

Left, Right, Up, Down, and Around Part 3: Some Handy Translation Techniques for Left-Handed Needleworkers

by Marjorie Mann

Use this decision-oriented process to convert right-handed instructions into left-handed stitching.

Left-handed instructors are hard to find . . .

If asked, many needleworkers say that they began their creative journey by learning to sew from their mother, cross stitch from their aunts, quilt from their grandmother, or knit and crochet from a neighbor. My own craft journey was somewhat different. When I was in the second grade, I wandered through the stores on Main Street, back when a Main Street truly was a main street, full of mom 'n' pop stores. Somewhere, in one of those small shops, I came across a stamped embroidery kit, and I instantly fell in love with it. I bought it on the spot and took it home. The battle had commenced.

I was born a very strong left-hander. My entirely right-handed family could never help me to acquire the technical skills for any craft, and there was no helpful left-handed neighbor lady or Girl

Scout leader to show me the way. It was me, the printed directions in the kit, my brain to figure it out, and my wobbly but willing left hand. Forty-five years on, the story remains the same. I continue to be a largely self-taught needleworker because most instructors are right-handed and do not know how to instruct a left-handed student. However, in the intervening years I have figured out a series of translation techniques that enable me to take a set of directions written for right-handed needleworkers and work the project left-handedly.

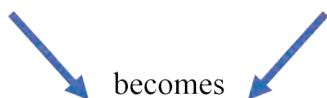
Left-handed instructors are hard to find, so left-handed needleworkers are frequently on their own when presented with a set of oral or written instructions geared towards right-handers. Rather than repeat the specific translation tips covered in the second article of this

series (see the March 2020 *Needle Arts*), this article presents a holistic, decision-oriented process to a needlework project that applies these techniques and creates a left-handed version of the instructions. Please note this is just one *possible* translation process for a project. Other approaches to organizing a left-handed version of a project can be created and are encouraged.

This article also includes a short list of cognitive needleworker superpowers that are more abstract. While this article is targeted specifically to the needlearts and to left-handed needleworkers, these cognitive techniques may also apply to the other fiber arts. Right-handed needleworkers may also find these techniques useful when attempting to resolve a stubborn problem on one of their projects.

THE RIGHT-TO-LEFT TRANSLATION PROCESS FOR NEEDLEWORK PROJECTS

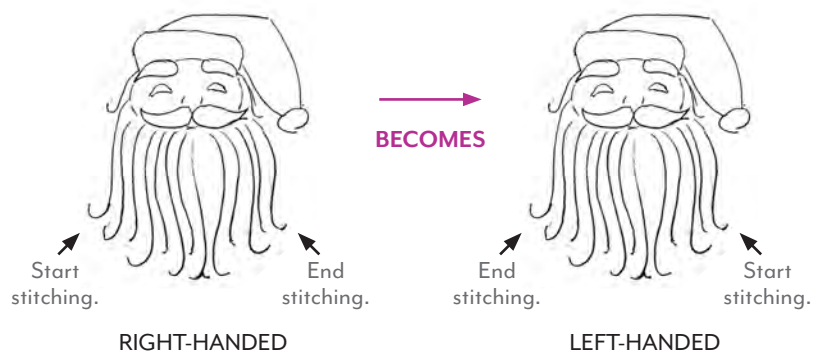
1 Study the entire project. With what is variously called a pattern, diagram, stitch chart, or graph (hereafter referred to as a diagram for simplicity), identify the start and end points for the entire project. These may need to be changed. As a specific example of this general principle, if the stitching starts in the northwestern quadrant and ends in the southeastern quadrant, you may wish to start in the northeastern quadrant and end in the southwestern quadrant.



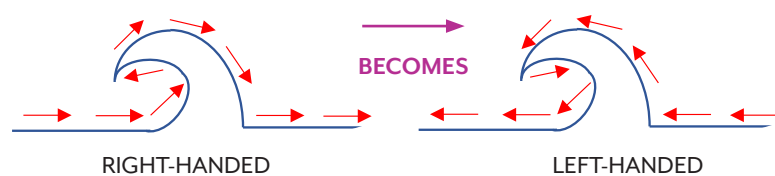
2 Identify the major areas (e.g., a feature, such as a beard, or a group of stitches) or the curvilinear lines within the project. Decide if you wish to change the stitching start and end points. For example, if the pattern instructs you to stitch Santa's beard from left to right, change the instruction so that you stitch his beard from right to left. In the example of a curvilinear line, change it to place your first stitch at the far right and the last stitch at the far left.

