

Sewing Basics

Resource Guide

YOUR SEWING MACHINE 🧵 SEWING TOOLS & NOTIONS 🧵 TIPS & TECHNIQUES



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guide to sewing
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Table of Contents

Your Sewing Machine

The Basic Parts of a Sewing Machine	3
Sewing A Seam	5
Basic Machine Stitches.....	7
Selecting Machine Stitch Length.....	8
Sewing Machine Tension Control.....	9

Sewing Tools & Notions

Top Five Cutting Tools for Sewing	12
Deciphering Measuring Tape Marks	14
Sewing Machine Needles	15
Hand Sewing Needles	17
Selecting the Right Thread	18
Bias Tape Cheat Sheet	20

Tips & Techniques

Selecting Fabric	22
Know How Much Fabric to Buy	23
How to Rip Out a Seam	24
Securing Machine-Sewn Seams.....	25
How to Make a Simple Hem	27
How to Sew on a Button	29

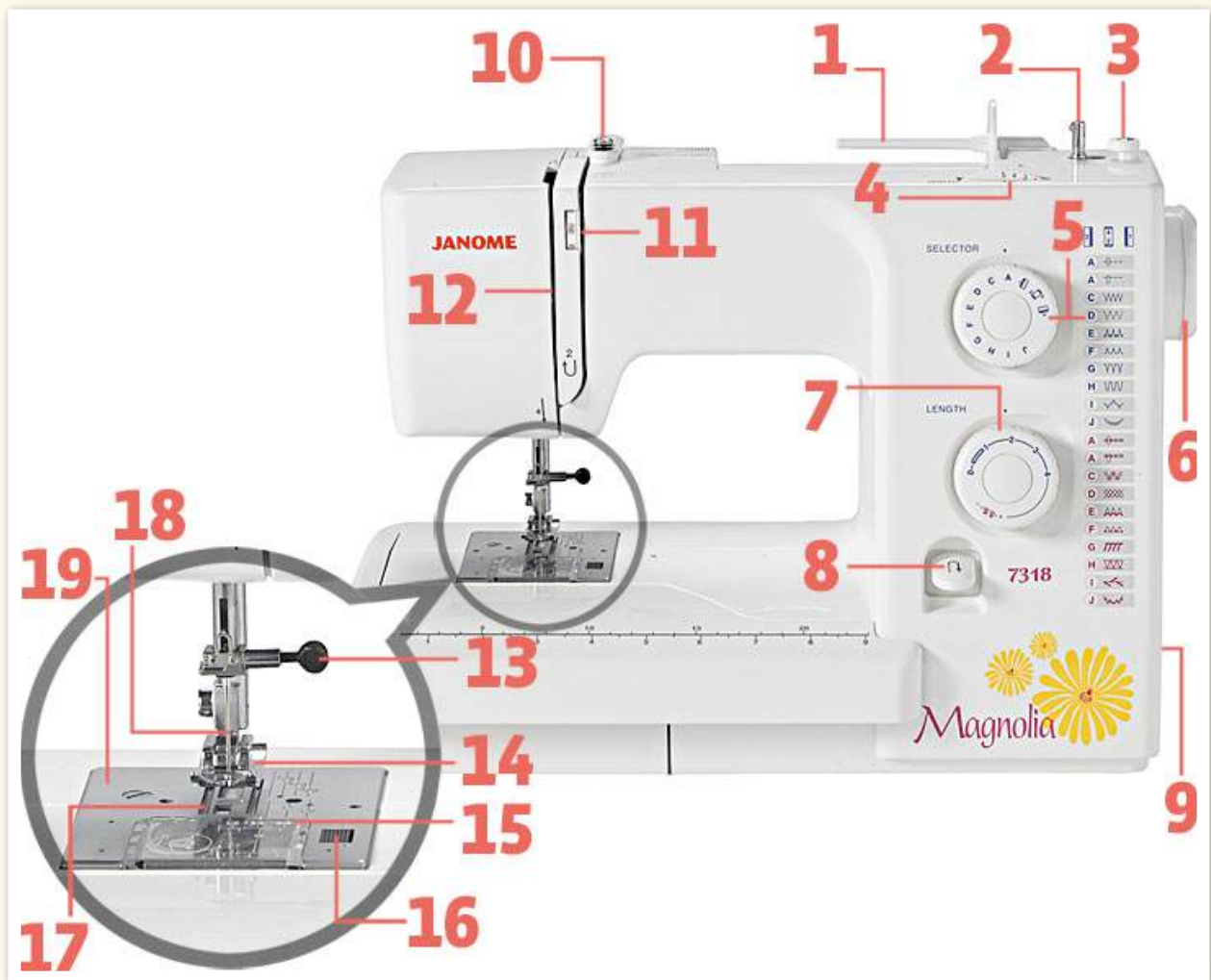
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The Basic Parts of a Sewing Machine

Don't let all the wizbangery of modern sewing machines scare you off. Basic sewing is simple. You'll be surprised at what you can accomplish with just an afternoon of practice. Today's sewing machines maximize your sewing experience with their ease of operation, and professional results. The parts of a sewing machine are easy to identify.

Models and makes of sewing machines differ in layout and features, but the basic parts are similar. Your machine's manual should show a detailed diagram of your specific model. If you don't have a manual, check the manufacturer's website. Often, manuals can be found online and downloaded. Consult your machine's manual for specific instructions on use and care.



1. **Spool pin:** Holds a spool of thread.
2. **Bobbin winder spindle:** Bobbin is placed here during winding.
3. **Bobbin winder stopper:** Stops winding the bobbin when it reaches capacity.
4. **Stitch width dial:** Controls the width your stitch. It is used to create a zigzag stitch.
5. **Pattern selector dial:** Turn the pattern selector dial to set the symbol of the desired stitch pattern. On computerized machines, stitches are usually selected on a menu screen.
6. **Handwheel:** The large knob on the right side of your machine. Manually raises and lowers the needle.
7. **Stitch length dial:** Controls the length of the stitch. Shorter stitches for finer fabrics, longer for heavier fabrics, basting and gathering.
8. **Reverse stitch lever:** The machine will sew in reverse while the lever is pushed. Depending on your machine model, this may be a button.
9. **Power switch:** The off-on switch is usually located on the right side of the machine, beneath the handwheel.
10. **Bobbin winder thread guide:** A thread guide used when a bobbin is being wound.
11. **Thread tension dial:** Controls the tension on the top thread. If too tight, the bobbin thread appears on the right side of the fabric. If set too loose, the needle thread loops on the underside of the fabric.
12. **Thread take-up lever:** The top thread passes through the thread take-up lever. It moves up and down with the needle.
13. **Needle clamp screw:** This clamp holds the needle in place.
14. **Presser foot:** When lowered using a lever on the back side of the machine, this foot holds fabric in place.
15. **Bobbin cover:** Covers and protects the bobbin holder while sewing.
16. **Bobbin cover release button:** Releases the cover for access to the bobbin.
17. **Feed dog:** The feed dog pulls fabric forward while sewing.
18. **Needle:** A needle pushes the thread through the fabric to form a stitch.
19. **Needle plate:** A metal plate beneath the needle and presser foot. It has an opening for the needle to pass through as it stitches, and another for the feed dogs to emerge and help move the fabric forward during sewing. Also called a throat plate.

