Chapter 1

Assembling Your Sewing Kit

In This Chapter

- Putting together the tools you need for sewing
- Pressing tools and why they matter
- Figuring out which sewing machine parts do what

Like most hobbies, successful sewing projects begin with a few good tools and a little know-how. Sure, you can collect some of these tools from your household: Those old scissors from the garage, the ruler from your desk drawer, and pins scavenged from freshly opened dress shirts, but you'll have a better sewing experience by using the tools intended for the job.

In this chapter, I list and explain the necessities — the tools I use just about every time I sew and that are essential for creating the projects in this book. I also give you some tips about additional tools that come in handy as your skills improve. So you can consider these tools your Sewing Survival Kit.

Keep your Sewing Survival Kit in a small fishing tackle box (other than your sewing machine and pressing tools, of course) or use one of the many sewing or craft organizers available through your local fabric store, craft store, or sewing machine dealer. Choose an organizer that has a handle and a secure latch so that you can easily carry it without dumping stuff all over the place.

Use the following as a checklist when you round up the tools for your Sewing Survival Kit; afterward, read the rest of this chapter to understand how each one works:

- Tape measure
- Dressmaker's shears
- Trimming scissors
- Fabric markers for light and dark fabrics

- Glass-head pins and pincushion (wrist or magnetic)
- Hand needles
- Sewing machine needles
- Seam ripper
- Invisible or removable transparent tape

Making Sure Your Sewing Measures Up

You use a *tape measure* for taking your own measurements, checking measurements on a pattern, and other measuring tasks. (See Chapter 4 for more information on patterns.)

All kinds of tape measures are available. I recommend that you use a plastic-coated fabric tape measure. This tape doesn't stretch, so you always get accurate measurements. Most tapes are ⅝-inch wide, the width of a standard seam allowance (see Chapter 6 for more on seams), and 60 inches long, like the tape measure in Figure 1-1. Many tapes come with both metric and imperial measurements and are two-toned, so you can readily see when the tape is twisted.

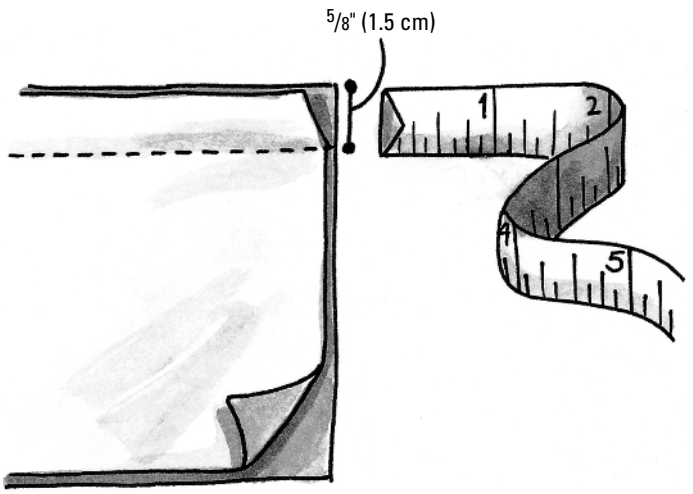

Figure 1-1: Tape measures are ⅝-inch wide and 60 inches long.

Keep your tape measure handy by draping it around your neck, but remember to take if off when you leave the house — no one ever believes in this fashion statement.

Taking on small tasks with a seam gauge

A tape measure suffices for most measuring jobs, but for measuring small and narrow things, such as hems and buttonholes, use a *seam gauge.* This 6-inch ruler has an adjustable slide that moves up and down the length of the ruler. When you measure a hem, you use the slide to see how deep the hem is as you move the seam gauge all the way around the hemline. When measuring buttonholes, simply set the slide to the correct length and mark away.

One of my favorite rulers is a clear O'Lipfa ruler. It's 24 inches long and 5 inches wide, and is marked into quarter-inch increments across the width of the ruler — handy for cutting even strips in many home decor projects. (Read the following section to find out about rotary cutters.) The ruler and the mat together work like a T-square — helpful when marking and cutting perfect 90-degree squares or rectangles and for cutting strips. You can find a lot of clear rulers on the market — many longer than my ruler, but I find that I use my O'Lipfa almost every time I sew.

