

On Your Way to the Masters: By Hand!

By Arenda Holladay

So, you're thinking of giving the Master Hand Knitting Program a try? What's it all about? What does it involve? How long does it take? And why would you want to do it?

A Little History

The Master Hand Knitting Program was announced in the Fall 1987 issue of *Cast On* as a way for members of The Knitting Guild Association (TKGA) to have their knitting evaluated using specific criteria and guidelines. It was designed as an educational process, not a competition or contest. Although the program has evolved over the years, at its core it hasn't changed much. Knitters work through three levels, each building on techniques demonstrated in the previous level. Each level is completed independently, and evaluated by the Master Hand Knitting Committee, before the knitter goes to the next level.

The Levels

What must the knitter do in each of these levels? Reading the "On Your Way to the Masters" articles in past issues of *Cast On* can give you a good idea.

Level I – Advanced Beginner covers knitting basics. Swatches to demonstrate garter stitch, Stockinette stitch and seed stitch are worked, as well as simple cables and yarnovers; basic increases and decreases are also part of the requirements.

Level II – Intermediate builds upon skills demonstrated in Level I. The knitter works swatches of paired decreases and increases, more complicated cable stitch patterns and several lace stitch patterns. Finishing techniques, such as seams and buttonholes, as well as color work are also covered. To complete this level, the member knits an Argyle sock and a vest, from either an existing pattern, or an original design.

Level III – Advanced requires much more from the knitter than the previous two levels. Swatches for patterns such as entrelac, traveling stitches and smocking, as well as different methods of cast on and bind off edges, are part of the requirements. To complete this level, the knitter designs a sweater and a hat, one being an Aran, the other Fair Isle.

In addition to the swatches, each level requires answers to a series of questions, and writing instructions and reports. To complete Levels II and III, the knitter writes reviews of books and magazines.

The Master Hand Knitting Committee

Who's looking at all of these swatches and reading these reports to see if they meet the standards of the Master Hand Knitting Program? The Master Hand Knitting Committee is made up of members who have completed all three levels of the program. Currently the committee has 10 members, three of whom serve as Co-Chairs, with each member agreeing to serve for two years. As vacancies occur, new committee members are selected from members who have completed Level III within the past 18 months. Committee members volunteer their time, but can take classes at TKGA conventions for free. The cost the member pays for each level covers administrative and shipping expenses.

The Evaluation Process

After the knitter sends a submission to TKGGA, it is forwarded to the committee members for evaluation. Level I submissions are reviewed by one committee member, Level II's by two committee members, and Level III's by three committee members — before being sent to one of the Co-Chairs for final evaluation. The Co-Chair reviews the comments of the committee members and the submission itself and then contacts the knitter directly about any corrections needed, or notifies TKGGA that the level is completed.

Practical Suggestions

After reviewing many submissions and consulting with the other committee members, I have some suggestions for everyone working on submissions for the Master Hand Knitting program.

When you receive your instructions, read them carefully — particularly the General Instructions on Page 1. They provide valuable information about generic swatch requirements and how to put your notebook together. You'll save yourself time and trouble if you carefully read these instructions **BEFORE** picking up your needles to knit the swatches. The majority of errors the committee finds could be avoided if these instructions were followed.

The Notebook

The materials for each level should be organized in a notebook, with swatches and all written materials placed in individual plastic page protectors. Most knitters use a three-ring binder to hold their submission, but you can also fasten the page protectors with metal rings or yarn; if you do this, be sure to fasten all three holes. If you use a notebook, don't use one reinforced with steel — it costs less to ship lightweight notebooks. For Level I, try to use a notebook that fits in a USPS Priority Mail box — they're free and convenient.

The program intersperses directions for swatches with questions and reports. Don't feel you have to organize your notebook in the same order. Consider dividing your notebook into sections for swatches, questions, reports, projects and the bibliography.

It may not seem that putting this notebook together has much to do with knitting, but you're creating a reference guide for yourself. If the swatches keep falling out, and the notebook is so poorly organized that you can't find what you are looking for, it won't be of much use to you. Your kindergarten teacher was right ... first impressions and neatness do count.