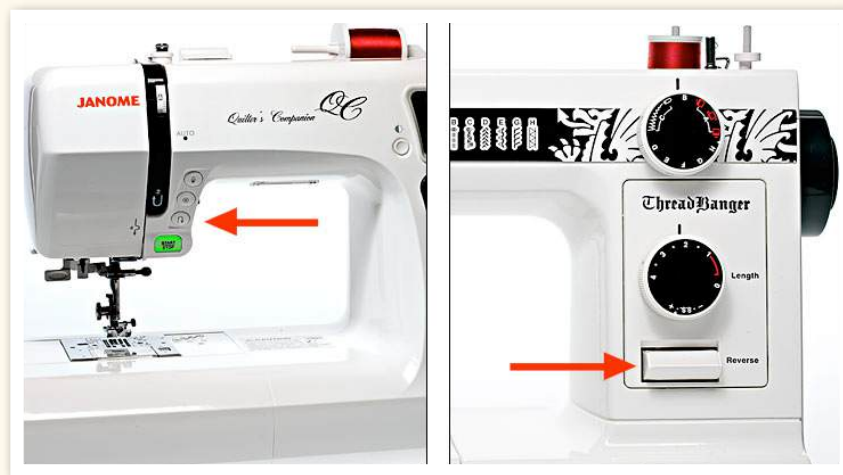
Sewing a Basic Seam

Fortunately, most sewing is based on one simple task: joining two pieces of fabric with a basic seam. Once you have that down, you're ready to do anything.

Step One: Where is My Reverse Button?

Before you start, locate the reverse button. Depending on your machine, this button can take many forms. Computerized machines often have a reverse button marked with a something that looks like a U-turn arrow. Mechanical machines traditionally use a lever for reverse.

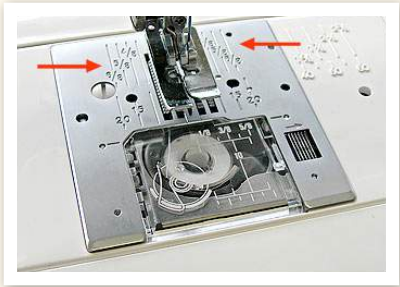
You use the reverse button to create what's called a "back tack." This technique secures the end of your seam so it doesn't unravel.



Step Two: Pinning and Seam Allowances

1. 9.9 times out of ten, you sew your fabric with the right sides together. The "right side" is the front of the fabric.
2. Line up the raw (cut) edges and pin the fabric together where the seam will be. Your pins should be at a right angle to the raw edge.
3. The seam allowance is the distance between the edge of the fabric and the seam. Your project instructions should tell you what seam allowance is recommended. The most common seam allowance is 5/8", although many home décor patterns call for 1/2" seam and many quilting projects call for a 1/4" seam. On most machines, you'll find common seam allowance markings on the throat plate. Use these as a guide to maintain the seam allowance width and keep your seam straight.

Step Three: Stitch



1. Place your fabric under the needle and lower the presser foot. On most machines, it's not a great idea to start at the very edge. There's not enough fabric for the machine to grab. To be safe, start about ½" from the top edge.
2. Turn the handwheel (that's the big knob thing on end of the machine) to lower the needle into the fabric. You don't HAVE to do this, but it's a good idea. The machine will start up more smoothly when the needle is down and it's a good way to make sure the needle is going exactly where you want it.
3. Depress the foot pedal slowly, and sew just a few stitches.
4. Now press the reverse button/lever. The fabric will begin sewing backward. Slowly stitch a few stitches backward, and then let go of the reverse button/lever.
5. Sew straight again, until the end of the seam. Remember to remove the pins as you sew. It's not good to sew over pins. Sew as slowly as you need, until you feel comfortable.

Note: You'll notice you don't have to push the fabric under the needle, but that the fabric seems to advance magically on its own. The machine contains something called "feed dogs", which are little grippers under the needle that advance the fabric, so it feeds through the machine evenly.

6. When you're almost to the end of your seam, press the reverse button/lever again.
7. Sew a few stitches backward, then let go of the button and sew straight off the fabric.
8. Stop. Raise the needle. Lift the presser foot. Gently pull out your fabric, cutting the thread free. It's a good practice to take a minute to trim the leftover thread tails at the beginning and the end of the seam. It keeps your work tidy.
9. Press your seam open so the seam allowances lie flat against the wrong side of the fabric.

Practice as much as you need until you feel comfortable.

Check your sewing machine manual or visit your dealer to find out more about special feet and tools available to help you maintain a straight seam, like seam guides and the ¼" foot.

Basic Machine Stitches

The most common basic stitches as shown on most sewing machines:



Straight Stitch

The first, most basic stitch is the straight stitch.

This stitch is used for all basic sewing. If you're creating a simple hem or sewing two pieces of fabric together, this is the stitch you want to use. You'll notice the dotted line goes right through the middle of an oval. This oval is meant to represent the opening in your needle plate where the needle goes in and out. With a regular straight stitch, the needle hits right in the center of the opening and all seam measurements are calculated from this center point.



Zig Zag Stitch

The zig zag stitch is basically a straight stitch modified to contain some width.

This is the stitch you want to use for appliqué (sewing something on top of something else) or for buttonholes. You can also use this stitch like a straight stitch when you're working with knits, to allow some stretch in the seaming. The zig zag stitch can be loose, or you can shorten the stitch length to make it tight.



Blind Hem Stitch

This stitch is used for securing hems that shouldn't be seen (hence, 'blind').

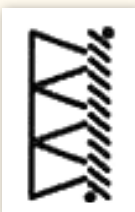
The stitches are secured in the back of the fabric, and so are not visible from the front. It does require a special foot and a special technique.



Basting Stitch

The basting stitch is just like the straight stitch, but set to an extra long length.

