

Chapter 1

The World of Sewing

In This Chapter

- ▶ Discovering why you should sew
 - ▶ Taking a look at the sewing process, seaming, and adding details
 - ▶ Understanding how sewing can save money and resources
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Why sew? Simply put, it's fun. You also get the gratification of making something useful and beautiful and the personal recognition from friends and family who are in awe of your raw, natural talent. Not to mention that what you learn about fabrics, fibers, and fashion helps you in other areas of your life.

You may think of sewing as a hobby in which you make clothes. But as you move from place to place in your busy life, start paying attention to how much fabric is used everywhere. You can sew Halloween costumes, teddy bears, prom dresses, and purses. Think of the fashions in home décor. A tablescape isn't complete without some great-looking linens — that you can make, of course. You can update your house by making a wardrobe of pillows with a set of covers for every season or by sewing a new duvet cover. Need a gift? Make a throw or fill a basket with a set of napkins. It's all possible when you sew. My friend and editor, Robbie Fanning, called this collection of possibilities “the world of sewing.”

Because the topic of sewing is so extensive and I have only so many pages in this book, I thoughtfully organized the world of sewing for you. I first walk you through the sewing process used in making clothing and then move on to ways to sew for your home and repair and remake existing clothing for a more sustainable wardrobe. My hope is that after you get to know more about this creative endeavor and have some success with the projects in this book, you'll spread your wings and investigate the larger world of sewing.

Figuring Out What Comes First: The Idea or the Tools?

My family was on a strict budget when I was growing up, so I'd read my *Seventeen* magazine and head off to the mall to see what all the kids were wearing. After seeing just what I wanted and knowing it was too expensive, I'd pore over the pattern catalogs for the latest junior fashions that I could "knock off."

Next stop — the fabric store. There I combed through the bolts for just the right fabric, color, and texture, and went on to the notions wall to find the right-sized buttons. Little did I know that I was shaping the skills I now use to create something trendy for myself, my family members, and my home.

So to answer the question of whether the idea or the tools come first, for me the idea or inspiration is first, and then the adventure of hunting for just the right project pattern and fabric starts me on my journey. After I find everything, I take it all home and put it together with tools — but not just any tools; tools that are a pleasure to use. Read on to understand what I mean.

The pleasure of using good tools

You can cook a five-course gourmet meal for eight by using nasty old pots and pans and cooking over an open fire, but it's not a lot of fun. The same is true for sewing — you can make a project by sewing everything together with a hand needle and thread, but it takes a lot of time and patience and you may not like the results. For me, the joy of sewing is having quality tools at my fingertips. No scurrying around the house to find a pair of shears that haven't been used in my husband's workshop or pins that have been pulled off packaged dress shirts. Sure, good tools are an investment, but if you're serious about learning to sew, nothing gets you closer to success than the pleasure of using a quality tool that works perfectly every time you use it. Not sure if you'll like sewing but still want to try it? Take a sewing class at your local fabric store or sewing machine dealer where you can use great tools and quality equipment.

I spend some time in Chapter 2 sharing my favorite tools with you, so check it out. Besides the fabric and pattern, here's what will make your sewing experience a real pleasure:

- ✓ **Measuring tools for small and large areas of a project.** I love my 6-inch adjustable sewing gauge, my flexible vinyl tape measure, and the see-through O'Lipfa ruler with ¼-inch increments.
- ✓ **Cutting tools for cutting out your project.** I use 8-inch bent-handle dressmaking shears, 5-inch scissors for trimming smaller areas, and embroidery scissors for clipping and ripping out unwanted stitches. For long straight cutting, the pizza cutter-type rotary cutter is the best.

