

Tools, Tips, and Techniques

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I have never had a doll complain about an outfit that I made for her.

Introduction

The following hints have been taken from my blog and revised for the sake of continuity. Occasionally a note in my patterns will refer you to topics in this paper. The topic **Basic Sewing Tools**, for example, is listed under equipment in all my patterns.

I have written other hints hoping that they might be helpful to you as you sew small dolls and their clothing. Some of the short cuts that I use are not traditional methods. If you prefer traditional methods, please use them.

Basic Sewing Tools

Sewing Machine

- It is much easier to sew small doll clothes and cloth dolls if you use a sewing machine with controllable speed. A sewing machine that only has a fast speed is hard to maneuver while you are sewing short seams and small curves.
- A zigzag stitch is a must for sewing knits. Zigzagging is an easy way to finish seams on tiny doll clothes.

Sewing Basket

I like sewing gadgets. I keep them in boxes and drawers all over my sewing room. If I were furnishing a sewing basket with basic sewing tools, I would list: dressmaker scissors, an assortment of pins and a pin cushion, an assortment of hand sewing needles, a thimble, and a tape measure.



- It is important that scissors are sharp and well made. I have both Gingher® and Fiskars® dressmaker shears. I can recommend either pair.



- I usually use glass head silk pins, but sometimes I use silk pins with a smaller metal head. I have an over sized tomato pin cushion and now a globe pin cushion made from the free pattern offered on my website.



- I have an assortment of hand sewing needles. Different sewing jobs need different size needles. The needle I use most often for hand sewing is a size 8 embroidery needle. For some jobs I may choose a longer or thinner needle. Occasionally I list an unusual size needle under equipment at the beginning of a pattern.
- Not everyone uses a thimble, but I can't get along without one.
- Along with my regular width tape measure I have a narrow tape measure made to use in dollmaking.



I have a few more tools that I use frequently. I have even more gadgets that I enjoy using at times. The tools that I have named are the ones that are used in most of my doll and doll clothes patterns.

Ironing

It is as important to press seams between sewing steps in doll dressmaking as it is to press while making larger projects. Basic Ironing equipment is essential to sewing.

- Steam iron
- Full size ironing board
- Spray water bottle for moistening fabric if you are not using steam in your iron

More Sewing Tools

Here is a list of other sewing tools that are useful. Occasionally I list one of these tools under equipment at the beginning of a pattern.

Sewing Machine Tools

- Open embroidery foot
 - I use this foot when I am sewing a traced shape such as an arm or leg. The foot's openness makes the line easy to see.
- Ott-lite®

- I have an ott-lite on my sewing table. I use it along with my open embroidery foot to stitch a traced shape.
- Patchwork foot
 - This foot was made for quilters, but it is great for sewing quarter inch and eighth seam allowances on doll clothes.
- Zipper foot

Sewing basket



The picture shows a collection of tools that I find helpful.

- There are two different point turners in the picture.
 - The one at the top of the picture is helpful when turning curved pieces.
 - The bottom turner is helpful for defining sharp angles.
 - Both turners are helpful for defining points.
- The second tool from the top is a hemostat. It is helpful for turning small fabric pieces and stuffing dolls and toys.
- I use my small scissors for clipping seams and delicate trimming.
- A seam ripper is very useful to me. I need it more often than I like to admit.
- The bodkin makes it easy to insert elastic into a casing.

Ironing

- Doll Clothes Ironing Board
 - I have a small ironing board made for pressing doll clothes that I find very useful. It makes pressing little sleeves and hems easier.



- A Sleeve Roll
 - A sleeve roll is sometimes a good choice for pressing small sewing projects, because small pieces may be pinned to it. I push the pins straight down into the roll as if it were a pin cushion.



- Pressing strips
 - Cut 1/2 inch wide strips from a 5 x 8 inch index card printed with a 1/4 inch grid. To accurately press under a 1/2 inch of fabric pull the edge of fabric over the paper strip and press. To press under 1/4 inch of fabric pull the fabric to the 1/4 inch line and press.