It's used to secure items together temporarily – so they stay in place as you plan for final sewing. The basting stitch can also be manipulated in a special way to create gathers.



Overcasting Stitch

Finally, this stitch is our defense against the raveling edge.

The overcast stitch is similar to the zig zag, but is normally used on the edge of a seam to prevent fabrics from fraying at the raw edges. It can also be used to finish a hem edge. Check the seams of some of your ready-to-wear knit clothing; you'll find an overcast edge that encapsulates the seam to prevent fraying.

Selecting Machine Stitch Length

Adjusting the stitch length isn't necessary for every project, but as you learn to work with different types of fabrics and understand the special needs of some, this guide will come in handy. A little length goes a long way.

The stitch length on your sewing machine indicates how many stitches will be made per inch. Depending on your project, you may need to adjust the stitch length. You want a longer stitch length if working with knits, to give them some stretch. A shorter stitch length will produce a tighter seam. Your sewing machine's manual is likely to have a handy stitch chart of suggested uses for the available stitches.

Our goal here is to show you how to SET the stitch length on the machine. Remember, the seam ripper takes no prisoners! The more stitches per inch, the more stitches to remove. Not that you'd ever need to rip out a seam, but say you had a friend who made a mistake ...



Stitch Length the Computerized Way

First, you'll need to figure out where the stitch length adjustment indicator is on your machine. If you have a computerized machine, odds are an LED display will show the stitch length. The Janome DC2010, shown left, is a good example.

Notice that the LED has an indicator light on the left side of the screen. When this light is next to the stitch symbol (at the bottom) you use the plus and minus buttons to increase or decrease the stitch length.



Stitch Length on a Mechanical Machine

If you have a mechanical model, your stitch length will be controlled by turning a knob, as seen on the Janome Magnolia 7318 (right).

Number 1 is the shortest stitch length, and number 4 is the highest. A basic stitch length is 2.



Sewing Machine Tension Control

I wish I had a tension dial I could ratchet back after a hard day at work. Your sewing machine won't ever be stressed out, but its tension can still get out of whack. You can take it to your dealer for adjustment or test and re-set it yourself.

Determining Proper Tension

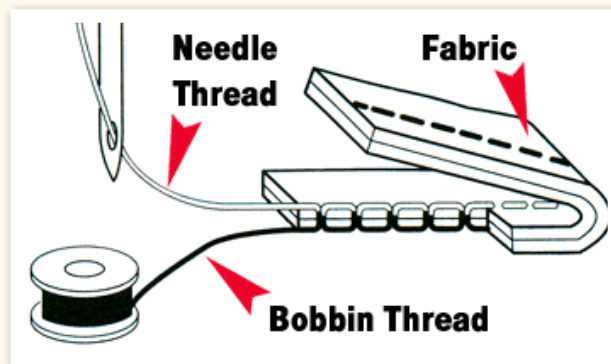
A sewing machine creates stitches by interlocking the bobbin thread with the needle thread. When the needle goes down into your fabric, a hook catches the needle thread and wraps the bobbin thread around it creating what's called a lockstitch.

When your sewing machine's tension is out of balance, the result will be weak seams that are loose or pucker, and thread that breaks. It's not pretty.

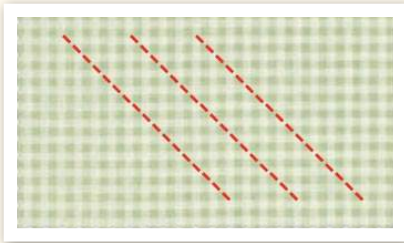
Below are the DIY steps to test and adjust your tension control. Be careful. If you don't feel comfortable making these precise adjustments, call your dealer. Bring in your machine and have your dealer walk you through it. Next time, you can do it yourself.

To examine your tension, thread your machine with one color of thread in the top, and use a contrasting thread on the bobbin. Set your stitch length to about 10 stitches per inch, which is a standard setting of about 2.5 on most machines. Using a scrap of folded fabric, sew several 4 – 5" diagonal seams. Observe the seam on both the top and bottom surface. Use a magnifying glass if necessary.

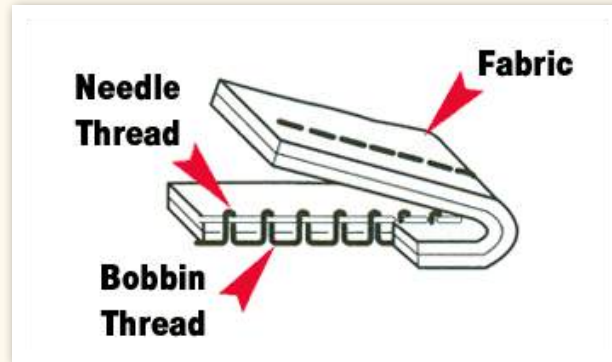
Balanced Tension



Proper tension produces evenly locked stitches with no top thread showing on the bottom of the fabric, and no bobbin thread showing on top of the fabric.

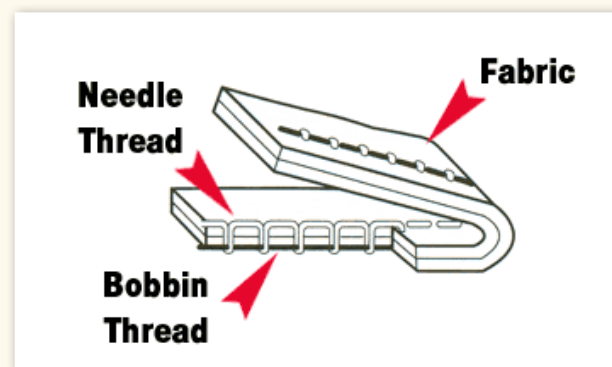


Upper Tension Too Tight



When the needle thread tension is stronger than the bobbin thread tension, the needle thread pulls the bobbin thread through the top of the fabric.

Upper Tension Too Loose



When the bobbin tension is stronger than the needle tension, it pulls the needle thread to the bottom of the fabric.

Adjusting Thread Tension

Adjusting the tension on a sewing machine is one of the more frustrating tasks for beginners. It takes a good set of eyes (or magnifying glass), and the patience to make tiny adjustments and continually recheck until your tension is balanced.

Before You Begin

What may appear to be a thread tension problem may, in fact, be something else:

- Did you thread your machine correctly?
- Is your bobbin placed correctly in the bobbin holder?
- Is your needle bent, dull or incorrectly inserted?

- Look in your bobbin case. Is your machine full of lint? If so, use your lint brush to gently clean it.

Check your instruction manual if you are unsure, and never continue to sew on a machine that is not working correctly. It can damage it.