3 If the pattern contains an illustration of a complex stitch composed of multiple, individual stitches (e.g., a leaf stitch), reverse the steps to stitch it. For example, if the leaf stitch illustration shows the stitch worked in a left-to-right direction, reverse it so that your stitch is in a right-to-left motion.

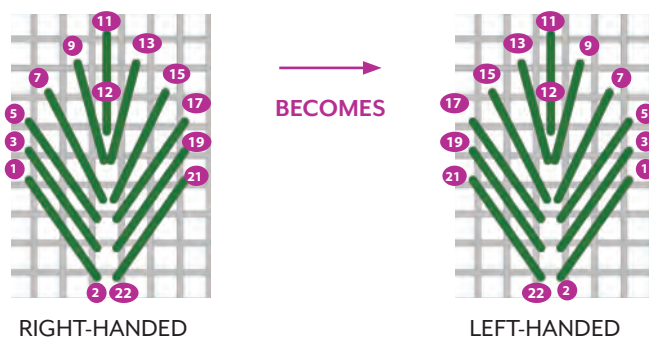
DIRECTION OF INDIVIDUAL STITCHES FOR A GROUP OF STITCHES



LINE DIRECTION FOR CURVES

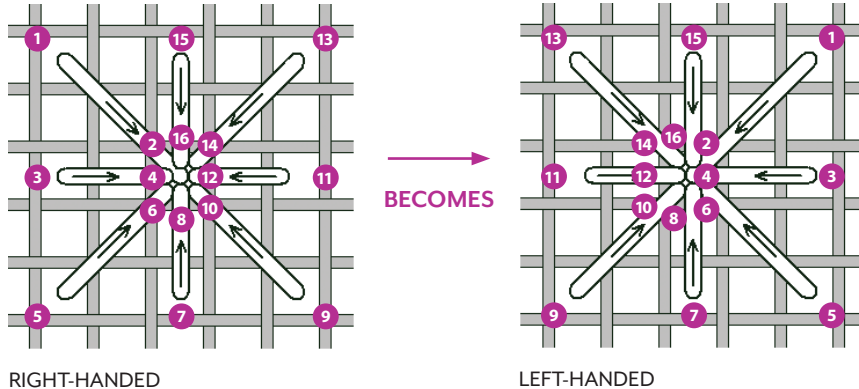


DIRECTION OF INDIVIDUAL STITCHES IN THE LEAF STITCH





Octagonal Jessica



Important Note: If the complex stitch requires individual stitches to cross over or under one another, such as the octagonal Jessica pictured above, reversing the steps may cause the finished stitch to appear subtly different when examined. If you wish it to appear *exactly* like the diagram, do *not* reverse the steps; *do* work the individual stitches in the exact order the diagram illustrates.

Reversing steps is a variant form of mirroring. At the very highest level, both are done mentally, with no pen, paper, mirror, or computer involved. Many left-handers just do it, often without realizing it. It happens automatically because they developed this cognitive skill early in life and make use of it on a daily basis.

4 Identify the line direction(s) of the diagram or project. In addition to the common *left vs. right* are the pairs *up vs. down* and various diagonal pairings. Evaluate these line directions and determine whether you wish to modify them to go in their opposite line direction(s).

LINE DIRECTION PREFERENCES

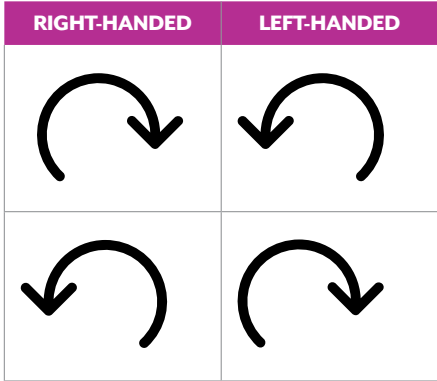


Red arrow: Direction often preferred by right-handers. Green arrow: Direction often preferred by left-handers.

5 Whenever you see a preposition that is of a directional nature, substitute with its directional opposite (e.g., change *left* to *right*, *away* to *toward*, etc.).

DIRECTIONAL PREPOSITIONS PAIRED OPPOSITES	
toward	away
to	from
come	go
in/into	out
up	down
back	front

6 Whenever you see the word *clockwise*, substitute the word *counterclockwise*, or vice versa.



7 If there is a circular direction in a series of stitches that proceed in a counterclockwise circle to form a larger stitch, evaluate this circular direction, and determine if you wish to modify it so the strokes go in the opposite circular direction.

