Why Do You Need to Know Sewing Terms?

There are quite a few sewing terms that you’ll need to know to be able to properly follow pattern instructions.

If you’ve been sewing for a long time, you’ll probably know many of these terms – or at least, you know the technique, but might not know what it’s called.

You’ll run across terms like “shirring”, “ease”, and “blousing”, and will need to be able to identify center front and the right side of the fabric.

This brief glossary of sewing terms is designed to help you navigate your pattern, whether it’s one you purchased at a fabric store or downloaded from an online designer.

You’ll find links within the glossary to “how-to” videos or more information at ClothingPatterns101.com

Don’t worry – there’s no homework and no test! Just keep this glossary handy for reference when you need it!
Appliqué – A method of surface decoration made by cutting a decorative shape from fabric and stitching it to the surface of the piece being decorated. The stitching can be by hand (blanket stitch) or machine (zigzag or a decorative stitch).

Armhole – The portion of the garment through which the arm extends, or a sleeve is sewn. Armholes come in many shapes and configurations, and can be an interesting part of a design.

Backstitch or backstitch – Stitches used at the beginning and end of a seam to secure the threads. To backstitch, stitch 2 or 3 stitches forward, then 2 or 3 stitches in reverse; then proceed to stitch the seam and repeat the backstitch at the end of the seam.
**Balance** – A garment that hangs evenly and straight on the body is balanced. A garment that is higher on one side than the other or swings out in one area but not others is not balanced. See also **hiking** for an example of a garment out of balance.

**Basting stitch or stay stitch** – A long stitch, used for temporarily joining 2 pieces together, or to stabilize fabric before joining. A basting stitch is not strong enough for a permanent seam. Basting may be done by hand or by machine, using the longest stitch available.

**Batting** – A nonwoven fabric usually made of polyester or cotton, with fibers bonded together mechanically. Batting is high-loft (thick, but not heavy, containing a lot of openness for air) and adds warmth to a garment or bed covering.

**Bias** – The diagonal of the fabric, crossing both the lengthwise and crosswise grain. Woven fabric cut on the bias has more stretch than a fabric cut on a straight grain, and a garment cut on the bias drapes and hugs the body beautifully. True bias is cut at a 45 degree angle.
**Bias tape** - Strips of fabric cut on the bias and used to finish the raw edges of a garment. The bias cut of the strips allow the tape to smoothly follow the curve of an armhole or neckline without bunching or twisting. The bias tape is visible only on the inside of the garment, stitching shows on the face side.

**Binding** – A method of finishing the raw edge of a garment by wrapping a bias-cut strip over the edge and stitching in place. A relatively simple finish, it can also be used to add contrast color to a garment.
**Block** – Also called a pattern block, basic block, or sloper, the block is a very basic pattern devoid of any styling details. It is used to establish fit, and then used in designing patterns that maintain correct fit. It is the “blank slate” upon which style is added.

**Body Fabric** – Also called the “shell” or “face fabric”, the body fabric is the primary fabric used on the outside of a garment. The term does not include linings or trim fabrics.
**Blousing** – Adding length to a bodice to allow extra fullness at the waist and ease of movement. The look is reminiscent of a blouse tucked into a skirt.

**Boning** – A rigid reinforcement, commonly made of plastic, and used to stiffen or hold the shape of a garment (such as a corset). Originally made of whale bone, and still occasionally made of metal.
**Bobbin** – 2 discs joined by a small shaft; the bobbin is wrapped with thread and inserted into the lower part of a sewing machine. The thread from the bobbin is drawn up by the needle thread to create a stitch.

**Box Pleat** – A pleat formed by folding the fabric in alternate directions. A box pleat has folded edges facing each other on the inside of the garment; an **inverted box pleat** has folded edges facing each other on the outside of the garment.
C –

**Casing** – Fabric folded and stitched to form a sort of “tube” into which elastic or cord is inserted.

**Center Front or Center Back** - An imaginary line running vertically from the base of the neck to the floor and used as a point of reference (i.e., “pleats are placed on each side of center front”, “the sleeve is measured from the center back neck”).

