

Why every knitter can (and should)  
learn the language of charts  
by Kathryn Gunn

# are you reading me?

All knitters are familiar with abbreviated forms in written knitting instructions. Simple commands like K1 P1 are a shorthand that clearly communicate how to knit a garment from a pattern. Or do they?

If you speak French, you would see something rather different in your pattern, and if German is your language, you'd see something different yet again. For every language, another shorthand, and if the knitter does not read that language then it is difficult, if not impossible, to follow the instructions.

Not to be confused with schematics, which generally give the finished dimensions of the item to be knitted rather than the instructions, charts like the ones used for lace knitting may be the closest thing you'll find to an international language of knitting—although they can still have their differences. For example, not all charts use the same symbols. Anyone familiar with the differences in written knitting patterns from North America or Europe will be aware that this is not a difficulty just with charts. (Cast off or bind off? Moss stitch or seed stitch? And let's not even get started on crochet terms.)

By offering a visual image of what has previously occurred and what is to occur next, charts allow the knitter to 'read' the knitting (and, for visually oriented people, to memorise the pattern repeats more easily). Charts also represent a single row of knitting more compactly than

written instructions and reduce the likelihood of errors in knitting from complex written instructions.

Following a charted pattern for lace may seem complicated, but in many ways it is easier than following written directions. Think of it as using a map rather than written or verbal directions to a particular place. 'Drive about 2 km, take the left, and then turn right at the fallen gum tree' might be misleading. A map, on the other hand, is much less ambiguous (as long as you know the name of the street you're seeking). Charts are, essentially, a map for knitters and the symbols are the key.

English	French	German
k1, p1	1 m end, 1 m env, 1 maille	1re, 1i

## Pointers

**Make a photocopy of the chart.**

A copy for your own personal use will not be a breach of copyright. Mark the chart off into sets of five or six stitches and rows so that you can find your place easily.

**Use corresponding stitch markers.**

These can be made from lengths of yarn in a contrasting colour.

**Count your stitches.** Unless directed not to, count after every row. The written instructions in a more complex chart should indicate where to count your stitches.

**Keep track of your rows.** Try a row counter, or good old pencil and paper.

**Use a lifeline.** In doing complex work, experienced lace knitters will often thread fine yarns in contrasting colours through a row of work. (Dental floss is excellent as it never snags on yarn!) This 'lifeline' makes it easy to rip back to a point before the mistake was made and then pick up the stitches to begin again.

## Charting the course of history

Charts for crafts have been used since at least Elizabethan times. They were made as woodcuts and are extremely rare. Early knitters may have used these as resources for their own designs although many were handed down as long knitted samplers of stitches.

With developments in printing, charts became much more popular in the late 19th and early 20th centuries. They were eventually developed by designers like the master lace knitter Herbert Niebling into intricate technical tools. These developments in charting made very complex designs accessible to many knitters.

# Reading a chart

Despite the lack of standardised symbols, the basics of reading a chart rarely differ. Here are a few ideas to keep in mind:

**Charts are read the way they are knitted.** Charts for flat knitting on two needles are read from right to left and then left to right from bottom to top. This is not like normal reading, but the reason for this is simple: when you are knitting on two needles it is the back of the work (or the wrong side) facing you on every alternate row, but you are still reading the chart from the right side. Think of it as knitting in front of a mirror. For example: for three rows of stocking stitch you could write the following instructions: Row 1 (RS) Knit (working right to left). Row 2 (WS) Purl (working left to right). Row 3 (RS) Knit (working right to left again). When you turn your knitting to work the wrong side, you are still physically working from right to left. But you're working into the backs of the stitches, so they appear to have been worked left to right.