Cutting Up (Without Cracking Up)

If I could have only two cutting tools, I'd use the following:

- **8-inch bent dressmaker's shears:** Shears are the best tool for cutting fabric. They have one straight and one bent-angle blade, a round thumbhole, and an oblong finger hole for comfortable, accurate cutting. The bent-angle blade gives your index finger a place to rest when you have a long cutting job. The bend in the blade also prevents you from lifting the fabric off the table, ensuring a more accurate cut.
- **5-inch trimming scissors:** These scissors have straight blades and two round holes for your finger and thumb. They come in handy for trimming smaller areas on a project and for clipping threads.

When shopping for shears or scissors, make sure that you test them on a variety of fabrics. They should cut all the way to the tips of the blades.

Some brands of scissors and shears are made of lightweight aluminum alloy. The lightweight models generally fit more comfortably in your hand, are usually a little cheaper than other models, and can be resharpened several times. However, with some brands, the lighter-weight blades may not cut as easily through heavy fabrics or multiple-fabric layers.

Steel scissors and shears are heavier, which means they easily cut through heavier fabrics and more fabric layers. Because each blade is made of one solid piece of steel, you can resharpen heavy scissors and shears more times than the lightweight variety, and they often stay sharper longer, too. But the heavier models are generally more expensive than their lightweight counterparts.

Regardless of the weight, scissors and shears with a screw joining the blades generally cut heavier fabrics and more layers than those that are riveted.

After you've plunked down money for a good pair of scissors and shears, don't let the family get hold of them and cut plastic, cardboard, wire, or anything you don't normally cut when sewing. The blades become rough and dull and not only will they chew or snag your fabric, but they also wear out your hand when you try to use them.

I also often use a pair of 3-inch *embroidery scissors.* The pointed blades are perfect for cutting out unwanted stitches and trimming laces, appliques, and hard-to-reach places.

After you decide you like to sew, treat yourself to a *rotary cutter,* which looks a lot like a pizza cutter, and a *cutting mat,* which protects the table and helps keep the rotary blade sharp. You use these tools without lifting the fabric off the cutting mat, so you can cut lines very accurately. Rotary cutters come in several sizes — I like the largest model because you can cut more, faster. But don't discard your shears; you need them for cutting intricate pattern pieces.

Cut edges can mean frayed edges, but you can put a stop to that with seam sealant. *Seam sealant* is a liquid that dries soft and clear so that you don't see any residue on the fabric and it won't snag or scratch. It comes in a small plastic bottle with a tip for easy aim. Dot it on a knot to prevent threads from coming out and dribble a bead at the cut edges of ribbon to prevent fraying.

Keeping your shears and scissors sharp

Dull scissors can make cutting a real drag: You have to work twice as hard to use them, and the results aren't nearly as good. Keep your shears and scissors sharp so they're a pleasure to use. After all, cutting is a big part of sewing, and if it's a chore, you won't like to sew.

Most sewing machine dealers sharpen scissors and shears. In addition, many fabric stores have a scissors-sharpener who visits the store periodically. After the pro finishes sharpening your shears or scissors, check that they cut to the point.

Making Your Mark

Sewing is an exact science, in many ways. When you sew, you must match up the pieces of your project precisely — otherwise you get the left sleeve in the right armhole and end up feeling like you're walking backwards all the time (find out more about sewing in sleeves in Chapter 10).

To help you match up your fabric pattern pieces exactly the right way, the pattern for a project includes *match points,* called notches and dots, which are printed right on the pattern tissue. To use these match points, lay the pattern tissue down on the fabric, pin the tissue to the fabric, cut out the pattern piece, and clip the notches and mark the dots from the pattern tissue to the fabric. (See Chapter 4 for more information on cutting out and marking patterns.)

Fabric markers made especially for sewing make transferring match points from the pattern to the fabric a quick and easy task. Use one of the following markers, depending on the kind of fabric you want to mark:

- **Disappearing dressmaker's chalk:** Excellent for marking dark fabrics, dressmaker's chalk disappears in about five days or when you wash or iron the fabric.
- **Wash-out pencil:** This pencil shows up well when marking dark fabrics and erases with a drop of cold water. It looks like a regular pencil with white, pink, or light blue lead.
- **Vanishing marker:** Best for marking light-colored fabrics, this felt-tipped marker usually has pink or purple ink that disappears in 12 to 24 hours, unless you live in a humid climate where marks can disappear in minutes.
- **Water-erasable marker:** This felt-tipped marker for light to medium-colored fabrics has blue ink that disappears with clear water or by washing the fabric. This marker works better than the vanishing marker if you sew in a humid environment.