**Centered Zipper** – A zipper set with the folds of fabric covering the zipper meeting at the center of the teeth.

**Chain stitch** – A stitch created with 2 threads, which appears as a straight stitch on the surface, but with a series of loops on the back. The chain stitch provides some stretch, and is not a “lock stitch” – the threads can be pulled out easily.
Clean finish - Finishing the raw edges of a garment to prevent fraying. A clean finish may be achieved with a facing, bias tape or binding, or folding and stitching the edge.

Collar band – Also known as a collar stand, the collar band is used with a shirt collar. It is a separate piece, relatively straight, set to the shirt with the collar set to the top of the band.

Concealed Zipper – A zipper set with the placket covering the teeth. The placket may be centered (or “kissing”) or lapped (one side of the placket covers the teeth, the other is stitched along the edge of the teeth).

Construction – The process of putting a garment together, either by sewing or fusing pieces. Construction can also refer to the method used to create a specific fabric (i.e., twill weave and plain weave are fabric constructions).
**Contrast** – A color or fabric that is different than the body fabric. Contrasting color in fabric, trim or thread is used as an accent.

**Cross grain** – Cutting the fabric at a 90 degree angle to the lengthwise grain. The cross grain runs across the width of the fabric (also known as the weft of the fabric).

![Diagram of fabric grain](image)

**Crotch curve** – The curve at the bottom of the rise, giving shape to a pant over the derriere and between the legs.

**Crotch point** – The point at which the rise seams and inseams of a pant meet.

![Diagram of crotch curve](image)
Cut on Fold – Cutting a single piece of the garment with the center aligned with the folded edge of the fabric. The fabric is ordinarily folded along the lengthwise grain. The pattern will be marked as follows:

D –

Dart – A wedge or diamond-shaped tuck stitched into a garment to control fullness and make the garment conform to the shape of the body.

Double needle stitch – Seam or topstitching made with 2 needles stitching at the same time. See flat felled seam for an illustration of double needle stitching.
**Drape** – The way the garment or fabric hangs on the body after the garment is constructed. Often used when the fabric is soft and “fluid”, the drape may also be firm and structured.

**Draping** – A method of designing a garment by laying fabric on a dress form and manipulating the fabric to achieve the desired look. The draped fabric is then used as a reference for making the pattern.

**Drawstring or draw cord** – A narrow cord, ribbon, string, or stitched tube of fabric inserted into a casing. The drawstring is pulled to draw the fabric together, and then tied to hold the fabric in place on the body.

**Dress** – A garment consisting of a bodice (top) and skirt. The two pieces may be joined with a waist seam, or the dress may hang from the shoulders without a waist seam.

**Dress form** – A form made of a wood frame, plastic, foam, or any other material that duplicates the human body. Used for draping and checking the fit and appearance of a garment. Also known as a body form or mannequin.
Ease – The amount of extra fabric allowed for movement and/or style in a garment. **Fitting ease (wearing ease)** is the minimum amount of room needed for comfort and movement, usually 1 – 1 ½” more than the body measurement. **Style ease (design ease)** is additional ease added to achieve the desired style (such as a full skirt or a full sleeve, or an oversized silhouette).

**Fit Ease vs. Style Ease**

Ease (as a verb) also refers to the process of gently joining a larger piece to a smaller piece, without pleats, tucks, or gathers. A bit of **fit ease(n.)** in a sleeve cap is **eased(v.)** into the armhole.
Exposed Zipper – A zipper set with the zipper teeth uncovered and visible. A concealed zipper, which is the norm, is set with the teeth covered by the fabric.

Eyelet – A small, round opening through which a thin cord the threaded (as in the eyelet of a shoe, with a shoelace). The eyelet is typically metal, but can be plastic or an embroidered circle (which is more likely to be purely decorative).
F –

**Fabric** – Cloth made by weaving or knitting yarns. The fabric is cut and sewn into garments. Fabric can also be knotted lace or netting, felted fibers, or bonding fibers.