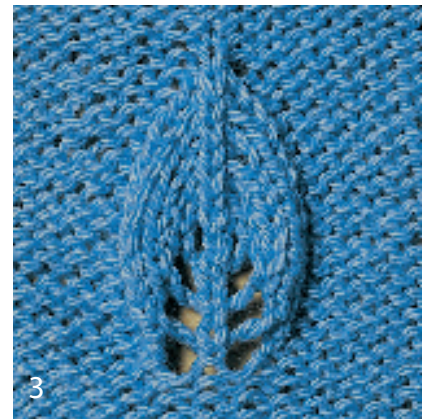
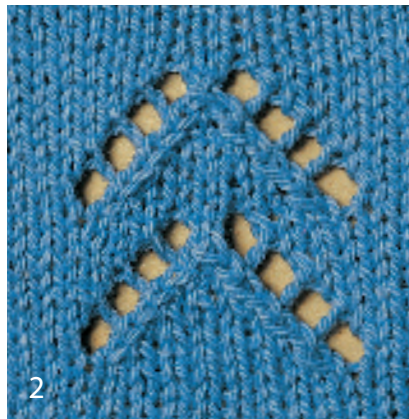
**Not all lines may be included in a chart.** This doesn't mean that something is missing but that the unlisted rows will be plain knit or plain purl rows, as in Sample 1 below. When rows are unlisted on a chart, the written instructions will indicate how they are to be knitted, generally directing to 'knit alternate rows' for garter stitch or 'purl alternate rows' for stocking stitch.

**One square on a chart means one stitch or set of stitches.**

**The stitch count may not be the same for every line in a pattern.** Charts make this easier to see.

## Chart symbol key

□	k on rs, p on ws
▬	p on rs, k on ws
○	yo
⋈	sl1 k2tog pss0
∕	k2tog
∖	k2tog tbl
⋈	sl2 k1 p2sso



Both of these charts represent the same eyelet motif (above) in symbolic form. Conventional written instructions would be:

Row 1: k6, k2tog, yo, k7.

Row 2 and every alternate row: purl.

Row 3: k5, k2tog, yo, k1, yo, k2tog tbl, k5.

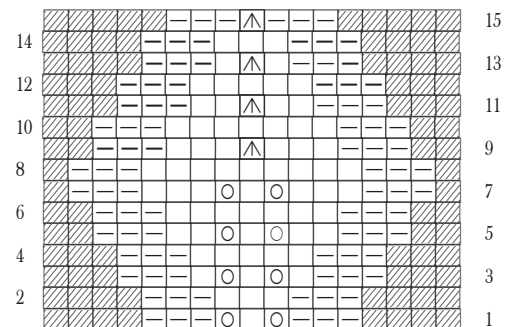
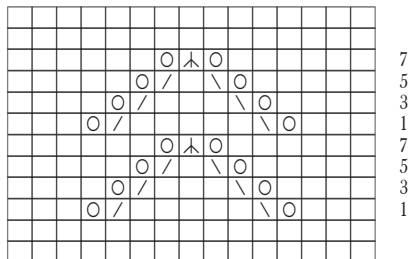
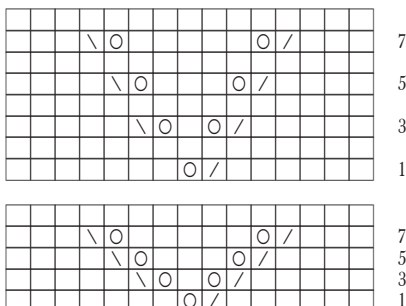
Row 5: k4, k2tog, yo, k3, yo, k2tog tbl, k4.

Row 7: k3, k2tog, yo, k5, yo, k2tog tbl, k3.

In the example below the symbol in the centre square is an instruction to decrease two stitches, or slip one, knit two together and pass the slipped stitch over (sl1 k2tog pss0). Note that there is also a yarn over on each side of the double decrease to add two stitches to the same row, so the overall stitch count remains the same.

In this example the grey squares indicate that there is no corresponding stitch.

Row 1 (RS): P3, yo, k1, yo, p3. Row 2 (WS): K3, p3, k3 (9 sts). Row 3: P3, k1, yo, k1, yo, k1, p3. Row 4: K3, p5, k3 (11 sts). Row 5: P3, k2, yo, k1, yo, k2, p3. Row 6: K3, p7, k3 (13 sts). Row 7: P3, k3, yo, k1, yo, k3, p3. Row 8: K3, p9, k3 (15 sts). Row 9: P3, k3, sl2 k1 p2sso, k3, p3. Row 10: K3, p7, k3 (13 sts). Row 11: P3, k2, sl2 k1 p2sso, k2, p3. Row 12: K3, p5, k3 (11 sts). Row 13: P3, k1, sl2 k1 p2sso, k1, p3. Row 14: K3, p3, k3 (9 sts). Row 15: P3, sl2 k1 p2sso, p3.



### References and further reading:

Miller, S (2002), Heirloom Knitting, Lerwick: Shetland Times  
Stove, M(2nd), Creating Original Handknitted Lace, Perth: Hale