8 One crucial recommendation: Before you begin to evaluate the project's diagrams and textual instructions, *make a photocopy of the original diagrams*. Most professionally-published needlework projects give printed permission to make one personal copy, but do check. Left-handed needleworkers certainly need to make full use of this permission when granted by the copyright holder. As you study the diagrams and make decisions, mark up the photocopy to reflect those decisions.

The photocopy may serve other uses that are not related to handedness. If you have visual difficulties, photocopying the diagram to a larger size alleviates any eyestrain. If the diagram comes in multiple, separate segments, making a photocopy then taping together the segments creates a single unified pattern.

I also find it extremely useful to highlight the lines in graphs, marking off the 10 x 10 group of stitches in an alternate color such as red. I label the rows and columns so that each 10 x 10 group of stitches has a unique geographic reference (for example, 1A, 1B, 2A, 2B).

It may also be useful to have a blank paper tablet or notebook to write notes as the project proceeds, concerning issues such as the experiments that failed or any successful changes made on the fly.

COGNITIVE SUPERPOWERS

In addition to specific directional modifications, there are a few of what might be called cognitive superpowers to employ. They aren't really superpowers, of course, but they are very useful cognitive tools you might choose to employ on your needlework projects.

THE POWER OF CHOICE

When I took a serious look at Yvette Stanton's book *the right-handed embroiderer's companion*, I had a revelation. I had been doing many stitches right-handedly all along. Not all stitches, just many. On the flip side, my mother pointed out that she had observed me forming letters differently. The end result was the same, a perfectly-formed *A* or an *O*. No one looking at the letters would know they had been constructed differently.

As a left-hander, you are often faced with a conscious choice: learn to do it right-handed or figure out how to do it left-handed. Only you can decide, and the decision is often ad hoc. What counts is the outcome you want to effect, degree of challenge you wish to undertake, or level of result you find acceptable.

That said, you also need to be aware that some instructors may insist on doing the step-by-step strokes to form the stitch or pattern in a specific way. My elementary school writing teachers certainly were of this type, insisting I form my *F*'s stroke-for-stroke as they demonstrated, or my *O*'s counterclockwise. It took me years and the assistance of an open-minded handwriting tutor to summon up the courage to say, "I'll form the letters my way." So, there may need to be a certain amount of give-and-take between you and your needlework instructor before you both arrive at the desired outcome of neatly-formed stitches.

THE POWER OF EXPERIMENTATION

Without doubt, experimentation on a doodlecloth is a very powerful tool in every needleworker's toolbox, and for every project. But it is especially important for left-handed stitchers because they may need to try out differently-done strokes (for example, *left* instead of *right*, *up* instead of *down*, *clockwise* instead of *counterclockwise*) to arrive at the desired end result.

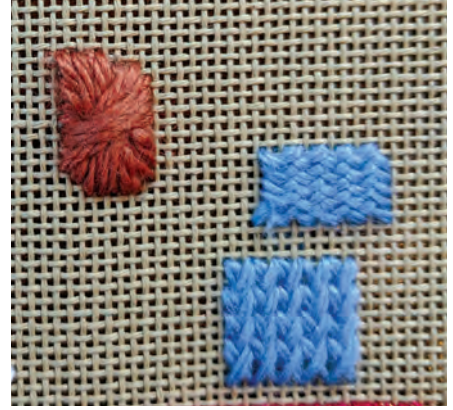
Try the stitch or group of stitches on the doodlecloth according to the oral or written instructions or illustration. See whether it works for you. Sometimes it works fine, depending upon your degree of laterality, or its handedness neutrality. But if it does not work for you, at *any* level of discomfort or for any reason, quickly and decisively move on to trying out a left-handed way that does work for you.

Once you find a way that works, then and only then should you proceed to stitch on your project's canvas or ground, confident that you will form neat and consistent stitches.

Even if you can successfully work the stitch or group of stitches right-handedly, you may wish to deprogram yourself and lean into your natural left-handedness. That is, do it left-handedly. If you are right-handed, you may wish to challenge yourself by stitching it with the needle in your right hand but as a left-hander (*clockwise* instead of *counterclockwise*, *right* instead of *left*), thus increasing your neural plasticity.

