

Buying a Sewing Machine

2.105

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SEW-lutions Guidelines

Your Guide
to
Successful
Sewing

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Whether you're trading up as your sewing skills have progressed, or you're purchasing your first sewing machine ever, there are important things to check out before you buy.

Determine your sewing needs. Do you sew only on medium-weight fabrics, or do you want to do upholstery and outdoor gear? Do you plan to do machine embroidery (*see Guideline 2.240 Buying an Embroidery Machine*)? Do you have a use for decorative stitches? Are you a quilter, or primarily a garment or craft sewer? Do you want a new machine, or would a pre-owned one suffice for your sewing needs? What's your budget for a new machine?

These answers will help guide you in the right direction and a good dealer can help match you to the right machine. If you're a beginner, or anticipate doing a lot of sewing, ask about the trade-up policy; some dealers will give you almost full value toward a new machine within a certain timeframe.

Ask sewing friends about their machines—likes and dislikes, recommendations, etc. If you're a newbie, perhaps take someone with you who is a more experienced sewer. It's important to get a machine you like and that will meet your needs, without being overly influenced by the salesperson.

Buying a machine from a recognized dealer offers many benefits in service accessibility, accessory purchases, classes and the availability of routine help, should you need it. Mass merchandisers, mail-order and online sales don't offer these benefits.

Test Run

Before you purchase any machine, sew on it—don't just watch someone else sew on it. Stitch on the kinds of fabrics you'll be using—multiple layers of denim if you hem jeans, lightweight knits if you make T-shirts, metallics and satins if you're a special occasion sewer, etc. Sew with different stitches, make a buttonhole, use the blindhem and stitch some decorative stitches.

Sew at different speeds, adjust tensions and get a "feel" for the machine. Is it comfortable? How's the noise level?

How does the machine operate? Some have a foot pedal, others a knee control. Can you raise the presser foot hands-free with a knee-lift, or by heeling back on the foot pedal?

Which Stitch(es)?

As you look at a machine, you may see hundreds of available stitches, divided into two types—utility and decorative. Utility stitches include straight and zigzag basics, mending, stretch, blindhem and buttonholes. Decorative stitches may include scallops, smocking, cross stitches, ducks, hearts and other motifs. How many stitches will you use?

Needle Nuances

Many machines allow for adjusting needle positions from left to right. This helps create an accurate seamline and is helpful for topstitching and zipper insertion as well. Many also allow you to stop the needle consistently up or down if you choose.

Foot Notes

Check how many feet come with the machine. You'll need an all-purpose foot (often called a zigzag foot), and one for blindhemming, buttonholes and zipper insertion. Other specialty feet may be included or available separately. How many feet are available?

Thread Tactics

Try sewing on the machine with some novelty threads and see how it performs. Metallic is usually the most challenging, but try rayon and topstitching threads as well if you anticipate a need for their use.

Does the machine have a bobbin winder that allows you to wind a bobbin as you sew? Does it stop when the bobbin is full? Is there an alert as you're running out of bobbin and/or top thread?

Check to see if the machine can work with larger threads in the bobbin so you can do bobbinwork (*see Guideline 17.225 Bobbinwork*).

Some machines offer a thread trimming function at the end of seams; others offer a built-in needle threader. Both can be handy, but not a necessity.

Weighty Matters

How much does the machine weigh? If you plan to transport it to class or guild meetings regularly, this could be a concern. Does it have a protective carrying case?

Do you have a place to leave the machine set up all the time, or will it need to come down after each sewing session?

Light Bright

If you sew on dark colors at night, or your sewing room lighting is iffy, you definitely want the machine to have good lighting. Some machines offer a single light near the presser foot, others offer a general light under the arm; some offer both.

Speed Settings

Some machines offer a variety of settings for speed. You can slow the machine for tedious tasks, or speed it up for long seams, etc. Check the machine still retains its full power at the slower speeds.

Tech Tactics

Some high-end machines connect to the Internet directly, or can be updated by downloading new stitches and features.

Class Acts

Are there new owner classes offered—if so, how many and are they free? Can you repeat the class if needed, or get individualized help?

How about additional classes and/or clubs? Some dealers offer clubs for specific brands and models that meet regularly and focus on projects or techniques to help you get the most from the machine.

Special Functions

Depending on your sewing needs, you may want to check on some special functions like the following:

- Does the machine have a memory so you can program in favorite stitch combinations and settings? If so, how big is the memory?
- For decorative stitching, how can you adjust the stitches, or are they pre-set? Some machines allow for adjustments only in pre-set increments (like narrow, medium and wide), others allow for fine-tuning in millimeters manually.
- Can you adjust the presser foot pressure for thick or thin fabrics, or is this function automatic?
- Does the machine accept your input as to fabric weight and type and offer advice on needle size and stitch choice?

- Does the machine have a free-arm or a standard flat bed? A free-arm is a narrower protrusion allowing you stitch around sleeve hems, cuffs, pant legs, etc. without contortion.

Quilting Questions

If you're a quilter, check these features before you buy:

- Does the machine offer a ¼" foot for accurate piecing? How about an even-feed or dual-feed foot?
- Can the feed dogs be lowered easily for free-motion stitching?
- Does the machine have a stitch regulator so that all your free-motion stitches are of even size?
- Does the machine offer any special quilting stitches?
- Check the space under the curved arm—how large is the machine bed workspace to quilt large items?

Purchase Pointers

- What type of warranty does the machine have?
- Is it serviced locally or sent somewhere for service? What's a typical turnaround time for service?
- What type of routine service and care does the machine need?
- Is there any trade-up policy should you decide later that a different machine is a better choice?
- If you require financing, are there plans available from the dealer? What are the terms compared to what you can find elsewhere?

In the End...

Compare multiple brands of machines in a similar model and price range to determine which one you like best and which one offers the most features you need. Some dealers sell more than one brand; others only offer a single line so you may need to visit more than one dealer.

A good dealer is an important piece of your sewing pleasure, so be sure you're comfortable with the people you'll be working with after the purchase.

A sewing machine should last for many years, be easy to operate, and meet your sewing needs as they grow and develop, so choose wisely and like any major purchase, be a smart consumer. 📌

For more information, see *Guidelines:*

2.102 *Sewing Machine Basics*

2.245 *Computerized Sewing Machines*