  

  The ink in vanishing and water-erasable markers uses a chemical that may react to the dyes and chemicals in synthetic fabrics. Always test markers on a scrap of fabric to make sure that you can remove the mark and that it doesn't come back when you press the fabric.

- **Invisible or removable transparent tape:** These are useful but not essential marking tools. Invisible tape has a cloudy appearance that you can easily see on most fabrics. Removable tape has the same adhesive as sticky notes and doesn't pull off the *nap* (fuzz) from velvet, corduroy, or velour. I use ½-inch-width invisible or removable tape as a stitching template for sewing in a zipper (see Chapter 9), as a guide for straight stitching (I talk about stitches in Chapter 5), and for a lot of other little jobs. Hide it from your family, though, or it may disappear when you really, really need it.

Pinning Down Your Projects

You need pins to sew. Period. You use them to pin the pattern to the fabric, pin the pieces of fabric together before sewing them, and for several other pinning jobs. Because pins are such a constant companion when you sew, buy some that keep your fingers happy.

I recommend using long, fine, glass-head pins. The glass head fits comfortably in your fingers when you pin through multiple layers of fabric, and the extra length makes pinning more secure. Plus, if you accidentally press or iron over the glass heads, they don't melt like the plastic ones may.

You also need a place to keep your pins. Some pins, like glass-head pins, come packaged in convenient plastic boxes that make great pin holders. But to save time, I wear a wrist pincushion so that my pins stay with me wherever I go.

A magnetic pincushion, available in a wrist or tabletop model, is handy in your cutting area and at the ironing board. Besides pins, small scissors and a seam ripper also stick to the magnetized surface. The magnetic cushion is also wonderful for picking up pins and stray metal objects that fall on the carpet.

Even though computerized sewing machines have improved, avoid getting the tabletop magnetic pincushion near yours because you may wipe out the machine's memory.

Pressing Issues

Why are you delighted when someone asks if your pie is homemade but insulted when someone points to your dress and asks, "Did you make that?" In sewing, if someone can immediately tell that your project is homemade, it's probably because something just looks . . . wrong. Usually this happens because the project wasn't pressed properly during construction. Using the right tools for pressing is just as important to sewing as using a sharp needle and thread that matches your fabric. Good pressing tools mean the difference between a project that looks good and a project that looks great.

Consider these points when choosing your tools:

- **Iron:** You need a *good* iron. I didn't say an *expensive* one — just a good one. Choose an iron that has a variety of heat settings and can make steam. Also, choose an iron that has a smooth *soleplate* (the part that heats up) and is easy to clean.

If you use *fusible products,* such as iron-on patches that melt when heated, you can easily gum up the iron. A non-stick soleplate makes it easy to clean and provides a smooth, slick surface for trouble-free pressing and ironing. Also, several newer brands of irons automatically turn off every few minutes, which is a real pain when you're ready to use the iron for sewing, so avoid buying an iron with this feature.

- **Ironing board:** Make sure you buy a padded ironing board. Without the padding, seams and edges press against a hard, flat surface that scars the fabric. This scarring shadows through to the right side of the fabric, so when a seam is pressed open it can look like ski tracks on either side of the seamline. The finished project has a shiny, overpressed look that's tough — if not impossible — to remove.

  Choose a muslin or nonreflective ironing board cover: The silver, reflector-type covers are too slippery and sometimes get too hot, causing unnecessary scorching on some synthetic fabrics.

- **Press cloth:** A *press cloth* is essential for pressing a variety of fabrics, from fine silks to heavier woolens and wool blends. You place the press cloth between the iron and the fabric to prevent shine and overpressing. Use a clean, white or off-white 100-percent cotton or linen tea towel or napkin, or purchase a press cloth.

  If you're considering a print or color-dyed fabric for a press cloth — don't do it. Dyes can bleed through and ruin your project. Terry cloth isn't a good choice, either. The napped surface of a terry cloth towel can leave the familiar terry texture on the fabric.

  A professional dressmaker friend of mine loves using a cloth diaper for a press cloth. The diaper is white and absorbent, can be doubled or tripled depending on the use, and is a good size for many projects.

After you decide to make sewing a regular hobby and you feel comfortable investing a little extra money into your projects, consider purchasing the following tools:

- **Seam roll:** This fabric cylinder measures about 12 inches long by 3 inches in diameter. You use the roll to press seams open without leaving tire tracks on either side of the seam. Because of the shape of the seam roll, the seam allowance falls away under the iron and doesn't press through to the right side of the fabric.
- **Tailor's ham:** This stuffed, triangular-shaped cushion has several curves on it that simulate the curves on your body. You use the ham to press and shape darts, side seams, sleeves, and other curved areas on a garment.

