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Plain Seams and Seam Finishes

Level 1

Oregon 4-H Clothing Construction Fact Sheets: Basic Skills—Level 1

4-H 320-19 • October 2014

A seam is the line of stitching that holds two fabric edges together. Plain seams are usually done by machine and are the most basic construction stitching.

When finished, the right side of a plain seam should look smooth without puckers or ripples. It should be as flat and inconspicuous as possible. Imprints or ridges from the seam allowance should not be visible from the right side. The wrong side of a plain seam should also look smooth without puckers. The seam allowance should be appropriate in width—wide enough to lay flat or narrow enough not to roll.

Plain seams can be double-stitched in various ways for strength or neatness. Also, plain seams can be made decorative with added topstitching, cording, or piping between the two fabric edges. The way seams are made, pressed, and finished depends on the design and purpose of a garment and on the fabric.

Seam allowances and guidelines

The seam allowance is the fabric between the stitched seam and the cut edge. After a seam is stitched, the seam allowances are on the wrong side of a garment. The standard seam allowance in a pattern is ⅝ inch (1.5 cm); sometimes it is trimmed to a narrower width after stitching. Patterns for lingerie or some knits may have a narrower seam allowance. The allowance is always clearly marked on the pattern or indicated in the instructions.

To maintain the size and lines of a garment, it is essential to keep seam allowances even and at the given width you stitch. It is helpful to have a guideline for the fabric edge parallel to the presser foot.

There are several kinds of seam guides. Some machines have guidelines etched on the throat plate ⅛ inch (3 mm) apart for seam allowances of different widths (figure 1).

You can purchase different kinds of seam-guide attachments. Some are magnetized to attach to the throat plate at the desired distance and can be placed either right or left of the needle (figure 2).

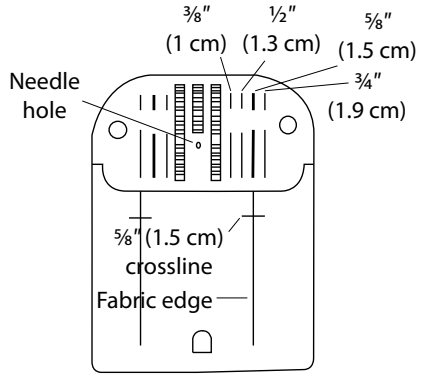


Figure 1. Seam guidelines on throat plate.

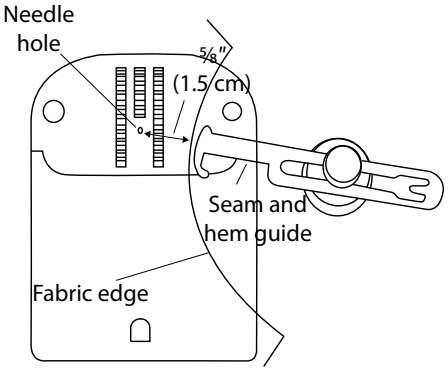


Figure 2. Seam-guide attachment.

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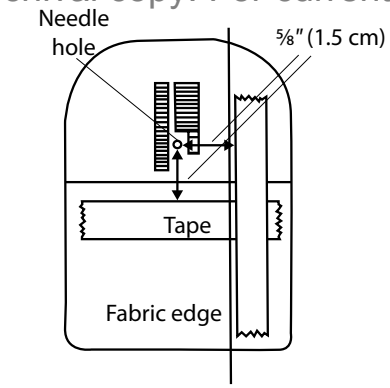


Figure 3. Seam guide marked with tape.

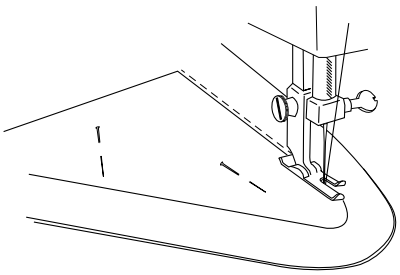


Figure 4. Special seam guide.

You can also make your own guidelines using strips of adhesive tape (figure 3). For turning corners, measure and mark a line (or lines) across the width of the tape, or use a second piece of tape. You can place your tape guides either right or left of the needle.

In places where two identical finished edges face each other and must match perfectly (such as lapels or the two ends of a collar), you may need a special seam guide. This is particularly true with curves. In such cases, you can trace the outline you want on brown paper, cut it out, pin it even with the desired seamline, and stitch along it (figure 4). By using the same guide for both edges, you are assured a perfect match.

Stitch length

The proper stitch length for a seam depends on weight, texture, and structure of the fabric; type of garment; location of the seam; and permanence of the stitching. In general, heavier fabrics require longer stitches, and lightweight fabrics require shorter stitches.

Stretchy fabrics, such as knits and crepes, and bias seamlines need shorter stitches to allow for more elasticity of the seam. Fabrics with close yarns and compact structures need longer stitches to prevent a puckered look. Leather and vinyl-coated fabrics need relatively long stitches to prevent weakening the seam. Test stitch length on scraps of your fabric before stitching on your project.

