sewing glossary



Studio manager Kalli performing quality control inspections.

Here is a running list of definitions of common sewing terms I use in my blog posts and patterns. I will add to this list over time as needed.

📌 **Last Updated: 2025-05-15**

Access the current version of the glossary here:
https://extradisciplinary.com/posts/sewingglossary

- **Backstitch:** securing a line of stitches by reversing direction and stitching backwards about 3 stitches. It's best practice to backstitch at the beginning and end of every line of stitching, unless you are **basting**.
- **Baste/basting:** When sewing garments, basting refers to sewing with long stitches (usually 4 to 6 mm) to hold fabric in place temporarily. When quilting, basting refers to a method of temporarily holding layers of fabric together until you finish quilting. Some folks use long pins, curved safety pins, or spray adhesive.
- **Bias grain:** refers to the diagonal that runs between the **lengthwise** and **crosswise grains**. If the pattern calls for cutting "on the bias," you will position the grainline markings on the pattern piece at a 45 degree angle to the selvage edges. Cutting along the bias grain provides the greatest amount of stretch in woven fabrics (even in fabrics without elastic fibers). Read more about grain here.
- **Clip**: to snip into the seam allowance along concave curves to prevent bunching and wrinkling when the object is turned right side out. Be careful to avoid cutting into your stitchline!
- **Crosswise (cross) grain:** corresponds to the weft threads of a woven fabric. It runs along the width of the fabric, perpendicular to the **selvage** edges. The cross grain has more stretch than the lengthwise grain, but less than bias grain. In general, the cross grain should be parallel to the ground, so the greatest amount of stretch wraps around the body. Read more about grain here.
- **Double-fold hem:** a method of **finishing a seam** where the edge of the fabric is folded under twice to enclose the raw edge so it doesn't fray.
- **Edgestitch:** a line of stitching very close (usually ~1/8") to the edge of the fabric, often used to secure a fold or seam. An edgestitch presser foot is very helpful for sewing a clean line of stitches parallel to the edge. Edgestitching is considered a type of **topstitching** since it's visible on the finished object, unlike regular construction seams.
- **Enclosed seams:** a method of **finishing a seam** where the raw edges of the fabric are enclosed within the finished object (such as by adding a lining) so that they don't fray.

- **Fat quarter:** a rectangle of fabric that is 18″ x 22.″ A fat quarter is a common size of pre-cut fabric that you can find at any fabric shop. They are often used for quilts and small sewing projects. A fat quarter is made by taking a half yard of fabric and cutting it in half horizontally (instead of vertically, which is the way the fabric is cut if you ask for a quarter yard), which yields a wider piece of fabric that is often more useful for sewing projects.
- **Finishing seams:** after sewing a seam, you must "finish" it in some way so it doesn't unravel or fray. The pattern may use certain techniques to finish seams (e.g., using a **double-fold hem** or **enclosed seams**), or may instruct you to finish seams as you wish. Common methods of finishing seams include sewing a zigzag stitch along the raw edge of the seam allowance, trimming your seam allowance with pinking shears, using a serger/overlocker, or binding the edges with bias tape.
- **Fusible interfacing**: a textile with adhesive on one side that is fused to another fabric using an iron to give the fabric more strength and stability.
- **Grade the seam allowance**: see **trim the seam allowance**.
- **Grainline:** In woven fabrics, grainline corresponds to how the fabric was manufactured on a loom. There are three types of grainline: **lengthwise grain**, **crosswise wise**, and **bias grain**. Read more about grain here.
- **Lengthwise grain** (also called the straight grain or just "the grain"): corresponds to the warp threads of a woven fabric. It runs along the length of the fabric, parallel to the selvage edges. There is little, if any, stretch along the lengthwise grain. In general, the lengthwise grain should work in the same direction as gravity. Read more about grain here.
- **Notch:** refers to either 1) making a small snip within the seam allowance of a pattern piece to mark a point of reference or 2) cutting out small triangles from the seam allowance of a convex curve to prevent bunching and wrinkling when the object is turned right side out. Be careful to avoid cutting into your stitchline!
- **Pivoting**: a method for sewing around corners. When you approach a corner, stop sewing with the needle down in the fabric (your sewing machine likely has a setting where you can choose whether the needle will stay down in the fabric or lift out of the fabric when you stop sewing). Don't backstitch or cut

your threads. Lift the presser foot and rotate the fabric so that the edge you haven't sewn yet is aligned with your seam allowance marking. Lower the presser foot and continue sewing. If your fabric edge is not aligned with your desired seam allowance marking, you can pivot the fabric back to its original orientation and sew a couple more stitches forward or backwards as needed. Alternatively, you can start stitching the new edge even if you're a bit off and guide your fabric to the desired seam allowance as you stitch.