Both the seam roll and the ham have a 100-percent cotton cloth side made out of heavy muslin-type fabric for pressing high-temperature fabrics such as cotton and linen and a wool side for pressing lower-temperature fabrics such as silks and synthetics.

Figure 1-2 shows you pressing tools in action.

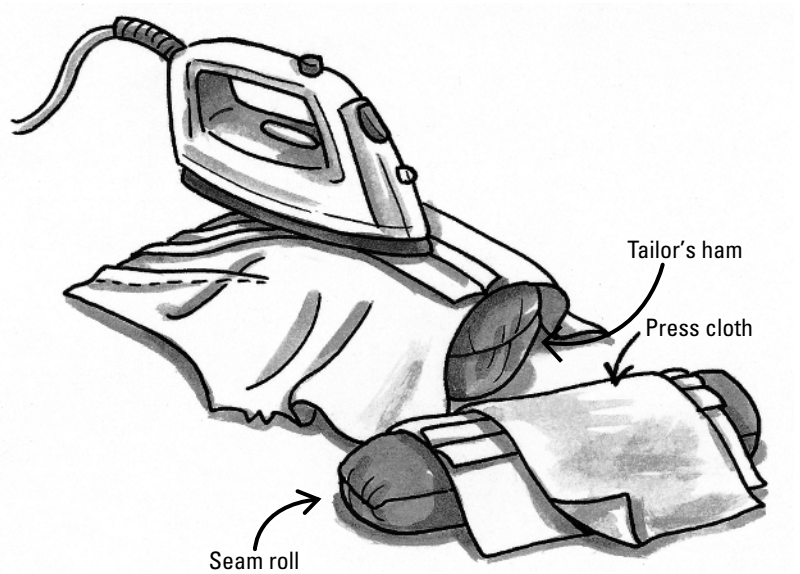

Figure 1-2: Pressing tools that turn home-made into hand-tailored sewing projects.

Needing the Right Needles

Needles come in hand and machine varieties, and you can find many shapes, sizes, and types within each variety. The needle you select depends on the fabric you use and the project you want to sew.

Generally, the finer the fabric you work with, the finer the needle — the heavier the fabric, the heavier the needle.

Selecting needles for hand sewing

When selecting hand needles, choose a variety pack, and you have what you need for most basic hand-sewing projects. Variety packs vary from brand to brand but generally have from five to ten needles of various lengths and thicknesses. Some even have different-sized eyes.

In a pinch, you can use any hand needle as long as the point can easily penetrate the fabric and the eye doesn't shred the thread.

Fortify your fingertips with thimbles

Fingers are fabulous tools, but they leave a little to be desired when it comes to pushing a needle through heavy thicknesses of fabric. Protect the soft pads of your fingers from potential pain with a thimble, which is kind of like a little hard hat for your finger.

Thimbles come in a variety of sizes; choose a thimble that comfortably fits the middle finger on your dominant hand. Try on a variety of thimbles until you find one that's just right — and then use it! You can save your fingers a lot of wear and tear.

Selecting needles for sewing machines

For machine needles, size #11 (in American sizing) or #12/80 (in European sizing) works well for general sewing on about 80 percent of today's fabrics.

To make sure that you have the right size needle for the fabric, read your Operating Manual or ask your local sewing machine dealer. Some needles offer different point types designed to handle different stitching techniques and fabric types. For most projects, though, a multipurpose or Universal point works beautifully. Buy a package or two of #11 American multipurpose or #12/80 Universal European sewing machine needles and you should be all set.

When shopping for sewing machine needles, remember to take the make and model number of your machine with you. Some models can use only their brand of needle without causing harm to the machine. When in doubt, ask your local sewing machine dealer what to buy.

During the course of a project, a sewing machine needle gets used and abused, and when the needle becomes bent or burred (like the end of a blade of grass or a fish hook), the needle skips stitches and can snag the fabric. Unlike hand needles, your machine needle will need to be replaced frequently. The best machine needle for any project is a new one, so start each project with a new needle.

As ye sew, so shall ye rip

If you sew, you must stitch rip. Okay, so it may not be a biblical proverb, but it's a fact of sewing. When you make mistakes, you correct them by ripping out the stitches, or unsewing. For specifics on unsewing, see Chapter 5.