- Finger pressing

Sometimes in dollmaking the only pressing equipment that you need is a finger or two.

- To finger press a seam open spread the seam open and run your index finger or thumb down the stitch line. Put enough pressure on the stitch to encourage the seam to stay open.
- To finger press a crease in the fabric pinch the fabric between your finger and thumb at the spot where you want the crease to begin. Pull the fabric through your finger and thumb along the line to be creased. If you are not satisfied with the crease, repeat the pinch and pull process.

Stitches

Machine Stitches

- Stay stitching
 - Stay stitching is usually sewn on the stitching line of a single layer of fabric.
 - It is used to prevent fabric from stretching.

- It is used as a guide for folding or clipping fabric.



- Topstitching

- Topstitching will be visible on a finished garment.
- Use the edge of the presser foot or a seam guide to produce a straight stitch.
- Match the thread color to the fabric or choose an interesting contrast.



- Gathering stitch

- Sew two parallel rows of long stitches and pull the bobbin threads until the fabric is gathered to the desired length.
- Check the fabric to see if the stitches can be removed from the fabric without leaving small holes. Then one row of gathering stitches may use a $\frac{3}{8}$ inch seam guide even though the joining seam will be $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Remove the visible gathering stitch after the joining seam has been sewn.

- Zigzag stitch

- Joining knits fabric
 - Use zigzag stitches to join knit fabric. I have not had success using a serger to join very small knit pieces.
 - Use a fairly wide zigzag stitch to join knits. Set the zigzags to be fairly close together, but not a satin stitch.
 - If your zigzag is not as wide as the seam allowance, you may trim the seam.



- Sewing lace to knits with the zigzag stitch
 - Lay the lace on the right side of the fabric.

- If the lace will extend above or below the fabric, overlap the raw edge of the knit with the lace heading.



- If the lace will lie on top of the fabric make the heading even with the raw edge.
- Stitch a narrow almost satin stitch on the lace heading.

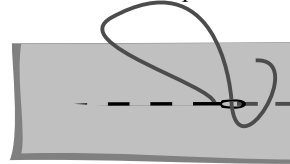


Hand Stitching

One stitch is defined as the needle going into and coming out of the fabric.

- Running stitch

- Several stitches are made with the needle before the thread is pulled through the fabric.



- Basting stitches

- Basting stitches are running stitches used to hold fabric together so that it can be sewn with a machine stitch.

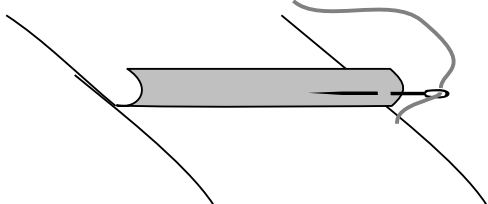
- Hand Gathering

- Hand gathering stitches are running stitches that are pulled so that the fabric is gathered over the thread.

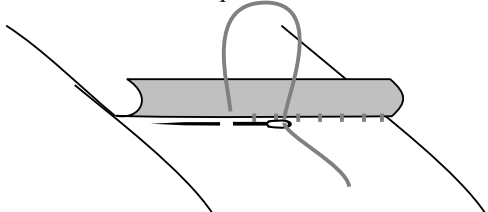
- Slip-Stitch

- A slip-stitch is an almost invisible stitch. It is a good stitch to use when putting in a hem.
- Finish the raw edge of the garment to be hemmed.
- Press in the hem. For these small doll patterns the hem is usually $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.
- Use a few pins to hold the hem in place.
- Check the length on the doll before continuing.

- Fold the finished edge back about 1/8 inch.



- Take about an 1/8 inch stitch through the folded back edge. Pull the thread through the fabric.
- Catch two or three threads and take a small stitch on the part of the hem that will be visible on the dress.
- Take the next stitch in the folded back edge. For these small hems the visible stitches should be about 1/4 inch apart.

