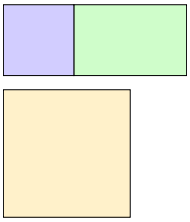
UnRuly Basics

The most basic, most important rules of free-piecing are these:

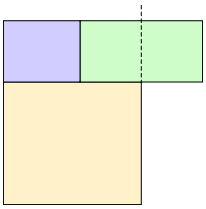
- *If it's too long, cut it off*
- *If it's too short, add to it*

Cut It Off

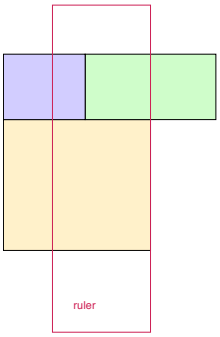
To join the yellow square to the unit in this illustration:



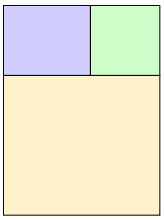
sew together and cut off the excess.



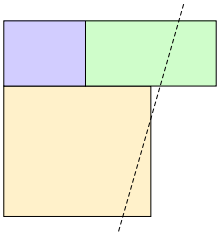
You can use your scissors or align a ruler along the edge of your base piece and slice with the rotary cutter:



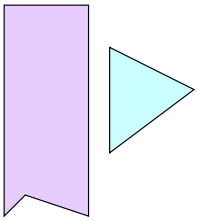
Either way you end up with a straight edge like this:



Add wonkiness by cutting instead at an angle, just don't leave any fabric gaps - avoid this:

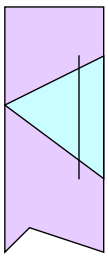


The process works the exact same way even when you're not working with squares and rectangles.

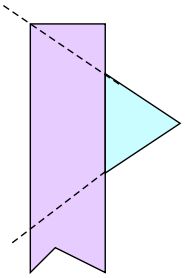


When sewing a triangle to a strip, leave extra room at the top because you'll be cutting at an angle. The wider the strip the more room you'll need to leave.

Flip right sides together and sew.

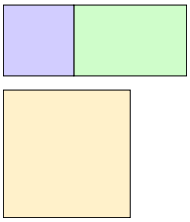


Press open and trim along the lines of the base:

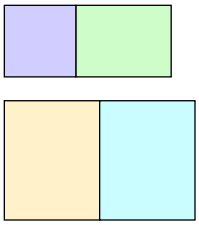


Add To It

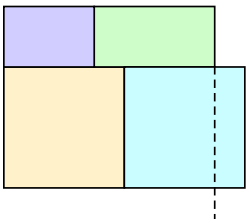
Sometimes you need a unit to be bigger, not smaller. The top unit needs to stay the length it is:



Add piece to the square.



Then join the units and trim if needed:

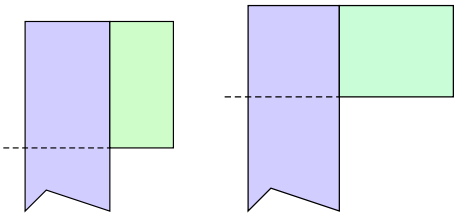


This is how free-piecing works at its most basic level.

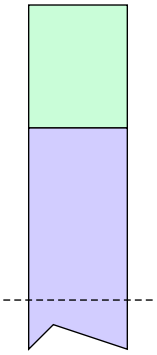
Use Strips

Take advantage of the length of your strips, not just the width.

Width:

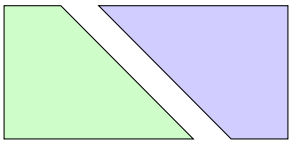


Length:

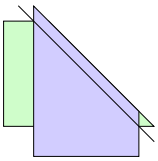


Joining Angles

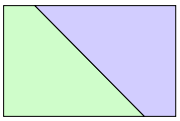
Anytime you have an angle, you must offset. For instance, to join these two pieces (or strips):



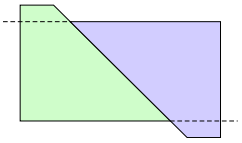
Place right sides together with the pointy bits sticking out - you're aiming to start the seam allowance at the spot where the two pieces meet:



to get this:



One of the joys of free-piecing is its adaptability. If you didn't offset pieces, cut off the excess bits:

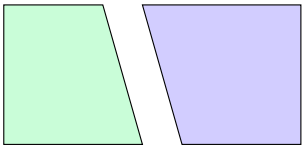


You'll end up with a narrower unit but that only matters if it HAD to be a certain width.

