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# Plain Seams and Their Finishes

## 4-H Clothing, Skill Level 2

Seams hold two or more pieces of fabric together. Plain seams, the most common type of seam, are the first step in making many other kinds of seams. The right side of a plain seam should look smooth, without any puckers or ripples. The fabric area beside the seam should look flat and smooth, without a ridge caused by the edge of the seam allowance.

The wrong side of a plain seam has the seam allowances, the amounts of fabric allowed for you to make the seam. The seam allowance is the fabric between the cut edge and the line of stitching. Seam allowances usually are  $\frac{5}{8}$  inch (1.5 cm), except on some stretch garments, such as T-shirts and lingerie. The seam allowances should be even and the right width for the fabric and article you're making. The seams along an edge such as a facing, collar, or pocket flap should be trimmed or graded to remove excess fabric bulk.

### Seam allowances and guide lines

A seam is prepared for stitching by pinning, and sometimes basting, the right sides of two pieces of fabric together along the seam allowance. The width of the seam allowance is always clearly marked on the pattern piece or written in the instructions.

First, pin together the ends of seams. Then pin any notches or markings that should be matched. Finally, add any pins you need to hold the seam allowances for sewing. Pins will be easy to remove as you sew if you place each pin crosswise to the edge with the head of the pin beyond the edge of the fabric. Insert pins so you catch only a few threads. This prevents slippage of the fabric.

Sometimes you may want to hand-baste a tricky or complex seam before machine-stitching it. Use a needle and thread with a knot in only one end of the thread. Use a running stitch in and out through the seam allowances along the stitching line. Machine-stitch exactly on the stitching line, then remove the basting (Figure 1).



Figure 1

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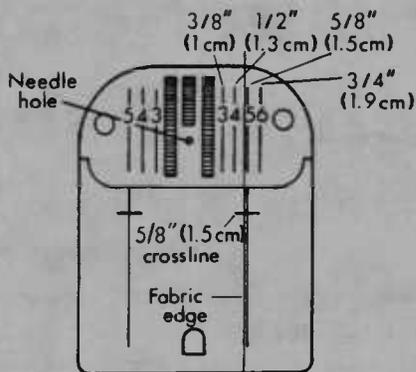


Figure 2

Usually, you can machine-stitch a seam after it's been pinned, without hand-basting. Don't sew over pins; they can break or damage the machine's needle. Remove pins as the sewing machine comes to them. Keep the two cut edges together and make sure the seam allowance is an even width as you stitch.

There are several kinds of guides to help you keep the seam allowances an even width as they're stitched. Some machines have guide lines marked on the throat plate. You can buy different kinds of machine attachments to use as guides, or you can use a 3-inch (7.5 cm) strip of ordinary adhesive tape. Mark the width of the seam you wish to sew with a fine, non-smearing pen; use a ruler to measure the distance from the needle and to act as a guide for a straight line (Figures 2 and 3).

### Stitch length

The length of stitch to use depends on the fabric, the type of garment, the location of the seam, and how long you want the stitching to last. Generally, heavyweight fabrics require longer stitches than lightweight fabrics. Stretchy fabrics need longer stitches to allow for "give" in the seam. Tightly woven fabrics and knitted fabrics with tiny loops need longer stitches to prevent a puckered look. Leather and vinyl coated fabrics need long stitches to prevent weakening the seam. Where more strength is needed, such as for sportswear or the crotch seam of pants, the stitches should be shorter.

Basting, which is a temporary line of stitching, uses stitches that are about  $\frac{1}{8}$  to  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (3 to 4 mm) long, or 6 to 8 stitches per inch. Most permanent stitches are about  $\frac{1}{10}$  to  $\frac{1}{12}$  inch (1 to 1.5 mm) long, or 10 to 12 stitches per inch.

Stitch a test seam with your fabric. Mark 1 inch of the seam by placing pins exactly 1 inch apart. Count the number of stitches within that inch. For example, if there are 10 stitches, each stitch is  $\frac{1}{10}$  inch long. Adjust the stitch length to longer or shorter as needed. For metric measurements, some machines are marked with the length of the stitch in millimeters. Or you can use a metric ruler to measure the length of the stitches.

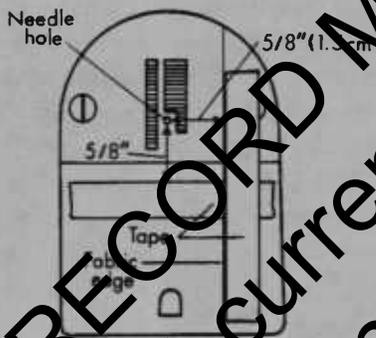


Figure 3

### Sewing a plain seam

Stitch exactly on the seam line. Start the stitching at the cut edge or, if necessary, at a special marking such as a dot transferred from the pattern to the fabric. After stitching three or four stitches, reinforce the seam with two or three backstitches. At the end of the seam, again reinforce the seam with two or three backstitches.

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Most seams are sewn with a straight stitch. If you are sewing with a stretchy fabric, you may need to use a narrow zigzag to give the stitches enough stretchiness to keep them from breaking.