- ✔ **Marking tools to show you how to turn a flat, shapeless piece of fabric into something useful.** You need a marking tool for dark-colored fabrics and one for light-colored fabrics. My favorites are disappearing dress-maker's chalk that washes out with water and air-soluble markers.
- ✔ **Pinning tools both for pinning and to hold pins.** My favorite pins for 90 percent of the sewing I do are 1¼-inch glass-head pins. To keep my pins from ending up all over the place, I use three magnetic pin catchers (one for the ironing board, one on the cutting table, and one next to my sewing machine). I also like a wrist pin cushion with a felt cushion so my pins are portable.
- ✔ **New hand and machine needles.** After some use, needles wear out and need to be discarded. As far as hand needles go, specialty needles are available for just about every hand-sewing task. I most often use self-threading needles for basic hand sewing and easy repairs — I used these even before I needed reading glasses because the thread just clips into place, no squinting and poking thread ends through a microscopic eye required.
- ✔ **Thread to hold everything together.** Be sure not to skimp on the thread — when you see three spools for \$1, run (away from the store, not to it!). The quality of that thread isn't worth the spool it's wound on. Read more about choosing quality thread in Chapter 2.
- ✔ **A good sewing machine to enjoy the sewing experience.** I said you need a good one, not an expensive one — and it doesn't have to be new. Just buy it from a reputable sewing machine dealer that can offer you reliable service and lessons if you need them.
- ✔ **A serger — if you discover that you like to sew and want to take your newfound skill to a new level.** If you're new to sewing, you don't need a serger, but after you have some experience, it makes the sewing process faster and more streamlined (like the microwave oven does for cooking).

Understanding fabrics and fibers

Among other perks of learning to sew, one cool thing is that you gain more knowledge about fabrics, fibers, how they respond to washing (or not), wearing, and pressing, and ultimately this knowledge makes you a savvier shopper of ready-to-wear garments. And because your time and effort is worth something, spend your sewing time wisely by buying the best fabric you can afford and the best fiber for the project you're making. So what's the difference between *fiber* and *fabric*?

Fabrics are woven or knitted yarns, which are created by twisting fibers together. Whether the fabric is all wool or a cotton-polyester blend, each fiber has its unique advantages and disadvantages, which makes one better than others for a particular project. (See more specific information about the most common types of fibers and fabrics in Chapter 3.)

If you aren't sure about your fabric choice, the sales associate at your local fabric store is a great resource for locating just the right fabric for the project. Most have knowledge it would take you years to learn, so don't be shy. Ask for help, tell her what you want to make, and ask for her best advice. This can save you time and guide you on your way to success.

Getting the sewing notion

In most fabric stores you find a notions wall that's full of specialty tools and sewing stuff that can be packaged and hung up. Notions range from pins, needles, scissors, shears, and measuring tools, to buttons, bra hooks, collar stays, and iron-on knee patches. The list of notions needed for a particular project is listed on the back of your pattern envelope, so when in doubt, find what you need on the notions wall. Don't be afraid to ask for help — what you need may be hidden in plain sight.

Pondering the pattern

Fabric stores have catalogs of patterns that you can browse through, but you only need to do a quick Internet search for “sewing patterns” and the world of sewing is at your fingertips. Looking for a particular project? Type in the project you want to make then “sewing pattern” after it to find even more choices. The Internet brings pattern catalogs home and puts the right project just a keystroke away. It also makes investigating independent pattern designers easy.



Choose a pattern designed for your skill set. If a pattern says it's easy, the instruction writers often still assume you have some knowledge of sewing, so if you're a true beginner, choose patterns for beginners. If you don't, you may become discouraged and never sew again! Simplicity Pattern Company helps beginners find appropriate patterns with their line of “Sewing For Dummies” patterns. Check it out at www.simplicity.com.

When the pattern has been chosen, check out the front and back of the envelope for very important information: what fabric works best to achieve the results pictured on the front of the envelope, how much fabric to buy for the sized garment you're making, what you need in the way of trims and notions (see above), and the front and back views shown in easy-to-read line drawings.

Inside the envelope you find an instruction sheet commonly referred to as the *pattern guide sheet*. The pattern guide sheet shows you which pattern pieces you need to use for a specific version of the pattern (several versions

or views may be packaged in one pattern), shows you how to lay out the pattern pieces on the fabric, and gives you step-by-step instructions showing you how to put the project together. Even though I've been sewing for years, I still refer to my pattern guide sheet to be sure that I haven't forgotten to do something. You can read more about working with patterns in Chapter 4.

Use this book to supplement the pattern guide sheet instructions. Many times pattern instruction writers assume you know how to make a dart or sew in a zipper and may leave out information essential for your success. If you don't understand what the instructions tell you, look up how I recommend you complete a particular technique. I'm confident that trying it my way will get 'er done and that you'll pick up the skills and the lingo as you work through the project. So where to begin? In the following section I break it down and give you a general idea of where you're headed — think of this as your sewing GPS at the mile-high view.

Sizing Up the Sewing Process

Like any new endeavor, sewing has its very own vocabulary, skill set, and process. After you decide on a project, select your pattern and fabric, and collect the notions and tools you need, the sewing process follows the basic steps outlined in this section to complete a project.