**Face side** – The outer surface of the fabric, also known as the “right” side of the fabric. Some fabrics are reversible and do not have a face or right side.

**Facing** – A method of clean finishing the raw edge of a garment by sewing a separate piece of fabric (with a shape that matches the edge) and folding it to the inside of the garment. The facing encloses the seams and is the neatest, cleanest method of finishing an edge.

**Fiber** – Synthetic or natural, fibers are the material that makes up the yarns that are woven or knit into fabric. Natural fibers include cotton, silk and wool. Synthetics
include polyester, nylon, acetate, and rayon. Fibers can be short and twisted together to create the yarn; or long, continuous filaments.

**Fit** – How well a garment conforms to the body wearing it. In retail, the term is also used to describe the overall style (as in body conscious fit, oversized fit, etc. - see **Ease**, above). This use is actually referring to **Style Ease**.

**Flat Felled Seam** – Also called Felled Seam, the raw edges in this seam are enclosed by folding the layers of fabric and topstitching in place on the surface of the garment. This technique is commonly used in denim, and incorporates the use of a special folder.
French Seam –
Like the felled seam, the raw edges of a French seam are enclosed. However, the French seam is a 2-step process of stitching a narrow seam with WRONG sides together, then folding the fabric right sides together and stitching again to enclose the narrow seam. It is most commonly used in very fine or sheer fabrics such as chiffon or batiste, where a serged edge would be unattractive.

Fusible web – A heat-sensitive adhesive used to bond fabrics together. Fusible Interfacing and fusible trims have the fusible web on one side of the fabric or piece, ready to be fused to the face fabric.
**G –**

**Gather** – or “gathering” is the process of drawing fabric together to control fullness. A full skirt is gathered to fit a waistband or fitted bodice; a full sleeve is gathered to fit a cuff. This can be done by hand or by machine. Also known as **shirring**.

**Godet** – A triangular inset that creates fullness and movement, typically in the seam of a skirt. A “softer” look than a tailored pleat.

**Grading** – Adjusting a pattern for different size measurements. A misses’ garment, for example, may be graded from size 6 to size 16. The amount of the adjustment for each size, and at each measurement point is referred to as the “grade rules”.

**Grain** – Usually referring to the lengthwise direction of the fabric, or the “warp”. Most garments are cut
parallel to the lengthwise grain (aligning the center of the pattern piece along the grain). Pattern pieces are marked with the **grainline** for easy alignment. The grain across the width of the fabric is the **cross-grain**, and is seldom used to align pattern pieces. Garments cut off-grain (not accurately aligned along the grainline) will twist and not hang correctly.

**Gussett** – A triangular or diamond-shaped piece of fabric inserted into a seam for more freedom of movement. Usually found in an underarm or crotch seam.
H –

**Hand** – The way a fabric feels when touched. The hand may be soft, firm, rough, etc.

**Hang** – The way the garment reacts on the body. The garment should hang straight and even at the hem, without twisting or distortion.

**Hem** – Finishing the bottom of a top, skirt, dress, sleeve, or pant leg by folding up the bottom edge and stitching in place (either by hand or by machine). The raw edge may be serged, folded under, or taped before stitching.

**Hiking (hiking up)** – A garment that does not hang correctly and is off-balance may be higher in one area than in others. The higher area is “hiking”. The bad
balance may also cause the hem to flare out at the same point.

**Hook and eye (or bar)** – A method of closure using a small metal hook on one side of an opening, and either a U-shaped loop (eye) or a straight bar on the other.

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**Inseam** – The seam on pants that runs from the crotch to the hem, on the inside of the leg.

**Interfacing** – A fabric used to reinforce a part of the garment, such as a collar, waistband, cuff, or placket (or anywhere a button or snap is placed). The interfacing is sewn or fused inside the piece being sewn, and typically adds some firmness or stiffness to help maintain the shape of the piece. Also called Interlining.
K –

**Knit fabric** – Fabric constructed with interconnecting loops, as opposed to weaving. Knit fabric may be created by hand or by machine, and generally has more stretch than a woven fabric.