Additional Tension Test

If, after looking at the illustrations above you are still unsure, you can test tension another way:

Take your fabric with the sample stitching, hold each end of the stitch line and pull gradually until you first feel thread break. The fabric will stretch a bit because you are pulling on the bias.

- If both threads break, the tension is in proper balance.
- If neither thread breaks, both tensions are too loose.
- If only the upper thread breaks, the upper tension is too tight.
- If only the lower thread breaks, the upper tension is too loose.

Making Adjustments: Baby Steps!

Check your manual to see where the tension adjustment dial is located. Once you've determined what your problem is, here's how to fix it. Just remember to make small adjustments, and retest until you reach balance.

- To loosen the thread tension: Turn the dial a half a number lower. Retest, by moving the tension slightly each time, until tension is balanced.
- To tighten the thread tension: Turn the dial a half number higher. Retest, by moving the tension slightly each time, until tension is balanced.

The Other Tension

There is also a lower tension adjustment located on the bobbin case. Just assume the lower tension is correct until you have made adjustments to thread tension.

Bobbin tension should be adjusted **ONLY** when you can't fix the problem by adjusting your thread tension. To adjust bobbin tension, refer to your instruction manual to locate the bobbin tension screw. The righty-tighty, lefty-loosey law applies here. Make tiny adjustments (1/8 turn at a time). Test and repeat.

Top Five Cutting Tools for Sewing

The most expensive ingredient in most home décor projects is your fabric, and you'll end up wasting it if you don't have good quality cutting tools. Don't skimp on these important members of your sewing basket. It really is worth it to buy the very best you can afford. Here are the Five Essential Cutting Tools that will help you get the best results.



Shears

Did your mom have a pair of scissors that were completely off-limits to you? Those were probably her good sewing shears. Shears look like scissors but have blades more than 6" long and different handle loops for your fingers and thumb. A good pair of shears will glide through fabric like butter and last you a lifetime. All you need to do is sharpen them occasionally, oil the pivot screw, and never use them to cut anything but fabric.

Scissors

In sewing jargon, scissors have blades under 6" and identical handle loops for your fingers and thumb. Use your scissors for cutting patterns, stray threads, tape, etc. But don't use them to cut fabric.





Snips

These small scissors with pointy blades are perfect for reaching in and snipping stray threads. Keep a pair by your sewing machine.

Rotary Cutter & Cutting Mat



These look like pizza cutters and were originally designed for quilt making. Their razor-sharp edge allows you to cut the fabric as you roll over it. You never have to lift the blade, so your fabric doesn't move and you make fewer cutting errors. As you might have guessed, your rotary cutter needs a special cutting surface. These "cutting mats" come in various sizes, have handy grid lines on them, and are self-healing (unlike your hand should you accidentally run over it with a rotary cutter). Get the biggest mat you can fit on your sewing table, because the larger your cutting mat, the less you'll have to move your fabric..

Seam Ripper



If you want your projects to look professional, you have to be willing to re-do seams that don't look quite right. A nice, sharp seam ripper will help you undo seams without damaging your fabric. It doesn't actually rip the seam but neatly slices the sewing thread, allowing you to try, try again.

Tips For Cutting Tools

- When cutting fabric, keep the bottom blade of your shears on the cutting surface. This will allow them to glide smoothly through the fabric.
- The less you move your fabric when cutting, the fewer errors you'll have. Use clamps to hold your fabric when measuring and cutting.
- When it's time to sharpen the blades on your best shears, have it done professionally. You'll see a big difference.
- Use your rotary cutter when you need to cut through two or more layers at once.
- Rotary cutters can cut you too. When not in use, or even when you simply set it down between cuts, always retract the blade or put on the cover.

Deciphering Measuring Tape Marks



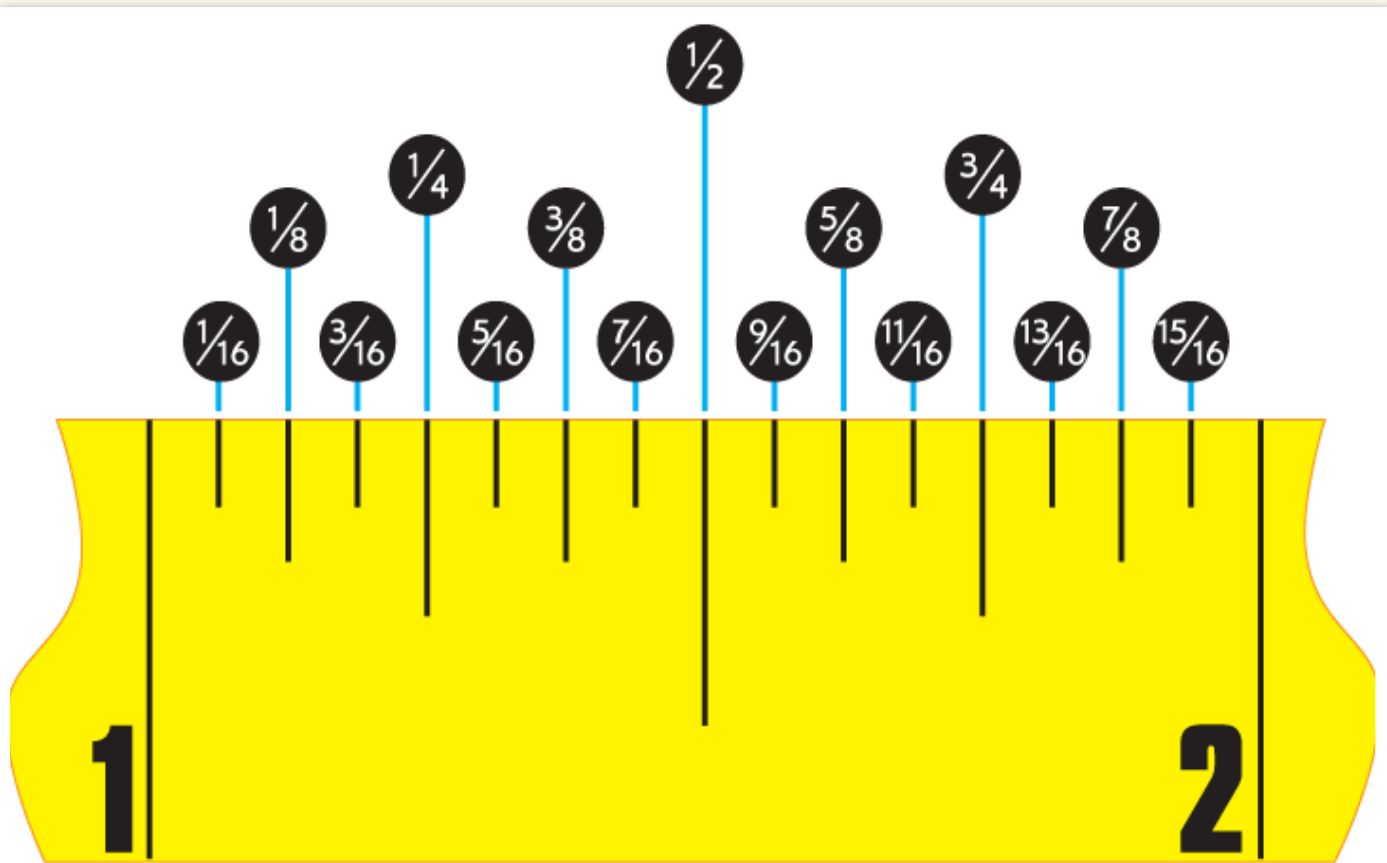
Tape measure divided into sixteenths.



