



SEW-lutions Guidelines

Your Guide
to
Successful
Sewing

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Selecting the Right Fabric

Because of the tremendous selection available, the task of choosing fabric can be somewhat overwhelming, even for the experienced seamstress. As you enter a fabric store, Web site or catalog, the huge variety of colors and splashy prints are the first to catch your eye. Upon closer inspection, the subtle textures and finishes provide more choices and raise more questions as to whether a particular fabric will be suitable for your project. Falling in love with a fabric is easy and essential to the creative process, but making an informed choice takes a little work and will ultimately determine the overall success of the project.

Select a Pattern

Begin with a specific style in mind or at least a general silhouette of the project you wish to make. This could be a photo, an illustration or just a vision in your mind's eye. For the best possible results, choose a sewing pattern that reflects your needs. At this time, keep only the pattern silhouette in mind. If a specific color or print is what caught your eye, save that for when you choose the fabric.

Search for Pattern Details

Study the pattern photo. Look for gathers, pleats, the drape of the sleeve or swing in the skirt to get a general feel for the weight and "hand" (drape) of fabric that will be suitable. On the back of the envelope, or maybe on the guidesheet inside, you'll find a more specific description of the project. A chart will tell you how many yards of fabric you'll need to purchase. Also on the envelope back will be a broad description of the recommended fabric. It usually begins with a general recommendation of soft or crisp fabrics and then may focus on specific fabrics—but these are only recommendations. Don't overlook cautions about unsuitable fabrics, such as "Not recommended for plaids" or "Designed for knit fabrics only."

Fabric Construction 101

The terminology we use to describe fabric is often insufficient. Perhaps this is why we all have a need to touch it to get a "feel" for whether it will be suitable. Consider all of

the following properties for each piece of fabric as you make a selection.

Fiber Content

The fiber is the base element the fabric is actually made from—the actual thread bits used to spin the yarns that are eventually knit, woven or matted into fabric.

Natural fibers, as they suggest, come from natural sources, such as plants and animals. They include wool and hair fibers, cotton, linen, silk and ramie. They often have wonderful properties (warmth and comfort) and at the same time, major drawbacks (shrinking, wrinkling and fading).

Synthetic fibers are vast in number and growing every day. They begin as chemicals in a lab, sometimes even recycled soda bottles, and are designed to perform in ways natural fibers can't. Overall, they're more wrinkle- and shrink-resistant, they perform better when subjected to heat, and they accept and hold dye better—making the fabrics easier to live with and care for.

To get the best of both worlds, two or more natural and synthetic fibers are often combined (and called a "blend") to create a fabric with all the properties we desire for a garment or project.

Construction

In making fabric, fibers are spun into yarns, and the yarns are then either woven, knitted or pressed to create a fabric.

Woven fabric has yarns running both horizontally and vertically. Depending on the weave, these fabrics are generally stable and firm when tugged along either the crosswise or lengthwise grain and show stretch or distortion when pulled diagonally (on the bias). Wovens are generally easy to sew, but they fray readily at the cut edges and require a good seam finish to prevent raveling.

A knit fabric's construction resembles that of a hand-knit sweater but with much smaller loops, using many more needles and sometimes incorporating several yarns. Like wovens, there are many varieties of knits giving us T-shirts, sweat suits, lingerie and bathing suits—just to name a few.

Knits have more stretch than woven and nonwoven fabrics, and some can stretch as much as 500 percent and, more importantly, "recover" to their original size and shape. Although knits are generally easy to sew, some require specialty threads and stitches. The cut edges don't ravel, but they may run—like pantyhose—and may have a tendency to curl.

Nonwoven fabric is made by matting fibers together with heat, pressure, steam and chemicals. Good examples are felts and some imitation suedes. Felt ranges in quality from wool felt fine enough for a dress coat or acrylics that aren't suitable for much more than a disposable costume. Manmade suedes are usually made from the latest and greatest synthetic yarns and, everyday, are getting closer to imitating the real thing.

If working with a nonwoven fabric, keep the pattern lines simple with few gathers or pleats. Nonwovens are relatively easy to sew, and they won't ravel or curl at the cut edges.

Search for Fabric

Armed with preliminary pattern information and the basics of fabric construction, narrow the vast fabric choices through the process of elimination. The major division in fabric types separates "garment" or fashion fabrics from home dec fabrics.

Width, Weight & Repeats

Decorator fabric usually measures from 50" to 60" wide and is found rolled on long cardboard tubes. Fabric used for apparel is folded in half and wrapped on smaller, flat cardboard "bolts." It usually measures

between 44" and 60" wide, also with a few exceptions.

The greater weight and density of decorator fabric is obvious. Also easy to see is the difference in the size of the printed pattern motifs (plaids and stripes), but the "repeat" is not always so obvious.

During fabric manufacturing, the artist's print is applied to many yards of fabric repeatedly. Depending on the print and the machinery used, this repeat can vary in length from less than 1" to almost a yard. For fabrics with a longer repeat, you'll need to purchase additional yardage to match or position the boldest motifs on the finished project. The extra fabric allows you to shift pattern pieces on the yardage to position motifs, so left and right curtain panels match or horizontal lines or plaids match up on a jacket's left and right front.

Usually on decorator fabrics, the pattern repeat, labeled in inches, is found on the information card or printed on the selvage (the finished edge of the fabric), and generally adding one repeat for each panel in your project will allow enough fabric for matching. For apparel fabric, this repeat dimension is not always listed. You may have to examine the fabric, measure the length of the repeat and "guestimate" how much extra fabric you need.

Nap

If you select a fabric with a directional print (trees or people printed in one direction so there is an obvious right side up) or a textured fabric that appears to be a different shade or color when viewed from different directions (corduroy or velvet), you may also need to purchase a little extra fabric—again so you're able to turn and move pattern pieces without running short of yardage.

Finishes

Look for labels listing applied finishes. Finishes are applied to make fabrics colorfast; wrinkle-, mildew-, stain- or soil-resistant; and flame retardant. Consider your needs and choose these fabrics accordingly. 🐾