Swatches

The instructions state: "Use only, smooth, light-colored worsted weight yarn ... unless otherwise instructed." This means exactly what it says. Don't use nubby, hairy, fuzzy, tweedy, multi-colored, variegated or novelty yarns for your swatches. It might be more fun to knit with these types of yarns, but they can camouflage mistakes and ruin the reviewer's eyesight, and result in your not getting full benefit from the program. Light-colored is subject to interpretation — for my Level I swatches, I considered a deep olive green as light color — I was wrong. To be on the safe side, you can't go wrong with white, cream, light tan, yellow or pastel colored yarns. Even if you don't normally knit with wool, you may want to use this fiber for your swatches. The natural elasticity of wool shows off your knitting to its best advantage. Cotton and many acrylics emphasize tension problems. Swatches made from wool block better than swatches made from other fibers.

Each swatch should be blocked properly and that means no curled edges, no flattened cables or ribbing — a lace stitch pattern should be clearly visible. Don't just go through the motions of blocking, look at the swatch when you've finished and see if it's acceptable. Be sure the swatch has dried completely before you put it in the plastic protector, especially during warm weather — mold happens!

The instructions for individual swatches provide its measurements; for example, work in k2, p2 rib for 2 inches or work in garter stitch for 4 inches. Measure your swatches carefully and accurately. It might be boring to knit an inch after decreasing, before binding off, but that's what the instructions say — and it's something the reviewers evaluate. At one time or another, every knitter has or will follow a written pattern, and one of the criteria the Master Hand Knitting Program evaluates is how well the knitter follows instructions. When measuring length, don't include the stitches on the needle in your measurement — if you do, your measurements will be off.

Swatches should reflect your best work. For all swatches, regardless of the technique being demonstrated, the tension should be even, there should be no split stitches, and the ends should be woven in neatly. Look carefully at the swatch before you attach the tag and place it in the page protector. If it can be improved, knit it again — this process will help you become a better knitter.

Tags

The instructions ask that you attach a tag in the upper left-hand corner of the swatch — there's a reason for this. The reviewers want to see if the knitter can read their knitting, that is, tell the cast on edge from the bind off edge. Your name, address, and phone number should be clearly printed on one side of the tag. The other side should provide the swatch number, technique and reference, if applicable. Note that the book reference does not have to be complete, due to space considerations. For example: Swatch 9 SSK decrease *Vogue Knitting*, pg. 43. [Be sure to include the complete reference in your bibliography.]



Why do the reviewers want references? If there's an error in the technique on the swatch, it helps them identify what went wrong and what to suggest to fix it. Even if the swatch is demonstrating a technique you use all the time, it doesn't hurt to give a reference. References also let the reviewer know what reference books you are using. Believe it or not, some reference books are better than others. I've looked at reference books where some of the swatches shown in photographs wouldn't pass the criteria of the Master Hand Knitting Program. If you don't own any reference books, check your local library. Used book stores are also a good source for out-of-print books.

Written Instructions

All levels require written instructions — for Levels I through III you write instructions for some of your swatches. For Level III, you write instructions for the hat and sweater that you design. Instructions should be clearly written and easy to follow. If you're not sure what to include in the instructions, refer to *The National Knitting and Crocheting Standards*, past copies of *Cast On*, or a commercial pattern for guidelines. Instructions should always include required materials, equipment, gauge, and an abbreviation key. The instructions should describe the swatch just as you worked it, and include the number of stitches to cast on, how many repeats, and when to bind off. It helps to assume that the person using your instructions knows absolutely nothing. When I got back my Level III submission, one of the corrections I had to make was to add Sleeves, make two to the instructions for my sweater which still makes me laugh.

It's a good idea to write the instructions as you work the swatch, or before you start. Trying to recreate instructions from a swatch you've knit several months before isn't any fun — a lesson I learned the hard way. When you're using a stitch pattern in a swatch, remember to include a reference. It makes it easier for the reviewer to check the accuracy of the stitch pattern.

Proofread your instructions and check your spelling — if you don't type your instructions, please print neatly. If you use a computer, don't use a font size smaller than 14 point for your text; use a spell checker, but be aware that some of them consider purl misspelled — and replace it with “pearl.” Be consistent.