Sewing a plain seam

The plain seam is used most often. Many other seams also begin with this seam. To sew a plain seam:

1. Place the two sections with right sides together, edges even, and notches or other construction marks matched. Pin or baste the edges to be stitched as necessary. Place pins perpendicular to the cut edge so you can remove them easily. Remove each pin just before it reaches the presser foot.
2. Stitch on the seamline. Set the machine for a straight stitch, or for the narrowest zigzag if you are working on a stretchy knit. The zigzag will give elasticity to a seam by adding more thread. If your machine has a straight or special stretch stitch, you may want to use it for extra strength on a stretchy knit.
3. Press in three steps:
   - » Press the line of stitching as it is stitched, without opening the seam.
   - » Then open the seam with the point of the iron, applying light pressure to fold open the seam allowances.
   - » Then lightly press the open seam flat. Even if the seam allowances will eventually be pressed to one side, as in a facing, press them open first. This will make the final seamline much smoother.

Plain seams are often made with two very different edges:

- When making a seam with a curved or bias edge and a straight edge, stitch with the curved or bias side on top.
- When making a seam with an eased edge and a plain edge, stitch with the eased edge down so the machine feed dogs work in the easing.
- When making a seam with a gathered or pleated edge and a plain edge, stitch with the fullness on top so you can control it.

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Joining inward curve to outward curve, or princess seam

This type of curved seam takes special handling. First, staystitch both edges ⅛ inch (3 mm) from the seamline. Clip the inward curve to the staystitching, making the clips as close as needed to allow the seamlines to meet.

Baste first, and then stitch the two edges together on the seamline. Notch the outward curve only enough to let the seam lie flat when open. If clips and notches are not directly across from each other, the seam will be smoother. Finally, press the seam open (figure 5).

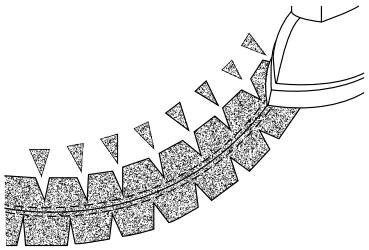


Figure 5. Pressing after joining an inward curve to an outward curve.

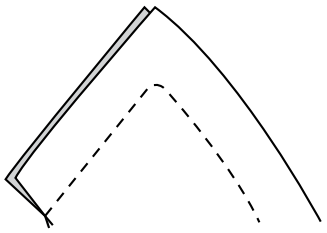
Corners in a seam

Before you come to a corner in a stitching line, shorten the stitch length for about six to ten stitches before and after the corner (figure 6a). This gives you more control to make the desired shape.

If the corner is a square right angle or wider angle: Stop with the needle in the fabric—exactly at the corner—raise the presser foot, shift the fabric around the needle, and lower the presser foot so stitching can proceed in the next direction.

If the corner is sharper or less than a square right angle: Make one or two stitches across the corner so you'll later be able to turn the trimmed seam.

Return to the normal stitch length after completing the corner, and trim the corner (figure 6b).



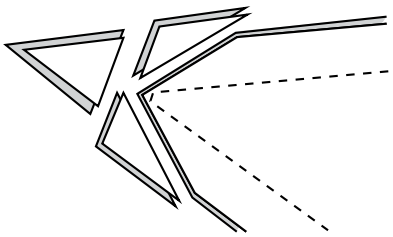


Figure 6a. Stitching a corner seam.

Figure 6b. Trimming a corner seam.

Crossing a seam

Crossing a seam means stitching over the end of one seam with another seam. Always press and, if possible, finish a seam before crossing it.

When two seam-ends come together, carefully match the seams with a pin as you place right sides together to prepare for stitching. Also put pins through the seam allowances to keep them from folding under as you stich across them. Keep a close eye on the seam allowances on the underside. After stitching, trim the seam allowance ends to reduce bulk (figure 7).

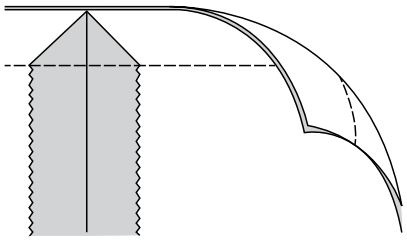


Figure 7. Crossing a seam.

Seam finishes

With knit and firmly woven fabrics, you may leave the edges of plain seams as is. With other fabrics, you must finish seam allowances to prevent raveling and for neatness—unless the garment is lined.

Seam finishes are not essential, but they can help the garment last longer. A seam finish should not add bulk or show through the right side of the garment. Try several seam finishes before deciding which to use. Different fabrics require different finishes. To decide which seam finish to use, consider:

- Fabric type and weight. Wovens and knits vary in their tendency to ravel, run, and roll at the seam edges.
- Wear and care the garment will receive. Garments that are worn and washed frequently will need more durable finishes than garments worn only occasionally.
- Whether seams will be seen. An unlined jacket requires attractive seam finishes. A lined garment may need no seam finish or only one that will prevent raveling.

