill like knitting. Oops! I meant to say “a skill like using knitting charts.” No, we have to go step by step, which for us knitters becomes stitch by stitch.

And sometimes, it’s stitch by bloody stitch.

Why This Book?

For those of us who already know how to use knitting charts, it can be almost impossible to remember what it was like to **learn** to use them. We have almost certainly forgotten how another knitter showed us what to do, stitch by stitch and row by row, or if we figured it out by ourselves, we forget that we did so painfully and with much hair-pulling.

I would love to sit down in person with every knitter who wants to learn to read, use, and create knitting charts, but since I can’t, I hope this book will fill in for me. It goes into what will, at times, feel like excruciating detail, because going into every single detail, going stitch by bloody stitch, is the entire point.

I’m hoping these extensive details will help you get some easy victories along the way and eventually lead you to that light-bulb moment when it all just clicks.

The Mystery Picture

Let’s look at a typical knitting pattern. These instructions form a very simple picture, a picture so simple a kindergartner could identify it instantly. Quick! What is the picture created by following these knitting instructions?

Try to figure it out in your head **before** you turn to the end of the introduction to see the charted version. No cheating! Did you cheat? Or did you really figure it out by looking at the instructions?

WHAT AM I?

CO 13 in white.

Row 1: K13 white.

Row 2: P6 white, P1 red, P6 white.

Row 3: K5 white, K3 red, K5 white.

Row 4: P4 white, P5 red, P4 white.

Row 5: K3 white, K7 red, K3 white.

Row 6: P2 white, P9 red, P2 white.

Row 7: K1 white, K11 red, K1 white.

Row 8: P1 white, P5 red, P1 white, P5 red, P1 white.

Row 9: K2 white, K3 red, K3 white, K3 red, K2 white.

Row 10: P13 white.

BO.

Could you quickly determine what the picture was, or did you really have to concentrate to figure out the simple shape?

If you thought it was hard to figure out what the mystery picture was, how can any of us ever hope to see what line after line of

K4, * P3, C4B, P3, C4F, P3, K2tog, yo, K2, yo, SSK *, rpt btw * to last 4 sts, K4

is supposed to look like?

Advantages of Charts

There are several reasons why we should at least learn to read and construct knitting charts, even if we choose to work from written-out instructions.

Charts Can Look Like Our Work in Progress

We'd never choose a pattern by looking at nothing but knitting gibberish: long lines of numbers and knitting abbreviations like the example line above. No. We always choose patterns by looking **at pictures of the finished projects**. In a very real way, knitting charts are stylized pictures that can, if needed, show every stitch of a project explicitly. With just a little practice, we can see the marked similarity between

- ☉ the project photo
- ☉ the chart
- ☉ what's actually hanging off our needles

The chart symbols, though, do make a difference. Some symbols make knitting charts that are as hard, or even harder, to read than written-out instructions.

It is true that charts can't always show all the fine details, as we'll see in several places. But overall, a chart with decent symbols leaves knitting gibberish in the dust.

Find Typos in Written-Out Instructions

Imagine proofreading page after page of written-out instructions.¹ Your job is to make sure **every** character on **every** line on **every** page is correct. It's about as exciting as reading the phone book.

Okay, so we aren't knitting pattern proofreaders. Well, actually we are: we just don't get paid for it! We are forced to be unpaid proofreaders because we're the lucky ones who have to work from instructions that caused someone else's eyes to glaze over by page three of a hundred-page book made up of lines like

K4, * P3, C4B, P3, C4F, P2, K2tog, yo, K2, yo, SSK *, rpt btw * to last 4 sts, K4

How hard do you think it would be to find that incorrect "P2" in the middle of, oh, page thirty?

If the patterns are charted, though, the "P2" that should have been "P3" will stand out like an NFL lineman at a nursery school.

Even if we prefer to work from written-out instructions, we can chart them first so we can be sure they're right before we even cast on.

Catch Execution Errors While We're Working

A knitting chart makes it a snap to see what we're supposed to be doing and, even more importantly, **where** we're supposed to be doing it.