Tape measure divided into eighths.

One of our website users sent us a question asking about the marks on a standard tape measure. Because we deal with the fractions everyday, we were surprised, but when we really looked at it we realized all the markings were not labeled. So if you are a beginning sewer, or you never found a love for fractions in school, this diagram is useful when sewing instructions refer to fractions of an inch.

Be aware that some measuring tapes divide an inch into sixteenths, just like the chart below, but others are only divided down to eighths (shown left). If you have a tape measure that is divided into eighths, just ignore the bottom row of fractions in the chart below.



Standard Tape Measure Showing Inch Breakdown

Sewing Machine Needles

A fresh needle makes a big difference in your sewing experience, but using the right size and type of needle is equally important. Choosing the correct needle is not quite as difficult as searching through the proverbial haystack, but it can be a little overwhelming. They all look pretty much the same unless you pull out the magnifying glass. But, different needles DO have different tips, eyes, shanks, grooves and shafts; and what you select can make a big difference in how well your machine sews through your fabric.

Needle Sizes

What the heck are those random numbers? The first thing you see on a needle package is the needle size. This will be shown as one number over another, such as: 70/10, 80/12 or 90/14. These numbers refer to the size of the needle.

There are two numbers because one is the American numbering system and one the European. The American system uses 8 to 19; 8 is a fine, thin needle and 19 is a thick, heavy needle. European sizes range from 60 to 120, 60 is a fine, thin needle and 120 is a thick, heavy needle. Some companies list American first, some list European first.

Here's the rule: the lower the number the finer the needle and the smaller the eye

For example, if you are going to sew a sheer window curtain, you would want a fine needle such as 60/8. Using a 120/19 would leave giant holes in your fabric. On the other hand, if you were to try to sew through upholstery fabric with a 60/8 needle, it would bend or break. Using a 120/19 would give you strength to penetrate your heavy home décor fabric and would have an eye large enough to carry the thicker thread you'll need to use.

Test first on a scrap!

When it comes right down to it, a needle can do as much damage to your fabric as a pair of scissors. Always test your needle with the actual thread you've chosen on a scrap of the actual fabric you'll be using for your project.

Needle Types

Once you have the size figured out, next you'll have to choose the TYPE of needle you want. As with any tool, you have general options and specialty options.



Universal Needles. Note the size at the top of each package.



Left: Jeans needles have sharp strong points. Right: Leather needles have a chisel point and for genuine leather only.

For the majority of home decor projects, go for the Universal needle. It works well for most woven fabrics, knits and synthetics.

Other home décor needle options:

- Jeans: has a sharp, strong point for denim, canvas and other tightly woven fabrics.
- Leather: has a chisel point for genuine leather only.
- Sharps: good for silks and micro-fibers.
- Metallic: if you are topstitching or embellishing with specialty threads, this needle has a larger eye to allow the thread to flow through without fraying and breaking.



Left: Metallic needles have a larger eye to prevent thread breakage. Right: Sharps are fine needles, good for silks and micro-fibers.

As you become more advanced, you can investigate other unique needle options, like stretch, twin, triple and wing.

Your needle is a very important part of your project. I think of it this way: a good needle in your sewing room is like a good knife in your kitchen.

Hand Sewing Needles

Hand sewing needles vary in thickness, length, point shape and size of the needle eye. They come packaged by type and size: the larger the needle size, the shorter and finer the needle. Yes, you read that correctly. Select the type of needle for the type of project and the size of needle for the weight and thread you are using. Fortunately, hand sewing needles are inexpensive, so you can afford to keep an assortment in your sewing area.

Hand Sewing Needles: The Basic Five



The packages shown are basic needle types. While there are dozens of special-purpose needles, these five will go a long way. If you're just starting out, get a variety pack.

Sharps

If you decide to buy only one type of needle, it should be Sharps. Sharps are medium length needles and the most commonly used hand sewing needles. They are also very sharp! (Available in sizes 1-12)

Quilting Needles

Often called Betweens, Quilting Needles are shorter needles with a small rounded eye. The shorter length allows you to stitch quickly and accurately. They are used for detailed handwork and quilting. (Available in sizes 1-12)

Embroidery Needles

Also called Crewel Needles, Embroidery Needles are the same length and thickness as Sharps, but have a longer eye for easier threading using embroidery threads. (Sizes 1-10)

Ball Point Needles

Ball Points have a rounded point which makes them perfect for sewing on knit fabric. Where a Sharp can damage knit fabric by actually breaking the knit stitches, a ball point glides between the yarns instead of through them. (Available in sizes 5-10.)

Chenille Needles

Chenille Needles are thick, have a large, long eye and are very sharp. They are used for ribbon and heavy embroidery where the eye can easily accommodate several strands of floss. The sharp point makes it easy to stitch through coarse fabric.

Add a Thimble and You're Good to Go



A thimble protects your finger when pushing a needle through fabric. Thimbles are commonly made from metal, leather and rubber. People who do a lot of hand sewing develop a preference for a specific type of thimble. For me, the key is to be sure it fits your finger – doesn't fall off, but not too snug. If you have long nails, you can even buy a thimble with a cut out area for your nail.

Selecting the Right Thread



There are literally hundreds of thousands of thread spools in the world. How on earth do you know which one to choose? It's part science and part art.

The Science - The Basics

The list below outlines basic thread choices. If in doubt, choose the thread that is closest to the fabric you'll be using. Cotton blend pillow? Cotton/polyester thread.