Make ripping stitches as pleasant as possible. Buy a sharp *seam ripper,* a little tool with a point that lifts the stitch off the fabric as the blade cuts the thread.

I've put too many unwanted holes in a project with a dull ripper simply because I had to push too hard to cut a stitch and ended up tearing right past the stitches into the fabric. When your seam ripper gets dull, throw it away and buy another one. You can't resharpen them.

Working with a Sewing Machine

Many folks drag out Aunt Millie's 75-year-old sewing clunker from the garage or basement, thinking it's good enough for a beginner. Turns out the instruction book for Millie's machine has long since disappeared, and just before completing a project, the machine becomes possessed by demons that sabotage every seam.

Just like your car, you want your sewing machine to be dependable. The machine doesn't have to be a race car, and it doesn't need every modern convenience known to man. It just needs to work well — every time.

Your local sewing machine dealer can show you a wide range of models and prices. Many dealers offer machines on a rental basis, and some dealers let you come into their classrooms and use a machine during open sewing time. You can also take Aunt Millie's machine into a dealer, have an honest assessment made about its general working condition and life span, and see if you can realistically count on using it.

Finding your way around a sewing machine

Acquainting yourself with the parts of the sewing machine and knowing how it works keeps you and your sewing machine out of trouble. Consider this section of the book your road map to navigating a sewing machine. I tell you all about the parts on a typical machine (shown in Figure 1-3) and what you use them for.

Of course, your sewing machine may look a little different from what you see in Figure 1-3. You may have a newer model, or you may be working on a serger (in which case, you should check out the section "Using a serger" later in this chapter). If things on your machine don't correspond exactly to what I show

you, consult the operating manual that comes with your machine to see how the parts compare.

Needle

The most important part of the sewing machine is the needle. It's so important that I devote a section to the needle, "Selecting needles for sewing machines," earlier in this chapter.

Always start a new project with a new sewing machine needle. A new needle won't skip stitches or snag the fabric, and changing your needle regularly may save you from an unnecessary trip to the dealer just to find out that all you need is a new needle. (Ask me how I know this.)

Presser foot

Sometimes incorrectly referred to as a pressure foot, the *presser foot* holds the fabric firmly against the feed dogs (check out the section "Feed dogs," later in this chapter to . . . well, find out about feed dogs) so that the fabric doesn't flap up and down with each stitch.

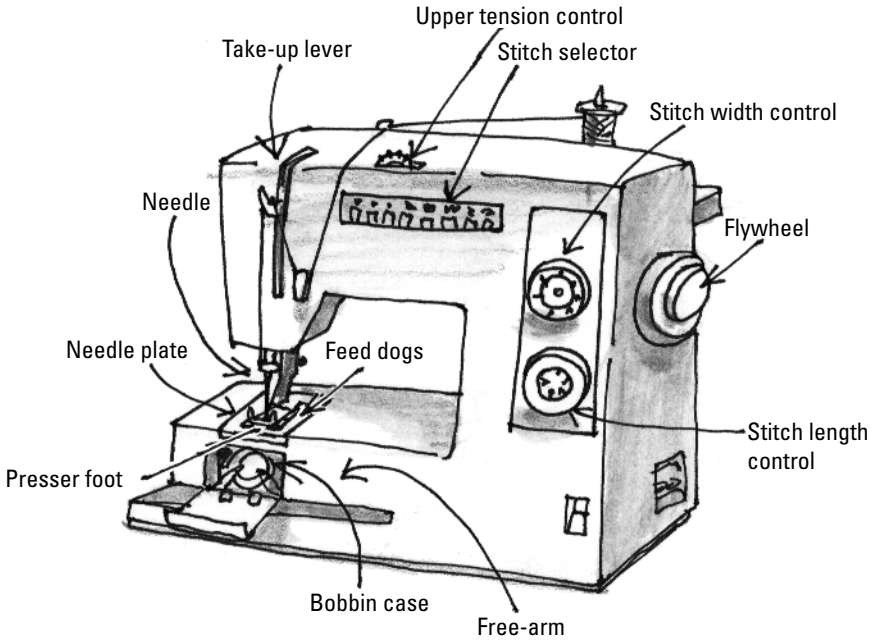

Figure 1-3: A typical sewing machine and its parts.