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**Knife pleats** – Pressed folds of fabric, each facing the same direction.

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L –

**Lapel** – A part of a collar which folds back to create a larger opening at the front of a shirt or jacket. The lapel ends at the top button or closure.
**Lapped seam** — A seam created by overlapping the edges of the fabric pieces and topstitching through all layers (often stitched twice, or with a double needle). Generally used with fabrics that do not ravel.

**Lining** — An additional layer of fabric sewn inside a garment for warmth, smoothness, a clean interior finish, and to extend the life of the garment. The lining (which may be full or partial) duplicates the size and shape of the exterior layer and lays smoothly inside the garment.

**Lockstitch** — A type of stitch or seam that does not ravel easily; the needle and bobbin threads interlock preventing the stitches from coming apart.
M –

Miter – Joining 2 pieces cut at an angle, creating an angled seam. Typically used on a V-neck.

Monofilament thread – Thread created by extruding a chemical fiber through a hole of specified diameter. The thread is continuous and generally strong. Nylon monofilament is often used in sewing and resembles fine fishing line.

N –

Nap – A directional finish on a fabric, usually a pile fabric such as velvet or terrycloth. The nap is smoother in one direction than the other. All pieces cut from a napped fabric must be laid in the same direction on the fabric.

Natural fibers – Fibers originating from plants or animals, such as cotton, linen, ramie, hemp, silk, cashmere, mohair, and wool.
**Non-woven fabrics** – Fabrics that are not created by weaving or knitting, such as felt or non-woven interfacing. These fabrics are composed of fibers that are bonded by heat, chemicals, or mechanical action.

**Notches** – Among the many markings that are the “language” of patterns. Notches are marks along the seam allowance of a pattern that help in aligning pieces when sewing, and can also identify the front or back of a piece (see below - one notch indicates the front, two notches indicates the back of a sleeve, crotch curve, etc). Other markings include grainlines and dots for matching points.
Off-grain – A garment that has not been cut with the grain in the center of each piece. Such a garment will not hang properly, and will twist on the body.

On-seam pocket – A pocket with the opening at the side seam (or other seam) of a garment. The pocket “bag” is stitched into the seam and is not visible on the outside of the garment.

Overlocked seam – A method of finishing the edge of a seam to prevent raveling. Overlocking is done with a specialized machine and may utilize 2 to 4 interlocking threads that loop over the edge of the fabric. Also known as a serged seam.
**P –**

**Patch pocket** – A pocket applied to the outside of a garment and topstitched in place. The pocket may be a simple square or any shape desired. It is stitched on all sides except one, to allow access to the pocket.

**Pattern** – A series of pieces (usually tissue or other paper) which is laid on the fabric for cutting the individual sections of a garment before assembly.

**Pattern Making** – The skill applied to create patterns. The ability to make flat fabric conform to a 3 dimensional body and move comfortably with the body.

**Picot** – A decorative trim applied to the edge of a garment consisting of a series of small loops.

**Piping** - A decorative trim applied to the edge or inserted into a seam of a garment. Piping consists of a folded piece of fabric which may or may not be filled with a narrow cord. Piping can be used to emphasize a seam line and add color to a garment.
Placket – A finished opening at the front, sleeves, or neckline, a placket generally supports buttons and buttonholes or snaps, and overlaps.

Plaid – Woven or printed pattern of alternating colors in the warp and weft (lengthwise and crosswise grain) of the fabric.

Pleat – A fold of fabric, usually pressed, which both adds and controls the fullness of a garment. See Box Pleat and Knife pleat.

Ply – A layer of fabric (ie, “cut 2 plies”, or layers). Or, the number of yarns twisted together to make a thread or heavier yarn (ie, 2ply yarn).
Pocket bag – A pouch of fabric that forms the functional part of the pocket; usually enclosed within the garment, as in an onseam or welt pocket (not used to refer to a patch or exterior pocket).

