

Hand-Sewing Skills

Level
1

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

4-H 320-13 • October 2014

Hand-sewing skills will be an important part of your sewing projects. Some hand-sewing stitches are temporary, such as basting. Other stitches are permanent, such as hemming and decorative stitching.

Learning to choose and use the best hand-sewing method for your fabric and item requires knowledge and experience. When hand-sewing is done well, the item or garment will have a final look of quality. Hand-sewing equipment is simple: needles, thread, scissors, and pins. You may also choose to use a thimble and beeswax.

Needle

Select a needle that is suitable for your fabric and the type of hand-sewing you are going to do. The needle should be small enough that it slips easily through the fabric and does not leave holes unfilled by the thread.

Sharps and embroidery needles (figure 1) are suitable for most hand-sewing. Longer milliner's needles are good for basting because more stitches can be collected on the needle at one time. Betweens are best for the short stitches used in hand-tailoring.

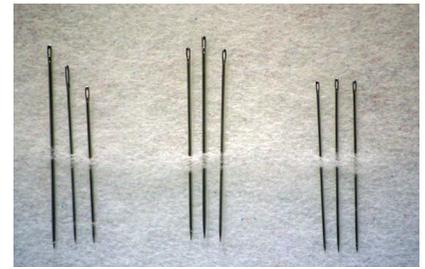


Figure 1. (left to right) Sharps, milliner's needles, betweens.

Thread

Select thread that is compatible with your fabric type and color (if you are doing permanent stitching), and the type of hand-sewing you are going to do. For cotton and wool fabric, use cotton or polyester/cotton thread (figure 2). For man-made fabric such as acrylic, polyester, and nylon, use polyester/cotton, polyester, or nylon thread. For silk fabric, use silk thread. Use silk thread for basting because it does not leave indentations or press marks.

Thread is available in different sizes. Size 100 is an extremely fine thread. Size 70, 60, and 50 are the most common medium sizes. Size 8, heavy-duty cord, and buttonhole twist are much thicker. The thread color should match or be slightly darker than the fabric.



Figure 2. All-purpose thread.



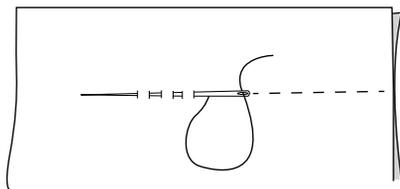


Figure 3. Running stitch.

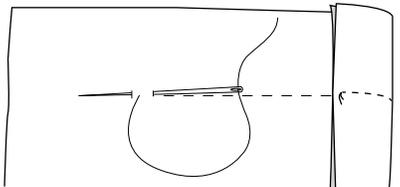


Figure 4. Backstitch.

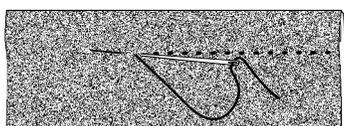


Figure 5. Pick stitch.

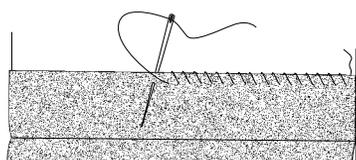


Figure 6. Overcasting.

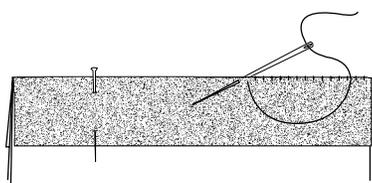


Figure 7. Overhand stitch.

Preparation

Cut the thread at an angle to make an end that will be easy to insert in the needle. Pass the freshly cut end through the needle and knot that same end. This will maintain the twist and keep the thread smooth. For basting, the knot can be visible. For permanent stitching, place the knot out of sight against an inside layer of the fabric.

Pulling the thread through beeswax will add strength and slipperiness. Do not use beeswax if the fabric is sensitive to oil stains.

General stitches

Running stitch (figure 3) is a basic stitch used for basting, easing, gathering, mending, and seams where there will be no strain. Take several stitches forward, weaving the needle in and out of the fabric. The size of the stitch depends on the purpose of the stitching. Use longer stitches for basting and shorter stitches for permanent sewing.

Backstitching (figure 4) is a basic stitch with several variations. It is a strong hand-stitch useful for repairing seams and hard-to-reach areas. With the right sides of the fabric together, bring the needle up through the fabric layers. Insert the needle about $\frac{1}{16}$ to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (1.5 to 3 mm) in back of where it came up, and bring it out again $\frac{1}{16}$ to $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (1.5 to 3 mm) forward. For each stitch, insert the needle at the end of the last stitch and bring it out ahead.

