

Beading on Fabric, part 1

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Adding beads to sewn projects adds a bit of "bling," and it's easy even for beginners.

Bead Types, Size and Weight

Long popular with hand beaders, glass beads come in a wide selection of sizes, shapes and colors. Seed beads, bugles and pressed glass beads are particularly needle-friendly (1).



(1)

When choosing seed beads, the larger the number, the smaller the bead. Size 10/0 or 11/0 seed beads are widely available in craft and fabric stores but you may need a specialty retailer for other sizes. To achieve the most detail in dense, pictorial beading use the smallest beads (2). If uniformity of size and shape is important to the success of your design, choose high-quality beads.



(2)

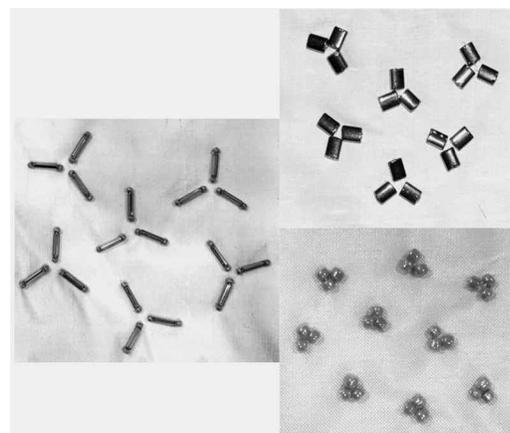
Semi-precious stones tend to be heavier than glass. They're typically drilled for stringing but the smallest versions are stitchable. Wooden, plastic and shell beads are usually more lightweight than glass.

Sequins are virtually weightless and the bling can easily dominate a motif. To create a more subdued shimmering effect, stitch a small bead through the hole of a clear sequin to reflect light.

Beadwork that's too heavy for the cloth may cause unattractive drag on a garment or accessory. In sufficient numbers, even tiny seed beads can be weighty. To firm up

a lightweight fabric in preparation for beading, cut fusible interfacing slightly larger than the design area and adhere it to the fabric wrong side. Cut the interfacing with pinking shears to soften the edges.

To cover a large area with minimal weight, space small groups of beads over the surface (3). For even coverage, mark a grid on the fabric. Stitch a cluster at each gridline intersection.

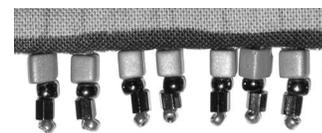


(3)

Shape

Rounded seed beads and tubular bugle beads are ideal for hand sewing. The holes are relatively large in relation to the wall thickness, so they can be stitched with a minimal amount of thread showing.

Large beads with small holes are drilled for stringing. They incorporate nicely into fringe (4); but when sewn to cloth tend to arch awkwardly away from the surface revealing a distracting amount of thread.



(4)

When selecting odd-shaped beads, be sure to examine the direction of the hole. Long skinny beads with holes drilled across one end (rather than through the length) usually won't lie flat when sewn. Flat, disc-shaped beads make interesting foundations for stacking with smaller beads. Stitch them in the same manner as sequins.

Coloration and Colorfastness

Beads are created and colored by a variety of manufacturing methods. The coloration of a bead may be the result of pigment that's infused throughout the raw material, from a tinted lining inside the hole of a clear or semi-transparent bead, from a surface-applied dye or paint, or from a galvanized coating. Always audition beads against the fabric you plan to stitch them to. Semi-transparent and color-lined beads that look beautiful against skin don't necessarily show well over a dark or busy fabric background.

Before beading a washable garment or accessory, be sure to test the beads for colorfastness by soaking a sample of each separately in a small amount of water overnight. Beads that bleed are unsuitable. Even if the water in each sample appears clear, drain the beads and rub them dry with a white facial tissue to make sure. If color rubs off, reject them. For washable and dry-cleanable projects alike, rub beads over an emery board to test for resistance to abrasion. Galvanized beads are highly prized for their metallic luster but they scratch easily. A knowledgeable bead vendor should be able to advise on the durability of a bead finish.

Thread

High-quality polyester sewing thread is a good choice for sewing beads onto fabric. It's readily available, user-friendly, and easily matched to a project. Nymo, a nylon beading thread, is available in a limited color range at specialty suppliers. Although stronger than sewing thread, it's slippery to handle and difficult to get through the eye of a needle. A thread conditioner helps control tangling of all fiber types and adds strength. Bugle beads are notorious for sharp edges that cut through thread. It helps to cushion each end with a seed bead.

Needles

Whenever hole size permits, use a long (approx 1 1/2") fine (size #10-12) regular hand sewing needle with an

eye just large enough for threading. Choose a beading needle as a last resort if you can't find a regular needle to fit the holes. Specialty beading needles tend to be very flexible, easily broken and are more difficult to thread because they have very narrow eyes.

Marking

Always test a marking device on an inconspicuous area of the project to make sure it won't show after beading. Design lines may be drawn free-hand, carbon-traced from a printed drawing, penciled through a stencil or stitched through a removable template. Air- and water-soluble pens or chalk pencils can be used for free-hand drawing or for tracing a stencil. Be sure to test a chalk marker to make sure the lines won't brush away before stitching is complete. To transfer a drawing, pin it the fabric and then slip dressmaker tracing carbon beneath. Trace over the design lines with a dull pencil or stylus.

When pencil or chalk won't show on a dark-color or napped fabric, use an indirect marking method. Trace the design lines onto a removable template of tissue paper or lightweight tear-away stabilizer. Hand baste it to the fabric. Bead over the drawing, sewing through the template and fabric as one (make sure each stitch catches through the cloth). After beading the dominant design lines, remove the basting stitches and carefully tear the template away from the beading stitches. Complete the project by filling in the outlines.

For the computer-savvy beader working on a washable project, there's a nifty variation on the indirect marking method. Using an ink-jet printer, print copyright-free artwork onto water-soluble computer-printable paper. Intended for the patchwork technique of paper piecing, it's available where quilting supplies are sold. Cut out the image, leaving a 1/4" margin all around. Hand baste it to the fabric. Bead through the paper and fabric as one; and then follow the manufacturer's directions for dissolving the paper.

Take Care

Before beading a washable item, be sure to launder it first to address any shrinkage issues. Plan to care for the finished project by hand washing. To support the weight of the beading, dry the item flat. 🖱️