For most machines, you can buy different presser feet for specialty jobs. Most machines come with four or five of the most useful variations, including the following (shown in Figure 1-4):

- **All-purpose foot:** This foot, which is usually metal, works well on a lot of fabrics. The foot is often available with a Teflon coating for an even smoother sewing experience.
- **Embroidery foot:** Sometimes referred to as the *appliqué foot,* the embroidery foot is often made of a transparent material. The high, wide groove carved out on the underside allows the foot to glide over satin decorative stitches without smashing them into the fabric.
- **Blind hem foot:** This foot helps stitch a truly invisible hem (you can read more about hems in Chapter 7). The blind hem foot usually has a wide toe on the right and a guide (which may or may not be adjustable) and narrow toe on the left.
- **Button sewing foot:** This foot usually has very short toes and a nylon or rubber gripper designed to hold a button firmly in place (see Chapter 5 for clever ways to sew on buttons by machine and hand).
- **Quilting or edge guide:** This foot slides or screws on behind the ankle of the presser foot. The guide rides over the previous row of stitching for parallel rows of quilting or next to an edge for perfectly positioned topstitching. (See Chapter 5 for more about topstitching.)
- **Zipper foot:** Not surprisingly, you use this foot to sew in a zipper (see Chapter 9 for the details on zippers). The foot has one toe, and you can adjust it either by sliding the foot over or by snapping it on the other side of the ankle.

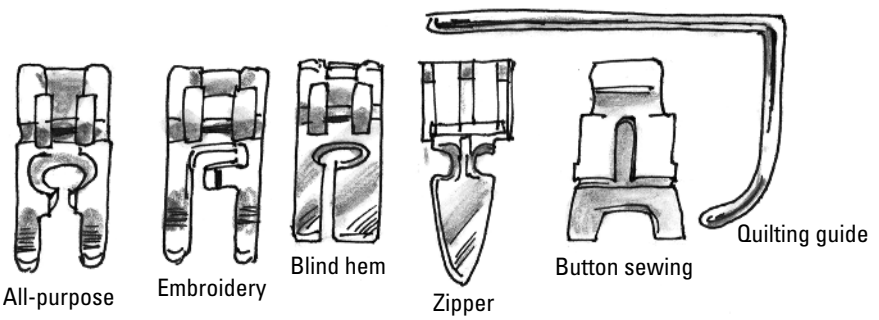

Figure 1-4: Typical sewing machine presser feet.

Presser foot lever

Lift the *presser foot lever* to raise the presser foot. Doing so releases the upper tension so that you can remove the fabric.

The timesaving knee-lift feature, common on commercial sewing machines, is available on some brands of household sewing machines. The knee lift allows you to have both hands free when removing the fabric from under the presser foot or when pivoting the fabric around a corner.

Feed dogs

Feed dogs, sometimes referred to as *feed teeth,* are saw-shaped teeth or pads that move the fabric through the machine. You sandwich the fabric between the presser foot and the feed dogs, and as the needle stitches up and down, the feed dogs grab the fabric and move it under the foot.

Most machines allow you to sew with the feed dogs up or down. You do most sewing with the feed dogs in the up position; you use the down position mostly for mending or for free-machine embroidery, in which you move the fabric freely under the needle as it stitches.

Needle plate

Sometimes referred to as a *throat plate,* the *needle plate* rests on the bed of the machine and fits over the feed dogs. It has either a small round hole or an oblong hole that the needle passes through.

The needle plate often includes a series of lines that run in ¼-inch increments from the needle. These lines guide you as you sew a seam allowance, which you can read more about in Chapter 6.

For most sewing, you use the needle plate with the oblong hole. This way the needle has the clearance it needs and doesn't break when you use a stitch that zigzags from side to side.

Bobbin and company

A *bobbin* is a small spool that holds about 40 to 70 yards of thread. The machine uses the needle thread and the bobbin thread to make a stitch.

Machines usually come with three to five bobbins that are specially made for the machine's make and model. Bobbins are wound on a *bobbin winder.* Check your operating manual for proper bobbin winding and threading instructions. After you wind the thread around a bobbin, the bobbin fits into a *bobbin case,* and the thread can be pulled up through the needle plate, ready for stitching.

If you're winding a bobbin that has a hole in it, double and twist the thread end, poking the folded end of the thread through the hole from the inside of the bobbin out. Place the bobbin on the winder, holding the thread end tightly. Start winding until the thread breaks off. This way, when you get to the end of a bobbin, the wrong end of the thread doesn't accidentally get caught in the stitch.

Bobbin winding does differ according to brand, so check your operating manual for bobbin winding instructions. No matter what brand you use, though, don't overfill the bobbin if you want smooth sewing and the best stitch quality.