Press seams after stitching them. It saves time to stitch several seams, then press them all at once before attaching them to another garment section. Press each seam in three steps. First, press the seam flat, just the way it was stitched. This helps to set the stitches and allows the thread to relax into the holes. Then lay the garment wrong side up with the seam allowances toward you. Open the seam with the point of the iron to fold each of the seam allowances back against itself and flat. Last, press the seam open using a light lift-and-lower motion. Most seams are pressed open. Even seam allowances that will be pressed to one side will be sharper if they are first pressed open. Check with your pattern instruction guide for seams that are to be pressed to one side.

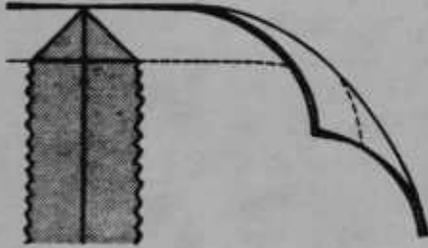


Figure 4

Before crossing a seam with another seam, be sure the seam is pressed open and, if needed, the edge of the seam allowance is finished. When two seam ends come together, carefully match and pin the stitching lines. Pin the seam allowances flat to keep them from folding as the cross seam is stitched. After finishing, trim the ends of the seam to reduce bulkness (Figure 4).

### Seam finishes

With firmly woven fabrics and knit fabrics, you may leave the cut edges of plain seams unfinished because they don't ravel or curl. Otherwise, finish seam allowances to prevent raveling, add wear life, and look attractive on the inside. A seam finish should not show through the right side of the garment as a ridge or imprint.

It's wise to try several seam finishes before deciding whether you need to use one and, if so, which one to use. Different fabrics call for different finishes. To decide which seam finish to use, consider:

- The wear and care the garment will receive. Garments that are worn and washed frequently need a more durable finish than other garments.
- The equipment you have and your skills using it. What kinds of stitches can you do on your conventional sewing machine? Do you have access to a serger? What kinds of stitches does it have?

*Machine stitched.* Sew a line of short stitches  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (6 mm) from the edge of the seam allowance. Allow the  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (6 mm) edge to fray and soften for fabrics with tightly twisted yarns to prevent the edge forming a ridge visible on the right side (Figure 5). This is a quick and moderately long-lasting finish.

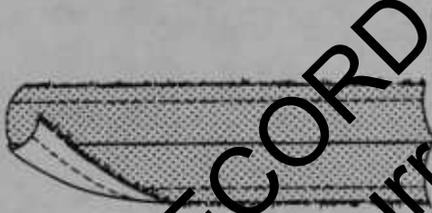


Figure 5

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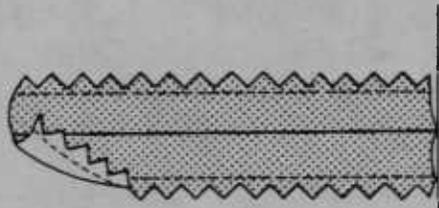


Figure 6

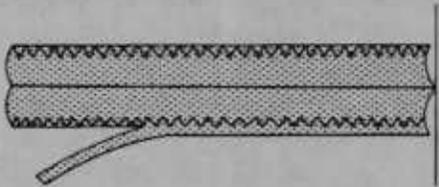


Figure 7

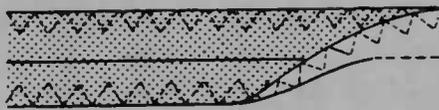


Figure 8

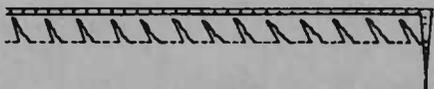


Figure 9

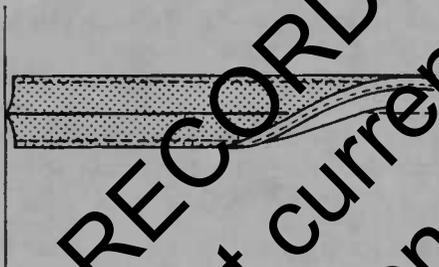


Figure 10

*Stitched and pinked.* Sew a line of short stitches  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch (6 mm) from the edge of the 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 it minimizes raveling (Figure 6).

*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 for firm fabrics. You also may use multistitch zigzag machine overedge, or blind stitch. Make sure 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. After zigzagging, trim the edge of the seam allowance to stitching if needed. Zigzagging is an effective finish to prevent raveling (Figures 7, 8, and 9).

*Serged.* Depending on the stitches done by your serger, either the two-thread overedge or the three-thread overlock stitch may be appropriate. Select the stitch and adjust stitch length and width after testing on a sample of your fabric. Serging prevents raveling and gives a ready-to-wear look to garments.

*Turned and stitched.* Turn under the edge of the seam allowance  $\frac{1}{8}$  inch (3 mm) and stitch along the edge of the fold. This finish may be used for light-to-medium weight fabrics. It's suitable for unlined jackets (Figure 10).

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