As you look over the rest of this chapter, it may occur to you that a lot happens before you start actually sewing things together. Have you noticed that it takes a long time for road crews to prepare to lay a new road and then almost overnight it's in and you're cruising smoothly along your merry way? That's how it is with sewing. When you get your fabric and pattern; lay out, pin down, cut, and mark your pattern pieces; fuse on the interfacing; and finish the fabric edges; you're two-thirds of the way finished. But I'm ahead of myself. Here's a quick breakdown of the sewing process and the creative journey you're about to take.

Preshrinking fabric

After getting home from fabric shopping, preshrink your washable fabrics so the finished project won't shrink any more after it's washed. (You can find the whys and hows of preshrinking in Chapter 3.)



If life gets in the way and you have to set your project aside temporarily, still preshrink the fabric when you first bring it home. That way you don't have to wonder if the fabric is "needle ready" when you are.

Finding the right pattern pieces

Most patterns have a couple of variations included. Each variation is called a *view* and requires specific pattern pieces. Check out the pattern guide sheet to see what pattern pieces are needed for the view you're making, then cut those pattern pieces apart from the large sheet of printed pattern paper and set them aside. Read more in-depth about this in Chapter 4.

Laying out the pattern on the fabric

The pattern guide sheet has a suggested pattern-piece layout for the width of the fabric you are using (see “Understating fabrics and fibers” above). This is the most important step because if you lay out and cut something crookedly or incorrectly, no amount of sewing, ironing, begging, or pleading will make the fabric behave the way you want it to. Learn the do's and don'ts in Chapter 4.

Pinning and cutting

When you have the pattern pieces arranged on the fabric, pin each pattern piece to the fabric ready for cutting. As you cut out each pattern piece, notice if there are special markings such as a dart or a larger than normal dot. If so, place the cut pieces that need to be marked in one stack and those that don't in another. Read on to learn why.

Marking

Even though you may not know what the random pattern markings mean, as you proceed through the project the guide sheet instructions will tell you. When in doubt, transfer the mark from the pattern paper to the fabric. Chapter 4 gives you several methods to do this. If you don't, you'll waste a bunch of time sifting through pattern paper you've removed from the fabric to find and mark something you should have done in the first place. (Trust me here — I make the mistakes so you don't have to.)

Interfacing

After cutting out the pattern pieces and marking them, your guide sheet may tell you to cut interfacing for several of the pattern pieces. Some patterns even give you separate paper pattern pieces for the interfacing. So what is it and why should you care?

Certain places on a project need a little extra stability — like a collar, sleeve cuff, waistband, or down the front of a shirt or jacket with buttons and buttonholes. If what you're wearing has a waistband, take a look at the two separate pieces of fabric creating the outside and inside of the band. Inside and between these two layers of fabric is a third piece of fabric called *interfacing* that keeps your waistband from stretching out of shape and that keeps the hooks and eyes, buttons, or snaps from pulling off the fabric. So even though this may seem like an unnecessary step and extra expense, interfacing gives your project a professional finish and provides excellent wear. Read more about interfacings and how to use them in Chapter 3.

Pressing for the best shape

One of my tailoring professors at the New York Fashion Institute of Technology said, “as you sew, have a love affair with your iron.” By that time I had been sewing for 14 years and didn't give my iron much thought, but she was right. The best way to get a very professional-looking project is to press every seam and press it well. Learn more about this pressing subject in Chapter 5.

Moving On to the Needle and Thread

Pieces of fabric are joined by using a needle and thread to stitch them together in a way that fits a form. Stitches are done by hand or machine, and some stitches work better than others for a specific job. See Chapter 5 for the breakdown of the most common hand and machine stitches.

Finishing the edges first

If you use a fabric that ravels, you need to treat the edges of the fabric in some way to stop it from raveling. This treatment is called *finishing* the edges and is done before the seams are sewn. You can finish the edges either with pinking shears, for that delightful zigzag cut that's impervious to unraveling, or by sewing the edges with a machine or serger. Discover what works best for your project in Chapter 6.

Shaping

Shaping a piece of fabric to fit a form is done by nipping in a little here or letting out a little fabric there. So before you sew most pattern pieces together, you need to shape them with a dart, gathers, or tucks so they conform to the particular body part they cover.

To both nip in and let out at the same time, you sew a *dart* — a little triangle-shaped wedge of fabric that's wide at one end and is stitched to a point at the other end. After the dart is pressed it turns that flat, lifeless piece of fabric into something that conforms to the shape of your waist, bust, knee, or elbow so the fabric can move with you and be comfortable.