When conducting experiments on the doodlecloth, remember that any new skill or stitch technique is awkward at first but gets easier with repetition and experience. Make full use of the doodlecloth, and keep it close at hand so you can refer to it as the project proceeds.

THE POWER OF SPATIAL RELATIONSHIPS



The author's doodlecloth for a project. Note that the brown circular stitch was formed clockwise.

Left-handers develop strong spatial skills out of simple necessity to navigate everyday life. In the needlework world, we often invoke this skill to figure out how to form a certain stitch or how to approach a group of stitches.

The most obvious example, one mentioned multiple times in the informal poll of needlework instructors, is the stem and outline stitches. When viewing them as two-dimensional objects, you realize that they are mirror opposites. But by envisioning them in three dimensions, something almost magical happens.

On the front of the work, stem and outline stitches are mirror image stitches. The back of the work, however, reveals that both stem and outline are a form of backstitch. Put another way, the backstitch on the front appears to be a stem or outline stitch or a mixture of the two on the back. The backstitch, stem, and outline stitches form a single complex three-dimensional object. The photos on page 40 show that it is difficult to discern which is the front or back of the stitching.

At the most advanced level of spatial relationship (way out there by Pluto, some might say) is the clockwise/counterclockwise distinction. Once we cease to view circular motion in two dimensions and view it in three dimensions, the distinction disappears. We discover *they are the same motion*.

Don't believe me? Then, do this. Have one person stand facing you and a second person stand behind you and

facing the first person. Do a clockwise circular motion. The person standing in front of you perceives it as a counterclockwise motion, and the person standing behind you perceives it as a clockwise motion. Same motion, different perspective, hence different perceptions.

The resulting how-to advice is simple: if some aspect of a needlework stitch is giving you fits, envision it in both two dimensions/mirror and three dimensions to see if a solution appears to working the stitch. This also applies to a group of stitches or any other aspect of the needlework project. And it is always a good idea to consult one or more stitch dictionaries while you are at it.

THE POWER OF INQUIRY

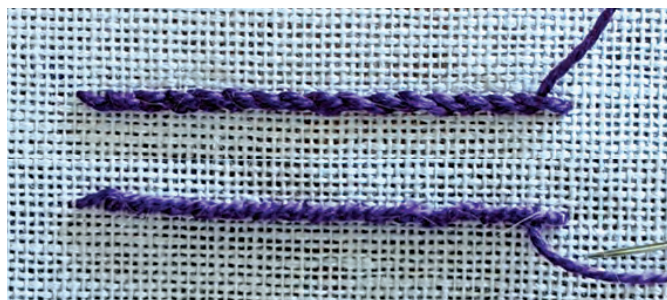
The last superpower is, in some ways, the most powerful one. Dare to ask **MUST** a stitch or a technique be done a certain way? Explore fearlessly the idea of working it differently.

My favorite personal example of the power of inquiry is from the third edition of *The Needlepoint Book* by Jo Ippolito Christensen. When describing the plaited stitch, more commonly called the herringbone stitch), she gave the following instructions:

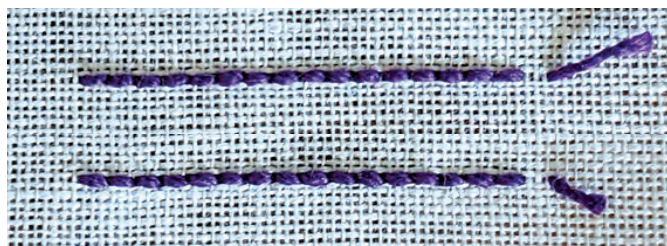
Work Herringbone from left to right only. Cut the thread at the end of the[sic] every row and begin the next row directly beneath the first stitch of the previous row.

I remember clearly my reaction to that implied direction *not* to work the even-numbered rows right-to-left (or, in boustrophedon: working odd-numbered rows left to right and even rows right to left). What the author was really saying is that the stitch *cannot* be worked right-to-left. My reaction was, “Oh, yeah? Watch me.” Within a minute of diligent thinking, I had figured it out and was happy and off stitching. Imagine my chagrin, however, when I discovered sometime later that the right-to-left version of the herringbone I thought I had invented was, in fact, another well-known stitch called the reverse herringbone stitch. But my essential point still stands: Oftentimes needleworkers have limited printed resources available to them and need to diligently figure out how to deal with the situation at hand. So, a pinch of the power of inquiry (and a dash of the power of experimentation) is a very useful tool to find the way forward.