Free-arm

A *free-arm,* sometimes called an *open arm,* is a squared-off cylinder on the bed of the machine that lets you stitch around tubular areas, such as pant legs, sleeves, cuffs, and armholes, without ripping out a seam.

Flywheel

The right end of the machine has a *flywheel,* or *hand wheel,* that turns when you sew. The flywheel drives the needle up and down and coordinates the needle movement with the feed dogs when creating a stitch. On certain machines the flywheel allows you to manually control the needle, which helps you pivot fabric under the needle when sewing corners.

To pivot your fabric under the needle, simply turn the flywheel so that the needle is down in the fabric, lift the presser foot, pivot the fabric, lower the presser foot, and then continue sewing.

Depending on the machine model, some flywheels have a *clutch* or button that you must release when winding a bobbin. Consult your operating manual for specific instructions on bobbin winding.

Stitch-length control

The *stitch-length control* determines the distance the feed dogs move the fabric under the needle. When the feed dogs move with shorter strokes, the machine sews shorter stitches. When the feed dogs move with longer strokes, the stitches are longer.

Your stitch-length control gives stitch lengths in one of the following two ways, depending on the make and model of the machine:

- Millimeters (mm)
- Stitches per inch (spi)

Throughout *Sewing For Dummies,* 2nd Edition, I give you stitch length settings in millimeters (mm) and stitches per inch (spi).

The average stitch length for mid-weight fabrics is 2.5 to 3 mm/10 to 12 spi. For fine fabrics, use 1.5 to 2 mm/13 to 20 spi. (Anything shorter is almost impossible to rip out when you make a mistake.) For heavier fabrics, basting, or topstitching, use 3.5 to 6 mm/4 to 5 spi. (You can read more about basting and topstitching in Chapter 5.)

Stitch-width control

The *stitch-width control* sets the distance the needle moves from side to side. You always measure this distance in millimeters (mm).

Some sewing machines have a maximum stitch width of 4 to 5 mm. Others create stitches as wide as 9 mm. A 5-mm width does the trick for most utility sewing. (Throughout *Sewing For Dummies,* I give stitch-width settings in a range that works for most sewing machines.)

Needle position

Needle position refers to the position of the needle in relationship to the hole in the needle plate. In center needle position, you center the needle over the oblong hole in the needle plate. In left needle position, you set the needle to the left of center. In right needle position, you put the needle to the right of center.

A few older, less expensive models have either a permanent left needle position or a permanent center needle position. Most new models (made in the last 25 years or so) have an adjustable needle position. Adjustable needle position comes in handy when you topstitch, sew on buttons, and sew in zippers. Instead of manually positioning the fabric under the needle, you simply move the needle into the right spot by adjusting the needle position. The needle position control is usually around, near, or a part of the stitch-width control. If you can't locate it, read your operating manual.

Stitch selector

If your sewing machine does more than straight stitch and zigzag, it has a way for you to select a stitch. (See Chapter 5 for more information on basic sewing machine stitches.) The *stitch selectors* on older machines are dials, levers, buttons, or drop-in cams. Newer, computerized models have keys or touch pads that not only select the stitch but also automatically set the stitch length and width.

Upper tension control

In order to make uniform stitches, your machine requires a certain amount of tension on the thread as it sews. You adjust the tension using the *upper tension control,* which is usually located on the top or front of the machine.

The upper tension is usually marked in numbers — the higher the number, the tighter the tension, and the lower the number, the looser the tension. Some makes have the upper tension marked with a plus sign (+), meaning more tension, and a minus sign (-), meaning less tension.

The old adage "If it ain't broke, don't fix it" definitely applies to the upper tension control. Unless you have major problems with the fabric puckering or the thread looping, leave the tension alone. If you experience these problems, consult your operating manual or a qualified sewing machine dealer for advice on adjusting the tension.

Pressure adjustment

The *pressure adjustment,* which you can usually find above the bar that holds the presser foot, controls how much pressure the foot exerts against the fabric.

For most sewing projects you want to leave the pressure on the *full* setting. This way, the fabric doesn't slip and slide around under the foot, creating crooked seams while you sew. For some jobs, like sewing through very heavy fabrics or through multiple thicknesses or stitching complicated embroidery designs, lighter pressure works better. Consult your operating manual for specifics on your machine's pressure control.

Take-up lever

The *take-up lever* is very important in the threading and normal operation of the sewing machine. This lever pulls just enough thread off the spool for the next stitch.