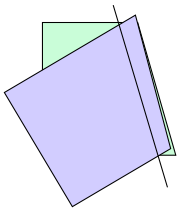
Just cutting off excess width doesn't work so well if you're joining strips - in that case you'll need the seam ripper.

What I just showed you was a 45 degree angle - the kind often used when joining two strips together to make binding.

It's a bit different when the angle is shallower. You still need to offset, but not as dramatically.



Put the right sides together and offset so that the two fabrics meet a quarter inch from the edge.



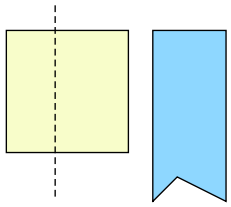
It's not (usually) a big deal if you get this wrong, just cut off any excess.

To sum up, when joining angles--whether 45 degrees or something else--offset. You'll use this technique a lot.

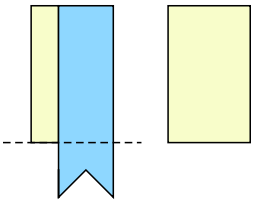
Strip Insertion

Inserting a strip means cutting through a base fabric and sewing a strip into the gap.

In this illustration the rectangle is sliced so that the strip can be inserted:

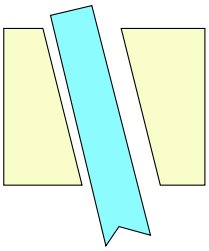


Right sides together, add a piece of the base to the strip and trim even:



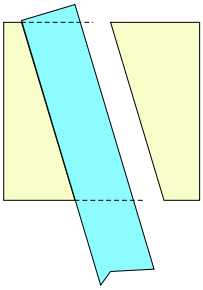
Add the other piece of base and trim even.

Inserting at an angle is slightly trickier. Only slightly. Slice at a diagonal--not going into either corner--and place the strip in the gap.



See how the top of the strip slants downwards? That will be the first seam. Flip right sides together, offset the strip a quarter inch (you're working with an angle) and sew.

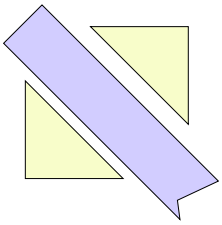
Press open and trim even:



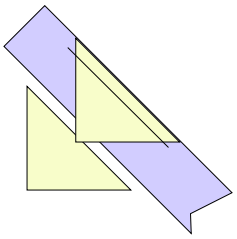
Now add the other side of the base. You're joining angles so don't forget the offset.

Inserting a strip into a corner

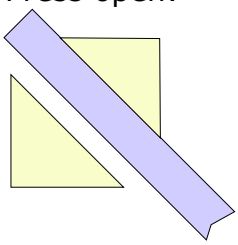
Here's a base square sliced diagonally from corner to corner:



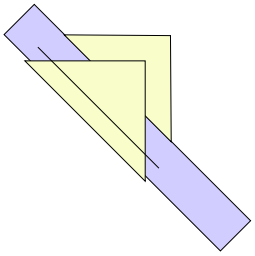
Flip the triangle onto the strip right sides together and sew. Leave extra length at the top of the strip.



