

Plain Seams and Seam Finishes

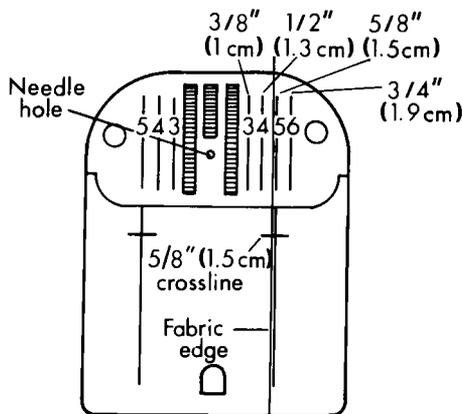
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A seam is the line of stitching, usually done by machine, that holds two fabric edges together. Plain seams are the most basic construction stitching. When finished the right side of a plain seam should look smooth without puckers or ripples, and should look 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, either wide enough to lay flat or narrow enough not to roll. Weight-bearing seams, and silhouette seams such as shoulder seams and side seams, are usually wider than enclosed seams, which should be trimmed to remove excess bulk.

Plain seams can be double-stitched in various ways for strength or neatness. Also, they can be made decorative with added topstitching, or cording or piping inserted 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.

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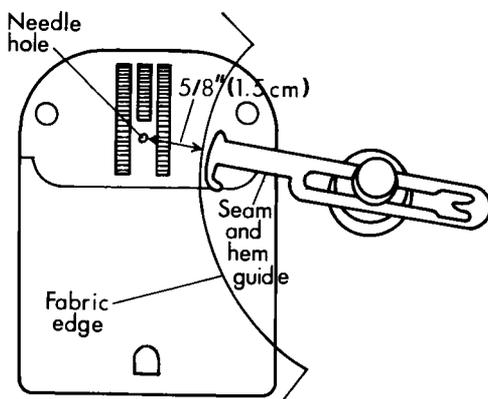
Seam allowances and guidelines



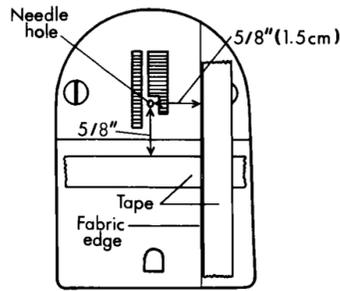
The seam allowance is the fabric between the stitched seam line and the cut edge. After a seam is stitched, the seam allowances are on the wrong side of a garment. The standard seam allowance in patterns is 5/8" (1.5 cm), sometimes trimmed after stitching to a narrower width. Lingerie patterns, and some patterns for 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 the seam allowances even and at the given width as they are stitched. It is helpful to have the guideline for the fabric edge parallel to the presser foot. There are several kinds of seam guidelines.

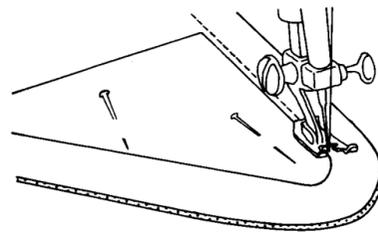
Some machines have guidelines etched on the throat plate, 1/8" (3 mm) apart for seam allowances of different widths.



Seam guide attachments of different kinds can be purchased. One that is easy to use consists of a magnetized guard set on the throat plate at the desired distance from the needle—either to the right or left of it.



You can also make your own guideline from a 3" (7.5 cm) strip of adhesive tape, with the markings you need. For turning corners, measure and mark a line (or lines) across the width of the tape, the same distance from the needle as the seam allowance. This guide can be placed either at the right or left of the needle.



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

Stitch length

The stitch length for a seam will depend on weight, texture, and structure of the fabric, type of garment, location of the seam, and permanence of the stitching. Generally, heavier fabrics require longer stitches; lighter-weight fabrics require shorter stitches. Stretchy fabrics like knits and crepes and bias seam lines need shorter stitches in order to allow for more elasticity of the seam. Fabrics with close yarns and compact structures need longer stitches in order to prevent a puckered look. Leather and vinyl-coated fabrics need relatively long stitches to prevent weakening the seam.