Q –

Quilting – Joining together several layers of fabric, usually including a cotton or polyester batting, to achieve a padded look. Adds warmth and can be used as a decorative technique.

R –

Reinforcement – A stitch, piece of fabric, or hardware designed to make a garment stronger at a certain point. For example, a rivet reinforces the corner of a jeans pocket; a rectangle or triangle of stitching reinforces the corner of a pocket on a shirt.

Rise – The length of the crotch seam, following the curve of the crotch.

Ruching – A gathered or pleated strip of fabric used to decorate a garment.
S –

**Safety stitch** – A stitch that seams and **overlocks** at the same time, using 5 threads. The seam is a 2-thread **chainstitch**, while the overlock consists of 3 threads. Often used on side seams or other main body seams on shirts, pants, and skirts. A “**mock safety stitch**” is made with 4 threads, only 2 of which overlock the edge.

**Scissoring** – A vent, placket, or other opening that does not hang straight on center. The opening overlaps farther than it should, often pulling the side seams out of balance. Or, the opening may hang open instead of closing at center.

**Seam** – Joining together of two or more layers (or plies) of fabric to construct a garment. Seams may be joined via a variety of methods, including single needle **straight stitch**, **chainstitch**, and “**safety stitch**.”
**Seam allowance** – The area of fabric between the seam and the edge of the fabric. Often ½”, or ¼” along curved edges, the width of the seam allowance can affect the strength and stability of the seam.

**Seam grin** – Essentially, loose stitches that show when the seam is pulled or under stress. Usually corrected by adjusting the tension of the thread.

**Seam pucker** – The result of tight tension on the thread, a puckered seam is slightly drawn up or gathered, not smooth and straight, and is prone to breaking.

**Seam slippage** – A seam weakened by fabric that is weaker than the seam joining it together. The yarns of the fabric begin to separate and pull apart, while the stitched seam remains intact.

**Selvage (Selvedge)** – The tightly woven area on each lengthwise edge of a fabric which prevents the edges from raveling. Created when the shuttle returns the weft yarn during weaving.

**Serged seam** – Seam finish using multiple threads looped over the edge of the fabric. See “overlocked seam” for illustration.
**Set circular (round)/set flat** – A cuff, for example, is set flat if it is set to the sleeve first, then the underarm seam is joined. It is set circular, or round, if the cuff seam and sleeve seam are closed first, then the cuff is set in a continuous, circular manner. Sleeves and other components may also be set flat or circular.

**Shell** – Outer layer of the garment, usually main **body fabric**.
**Shirring** – The process of drawing together fabric to control fullness (see also “gather”). This can be done by hand or machine; “shirring” is commonly used to describe the process using elastic thread in the bobbin to draw in the fabric.

**Single needle** – Generally referring to a *straight stitch*, or the machine that creates a straight stitch.

**Skew/skewing** – Crosswise grainlines that are not perpendicular to the lengthwise grain. This will cause the garment to twist or hang unevenly, called “skewing”.

**Sleeve cap** – The shaped area at the top of a sleeve that is set into the armhole and fits over the shoulder and bicep area of the arm. The height and shape of the sleeve cap determine the fit and ease of movement in the sleeve.
**Sleeve header** A strip of fabric (usually firm and tightly woven) that is inserted into the sleeve cap to give support and shape of the cap.

**Snap** – A metal or plastic closure consisting of a ball (male) side and socket (female) side.

**Stay stitch** – A line of stitching used to stabilize a cut piece before sewing. A stay stitch is generally a longer stitch, and runs very close to the seam/stitch line.

**Stitch** – The formation of threads that form a seam. See **straight stitch, safety stitch, chain stitch, and overlock**.