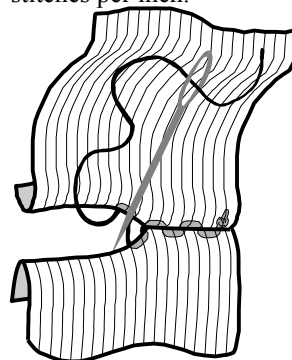


● Ladder Stitch

In doll patterns and doll crafting magazines the invisible hand stitch used in doll construction is called the ladder stitch. In embroidery books the ladder stitch is a decorative stitch that looks like a ladder. The dollmaker's ladder stitch is similar to the slip-stitch, but it is done on the outside of the doll.

- Using the ladder stitch to connect the doll's head to the body
 - Insert the neck into the opening in the head.
 - Use a few pins if you like to hold the two parts together. I usually just hold the two together as I sew.
 - Take a small stitch in the head.
 - Pull the thread through each stitch as you take it.
 - Take the second stitch in the neck.
 - Go back to the head for the next stitch and make it very close to the first stitch.
 - Continue back and forth.
 - Take only one stitch at a time. Pull the thread completely through with each stitch.

- Keep the stitches very close together. You should take between fifteen and twenty stitches per inch.



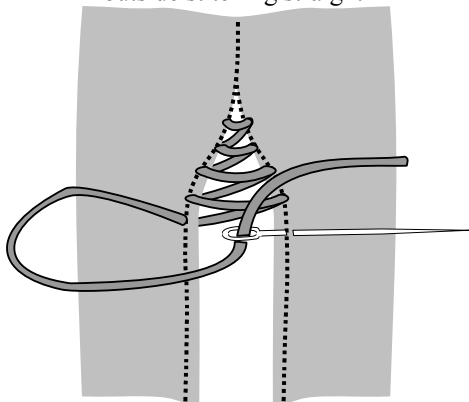
Picture courtesy Dover Publications "Easy to Make Story Book Dolls" by Sherralyn St. Clair

- Sewing arm and leg stuffing openings closed with the ladder stitch
 - Finish stuffing each piece.
 - Tuck the raw edges of the stuffing opening inside the arm or leg.
 - Hold the edges of the stuffing opening together as you sew.
 - Do not overlap the edges as you sew.
 - Take a small stitch on one side of the opening.
 - Pull the thread through each stitch as you take it.
 - Take the second stitch on the other side of the opening.
 - Go back to first side for the next stitch and make it very close to the beginning stitch.
 - Continue back and forth. Keep the stitches very close together. You should take between fifteen and twenty stitches per inch.

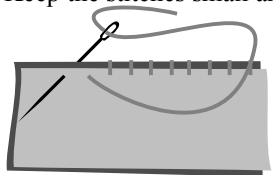
● Overcasting Stitch

- Using overcasting to close a body back stuffing opening
 - Start sewing at the top of the stuffing opening on the left side of the opening. Hide the thread knot by inserting the needle into the top of the stuffing opening and bringing it out on the left side.
 - Make a stitch straight across the opening to the right side.
 - Make the second stitch going right to left slightly slanted. The second stitch in each pair will be inside the closing, so that the visible stitches go straight across the stuffing opening.

- Continue back and forth keeping the outside stitching straight



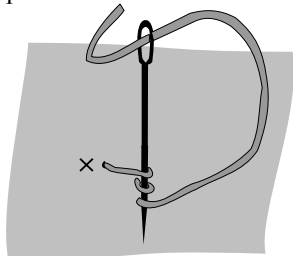
- Pull the stitches tight as you sew. The above figure shows loose stitches to illustrate thread placement.
- Using overcasting to close an arm or leg
 - Finish stuffing each piece.
 - Tuck the raw edges of the stuffing opening inside the arm or leg.
 - Hold the edges of the stuffing opening together as you sew.
 - Sew both sides of the opening together with each stitch.
 - Keep the stitches small and close together.