A chart lets us see the relationship between the current row's stitches and those from the previous row that they're supposed to be on top of. So if the current stitches are off by one, as in the previous example line having a "P2" instead of a "P3," we'll see pretty quickly that the stitches that follow that incorrect P2 are not lining up with the previous row's stitches.

¹ I certainly can **now**.

Some Projects Have Only Charts

Some books and some authors use only charts. If we can't read the charts, we can't make the projects.

Make Projects from a Language We Don't Know

Charts-only books and patterns are common in some parts of the world. If we're familiar with charts, we might be able to use knitting patterns from other countries even if we don't know the languages the patterns are written in. By comparing the chart to the project photo, we have a good chance of figuring out what the symbols mean and making the project, even if the symbols are different from any we've ever seen before.

Separate Border and Pattern Stitches

Many knitting projects mix instructions for border stitches with those for the pattern itself. But what if we don't like the border the designer used? If the border and stitch pattern instructions are intermingled, it's difficult to figure out how to change the border, whether we want to narrow it, widen it, change the stitch pattern, or remove it altogether.

If we chart the instructions, we can very quickly and easily enlarge, shrink, or change the stitch pattern of the border, or we can do a border-ectomy to eliminate it entirely.

Make a Different Project from the Same Instructions

Suppose we find a really cool stitch pattern that's used to make a hot pad. We like it so much that we want to go way beyond a hot pad: we want to make a blanket with the stitch pattern.

But if the pattern stitches are not clearly defined in the instructions, then it's almost impossible to use the cool stitch pattern for anything else.

This same idea goes the other direction too. We might want to make a nifty set of hot pads from a cool blanket. But again, if the instructions are written out in the typical way instead of being charted, it's hard to adapt them to make a different project.

Resize Stitch Patterns and Motifs

If we chart a project's instructions, we can enlarge (or shrink) some stitch patterns and motifs by adding (or removing) stitches and/or rows.

A twenty-stitch/twenty-row motif might be fine for a large blanket, but it would be entirely out of scale for a baby sweater.

We Read Charts in the Same Direction as We Work

With written-out instructions, we read left to right and top to bottom, but we all work from bottom to top, and for half the rows, we're working across the stitches in the opposite direction than we're reading. Trying to find our place in the middle of a row of knitting gibberish can get tricky.

With charts, we start reading at the bottom, which is where we cast on and start working. And it's possible to read **every** chart row in the same direction we work the stitches.²

Determine the Shaping for a Cardigan's "Other" Front

Most cardigan projects will give the shaping for only one of the fronts. There will be thorough instructions for shaping the armhole, neckline, and shoulder of, say, the left front. Then the instructions will have a blithe

RIGHT FRONT

Work as for left front, reversing all shapings.

Wow, isn't that so colossally helpful?

If we chart the instructions for the given front, then we can quickly mirror-image all the shaping for the other front.

Design Our Own Motifs, Patterns, and Projects

We can create motifs and stitch patterns, and we can easily combine multiple patterns of any size and type to make a large project.

If we've charted a motif or stitch pattern in the computer, we can copy it repeatedly to get a good idea of what the project would look like.

Disadvantage of Charts

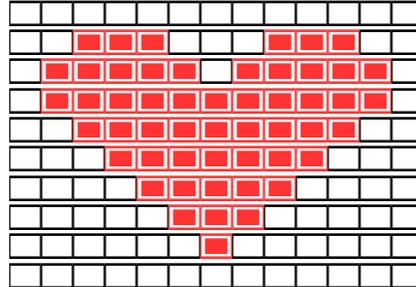
The only one I can think of is that we have to learn to read them.

Well, that's what this book is for.

² OK, it's true that for wrong-side rows, we have to turn the chart upside-down. But that's a trade-off easily made.

The Mystery Picture Revealed

Did you turn back here before you put some effort into figuring out what the picture was just from reading the written-out instructions?



Yep, I would have too.