Pick stitch (figure 5) and **prick stitch** are backstitches with the thread on the right side carried back only one or two fabric yarns before being inserted into the fabric. The pick stitch is sewn through only the top layer of fabric to give a decorative, beadlike effect on the surface. The prick stitch is also a decorative stitch used mainly for applying zippers from the right side of a garment. Unlike the pick stitch, the prick stitch passes through all fabric layers.

Overcasting (figure 6) is used to finish raw edges of delicate fabrics to prevent them from raveling. It was used for all fabrics that ravel before zigzag machines were available to the home sewer. Take diagonal stitches over the edge at a uniform space and depth.

Overhand stitch (figure 7) and **whipstitch** are closer, tighter variations of overcasting. Both hold two finished edges together. The overhand stitch tends to be less conspicuous. For the overhand stitch, insert the needle at a diagonal through the back and front edges so the stitch itself is straight. For the whipstitch, insert the needle at a right angle so the stitches are slanted.

Hemming stitches

Hemming stitches are used to secure a garment hem or item edge. Depending on the item and fabric, choose either a flat or blind hemming technique.

Slip stitch (figure 8) is used for invisible finishing when there is a folded or turned edge. This stitch can be used for hemming or to close the opening of a pillow or stuffed toy. To hem, slip the needle through the edge of the fold and then pick up a yarn of the under fabric. Space stitches evenly, making sure the thread does not show or cause an indentation on the right side. To close an opening, slip the needle through the edge of the fold, alternating sides. Pull the thread taut after every few stitches to draw the two sides of the opening together.

Hemming stitch (figure 9) is used when the hem is finished with a seam binding. Take a one- or two-yarn stitch in the garment, and then bring the needle through the edge of the seam binding. The stitches that pass over the seam binding edge to the garment may be slanted (quick, but less durable) or vertical (stable, more durable). The stitch should be inconspicuous (not noticeable) from the right side and not drawn or pulled too tightly.

Blind stitch (figure 10) is inconspicuous from both the right side and the hem side of a garment. First, finish the raw edge of the hem or facing without folding it. Then, $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (3 to 6 mm) from the hem edge, alternate small, horizontal stitches between the garment and the hem. Leave about $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch (6 mm to 1.3 cm) between stitches. Do not pull stitches tightly. Stitches or indentations should not be visible from the right side. This stitch permits pressing from the right side without the hem edge causing a visible ridge. Use this stitch with non-stretchy fabric.

Catch stitch (figure 11) is like the blind stitch except it is flexible and suitable for use with non-raveling, stretchy fabrics. It also permits pressing from the right side without the hem edge causing a visible ridge. Take the stitch itself in the opposite direction from the line of needle movement. Work from left to right. Between the hem and garment, $\frac{1}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (3 to 6 mm) from the hem edge, take a small stitch in the hem. Then move diagonally to the right to take the next stitch in the garment. Alternate stitching in this zigzag fashion. Keep stitches loose to keep the hem edge flexible.

Tacks

Tacks are hand-sewing stitches done during marking or construction.

Marking or tailor's tacks (figure 12) are used to transfer construction details and matching points from the pattern to the cut section of fabric. Start with a long length of double, unknotted thread. Take a small stitch on the pattern line through the pattern and fabric. Pull the needle and thread through, leaving a 1-inch (2.5 cm) thread end. Take similar stitches every 2 to 3 inches (5 to 8 cm), leaving thread slack in between. Cut the threads and gently pull the pattern off, taking care not to also pull off the thread markings. You can also loop thread to mark dots and symbols, but you must cut the loops before you remove the pattern.

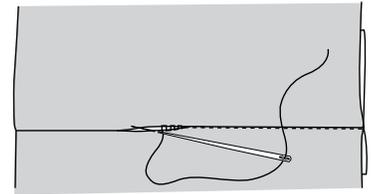


Figure 8. Slip stitch.

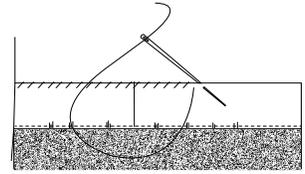


Figure 9. Hemming stitch.

