

Topstitching

12.225

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What is it?

Topstitching is a single or multiple set of lines of stitching showcased on the garment right side, either for decorative or functional purposes. It's found on many types of garments, from sporty to formal, tailored to heirloom.

The term is often used interchangeably with edge stitching, though generally topstitching refers to a stitching line about 1/4" from the edge or a style line, such as seaming or pockets. Edge stitching, as its name suggests, is done very close to the edge. Occasionally, both types of stitching are used in a single design area. For example, a collar may be both edge stitched and topstitched.

Topstitching helps to hold garment layers in place and keep edges flat, or it may be a means of attachment for a design feature, like a pocket or band. On a collar or lapel edge, the added stitching keeps facings rolled under and gives a structured look.

Thread Tricks

Because topstitching is meant to be seen as a design detail, it's often done with a contrast and/or heavy weight of thread for prominence. Many thread companies make a "topstitching weight" in basic colors, and a sometimes in a variety of fibers, including silk.

When sewing with topstitching thread, use a topstitch needle with a large eye (size 90/14 or 100/16) to allow the strands to pass through without shredding or breaking.

Topstitching can also be done using regular sewing-weight thread, either in a matching or contrasting color. It's also possible to put two all-purpose threads through a single needle to make a more visible stitching line. Place one spool on each spool pin, so they feed off in different directions. Follow your machine owner's manual for threading at the tension area.

Stitch Smarts

Most topstitching is sewn with a straight stitch, using a slightly longer length than is used for garment construction. When using topstitching thread, it's imperative to lengthen the stitch to create a good quality stitch.

Topstitching can also be done using a triple straight stitch, where the machine actually stitches backward and forward in the same line, creating a more prominent look.

Decorative machine stitches can be used for topstitching if they seem appropriate to the garment styling.

Caution: If the topstitching will be going over differing number of layers of inside seam allowances, test-stitch to be sure there is no visible difference in stitch length as a result of varying thicknesses. An example of this would be crossing side seamlines along a pants hem where the area becomes much thicker than the rest of the hem.

Always test-stitch on the same fabric and number of layers as the actual project. Refine stitch length and tension settings if needed.

When topstitching, do not backtack or overlap stitches to anchor the stitches; instead, abut stitching lines and leave the thread ends long enough to pull to the underside and tie off, then bury the thread ends between the layers.

Thinking Straight

Since topstitching is highly visible, it's important that the stitching lines are perfectly straight. Most machines have a presser foot where the distance from the needle to the foot edge is 1/4", which can be used as a guide. Align the presser foot edge with the garment edge, and stitch slowly to maintain an even distance.

Some machine brands also offer a 1/4" topstitching foot, with a raised edge guide, either fixed or adjustable (1). When using this foot, the vertical edge rides along the garment edge to maintain even spacing. Another option is a quilting guide, or removable basting tape placed along the edge. If your machine allows for needle position adjustment, use it to fine-tune the spacing you prefer.

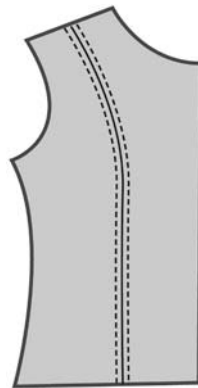


1
Photo courtesy of Husqvarna Viking

Always topstitch from the visible side of the garment as it's worn.

Twice as Nice

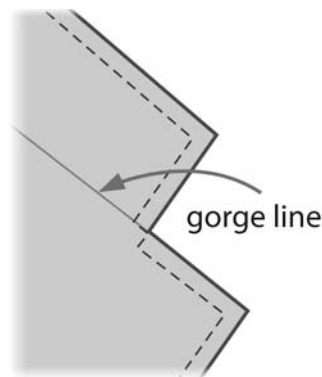
Topstitching can also be done using a twin needle to create two rows of straight stitching on the garment right side, spanned by a zigzag on the underside. The two threads may be the same or differing colors. This technique is often used on knits for hemming.



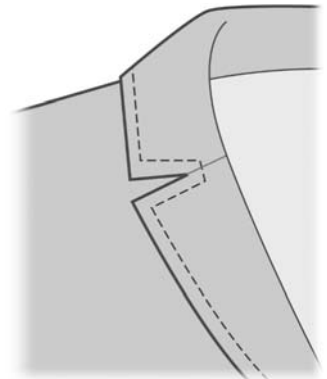
Or, two rows of topstitching can be used on opposite sides of a seam for highlighting. It's important that the rows remain evenly spaced from the seamline, so stitch slowly and carefully (2).

What to do?

A notched collar/lapel junction can be tricky to navigate. The preferred method is to stitch 1/4" from the collar/lapel edge, pivot at the gorge line (the seam between the collar and the jacket), and take a few stitches in the well of the seam, then go back out to the 1/4" line to continue stitching (3).



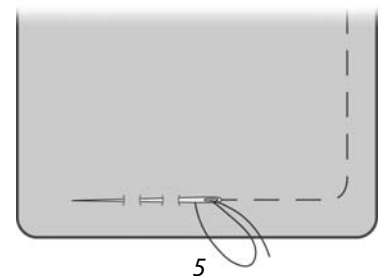
An optional method is to stitch across the collar/lapel seamline parallel to the collar edges, turn the corner for a few stitches, and continue parallel to the lapel edges (4).



When you're topstitching a turn-back collar (like a shawl collar jacket), stitch from the jacket right side up to the roll line, often marked on the pattern. Then, turn the jacket over and stitch from the visible collar side. This technique allows the right side of the garment to always be on top during the stitching process. Thread ends can be secured and buried between the fabric layers.

Give 'em a Hand

In addition to sewing on the machine, topstitching can also be done by hand using a saddle stitch (5). In most instances, heavier thread is used for this technique and it's imperative to keep stitches evenly spaced. The space between stitches should be the same as the stitch length for the best look. 🖱️



For more information on topstitching, see Guidelines 17.227 Twin-Needle Sewing and 18.221 Patch Pockets, Part 2.