Cotton-wrapped polyester: usually labeled "all-purpose," this is the thread you will find the biggest selection of in fabric stores. It's great for all types of home décor fabrics and can be used for both hand and machine sewing.

100% polyester: best for synthetic fabrics or fabrics with stretch. Polyester is strong, flexible and usually colorfast. It can be used for hand or machine sewing.

Heavy duty polyester: pick up a spool with this designation for projects that require extra strength and stitch durability. For example: a seat cushion in a heavy upholstery fabric. It can use used for hand or machine sewing.

All-cotton or silk: for light to medium-weight fabrics or delicately woven fabrics with little or no stretch. All-cotton thread has no "give," so the stitches may break if used on a stretchy fabric, like knit. Silk is more elastic than cotton, so opt for silk if your delicate fabric has any stretch to it at all. Either type can be used for hand or machine sewing.

Quilting: traditionally made of 100% cotton with a special finish that allows the thread to slide easily through multiple layers of fabric and batting. Quite strong and sturdy, quilting thread is particularly good for hand sewing and also good for machine sewing.

Metallic: usually reserved for topstitching or embellishment in home décor, this type of thread is made from metal strands twisted around a polyester core. There is a difference between hand sewing metallics and machine sewing metallics so check the spool before you buy.

Buttontwist: a soft, heavy thread that's perfect for making buttonholes, sewing on buttons and topstitching.

Weight

The heavier the thread the smaller the weight number. If you want a fine thread for a fine fabric go for a 120 weight (abbreviated wt.). If you need a thick thread for a topstitching accent, try a 12 wt. or 15 wt.

The Science

Tensile strength

This is how far a thread can stretch before it snaps. There are little robots in the thread factories that do nothing but stretch a thread to its breaking point day after day after day.

Dye lots and consistency

Thread is dyed in huge vats so it's possible for there to be color variations from batch to batch. It's best to buy all the thread you think you'll need at one time to help insure a perfect color match from spool to spool. For most home décor projects, one spool is probably plenty. For techniques like embroidery, you often need several spools.

The Art

Color

This is where the fun begins. Talk about a rainbow of choices! There are so many beautiful thread colors on the market today. It's like that big box of 64 crayons, but without the waxy smell or the cool built-in sharpener. Choose a color that matches the most dominant color in your fabric. If you can't find a perfect match, go one or two shades darker. Light color stitching tends to stand out. Darker colors blend in.

Style

Soft cotton, organic blends, glittery and shiny -- beauty is in the eye of the beholder. Don't let anyone but your inner stylist tell you what is right or wrong. Go with the rules above for stretch and stability. Go with your heart for look and feel.

Brand

After a while you'll probably come up with your own favorite brands based on color selection, availability and/or quality. But here are some good names to look for when you start your shopping:

- Coats & Clark
- Madeira
- Robison Anton
- Mettler
- Gutermann
- Sulky

Bias Tape Cheat Sheet

The six most common types of bindings:

1. Single fold bias tape

This is the flat bias trim with both edges folded in. It finishes at 1/2" and requires stitching along both edges... similar to applying ribbon. It's normally used for trim, casings and narrow facings.

2. Extra wide single fold bias tape

Just like the single fold above, but this bias trim finishes at 1". Like its skinny cousin, it requires stitching along both edges and is most often used for trim, casings, facings and hems.

3. Double fold bias binding

This is basically our friend the single fold bias tape from above, folded in half. It's almost always used as an edge finish or to create ties. It finishes at 1/4".

4. Extra wide double fold bias binding

You're noticing a pattern by now, I'll bet. The extra wide double fold, is the extra wide single fold, folded in half. It finishes at 1/2" and as above, is most often used as an edge finish or for ties.

5. Quilt binding

I like to think of this as extra-extra wide double fold bias binding. Quilt binding finishes at 7/8". Use it to finish the edges of fabrics with bulk, like fleece blankets or, as the name implies, quilts.

6. Blanket binding

The type of binding is simply folded once, in half, finishing at approximately 2". Most often used for finishing fleece blankets or replacing worn blanket binding. It's almost always satin.



Choosing the Right Fabric

The easiest fabric to use when you are learning to sew is *quilting cotton*. It's not just for quilts, but earned its name because quilters are very particular about the quality of fabric they use. You should be too, whether it's a quilt, a pillow cover or an apron. Once you have a little experience with quilting cottons, you'll be better equipped to try other fabrics like knits, laminates, or slippery satins.

Why Quality is Important

All quilting cotton is not equal. Many factors make up a quality fabric, such as:

- the length of the cotton fiber and thread count
- dyes and colorfastness
- finishing processes

It takes a trained eye and hand to be a good judge of fabric, so it's not only safer, but worth it to put your trust in quality name brand quilting fabric. It's a bit more expensive than what you find in discount stores, but it also contains better fibers, a finer weave and reliable finishing steps that give fabric a nicer feel. Discovery of the problems with cheap fabric usually come AFTER you've put your hard work into something, and *then* you notice:

- it wears poorly and shrinks a lot or unevenly
- the fabric print is crooked
- the color runs or fades quickly
- it's excessively wrinkly
- a chemical smell that won't wash out

Discount superstores are where you are most likely to find inferior fabric. Fabric from quilting shops (online and in-store) and major fabric retailers can usually be trusted since these businesses rely on customer satisfaction to succeed.

Fabric Collections

In addition to the basics that come from quality quilting fabric companies – solid colors, strips, dots, gingham, etc., they work with experienced textile designers to create fabric *collections*. A collection is a group of fabric prints (and sometimes coordinating solids) that work together harmoniously to help you achieve a professional look with your sewing projects. Most collections include several *colorways*, or palettes, to give you the freedom to mix and match to suit your personal style and taste. Collections are a great way to begin your sewing experience.



Know How Much Fabric to Buy

If your project instructions call for two yards of 60-inch wide fabric, but the fabric you want to use is 45 inches wide... attempting to dredge up that old math lesson in proportions is probably not going to happen on the fly. Instead, use this handy conversion chart for those times you don't have a pattern envelope with a yardage conversion table.

Remember, this is an estimate. If your fabric has a large-scale pattern or is one-directional, it's best to buy extra.