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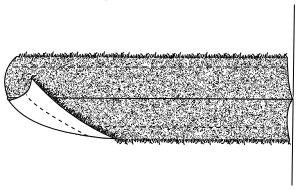


Figure 8. Seam finish—machine-stitched.

Machine-stitched

Use a line of short stitches ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge of the seam allowance (figure 8). This finish is useful for fabrics with coarse yarns; it allows the edge to fray and soften, which prevents the edge from forming a ridge that may be visible on the right side.

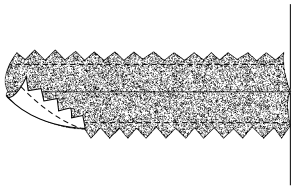


Figure 9. Seam finish—stitched and pinked.

Stitched and pinked

Use a line of short stitches ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge of the seam allowance. Then cut the edge of the seam allowance with pinking shears (figure 9). Pinking allows the edge to soften and minimizes raveling.

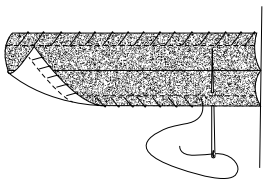


Figure 10. Seam finish—hand-overcast.

Hand-overcast

Make overcast or blanket stitches by hand with a single thread (figure 10). Space stitches about ¼ inch (6 mm) apart and ⅛ inch (3 mm) to ¼ inch (6 mm) deep. You may choose to make a line of straight stitching ¼ inch (6 mm) from the edge to use as a guide before overcasting. Do not pull stitches too tight. This finish is used when machine zigzag is impractical, or on delicate, ravel-prone fabrics.

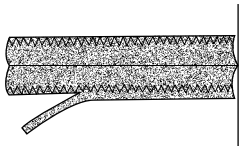


Figure 11a. Seam finish—zigzag.

Zigzag

Test a sample of your fabric using a short stitch length and medium stitch width. Stitch near but not on the edge of the seam allowance for soft fabrics. Stitch over the edge of firm fabrics. Multi-stitch zigzag, machine overedge, or blind stitch may also be used (figure 11). Check to be sure the seam finish remains flat, does not cause a ridge or imprint when pressed, and does not stretch or rip. If needed, adjust stitch length, width, and location on the seam allowance. Trim the edge of the seam allowance to the stitching if needed. This is an effective finish to prevent raveling.

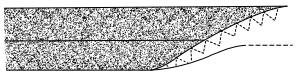


Figure 11b. Seam finish—Multi-stitch zigzag.

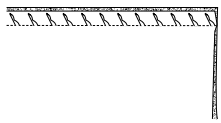


Figure 11c. Seam finish—Machine overedge.

Turned and stitched

Turn under the edge of the seam allowance ⅛ inch (3 mm), and stitch along the edge of the fold (figure 12). This finish may be used for light- to medium-weight fabrics. It is suitable for unlined jackets.

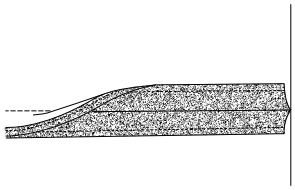


Figure 12. Seam finish—turned and stitched.

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Bias-bound edges

You can use strips of bias lining or underlining, double-fold bias tape, or fold-over lace to enclose seam edges. Wrap folded edges of the bias around the seam allowance with the wider side of the bias to the underneath. Stitch close to the edge of the top fold, catching the underneath fold (figure 13). Bias-bound edges may be used on light- to medium-weight unlined jackets or coats.

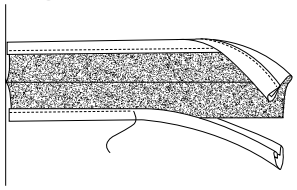


Figure 13. Seam finish—bias-bound edges.

Hong Kong

Cut 1½-inch-wide (4-cm) bias strips of lightweight material. With right sides together, stitch the bias strip to the seam allowance ⅛ inch (3 mm) from the edge (figure 14a). Turn bias over the edge to the underside and press. From the right side, stitch in the crevice of the fabric fold from the first stitching, catching the unfinished edge (figure 14b). Trim the unfinished edge of the bias close to the stitching. This finish is used for heavyweight, unlined jackets and coats. It is an attractive finish that has decorative uses.

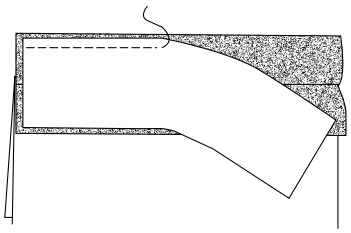


Figure 14a. Seam finish—Hong Kong, step 1.

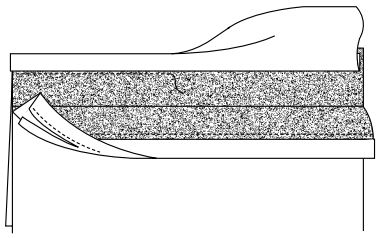


Figure 14b. Seam finish—Hong Kong, step 2.

References

Reader's Digest. (2005). *Complete Guide to Sewing*. (2005). Pleasantville, NY: The Reader's Digest Association.

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