



Choosing and Using Scissors and Shears

1.130

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Facts and Facets

The information in this Guideline is designed to help you choose and use the most appropriate cutting tool for the project at hand. Consider quality and end use when shopping for scissors, shears and rotary cutters. (For information on rotary cutters, see Guideline 1.133.)

Many fabric stores have display models you may try before buying from stock, while some cutting tools are packaged so you can actually sample them. To test scissors or shears, hold them as you would to cut, and consider how their weight and balance feel in your hand. Check for smoothness inside the handle rings. Then cut a variety of fabrics as the quality tests below suggest. To help ensure future satisfaction, also look for:

- Tempered- or stainless-steel blades. The former has a reputation for quality and strength, the latter for value and being lightweight and rustproof.
- Uniform width and angle of the cutting edges.
- Smooth cutting from the back of the blades to the points.
- Adjustable screw securing the blades. If the blades on scissors work out of alignment; shears with an adjustable screw can be readjusted using the screw to correct the blade alignment. Scissors with a nonadjustable rivet (sometimes molded to look like an adjustable screw) cannot be fixed.
- A reasonable warranty.

Care Guidelines

To use shears to maximum advantage, take long strokes the length of the blades.

Never use fabric-cutting scissors on paper or other nonfabric materials.

Tie a piece or ribbon around your fabric scissors, and tell your family that the ribbon means fabric only. Or, purchase scissors and shears with different-color handles.



Photo courtesy of Heritage Cutlery

Wipe scissors clean with a dry cloth after each use. This is especially important after cutting polyesters and other synthetics; lint from these manmade fibers is abrasive and can dull the blades.

Keep the cutting blades sharp. Some stainless steel scissors and shears come with a molded plastic sheath that has a built-in blade sharpener. Forged steel scissors and shears can be sharpened using a sharpening stone. Both may be sharpened using a professional-style electric sharpener. Or they may be sent to a professional sharpening service or back to the manufacturer.

Occasionally oil the pivot screw with a tiny drop of sewing machine oil. Open and close the blades a few times, then wipe the blades with a soft cloth.

Don't force a cut—this can deform the blades or spread them permanently.

Store your scissors or shears in a box or pouch.

Cutting into a straight pin or needle will permanently damage scissors.

Tip: Keep small scissors or thread snips handy by tying them to a length of ribbon and wearing them like a necklace as you sew.

Cutting Tool Definitions & Uses

Many cutting tools are available for “lefties” (left-handers); ask your dealer about special ordering left-handed scissors if they aren’t in stock; some shears are available with spring-action handles—often preferred by those plagued by arthritis and repetitive strain injuries.

Be sure your cutting table is an appropriate height for you and your cutting task. (See Guideline 21.110.)

Bent-handled shears feature an angled lower blade. This keeps the blade flush with the table surface while cutting, affording greater accuracy. Popular lengths are 7" to 10". These also are available with micro-serrated blades for more precise cutting of thin, slick fabrics and in lightweight models for making large cutting jobs more comfortable on all but the heaviest fabrics. Quality test: Cut to the tip through four layers of mid-weight fabric.

General-purpose shears will save your sewing shears and scissors from misuse. Use to cut paper, trim leather, snip twine and for other general household textiles. Quality test: Cut through two layers of cardboard.

Sewing scissors, also called trimmers or tailor’s scissors, come in a wide range of lengths, with 5" to 7" most often recommended. These tools feature finely tapered blades with one pointed and one rounded tip; the blunt tip prevents fabric snagging when trimming and grading seams. Quality test: Cut through two layers of mid-weight fabric. Clip notches with the tip.

Embroidery scissors, with thin, 3 1/2"- to 5"-long blades, are ideal for clipping and notching, trimming fabric from delicate appliqués and embroidery, and snipping thread tails. Many are reproductions of antiques with figurative handles, decorative scrollwork and various metallic finishes, making them as beautiful as they are useful. Quality Test: Cut a five-pointed star from sheer fabric.

Appliqué scissors are especially designed for close trimming while protecting fabric from damage. The “duckbill” blade allows the scissors to glide between layers of fabric. The curved handles make it easy to trim appliqués and thread when fabric is stretched in an embroidery hoop. Quality Test: Trim fabric close to edgestitching.

Machine embroidery scissors feature unique handles curved to one side to allow comfortable, accurate trimming of loose threads on machine embroidery. Quality test: Clip threads from work in a machine embroidery hoop.

Thread nippers and clippers are spring-action clippers—with or without a finger loop—featuring very short blades for cutting thread tails and clipping seams quickly. Quality test: Clip a small length of thread or yarn. Spring-back action should be brisk.

Pinking shears have sawtooth blades. They are used to add a ravel-resistant seam finish to loosely woven fabric, automatically notching and reducing bulk in seams and creating a decorative finish on fabrics that don’t ravel. Lengths range from 7" to 10 1/2". Also available are lightweight models, as well as scalloping shears for a more rounded effect. Quality test: Cut from the second tooth to the tip, close to the edge of both lightweight and heavyweight fabrics. Check for an uneven “pinked” pattern. A deeper cut will stop the raveling better.

Buttonhole scissors have a special adjustable screw for securing them partially open. This open position translates to a precise cutting length (usually between 1/2" and 1 1/4") that prevents cutting through the stitches at the buttonhole end. Quality test: Adjust the screw to correlate to a buttonhole length and mark that length on a double layer of test fabric. Test on both light- and heavy-weight fabric for ease and precision. 🖨