Fabric Width	35 inches	44-45 inches	50 inches	54 inches	60 inches
Yardage	1-3/4	1-3/8	1-1/4	1-1/8	1
	2	1-5/8	1-1/2	1-3/8	1-1/4
	2-1/4	1-3/4	1-5/8	1-1/2	1-3/8
	2-1/2	2-1/8	1-3/4	1-3/4	1-5/8
	2-7/8	2-1/4	2	1-7/8	1-3/4
	3-1/8	2-1/2	2-1/4	2	1-7/8
	3-3/8	2-3/4	2-3/8	2-1/4	2
	3-3/4	2-7/8	2-5/8	2-3/8	2-1/4
	4-1/4	3-1/8	2-3/4	2-5/8	2-3/8
	4-1/2	3-3/8	3	2-3/4	2-5/8
	4-3/4	3-5/8	3-1/4	2-7/8	2-3/4
	5	3-7/8	3-3/8	3-1/8	2-7/8

How to Rip Out a Seam

Anyone who sews knows that some seams just weren't meant to be. If it isn't right, STOP! Reach for your seam ripper and follow these easy step-by-step seam ripping instructions.

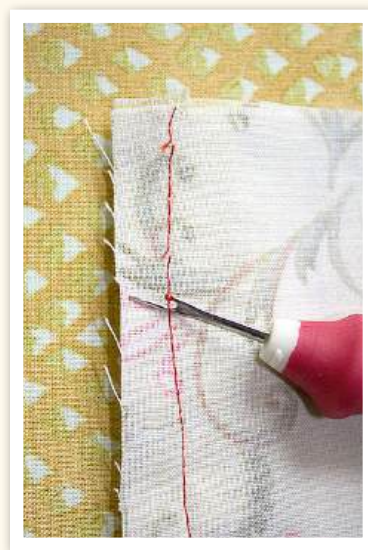
The best way to rip out a seam is with a seam ripper. Keep in mind that seam rippers, like any blade, eventually dull and need to be replaced. While there are several ways to rip out a seam and several tools that can do the job, our favorite method is shown below:



Yikes! This seam needs to come out.



Use your seam ripper as shown to cut through every second or third stitch.



All done on this side.



Turn over and gently pull the uncut thread from the back side of the seam.



Voila! Pick up the little thread bits with a lint roller. Now, try re-sewing the seam.

Securing Machine-Sewn Seams

Don't you hate it when the stitches start coming out of the hem on your favorite pants? The first one usually takes some time, then the rest fall like dominoes! You can avoid this situation in your own sewing by securing the ends of your seams. Read on to see how simple it is to make sure your stitches never start to come undone.

There are two ways to secure a machine sewn seam. One is the back tack and the other is the locking stitch. Any machine can perform the back tack, and certain machines contain a button that automatically knots a seam, called the locking stitch button.

Back Tack

First, let's review the back tack. The back tack secures the start and stop of a seam by stitching over stitches to lock them in place. To do this, you will need to locate the reverse function on your machine. This may be a button, like this:

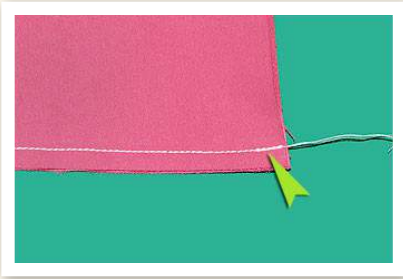


Or it may be a lever, sort of like this:



Here are the steps for creating the back tack:

1. Place your fabric under the presser foot.
2. Begin by sewing a few stitches slowly.
3. Press the Reverse Button, and, holding it down, sew backward over the few stitches you just created.



4. Release the Reverse Button, and sew to the end of the seam.
5. At the end of the seam, press the Reverse Button once more, hold it down, and stitch a few stitches backward.
6. Release the Reverse Button and sew off the seam.

Locking Stitch

Some computerized machines contain a Locking Stitch Button. (On Janome machines, this button looks similar to a bull's eye.)



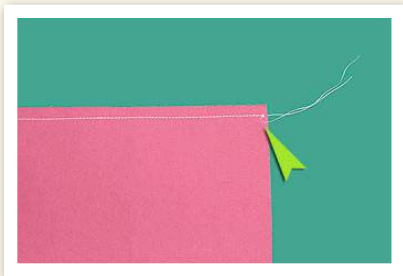
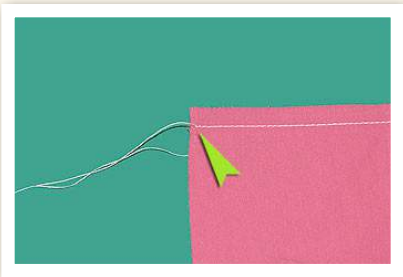
This button will knot off your stitches for you. When you use this stitch, the seam on the front of your sewing will look clean and the back of the seam will show a small knot.

This stitch is a good option for a project where the front seam will be very visible, but the back will not, such as topstitching.

The locking stitch should also be used at the beginning and end of a row of decorative stitches -- since back tacking with these more elaborate stitches makes quite the messy jumble of thread!

To use the Locking Stitch button, follow these steps:

1. Place your fabric under the presser foot.
2. Press the Locking Stitch button before you begin sewing.
3. Then press the foot pedal as if you were sewing normally.
4. The needle will go up and down a few times in place while the machine creates the knot.
5. It will then stop working, even though you are still pressing on the foot pedal.
6. To begin stitching your seam, take pressure off the foot pedal, and then depress it again normally to sew the length of your seam.
7. Stop sewing just before the last stitch of your seam.
8. Press the Locking Stitch button.
9. Press the foot pedal to create a locking stitch as your last stitch.



How to Make a Simple Hem

Every athlete knows it all comes down to the finish. It's the same with sewing – just not as sweaty. A smooth, beautiful hem makes everything look better and more professional. The simplest of hems is the double-turn hem, which you can use on almost any edge where you want an easy, clean finish.



Double-Turn Hemming

The first thing to do is determine how big a hem you need to get the finished length you want.

Most people prefer to err on the side of narrow over wide so there's less bulk to the folded fabric and the hem will lay nice and flat. In fact, it's often better to trim your fabric just a bit rather than make a giant hem.

Large

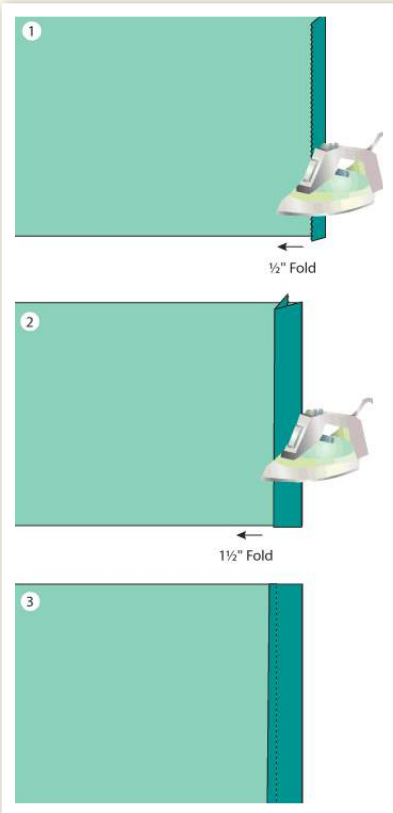
Let's say you have 2" to work with for the bottom of a curtain. First, fold in your raw edge $\frac{3}{4}$ " and press. Then, make another fold $1\frac{1}{4}$ ". Your first fold rolls inside the second and you end up with a nice folded edge on both the top and bottom. Press this double fold and stitch down, sewing close to the fold in the fabric.

