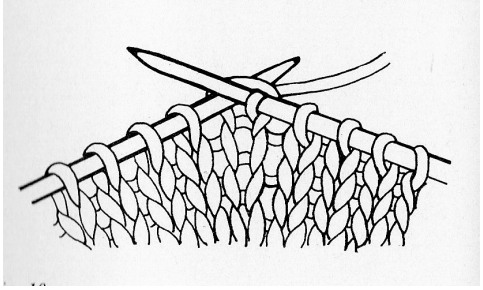
## Words for recording knitting and knitted fabrics. An introduction to important distinctions and concepts. Ruth Gilbert, March 2018.

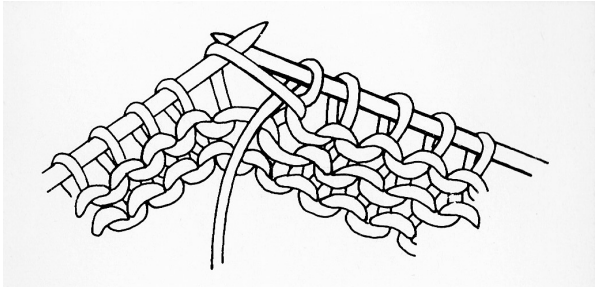
At the Knitting History Forum meeting in November some unfamiliar terms were introduced in the description of knitted fabrics and artefacts. Yes, these may be unfamiliar terms (although many are already used in industry and by machine knitters) but terms only become familiar through use. We are not suggesting that everyone abandon the words they are used to, only that when you need to be precise, it helps to have a precise terminology. The basic principle is: one concept, one term. An important issue is to distinguish between processes and their results. The following may seem laboured, but if the aim is precision then clarity is essential.

**To knit, a verb,** is the process of making **knit stitches** and **purl stitches** to produce many and various knitted fabrics. Of course there are other things that can be done to make elaborate and complex structures, but we are still working at an elementary level on the terminology. How to describe lace and cable structures or industrial 'half-cardigan' will have to wait. The things made by knitting need nouns and adjectives to describe them, as **a knitted garment** or a k**nitted fabric,** which are not 'knitting', nor is the fabric a 'stitch', because the stitch is part of the process, not the product.

It is impossible to describe a fabric in the abstract in terms of knit and purl stitches, because which produced the result depends on which surface the stitch was worked from. Therefore the fabric must be described in some other way, and the industry standard is face and reverse loops. A **knit stitch** worked on the surface presumed to be the 'right side' or 'technical face', **recto,** of the fabric and a **purl stitch** worked on the other surface, **verso,** produce the same result. The worked loop of the previous course lies in the fabric as a **face loop**, which appears as a 'v' shape on the recto, with the bar or head of the loop, a **reverse loop,** on the verso.

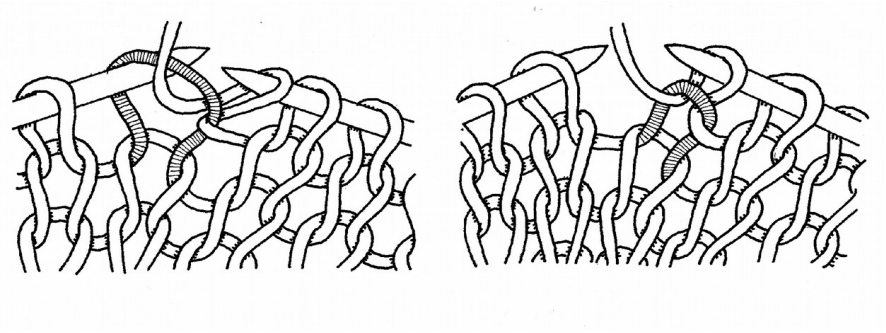


Knit stitch making face loop



Purl stitch making reverse loop

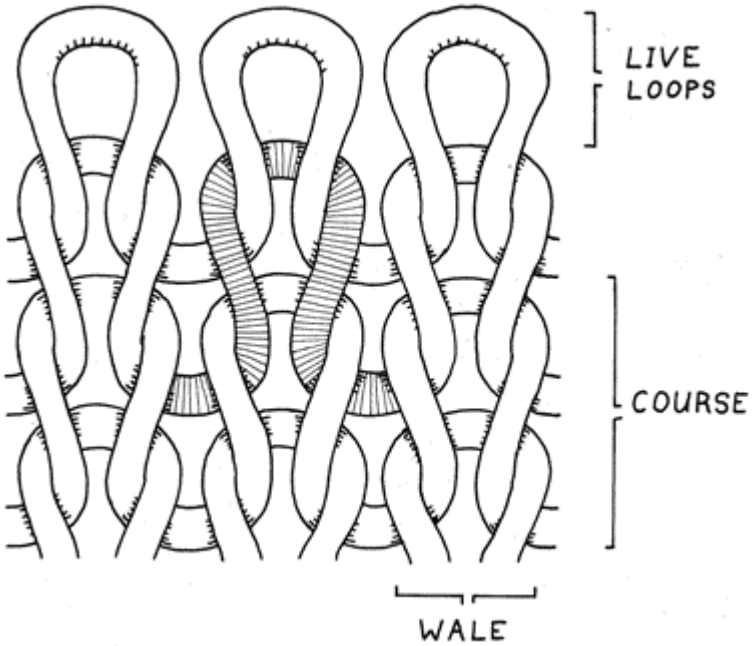
This simple fact is essential to understanding the technical possibilities of knitting, and it shows the necessity for descriptions of knitted fabric that avoid assumptions about production methods.