Newer machines have a needle-up, needle-down function that automatically stops the needle in the up or down position without your having to manually turn the flywheel. Set this function for the up function, and the needle stops out of the fabric — you don't unthread the needle with the next stitch. Set it for the down function, and the needle stops in the fabric for easy pivoting around corners.

Speed control

Many newer machines have a *speed control.* It works like the cruise control in your car or the feature in your computer that controls the speed of your mouse. You adjust the speed control so that you can't sew faster than what feels comfortable.

Reverse button

At the beginning and end of seams, you often want to lock the stitches in some way so that they don't come out. You can tie off each seam by hand (ugh) or use your reverse button. Simply sew three or four stitches, touch the *reverse button,* and the feed dogs back up the fabric a couple of stitches. Release the button, and the machine resumes stitching forward. The stitches are then locked off and secure.

Maintaining your sewing machine

A little-known pest infestation runs rampant in the world's sewing machines — dust bunnies. These little guys can cause all sorts of problems for you, including the following:

- Skipped stitches
- Needle or bobbin thread looping when it shouldn't
- Noise and a lot of vibration
- General sluggish performance

You must keep lint dusted out from under the feed dogs and the area where the bobbin case sits in the sewing machine. When lint gets packed under the feed dogs your machine has a hard time making stitches.

Read your operating manual before you clean out the lint. You need a good lint brush with a lot of bristles. Some — but not all — machines come with a good one; if yours is skimpy, buy a new one.

Follow these general instructions to get rid of lint:

1. **Fluff out your brush until it looks like you've stuck it into a light socket.**

   This way, each bristle reaches into the lint-infested area and finds as much lint as possible.

2. **Unplug the machine.**
3. **Remove the needle, presser foot, needle plate, bobbin, and bobbin case.**
4. **If you can, remove the race area, snap off the race cover, remove the hook (Figure 1-5), and then memorize how the hook and race cover go back together.**

   Your operating manual most likely shows you how to fit the pieces together but find out *before* you start.

5. **Brush away the lint collected in and around the race area, especially under the feed dogs.**
6. **Put the race back together.**
7. **Plug in the machine and run it without the needle, needle plate, presser foot, bobbin, and bobbin case.**
8. **Now put everything back on your machine.**

   When replacing the needle, make sure the flat side goes to the back of the machine for a top- or front-loading bobbin. For machines with a side-loading bobbin, the flat side goes to the right.

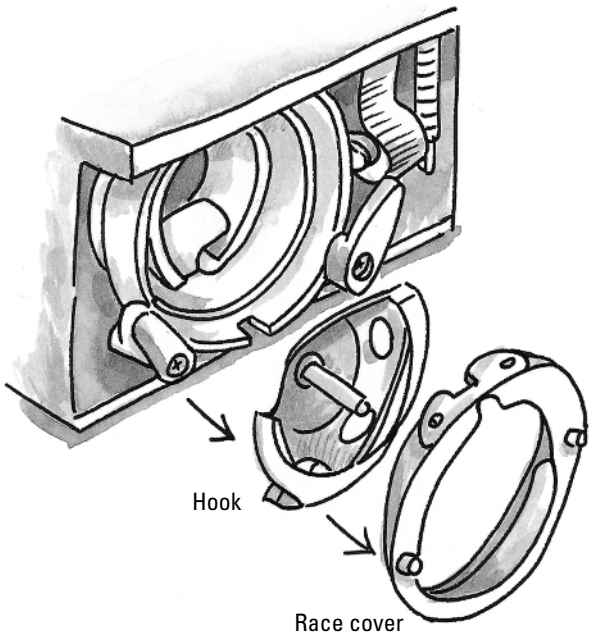

Figure 1-5: The race area.

Removing dust bunnies from your sewing machine sometimes involves taking the machine apart (and then putting it back together). Your best bet is to figure out how to clean the machine by taking the after-purchase lessons offered by most sewing machine dealers. For really heavy, once-a-year cleaning and tune-up, see your local sewing machine dealer.

Using a serger

A *serger* is to sewing as a microwave oven is to cooking. I love my serger because it really speeds up the sewing process by sewing a seam, finishing the edge (like the seams you see in ready-made clothing), and then cutting off the excess fabric in one step. You can use a serger to stitch a wide variety of fabrics, but it can't make buttonholes. A serger works much faster than a standard sewing machine, but it's not as versatile.

Most beginners start off on standard sewing machines. However, in case you want to sew on a serger, I give you special instructions where you need them throughout *Sewing For Dummies,* 2nd Edition.