Medium

Perhaps you'd like a narrower option for the edge of a pillow back opening or the bottom of a table cloth. In this case fold under $\frac{1}{2}$ " and press. Then fold under an additional $1\frac{1}{2}$ " and press. As above, stitch the hem down, sewing close to the fold in the fabric.

Small

Sometimes, you need a tiny hem for something like a napkin edge. In this case, your double-turn should be just $\frac{1}{4}$ " to start and then a second $\frac{1}{4}$ " to finish. This is also called a "Rolled Hem," and on many machines, you have a presser foot called, unusually enough, a Rolled Hem foot to help you do the job. This specialty foot comes standard on many machines, like the Janome models we recommend at Sew4Home, or you can purchase it separately.



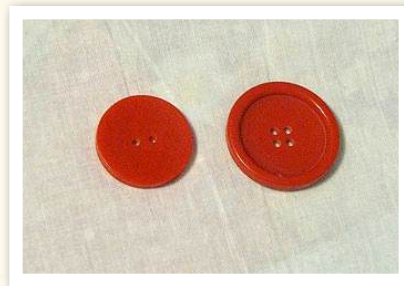
Blind Hemming

Blind hemming is exactly what you think it is: a hem with stitches you barely notice. This is the perfect option when you'd rather not have the "top-stitching" look of the double-turn hems described above. It is a much more elegant solution.

How to Sew on a Button

The up-side of button sewing is that it's relatively quick and easy. Our button sewing tutorial explains the basics. There are two types of buttons: Flat buttons and Shank buttons. Flat buttons have holes through the body of the button and thread is visible from the outside.

Shank buttons have a small "eyelet" piece that extends from the back of the button with a hole for attaching the button. These buttons are generally more decorative than flat buttons because the top surface is available for decoration.



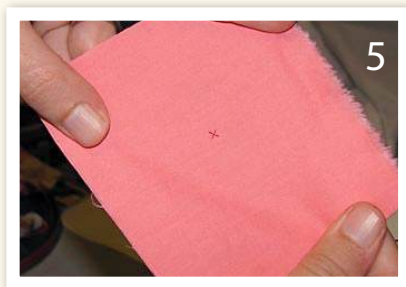
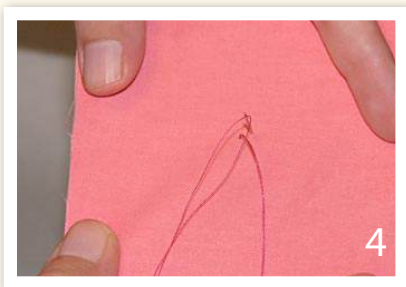
Flat buttons

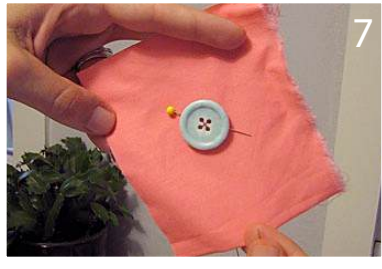


Shank buttons

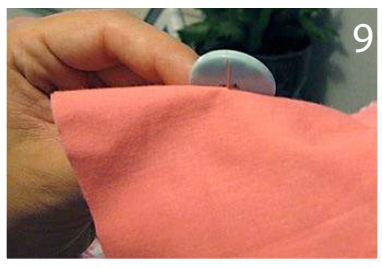
How to Sew on a Flat Button by Hand

1. Cut a length of thread about 24".
2. Thread the needle, and loop the thread so it is folded on itself.
3. Make a knot, catching both ends so you are working with double thread (you want the strength of two strands of thread when you are sewing a button so it doesn't fall off). Trim the thread so you leave a short tail.
4. Pull the needle up through the back of the fabric in the location where you would like to place your button. (Because, of course, you've already figured out and marked where you want your button to be ... right?)
5. Stitch an "X" in the fabric in the button location.
6. Using the "X" as your guide, and with the button slightly raised from the fabric surface, bring the needle up through one hole of the button, then down through the hole diagonally across from it. Note: this is the pattern for a four-hole flat button. Sometimes there are only two holes, in which case you are simply sewing back and forth.



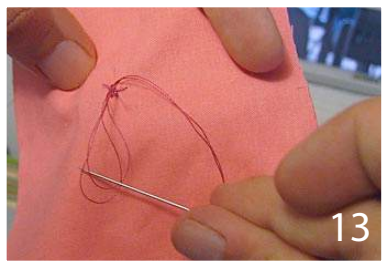


7. To keep the button elevated from the fabric, so there is space to fit it through the buttonhole when you're done, place a pin between the fabric and the button.



8. Repeat so the thread goes through all holes. Do this four times. You will end with your needle and thread on the backside of your fabric. Remove the pin.

9. Bring your needle and thread through the fabric once more, but keep it UNDER the button.



10. Wrap the thread tightly around the thread at the base of the button where it is now attached to the fabric. Wrap it around a few times. This reinforces your work.

11. Bring the thread through to the back side of the fabric again.

12. Pass the needle through a few of the stitches, and form a loop.

13. Pull your needle through this loop to form a knot.

14. Trim the thread to leave a very short tail.

How to Sew on a Shank Button



1. To sew a Shank button, you're going to follow the steps above with just a few minor alterations.

2. Because the button has a shank, you don't need to worry about creating one (the button raises itself from the surface of the fabric, so there is a natural space between it and the buttonhole). You can sew on this button without using the pin behind the button to lift it from the fabric surface.

3. When stitching the button, just pull your thread through the single hole of the shank button four or five times.

4. Knot your thread and trim the tail in the same manner as above.

Button Sewing by Machine



Some advanced sewing machines come with a button sewing foot and a computerized feature that allows you to sew on buttons with your machine. Check your manual to see if this is possible on your machine. It's an ULTRA cool feature to have when you have lots and lots of buttons to sew.