A purl stitch worked from the recto of the fabric makes a reverse loop on the recto and a face loop on the verso. A knit stitch worked from the verso produces the same result.

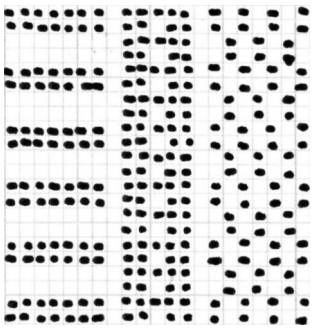
Where patterns are made with face and reverse loops they will always be readable from either surface. This sounds complicated but is not, and it separates the stitch-making action from the structure that results. Thus 'stitch' means only the action of making a new loop, and nothing else.

A knitted fabric is composed of **loops**, the result of the action of making a stitch**.** These usually occur in a grid formation. Whether the loops are made by working **back and forth** or **round** is irrelevant to the structure of the fabric, although it is essential when giving instructions for making an item. When describing archaeological fragments, the method of production may not be clear, so a non-specific term is needed. The course of the element through the structure, whether in rows or as a continuous spiral worked round, can be seen to form regular **courses**. The loops can also be seen to be in vertical columns, **wales.** These things have to be called something, and these are the usual industry terms.

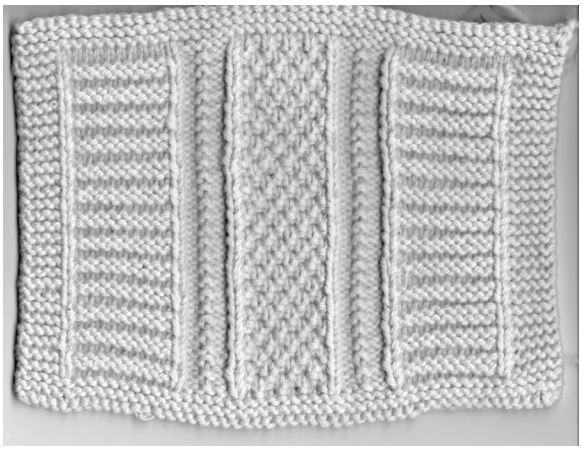


The commonest knitted structure is encircled loop, often called 'stocking stitch', shown in the diagrams here. The fabric has two different surfaces, one composed entirely of face loops and the other, consequently, entirely of reverse loops. After much discussion this structure will be referred to as **simple knit**. Two other common fabrics are both reversible, that is, the recto and the verso have the same configuration of face and reverse loops. The fabric structure consisting of alternate courses of face and reverse loops is commonly called 'garter stitch', technically **single ridge**, the ridge caused by a lateral change from face to reverse loops. Now you can relax, because you will recognise the next example: a fabric that consists of alternate wales of face and reverse loops, called **single rib**, a rib being a vertical change from face to reverse loops.

The easiest way to describe a structure composed of face and reverse loops is as a chart. There are a number of variants, but as a rule a face loop is represented by a blank square and a reverse loop by a dash, dot or coloured square. The grid can be square, although if it is proportioned like the original fabric that is better.



The elaborate rib-and- ridge structure of a pair of silk stockings from the tomb of Eleanora of Toledo would be difficult to describe adequately but the chart is simple and clear. Only one surface of the fabric needs to be shown (because the other surface will have the opposite configuration of face and reverse loops) and in this case, only the dividing vertical rib between the repeated textured panels will be different on the verso. Charts, diagrams and illustrations of knitted fabrics should be 'technically upright', with the working direction from bottom to top if known or deducible.



A chart can, of course, be used as instructions for reproducing the fabric. The fabric properties can be seen in the worked sample, right, showing the elasticity in both directions. This sample was made in dishcloth cotton because it is stable and scans well. It is better to scan fabrics directly than to photograph them and I was advised to try all four possible orientations, as the contrast may be better in one than another.

It is possible to chart more complex structures, although structure diagrams or good photographs may be clearer, particularly for non-knitters.