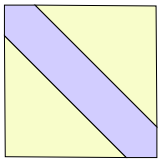
Press open:



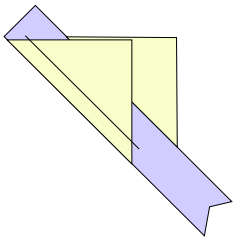
You can trim the strip now or do what I do and just add the other bit of base. If you want to maintain the square shape, then align the next base bit like this:



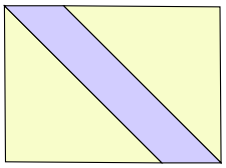
Press open and trim to get this:



Another option is to align the second base triangle differently:



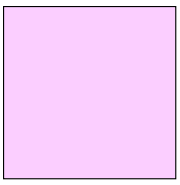
And end up with a rectangle:



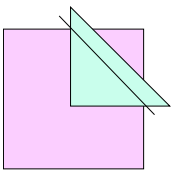
Corner Triangles

You can make rounded edges and circles by adding triangles.

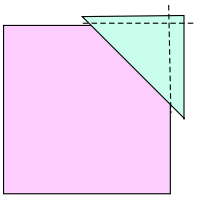
This is a plain old square. Nothing interesting about it.



But it's easy to transform. Take a triangle and place it right sides together on the square. The triangle points need to stick out by at least a quarter inch. Less than that and you'll be cutting the square down (though that works too). Sew.

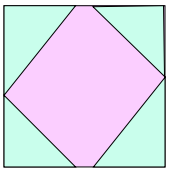


Press open and trim the extra bits of the triangle

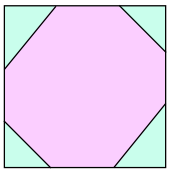


Trim off the excess square that's underneath the triangle, making sure to leave the quarter inch seam allowance.

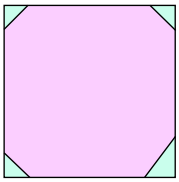
Repeat that step three more times. Try sewing some on at an angle - just make sure your triangle is oversized.



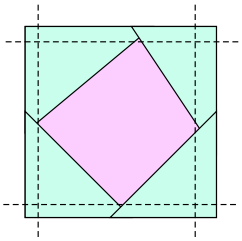
Okay that doesn't look like a circle right now but after the seam allowances get taken up it transforms:



Here are two things to watch out for. If you add triangles that are too small they practically disappear and you lose the roundness.

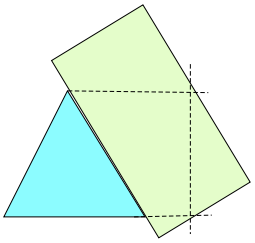


The other thing to avoid is overlap of the triangles - you'll make a diamond. Cure that by trimming down:



Duplicating an Angle

This is a triangle that needs to be turned into a square (or rectangle). You could sew it to a rectangle or strip and trim even:

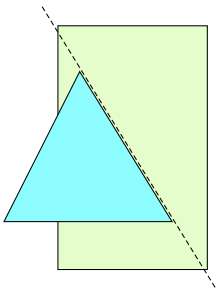


The huge downside is all the stretchy bias that you get on the edge of the unit.

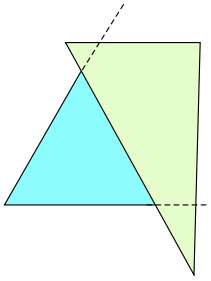
Here's how to duplicate an angle in order to avoid bias on the edges.

Take the triangle and lay it on a wide strip or rectangle of fabric. Both fabrics are right side up. Place the base triangle so that the tails of the new piece are at least half an inch bigger than the base. The narrower and steeper the triangle, the more extra you'll need.

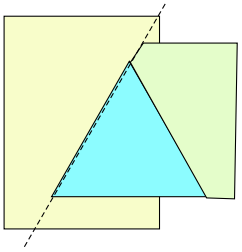
Use your ruler and rotary cutter to slice the under fabric along the edge of the base. It's okay if you cut the base somewhat, since the goal is to have the angles match and they will.



Flip the new triangle onto your base right sides together and sew. Press and trim. Notice in the illustration that I followed both lines of the base piece - if you do it that way you'll end up with a taller unit.



To add the other side, follow the same procedure.



And you'll end up with this - so helpful for letters like V and for trees and roofs.