**Stitch length** – the number of stitches per inch of seam.

**Stitch width** – In a zig-zag or other back-and-forth stitch, the stitch width is the distance between stitches from right to left.
**Stitch in the ditch** – Usually used on a waistband, stitching in the ditch refers to stitching in the crevice between the waistband and the skirt or pant, to secure the band on the inside of the garment. Stitching in the ditch makes the line of stitching almost invisible.

**Straddle stitch** – Double-needle topstitching that is centered over the seam.

![Straddle stitch, or double needle centered over the seam](image)

**Straight stitch** – Usually made with a single-needle sewing machine, a straight stitch seam is created with a needle thread and a bobbin thread and is a lockstitch (it does not ravel easily).

**Swing tack** – Loosely attaching a lining to the shell fabric (usually of a skirt) with a thread chain or thin strip of fabric. The swing tack prevents the lining from riding up or pulling away from the garment, while still allowing separate movement.

**Synthetic fibers** – Man-made fibers, such as polyester, nylon, rayon, tencel or acetate.
T –

Taping – A method of reinforcing a seam, often found on tee shirts. A strip of fabric is sewn, centered over the seam, and stitched on each side. The effect on the face of the fabric is a double needle saddle stitch. The term can also refer to applying bias tape to finish an edge.

Thread – A very thin, twisted yarn used in sewing. Threads may be spun from staple (short length) or monofilament (long, continuous) fibers, and may be natural or synthetic.

Tension – The balance of force between the needle thread and the bobbin thread in a sewing machine. Tension must be balanced for even, strong stitches. Tight tension results in puckered seams. Loose tension results in looped thread and seam grin. Generally, problems that appear on the needle thread come from incorrect tension in the bobbin; problems with the bobbin thread come from the tension in the needle thread.
**Topstitching** – Stitching that shows on the face side of the fabric, along a seamline or an edge. Topstitching may be single needle or multi-needle, in matching or contrasting thread, decorative or functional (as in securing the edge of a facing or a seam allowance).

**Torque** – The twisting of a garment at the side seams, due to cutting, knitting or weaving off-grain.

**Tuck** – A fold of fabric secured at the top, similar to a pleat. “Tuck” usually refers to a small, narrow pleat and may be topstitched for decorative effect.

**Twill tape** – Woven tape with a twill weave used for decoration, or to reinforce seams. Twill tape does not have the flexibility of bias tape when following a curve, but is stronger than bias tape.
U –

**Underarm** – On the body, the underarm is the armpit. On a garment or pattern piece, it is the lower part of the armhole, or the sleeve seam that runs along the underside of the arm.

**Underlining** – Also called flat lining, an underlining is a piece of lightweight fabric that duplicates a garment piece and is stitched to the back side of the garment piece before the garment is sewn together. Unlike most linings, under/flat lining does not hang separately inside the garment; it adds a ply of fabric to each piece to reinforce the fabric before sewing.

**Understitch** – A row of stitching that follows the seam line of a facing, joining the facing and the seam allowance together. This prevents the facing from rolling forward and becoming visible when the garment is worn. The stitching does not show on the face side of the garment; the stitching is on the facing and seam allowance only.

V –

**Vent** – An opening on the edge of a garment to allow movement. The edges of the vent may meet, or may overlap, as in a kick pleat, or may be cut in a “V” shape.
W –

Wale – A vertical row in a fabric that is raised (as in each “line” of corduroy). Also a vertical row of stitching in a knit.

Warp and Weft – The yarns running lengthwise (warp) and crosswise (weft) that make up a woven fabric.

Woven fabric – Fabric created by interweaving lengthwise (warp) and crosswise (weft) yarns. The weft yarns may go over and under the warp yarns in a variety of patterns (ie, twill, satin, and herringbone weaves are variations on the over/under pattern of weaving).

Y –

Yarn – Fibers that are twisted together to create one long, continuous thread used in weaving or knitting fabric. Yarns may be made up of one or more plies. Many thin plies are more flexible than one thick ply.

Z –

Zipper – Closure consisting of interlocking “teeth” of metal or plastic, with a slider that opens or joins the teeth.