



# SEW-lutions Guidelines

Your Guide  
to  
Successful  
Sewing

© 2008 Sewing & Craft Alliance  
Permission is granted to  
educators and retailers to  
reproduce these publications  
as-is as a handout for  
educational purposes only.  
They may not be altered,  
changed or added to in any  
manner. No commercial or other  
use, distribution, or  
reproduction is permitted.

Get free projects and  
more SEW-lutions  
Guidelines at  
[www.sewing.org](http://www.sewing.org)



## Denim ... More Than Just a Pair of Jeans

4.110

Page 1

Although the term denim originated in France, denim fabric is all-American thanks to Levi Strauss' denim work pants dating back to the late 1800s. Comfort, versatility and durability continue to be denim's biggest assets, far outweighing the fact that it shrinks, frays and fades in the wash.

Denim is best-known for its use in the manufacture of jeans; however, it can be made into just about anything, depending on its weight. Even formalwear designers turn to denim for inspiration occasionally!

Denim is a strong, durable fabric constructed in a twill weave with indigo and white yarns. The blue/indigo yarns are the lengthwise or "warp" threads (parallel to the selvage). The white yarns run across the fabric width (the weft threads). Denim is traditionally woven with 100%-cotton yarn; however, today it's blended with polyester, to control shrinkage and wrinkles, and Lycra to add stretch.

Today, denim has many faces. It can be printed, striped, brushed, napped and stonewashed, and the indigo blue yarns can be replaced with different colors to create colored denim.

### Fabric/Pattern Selection

The key to sewing with denim, is selecting the proper weight denim for the pattern. Since denim is a twill weave, it has a slight diagonal pattern; avoid patterns that aren't suitable for obvious diagonals.

Heavy denim (12- to 14-ounce) tends to work best when made into jeans, jackets, overalls and work clothes. It's bulky, stiff and best-suited to designs with straight lines and little or no gathering or easing.

Pants, jackets, skirts and accessories, such as bags, work up well in medium-weight, 10- to 12-ounce denim. Lighter denim can handle softer styling and some curved seams that require easing and/or gathering.

Skirts, shirts and dresses make up perfectly

in lightweight denim (6- to 8-ounce). This denim is the easiest to sew and can be handled like any woven cotton fabric. However, all the seams should be clean-finished, since denim frays badly.

### Preparing to Sew

Denim shrinks with washing, fades with wear, stretches when worn and its color tends to run in the wash, so prewash and dry the fabric several times before sewing. This also removes any sizing, which can cause skipped stitches, and softens the fabric.

If the label on the end of the bolt indicates the fabric is Sanforized, then the fabric has been treated, and the shrinkage will not exceed 1% in any direction.

Prior to washing, serge or zigzag the cut edges to minimize raveling.

Tip: To test for crocking, the loss of dye from abrasion, rub the denim with a piece of white fabric. If the white fabric picks up color, the dye will continue to fade in the wash and when it's rubbed.

When cutting out the pattern, consider cutting facings from lining or contrast fabric to reduce bulk. Be sure to use a with-nap cutting layout (see Guideline 4.120).

### The Right Tools

Begin every project with a new needle, especially a denim project; denim dulls needles quickly. The heavier the denim, the larger the needle required. Sew heavy denim with a size 100/16 needle, medium-weight denim with an 80/14 needle and lightweight denim with a size 75/11 needle.

For the best results purchase a denim needle. It has a longer, sharper point, so it can penetrate the close weave of the cloth easier. Its larger eye accommodates decorative topstitching thread.

For standard sewing, use polyester or cotton-wrapped polyester thread, and use

decorative thread for topstitching.

It's helpful, but not necessary, to have an even-feed and/or roller presser foot for sewing over multiple thick layers of fabric.

## Sewing

Sew denim just as you would any firmly woven fabric, but keep in mind that the fabric frays, so seam finishing is essential.

Stitch a test seam to determine the best stitch size; heavier fabrics need fewer stitches per inch than lighter weight versions. Sew heavy denim with about 10 stitches per inch and lighter denim with about 12 stitches per inch (3 mm). Reduce the thread tension and the presser-foot pressure slightly, so the fabric feeds evenly.

## Types of Seams

Denim can be sewn with a standard 5/8" (1.6 cm) seam; however, most denim garments feature flat-fell and topstitched seams. Stretch denim requires a stretch stitch.

The most popular denim seam is the flat-fell seam; it's very durable and gives a nice, clean finish on the inside of the garment. For instructions see Guideline 11.330.

## Seam Finishes

Because denim ravels, it's important to clean-finish all seams. Several seam finishes are satisfactory.

The easiest seam finish is a pinked edge. Simply trim the seam allowance with pinking shears. For extra protection, run a straight stitch along the raw edge first and then pink it (1).

It is also easy to zigzag the seam allowance edge (2) or serge the raw edges as you sew (3).

On unlined jackets, where the inside of the garment is often visible, bind seam allowances with double-fold bias tape (4). See instructions in Guideline 11.340.

## Topstitching

Topstitching gives denim its trademark look, as well as decorative appeal. Use heavy contrasting thread such as buttonhole twist or decorative thread designed for topstitching. If you don't have topstitching thread, use two strands of regular thread so the topstitching stands out. Use regular thread in the bobbin. If the threads bind up, loosen the needle-thread tension slightly.

## Closures & Hems

Machine worked buttonholes, zippers and decorative snaps are the most popular types of garment closures on denim.

Hems are most often stitched by machine with one or two rows of narrow topstitching. Narrow denim hems have a tendency to curl. To reduce curling, finish the lower edge by pressing it to the wrong side or serging it. Add a strip of fusible web to the hem allowance, and then fold and fuse the hem in place before topstitching.

## Garment Care

Denim garments require some care when laundering. To avoid ruining other clothes, wash denim items separately until you notice the wash water remains clear. To minimize fading, turn items inside out and add a cup of white vinegar to the wash cycle. If you don't want to lose any color, dry-clean the item. ■

