



Machine Buttonholes, part 1: Tools and Techniques

12.230

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Buttonholes are the essential finishing touch on blouses, jackets and any other project that utilizes buttons for closure. They are normally stitched when the garment is finished, so learning the ins and outs of perfect buttonholes protects your investment of time and materials in the project.

Tools

Buttonholes can be stitched with a regular presser foot, ordinary sewing thread and a pair of scissors for cutting the opening, but specialized notions make the task easier and increase accuracy, especially when a project calls for several identical buttonholes.

Most zigzag sewing machines come with a buttonhole foot. The simplest have a wide opening to accommodate the needle swing and a large groove underneath to help the foot glide over the stitch thickness. Some feet include an embossed gauge to judge the finished buttonhole length.

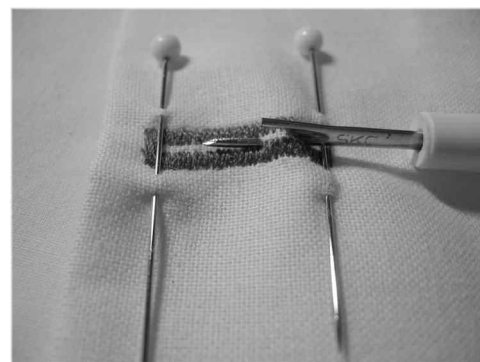
Machines with automatic buttonhole settings often include a foot that adjusts for different buttonhole lengths. The adjustment can be made manually, by sliding a lever on the foot along a gauge, or automatically, by placing a button in an adjustable holder on the foot. On some machines a lever beside the needle bar must be locked into position so it interacts with the foot to cue the machine when it's time for a change in stitch direction.

Grand Openings

Once the buttonholes are stitched, they must be cut open. It's important to cut through the fabric and interfacing only, leaving the buttonhole stitches intact. If there isn't enough room between the stitch columns to cut the fabric, adjust the buttonhole stitch width (refer to the machine owner's manual).

To open a buttonhole, insert the tip of fine scissors through the fabric near the middle of the buttonhole. Rotate the blades to position the scissors along the buttonhole length and snip to one end, then reverse the motion and cut to the other end.

A sharp seam ripper or razor blade can also be used to open buttonholes, although the slicing action of these tools increases the likelihood that the end stitches may be clipped or cut through completely. To minimize the risk, stick a straight pin through the buttonhole at each end to act as a stopper (1).



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The most efficient tool for cutting buttonholes is a specially designed chisel-like buttonhole cutter. Because it cuts through the buttonhole with simple downward pressure, there is little risk of clipping the end stitches. If the buttonhole is longer than the chisel, make two or more overlapping cuts to open it fully. If the buttonhole is shorter than the blade, lay the garment over the edge of the cutting block or mat (included with the chisel) so that the buttonhole end won't be cut (2).



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Size

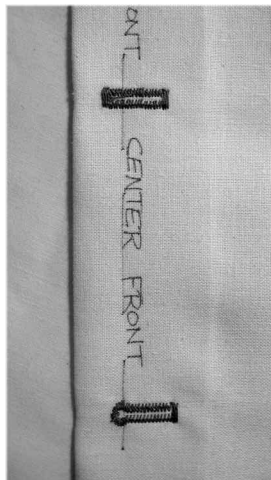
For ordinary buttons with a flat profile, determining the correct buttonhole length can be as simple as adding 1/8" to the button diameter. For example, a flat 1/2" button needs a buttonhole with a 5/8" opening when stitched on medium-weight woven fabric. Exceptions are made for buttonholes stitched on very lightweight or heavyweight fabrics, and for buttons that aren't flat.

Large, round or embellished buttons should be measured to determine the buttonhole size. Cut a narrow strip of paper and wrap it around the button at its widest point. Mark the strip where the ends meet. Lay the strip flat along a ruler and measure between the marks to find the button size; add 1/8" or a bit more to the measurement to determine the buttonhole size. Always make a sample buttonhole on interfaced garment fabric scraps and test to ensure the button fits through the opening. Also be sure the buttonhole is not too long to hold the button for secure fastening.

Placement

Buttonhole placement decisions include both location and direction. Most buttonholes are placed near a garment edge, on either the lengthwise or crosswise fabric grain. Proximity to an opening creates the functional closure, while placement along a grainline creates openings with minimal stretch.

The distance from the end of the buttonhole to the garment edge must be at least 1/8" more than half the button diameter to ensure the button doesn't extend past the edge when fastened. If using a button size other than that listed in the pattern instructions, take this into account when cutting and sewing the project. Horizontal buttonholes generally begin 1/8" from the center front or other marking that determines the overlap for the button fastening (3). Vertical buttonholes lie along the mark that determines the overlap.



3

Ordinarily, buttonholes are equally spaced along the garment edge. If the buttons and buttonholes form a decorative element, the spacing can be altered to fit the design. For bodices, it's important to place a button at the fullest part of the bust to avoid unsightly gapping. If the pattern has been altered, be sure to respace the buttonholes accordingly.

Interfacing Options

The right interfacing is crucial for buttonholes that look good and function properly over the life of a garment. It supports the stitches and keeps the opening from stretching as the button is pushed through the opening.

Interfacing on a lightweight woven blouse may be as simple as a double-folded placket in which the extra fabric layer serves as the interfacing. Garment patterns that call for buttonholes include suggestions for types of interfacing, as well as patterns for cutting and instructions for applying them.

Fusible interfacing, where appropriate, may also prevent raveling and subsequent detachment of the zigzag stitches by fusing to the fabric threads. If the buttonholes are used as a decorative element in the garment, consider adding an extra layer of crisp interfacing to further stabilize the buttonhole area.

For more information on machine buttonholes, see Guideline 12.231. 📖