To round out our discussion of the needleworker’s superpowers, here’s another personal story. A few years ago, I was making a Christmas stocking for my nephew. It had a character wearing a beret, and every genuine beret must have a button on its crown. I thought it would be a neat idea to use a real button as an embellishment. When I went through my mother’s button stash, only one matched the size, style, and color I needed. The button, alas, had a tall shank.



Front of work with stem stitch at top and outline at bottom



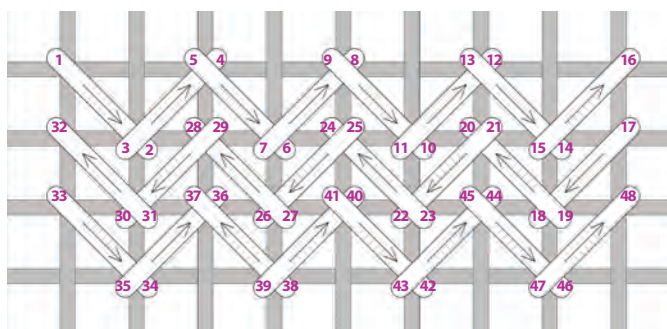
Back of work with back of stem at top and outline at bottom, forming backstitches

Consequently, when I attached it to the canvas, it flopped all over. Hmmm . . . what to do?

After a few seconds’ thought, I cut the canvas thread to pull the shank to the underside. I heard the needlepoint police rise up and shriek at full bullhorn volume. Cut a canvas thread? Anathema!!! But a few seconds later a surprisingly loud voice inside me rose up in equal counterpoint. “It’s **my** project, so I can do whatever I want. The needlepoint police can jolly well butt out.” I suspect it was easier and faster for me to make that decision because I am left-handed. We left-handers learn early that if we cannot conform to the world, we will make the world conform to us.

And that’s the point. Remember, it is your project, and you can do it any way you wish. It needs to satisfy only you.

MARJORIE MANN is a left-handed crafter with more than five decades life experience and four decades crafting experience.



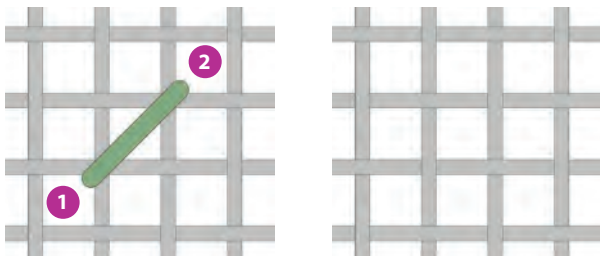
Herringbone and reverse herringbone used in combination. The herringbone, worked from left to right, is stitched on odd-numbered rows. Reverse herringbone is worked on even-numbered rows, from right to left.

EXERCISES

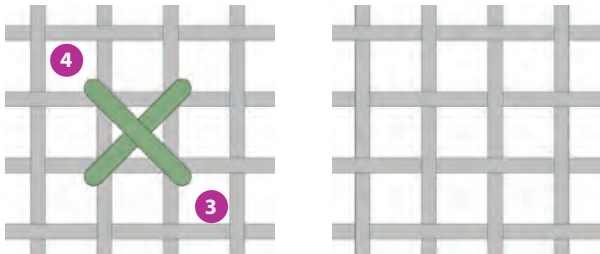
- 1 Translate the following Hardanger instructions for right-handed stitchers into instructions for left-handed stitchers.

Begin by stitching the kloster. Thread up with a length of white #5 pearl cotton. Using an away waste knot, bring the needle out fourteen threads down from the center of the Hardanger fabric. Take the needle down four threads above, and with a sewing motion, bring the needle out one thread to the left of the original insertion point. Continue stitching four more satin stitches in the row. To complete the fifth stitch of the kloster, bring the needle out four threads down and four threads to the left.

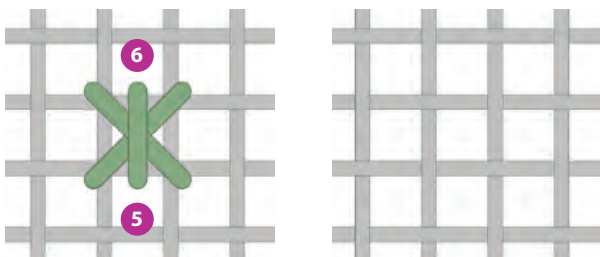
- 2 Below is a diagram of a Symrna cross stitch, a stitch created by multiple single stitches. The diagram lists the order of steps for those who are right-handed. Create a left-handed version of the diagram by reversing the order of the steps.