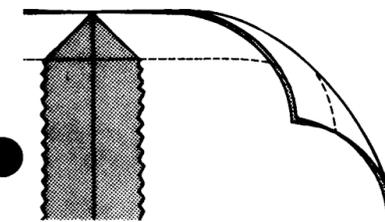
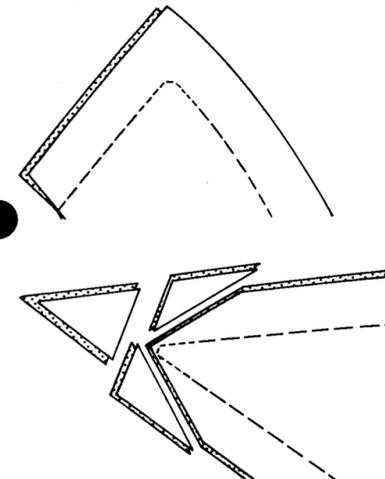
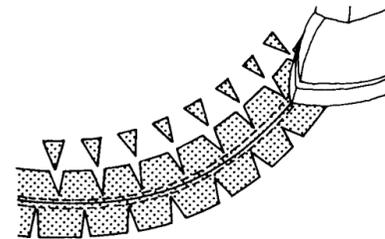
Sewing the plain seam

The plain seam is the basic seam used most frequently; many other seams also begin with this seam.

A. Place the two sections right sides together, edges even, notches or other construction marks matched. The edges to be stitched may be pinned or basted as necessary. Place pins perpendicular to the cut edge so they may be easily removed. Remove each pin just before the pressure foot reaches it.

B. Stitch on the seam line. Either 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.

C. 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 are finally to be pressed to one side, as in a facing, press them open first—you will have a much smoother seam line.



Plain seams are often made with two quite 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.

Joining inward curve to outward curve, or princess seam—This curved seam takes special handling. Stay-stitch both edges $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3 mm) from the seam line. Clip the inward curve to the stay-stitching, making the clips as close as needed to allow the seam lines to meet. Then stitch the two edges together on the seam line—you would probably do well to baste first. 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, a smoother seam will result. Press the seam open.

Corners in a seam—Before you come to a corner in a stitching line, shorten the length of the stitches for about 6 to 10 stitches before and after the corner. How you handle the corner is determined by the sharpness of the angle at the corner. 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 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 in order to be able to turn the trimmed seam. Return length of stitches to normal after completing the corner.

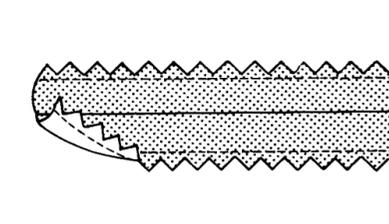
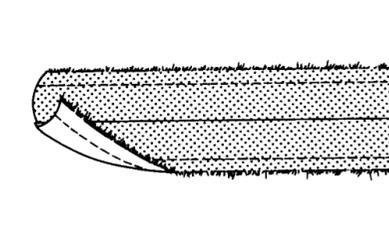
Crossing a seam—This means stitching over a seam-end with another seam. Never neglect pressing, and if possible finishing, a seam before crossing it. When two seam-ends come together to be crossed, carefully match the seam lines with a pin as you place right sides together. Put pins through the seam allowances to keep those on the underside from folding under as the crossed seam is stitched. After stitching, trim the seam allowance ends to reduce bulk.

Seam finishes

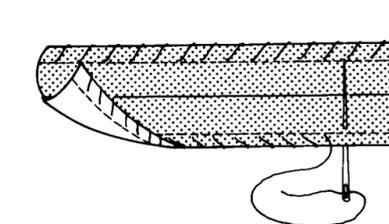
With knit fabrics and firmly woven fabrics, the edges of plain seams may be left as is. Otherwise the seam allowances must be finished to prevent raveling, and for neatness, unless a garment is lined. Seam finishes are not essential to complete a garment but they can add to the wear life. A seam finish should not add bulk or show through the right side of the garment. It is wise to try several seam finishes before deciding which one to use. Different fabrics call for different finishes. To decide which seam finish to use, consider:

- The fabric type and weight, whether it is woven or knit, its tendency to ravel or run, or the tendency of the seam edges to roll.
- The wear and care the garment will receive. Garments that are worn and washed frequently will need more durable finishes than infrequently worn or fad-type garments.
- Whether the seams will be seen. An unlined jacket requires attractive seam finishes, while a lined garment may need no seam finish or only one that will prevent raveling.

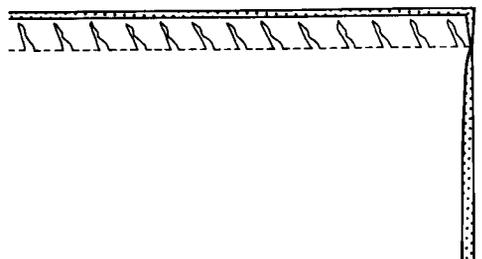
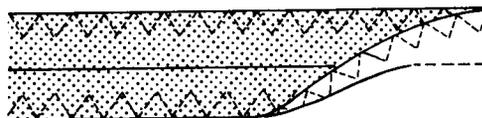
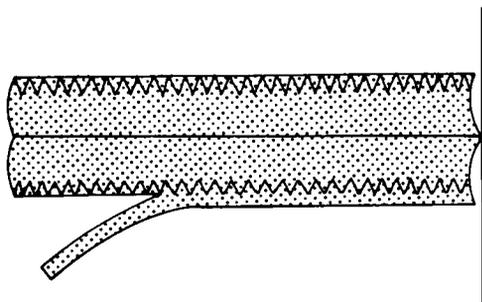
Machine stitched—Use a line of short machine stitches $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6 mm) from edge of seam allowance. Allow edge to fray and soften for fabrics with coarse yarns to prevent the edge forming a ridge that may be visible on the right side.