- **Press:** applying pressure to a seam after sewing to help the stitches settle in and make the seam as flat as possible. Many of my patterns use just your fingers to apply pressure, but most sewing projects call for you to apply pressure with heat and sometimes steam using an iron. Pressing is different from ironing: to press, you hold the iron still and apply pressure, whereas to iron, you move the iron back and forth. It's best practice to press every seam you create before you sew another one. Patterns will ask you to press your **seam allowance** 1) flat or as sewn, 2) towards one side of the stitch line, or 3) open like a book.
- **Quilt/quilting:** a quilt (noun) is created by stitching together two layers of fabric—the quilt top and the quilt backing—usually with a layer of batting in the middle to add warmth and loft. Quilting (verb) is the act of sewing the visible stitch lines (often in decorative patterns) that hold the layers of fabric together. When we think of a quilt, we often visualize patchwork quilts made by piecing together small pieces of fabric to create a design, but you can also make wholecloth quilts by quilting pieces of fabric without any patchwork.
- **Quilting cotton:** a durable cotton fabric with a high thread count and tight weave. The "standard" quilting cotton weight is 4.4 oz, but most fall within the 4–5 oz range. Quilting cottons are widely available and come in an overwhelming selection of colors and prints. You can use quilting cottons for much more than quilting, but I don't recommend them for garments (too crisp!).
- **Right side:** the side of the fabric that will face the outside of the object and be visible. Some fabrics do not have an obvious right or **wrong** side; in those cases, just pick one side and be consistent throughout your project.
- **Seam allowance:** can refer to the specific distance between the edge of the fabric and stitching line called for in a pattern (e.g., use a seam allowance of

1/2″) or the area between the stitching line and the edge of the fabric (e.g., trim the seam allowance).

- **Selvage/selvedge**: The finished side edges of woven fabrics, created by the weft threads wrapping around the side of the weaving to start the next row. You can identify the selvage edge of a fabric by looking for fringe, pin pricks (where it was attached to the loom), or printed text. The selvage edge is perpendicular to where the fabric was cut off the bolt.
- **Stitch length:** the length of each stitch; the default length for a straight stitch on most sewing machines is 2.5 mm, but you might increase the stitch length when topstitching and basting.
- **Topstitch:** a line of stitching that can be seen from the outside of the object and is usually sewed from the right side of the fabric. Topstitching often uses slightly longer stitches (3.0 mm) than the default stitch length (2.5 mm) used for sewing most seams.
- **Trim (or grade) the seam allowance:** cutting away extra fabric from the **seam allowance** after sewing a seam to reduce bulk. When trimming, cut each layer to a different length to create a gradual transition rather than a big speed bump. In general, the shortest layer should be no smaller than 1/8″ so the fabric doesn't unravel, and the longest layer should be the one closest to the **right side** of the finished object.
- **Weight:** how heavy or light your fabric is. Fabric is usually measured in ounces per square yard (abbreviated oz/yd² or just oz) or grams per square meter (abbreviated gsm). The weight of the fabric you choose affects the structure, durability, and functionality of your finished object. If you choose to use a fabric that is not the same weight as what a pattern calls for, it may not turn out as intended.
- **Woven fabric:** fabric that is produced by weaving two sets of yarn/thread together on a loom. The yarn is interwoven at right angles to each other, which makes the fabric sturdier but prevents it from stretching much. In contrast, knitted fabric is made with one piece of yarn that is knitted together through interlocking loops. These loops allow the fabric to stretch, even if the fabric doesn't contain stretchy fibers like elastane/Spandex/Lycra.

- **Wrong side:** the side of the fabric that will face the inside of the object and won’t be visible.