

# I Spy Quilts

## Word-Association Borders Help Children Learn

by Sharon Fry

The gift of an I Spy quilt to a little one is many layered. Children love cuddling in a quilt. They enjoy the “I Spy” game of looking for various objects found in their quilt, an activity that can keep them content for hours.

Bright, happy colors grab a child’s attention. Including words relating to objects in the quilt on an inner border makes for a terrific word-association learning experience, too.

I’ve made a lot of I Spy quilts over the years and find they are a lot of fun to make. You may be amazed at how many fabrics you already have in your stash that can be incorporated into a quilt. Add to I Spy fabric options by being on the lookout for fun fabric motifs, or consider a fabric exchange with quilting friends. Let your imagination run wild and have lots of fun making these quilts.

I’ve had some unusual fabric requests. One woman asked me to include the logo of a particular sports team, another wanted monsters for her grandchild, yet another wanted violins and music-related items. A friend asked if I would transfer pictures of her family onto fabric, incorporate them into the quilt, and print the names of the people in the border. I’ve made quilts for girls and boys, but also keep quilts without a gender orientation on hand for instant gifts.

When making I Spy quilts, the size to make the triangles or squares is up to you. I like cutting 6" squares for a child’s quilt, and 4" squares for a baby-sized quilt. The technique of cutting and sewing squares and triangles for the quilt is basic. Save all of the little scraps to make an outside border.

Once the inner portion of your quilt is made, making the hand-printed inner border isn’t as scary as it looks, and it really adds a lot to an I Spy quilt. To help you make your own border, I’ll share some secrets I’ve learned along the way.

First, I always print the words on the borders before attaching them to the quilt because doing so helps reduce the possibility of mistakes.

I’ve found that good quality, white, 100 percent cotton fabric works best for these borders. As pretty as they are, I don’t recommend using white-on-whites or textured fabrics because colored pens often don’t “take” well against them and the results look blotchy. I’m also a believer in pre-washing all my quilting cottons in hot water and drying them in a hot dryer. Doing so eliminates future bleeding or shrinking in kids’ quilts that will definitely have to be washed.

To begin, cut the inner border strips. Of course you can make your border any width you want, but for an average 42" x 52" quilt I usually cut mine 3" wide, including seam allowances.

Freezer paper is an absolute must for my I Spy borders – a quick trip to the grocery store will yield what you need.



*I Spy quilt, 26 1/2" x 56 1/2", designed and made by Sharon Fry*  
IN THE COLLECTION OF OLYVIA PÉREZ HOOVER

It keeps the fabric from slipping, which makes writing on it really easy. I cut one piece of freezer paper the length of the quilt's side borders, and another equal to the length of the top and bottom borders; then from each piece cut two strips the width of the border strips.

Freezer paper has a dull side and a shiny, waxy side. To prepare for a double row of words on the border, use a rotary ruler and pencil to draw parallel lines on the dull side  $\frac{5}{8}$ ",  $1\frac{1}{4}$ ",  $1\frac{3}{4}$ ", and  $2\frac{5}{8}$ " from one edge along the length of each freezer paper strip. Once you're satisfied with the placement of the lines, mark over the pencil lines with a black permanent pen (my favorite is a Sharpie® Ultra Fine Point). Iron the shiny side of the freezer paper onto the wrong side of your fabric strips. So you can use the lines as printing guides, you'll need to work with light shining through the fabric and freezer paper. Use a light box, improvise by placing a light below a glass surface, or tape the strips to a window.

With your border pieces prepared, look over the quilt, searching for objects that can be identified by a single word or simple phrase. Write those words on a piece of paper (for example: *eye, dog, boy, ice skate, shoe, red, ball, ear, horse*), and place the list next to your light source. Have a dictionary at hand to verify the spelling of words like hippopotamus or octopus – after all, you would not want a child to grow up spelling words incorrectly just because you did! One customer requested I throw in some French words so her nephew could learn another language at an early age. Try not to repeat words on the border, but it isn't a big deal if there are repeats.

My favorite colored fabric pens are non-toxic Y & C FabricMates® that I purchased for \$1.89 each at a Ben Franklin store. If you choose another brand, prior to writing on the inner border be sure to test the pens on a piece of your fabric by washing it to make sure the colors do not bleed or disappear.

To prevent pens from drying out, I'm careful to keep the tops on them when they're not in use. The pens I use allow me to make several quilt borders before the ink runs out.

The printing can be all one color or the colors of the words could be coordinated with a nursery decor, but my preference is to use a rainbow assortment of pens. After using a pen for one word or phrase, I put that pen at the bottom of the pile and then use another color so no two colors are next to each other and I get a balanced variety.

To print on the border, position a border strip over a light source so the lines on the freezer paper show through. Begin printing words from your list, using the lines as guides. Since these quilts are for young children, print block letters rather than writing cursive letters. When printing words on your border, be sure to leave at least a quarter inch on each end for seam allowances. As you approach the end of the fabric strip, be careful



**Detail, I Spy border, uses both Spanish and English words for a child in a bilingual family.**

to find a word or words to exactly fit into the remaining space.

A friend of mine made a mistake while printing her border, so she simply drew a little design around the problem. Add a few more drawn flowers or smiley faces – whatever you are talented enough to draw – and it looks like it is supposed to be there. In other words, don't worry about making a mistake – make lemonade!

Remove the freezer paper and carefully roll the marked freezer paper into a little tube and store it for your next I Spy quilt. I use freezer paper at least five times before it loses its stickiness.

Although I have never had any ink bleeding when using my pens, I recommend pressing the border fabric to heat-set the ink.

In the event that the quilt will be hung on a wall, I position the sides and top border with the bottom of the words next to the interior of the quilt. The bottom border is placed with the top of the words next to the interior of the quilt so all of the words are easy to read.

Now attach the borders to your quilt, pressing the seams away from the white borders; finish as you wish and be prepared for lots of "oohs" and "ahs" from all ages. ■



**girl / la niña**



**red / rojo**



**sun / el sol**



**dog / el perro**



**boy / el niño**



*Sharon Fry lives in Sonoma, CA, with her husband, Harry, Rosie (an African grey parrot), and two cats (her care also extends to deer, foxes, raccoons, and even skunks). For the past 14 years Sharon has served as librarian of the Santa Rosa (CA) Quilt Guild; she plays in her studio every chance she gets.*