Need a nip here and a lot more fullness there? Then sew a tuck — it has a similar purpose as a dart except that the fabric is taken in, stitched in a straight line, and is open (rather than coming to a point) on one or both ends. Adding gathers and elastic are other ways of putting shape where you want it. Learn all about these shape-shifting techniques in Chapter 8.

Seaming

The place where two pieces of fabric come together is called a *seam*. Seams can be straight, curved, or turn a corner. After seams are sewn they're pressed and ironed into submission so that flat piece of fabric can be transformed into something that follows the contours of your body or a piece of furniture. What happens if you make a mistake? No worries. Unwanted stitches can be ripped out in several ways. You can find out more about seaming, pressing, and ripping in Chapter 6.

Closing

After your garment is made, you need a way to keep it on, and you typically accomplish this with a zipper or buttons and buttonholes. Besides being practical, both closure methods can be incorporated as design elements. There are some tricks to sewing them well, though, and pattern guide sheets rarely provide the instructions you need. Check out Chapter 9 for step-by-step guidance when installing zippers and to find out how sewing on a button can be a creative endeavor, too.

Hemming

Unless you want to pay someone every time you need to have a hem altered, learning how to hem is a life skill — like sewing on a button. You probably know what a hem is (just in case, it's the folded over and finished edge of a project), but did you know you can sew wide hems, narrow hems, cuffed hems, straight hems, curved hems, double hems, and blind hems? When you know how to hem and what hems look best on what projects, you're on your way to hemming success. Get the scoop on this life skill in Chapter 7.

Adding Fashion Detail with Sleeves and Pockets

Even though fashions change, the basic how-tos of sewing sleeves and pockets remain the same. Sleeves come in many flavors and often add the detail that makes the outfit. They can be short, long, raglan, set-in, faced, split, cuffed, tapered, batwing, or butterfly; gathered, puffed, tucked, cuffed, or padded. (Phew!) Armholes can be finished off with a decorative binding or faced with a matching fabric (read more about facings in Chapter 10). Stay tuned to find out what fashion will do to sleeves, but know this: When you learn the basics and feel comfortable with conventional sleeves, you have conquered the toughest part. When fashion changes, you'll be ready to tackle whatever trend comes a-knocking.

While pockets are far less fickle, they're a detail that can define a garment. Take a jeans back pocket, for example. Who knew *derrières* from every walk of life could don so many designs? Read more about these little patches of inspiration in Chapter 11.

Sewing for the Home Is Where the Saving Is

If you're a fan of home-interior makeover TV shows, you can hardly tune into a show without seeing someone using a sewing machine. What I love about sewing for my home is that I get the look I want and for so much less than custom made. And the sewing goes fast because most projects involve cutting and sewing straight lines.

What's different about sewing for your home versus sewing clothing is that you need more room to spread out and cut the fabric. You also use a ½-inch seam allowance rather than a ⅝-inch seam allowance used in typical garment construction. Home décor fabrics are usually a little heavier and wider than apparel fabrics, and a whole set of trims and notions are specific to home décor projects.

If you're new to sewing projects for your home, try your hand at making the smaller projects for your table or throw pillows for your family room found in Chapters 12, 13, and 14. If new widow treatments or a bedroom makeover are on your to-do list, then Chapters 15 and 16 are instrumental in your decorating success.

Doing Your Part for the Planet with a Sustainable Wardrobe

My mom and grandma were always sewing. Besides making a lot of my clothes, both women fixed everyone else's clothes by hemming, rehemming, fixing split seams, replacing zippers, sewing on buttons, and adding embellishments. Adjusting and updating clothing was just a normal thing.

Fast forward to the '80s, '90s, and early 2000s; the economy was cooking and ready-to-wear clothing was inexpensive and easier to discard than repair. Thanks goodness that now we've come to our senses and see the value in repairing, recycling, and repurposing things. Chapters 17, 18, and 19 give you the thrill of saving ill-fitting or damaged garments from the trash. You can make something fit and look better and get the satisfaction of completing it in one short sitting. Though these chapters come late in the book, repair work may be some of the first sewing you do, and hopefully you'll discover right away that sewing is great fun. It's a creative outlet for creating something useful, beautiful, or practical. It's also a hobby you can enjoy for a lifetime, so welcome to the world of sewing. I'm glad you're in it with me.