Questions

Read the questions very carefully and answer them completely. Use common sense and your experience as a knitter, but also look through reference sources for additional information. The purpose of the questions is to expand your understanding of the topics covered in each level. List any references you've used, and provide complete information for your references. For example: *Vogue Knitting* Editors, *Vogue Knitting*, Pantheon Books, 1989, pg. 43. Reread your answers, and proofread them before putting the final version in the sheet protectors.

Reports and Reviews

The program instructions state the length for reports and reviews — three inch top margins, double spacing and size 36 point type does not fool the reviewers. Use multiple references for your reports. Book and magazine reviews should reflect your opinions — only listing a book's contents is not a review. If you're not sure what information to include in reviews, look through any knitting publication and use those reviews as a guideline.

The level includes a very complete bibliography, which indicates whether the book is a technical guide, a design book or a stitch pattern book. For Level II, you're instructed to review specific types of books. Check the bibliography to be sure the book you want to review fits the specific category.

Projects

The vest required for Level II, and the hat and sweater required for Level III, provide an opportunity to use what you have learned. Be sure your projects reflect your best work — pay attention to the details. The increases/decreases, seams, stitch patterns, color changes, the weaving in of ends, etc., should match the quality of your swatches.

The instructions you write for your swatches are practice for the instructions you write for your projects. They should meet publication standards and include all the required elements. Again, use published patterns as guidelines if needed. Charts and graphs should be easy to follow and clearly labeled. If you have friends who knit, give them your instructions and ask their opinion on how easy they are to follow.

The projects are a chance for you to demonstrate your knitting skills and creativity. There are a few stipulations on the types of yarn to be used and the type of garments to be knit for Level III, but you still have quite a bit of freedom. Don't be afraid to show off.

How Long Does The Program Take?

You can take as much time as you need to complete each level. However, if you've had your instructions for over a year, contact TKGA for updated instructions. Everyone must complete the current version.

When you complete a level and send it to TKGA, they forward it to the committee members. As stated above, the upper levels go to several committee members before the Co-Chair does the final evaluation, so please allow 2-3 months for the return of the materials. Very few knitters pass a level on the first try. Most must resubmit a swatch or two before passing that level. Don't get discouraged — remember, this is an educational program — you can't learn if you aren't aware of your mistakes. Once you've received a letter from a Co-Chair congratulating you on successfully passing the level, you can request the next level.

Why Become a Master Knitter?

Why would you want to complete the Masters Hand Knitting Program? You do get a certificate and a pin after completing all three levels, and you can introduce yourself as a Master Knitter, but that isn't much, considering how much work the program involves. Maybe the story of one knitter can show what the real benefits are:

“My grandmother showed me how to knit when I was about 10 years old, and I remember making a purse and a pair of slippers before moving on to quilting, crocheting, needlepoint and counted cross stitch. I came back to knitting after 20 years — with a vengeance. I knit constantly. I finished countless numbers of hats, scarves and sweaters. Every friend and family member was the recipient of a knitted gift. I was completely self-taught and I took pride in never asking anyone for help. I followed patterns and made up techniques as I went along. I didn’t own a single reference book — I considered myself an expert knitter.

“When I came across an issue of *Cast On*, the Master Hand Knitting Program interested me, and I decided to give it a try. I really didn’t think I’d learn anything — after all, I was an expert. When I sent off my Level I notebook, I fully expected to get a letter back telling me what I already knew, that I was an expert. That wasn’t what the letter said. The reviewer made suggestions on how I could improve the quality of my knitting! At first I was outraged. Just who did they think they were? After I calmed down, I read the letter again and realized the reviewer had a point. As I remember, she had noted that SSK decreases should be mirror images of k2tog decreases. Mine were twisted and distorted. It had never occurred to me that decreases should be mirror images. I started to realize that for years I had been concerned primarily with quantity not quality.”

“Before starting Level II, I purchased several reference books. As I knit the swatches for Level II, I referred to these books and did something I didn’t do in Level I — I looked at my swatches with a critical eye. I knit many of the swatches several times before I was satisfied with my work. Not surprisingly, my knitting dramatically improved. When I compare the swatches I did for Level I with the swatches I did for Level III, I can hardly believe they were done by the same person.”

“After going through the Master Hand Knitting Program I’m closer to becoming what I only thought I was before, an expert. And with research, practice, and hard work maybe I’ll be an expert one day!”

—Arenda