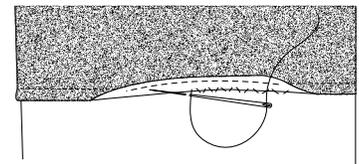


Figure 10. Blind stitch.

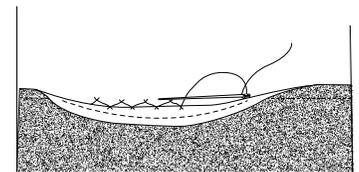


Figure 11. Catch stitch.

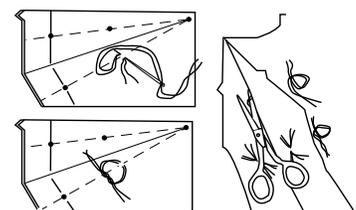
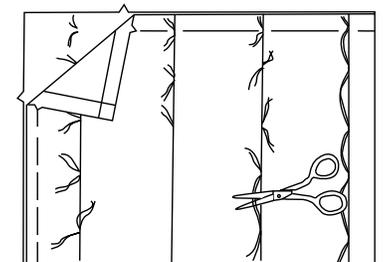


Figure 12. Tailor's tack.

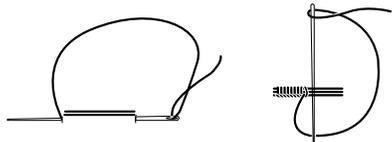


Figure 13. Bar tack.

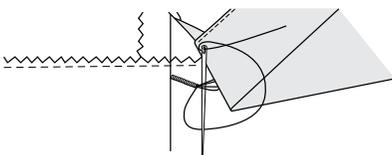


Figure 14. French tack.

Bar tack (figure 13) is a reinforcement tack used at points of strain, such as buttonholes or corners of pockets. Fasten the thread, and bring the needle through to the right side. Take two or three long stitches—the length the bar tack needs to be—in the same place. Catching the fabric underneath, make closely spaced blanket stitches around the thread to cover the long stitches.

French tack (figure 14) is similar to a bar tack. It connects two separate garment sections, such as the bottom edge of a coat and bottom edge of the lining, while still allowing each piece to move independently. To make a French tack at the hem edge, take a small stitch through the top of the garment hem edge and another small stitch directly across from it in the lining. Leave 1 to 2 inches (2.5 to 5 cm) of slack between stitches. Repeat three to four times. Then work closely spaced blanket stitches over the threads.

Decorative stitches

There are several decorative stitches. Here are a few common ones for you to learn.

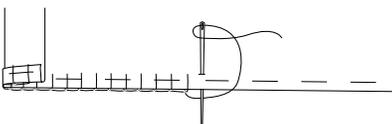


Figure 15. Blanket stitch.

Blanket stitch (figure 15) is often used to cover fabric edges decoratively. It is traditionally an embroidery stitch, but it can also be used in garment construction. For the first, and each succeeding stitch, insert the needle through the fabric from the right side and bring it out at the edge. Keeping thread from the previous stitch under the point of the needle, draw the needle through, forming the stitch over the edge.

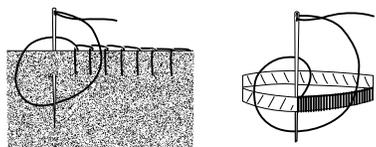


Figure 16. Buttonhole stitch.

Buttonhole stitch (figure 16) is used as a decorative stitch at the edge of the fabric and for hand-worked buttonholes. Work from right to left, with the point of the needle toward you and the edge of the fabric away from you. Fasten your thread and bring it out above the edge. Loop thread from the previous stitch to the left, then down to the right. Insert the needle from the underside, keeping the looped thread under both point and eye of the needle. Pull the needle out through the fabric, then away from you to place the purl of the stitch on the fabric's edge. For a buttonhole, stitches should be $\frac{1}{8}$ inch (3 mm) deep with no space between.

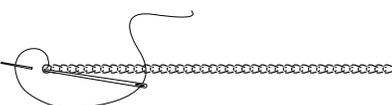


Figure 17. Chain stitch.

Chain stitch (figure 17) is a continuous series of looped stitches that form a decorative chain. Work from right to left. Fasten the thread, and bring it to the right. For each stitch, loop the thread around, insert the needle just behind where the thread emerges, and bring it up over the looped thread a stitch length in front of that point. Pull thread through, to the left, to form the looped stitch.

References

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

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Photos by Pamela Rose, © Oregon State University.

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