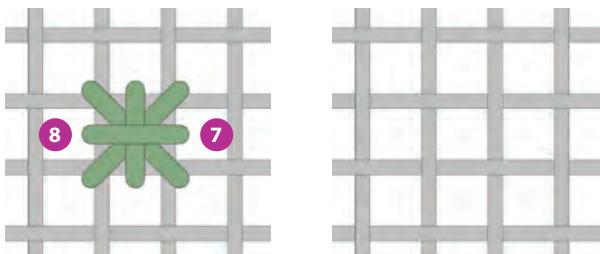
Step 1



Step 2

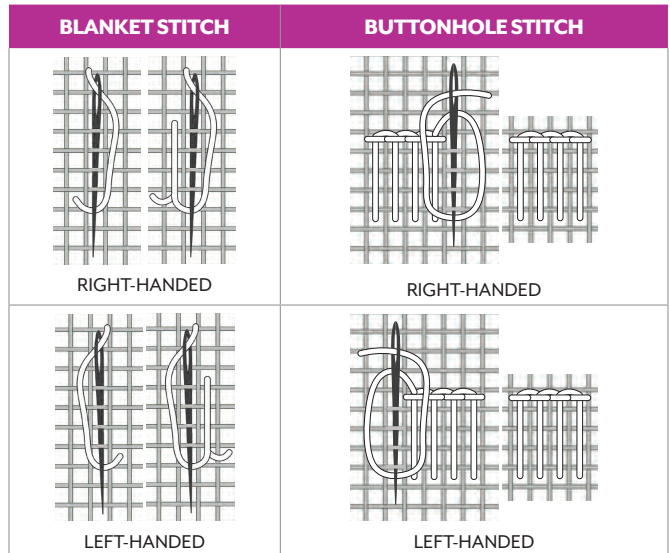


Step 3

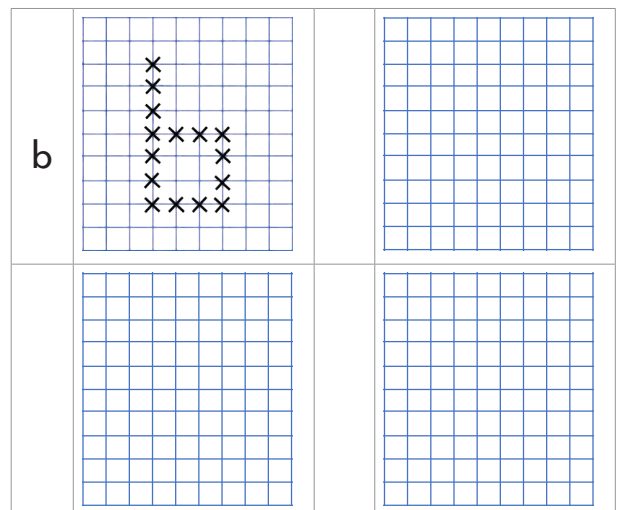


Step 4

- 3 The solution for this 3-D manipulation exercise does not involve the left-hander/right-hander distinction, although the 2-D manipulation for each stitch does. The illustrations below are for the buttonhole stitch and the blanket stitch, two stitches that are frequently confused. Analyze the illustrations and identify the feature that distinguishes the one from the other. If analyzing the illustration on the page does not give you the answer, try doing both stitches on a doodlecloth or other small project, such as the edge of a scissors fob.



- 4 Look at the lowercase letter in the table below and its rendering in a cross-stitch diagram. Mentally view it as a 3-D object. Alternatively, take some modeling clay, putty, or something similar. Create the *b* with the clay. When it has dried, hold the *b* in both hands and turn it in multiple directions. What additional three lowercase letters of the alphabet appear? Fill in the remaining empty charts with the three letters. Then take the cross-stitch version of the *b*, and create the cross-stitch version of the three letters. This exercise works well when instructions are incomplete, such as the charting of only a few letters in the alphabet where more are needed.



BIBLIOGRAPHY

Many of following citations are for books in English published on the topic of how left-handers can cope in a right-handed world. The remaining citations are for books that were specifically cited in the preceding article.

When figuring out how to do a stitch left-handedly, the most powerful visual tool is YouTube videos. Go to [youtube.com](https://www.youtube.com), and conduct a search on “embroidery for left handers.” Browse the extensive resulting set, and select the video you wish to view. It is both enlightening and addictive.

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