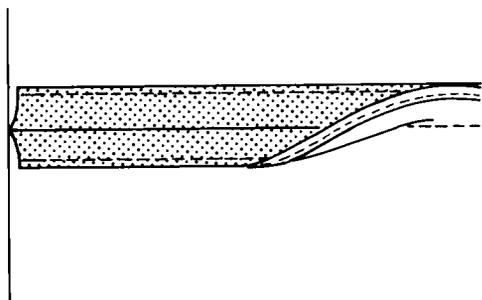
Stitched and pinked—Use a line of short stitches $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6 mm) from edge of seam allowance. Then cut the edge of the seam allowance with pinking shears. This finish allows for the softening of the edge by pinking and minimizes raveling.



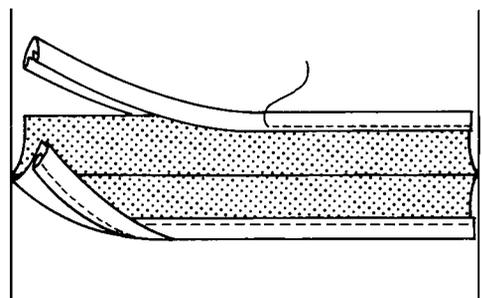
Hand-overcast—Make overcast stitches or blanket stitches by hand with single thread. Space stitches about $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6 mm) apart and $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3 mm) to $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6 mm) deep. Overcasting may be preceded and guided by a line of straight stitching $\frac{1}{4}$ " (6 mm) from the edge. Do not pull stitches too tight. This method is used on delicate, ravelly fabrics such as silks or when machine zigzag is impractical.



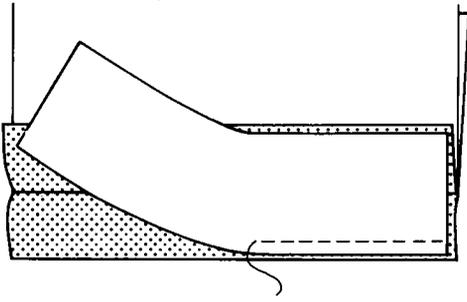
Zigzag—Test a sample of your fabric using a short stitch length and medium stitch width. Stitch near but not on the edge of the seam allowance of soft fabrics; stitch over the edge of firm fabrics. Multi-stitch zigzag, machine overedge, or blind stitch may also be used. Check that the seam finish remains flat, not causing a ridge or imprint when pressed and not stretching or rippling. Readjust stitch length, width, and location on the seam allowance if needed. Trim edge of seam allowance to stitching if needed. This is an effective finish to prevent raveling.



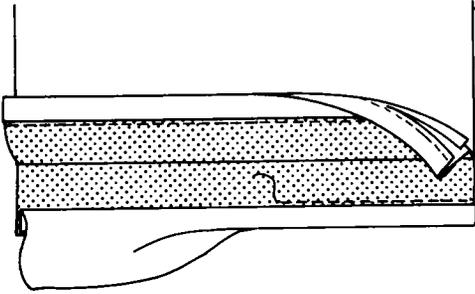
Turned and stitched—Turn under the edge of the seam allowance $\frac{1}{8}$ " (3 mm) and stitch along edge of fold. This finish may be used for light-to medium-weight fabrics. It is suitable for unlined jackets.



Bias bound edges—Strips of bias lining or underlining, double-fold bias tape, or fold-over lace, may be used to enclose seam edges. Wrap folded edges of 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. Bias bound edges may be used on light to medium weight unlined jackets or coats.



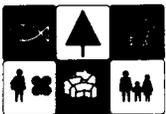
Hong Kong—Cut 1½" (4 cm) wide bias strips of light weight material. With right sides together, stitch bias strip to seam allowance ⅛" (3 mm) from edge. Turn bias over edge to the underside and press. From the right side, stitch in the crevice of the fabric fold from the first stitching, catching the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



*Prepared by Ardis W. Koester,
Extension textiles and clothing specialist*

Selected References:

- Coats and Clark. *Coats & Clark Sewing Book: Newest Methods A to Z*. Western Publishing Company, Inc., 1976.
- Reader's Digest. *Complete Guide to Sewing*. The Reader's Digest Association, Inc., 1976.
- Simplicity. *Simplicity Sewing Book*. Simplicity Pattern Co. Inc., 1975.



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