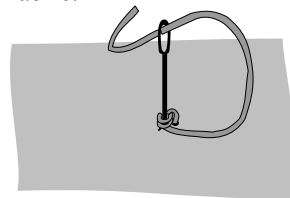
● French Knot

The French knot is the embroidery stitch used for the bunny's eyes in the bunny slippers. The books I have read have different opinions on the number of times to wrap the floss around the needle while making the stitch. One book says only one wrap. One book says one or two. Another book says two or three wraps. I decided to use the average of two wraps for the bunny's eyes. To make thicker French knots, use more strands of floss.

- Bring the needle to the right side of the fabric slightly to the right of the point marked for the French knot.
- Pull all the floss through the fabric until it stops at the knotted end.
- Hold the needle close to the marked point and wrap the floss around the needle twice.



- Insert the needle through the point marked on the fabric.



Transferring Pattern Markings to Fabric

First choose a pen, pencil, or other method to mark your fabric pieces. Then choose the method to use for transferring the pattern markings to the fabric. You can find other more traditional methods for marking fabric in sewing handbooks.

Choosing pens and pencils

- Use a thin line air soluble pen when marking on the right side of the fabric. I find that the thicker air soluble pens are not precise enough for marking small size sewing projects. Mark with this type of pen just before sewing, because it disappears quickly. Sometimes the markings will last a few hours or a few days zipped in an air tight plastic bag. The time the marking lasts depends on the age of the pen and the amount of humidity in the air.
- For marks on the wrong side of the fabric and marks for embroidery designs, I like to use Prismacolor® pencils. They wash out easily.
- If you prefer more traditional marking methods, you can purchase tailor's chalk in various colors, or try a marking wheel and transfer paper.

Tracing Markings

- Hold the pattern and fabric up to a window to trace markings. This method is easier if the pattern and fabric are held to the window with drafting tape. (I think masking tape is too strong.)
- A clear plastic box picture frame works fairly well when tracing pattern markings. It should be propped up at an angle rather than resting flat on a table. Another solution is to have a battery powered light under the plastic box. Light should be behind the pattern that you are tracing.
- My favorite tracing method is a light box or table. I bought a small inexpensive one years ago. Larger ones may be fairly pricey. I use a small amount of drafting tape to hold the pattern and fabric to my light box.

Clipping fabric

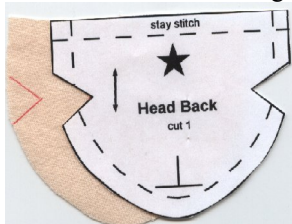
- Cut out the small notches in the seam allowance that are used to help match fabric pieces.



- You can make a small clip in the middle of each notch if you prefer.

Cutting out Parts of a Paper Pattern

- Darts
 - Rather than tracing darts you can print out or copy a second pattern piece.
 - Cut the dart shape out of the pattern.
 - Place the pattern on the fabric piece to be marked.
 - Trace the dart where it belongs on the pattern.



- Dots
 - Pull a pin with a small metal head through the dot on the paper pattern.
 - Put the pattern on the fabric to be marked.
 - Use a pen or pencil to mark the fabric through the hole in the pattern.



Finishing Raw Edges

Serger

- Finishing two raw edges together
 - Sew the seam with a straight stitch on a sewing machine.



- Serge using only three spools of thread. This method produces a narrow finished seam and a small stitch connecting the fabric pieces. Serge close to the machine stitching so that the serger knife will trim the seam to about 1/8 inch. Note that the bottom of the sample has not been serged to show how the serger knife has narrowed the seam.



- Add a drop of seam sealant on the stitching at the beginning and end of each line of serging.
- Press the seam to one side.
- Small curves such as those on sleeves and necklines of doll clothing are difficult to do with a serger.
- Finishing single edges in hems and casings
 - Use only three thread spools to make a narrow finish.
 - Sew near the edge so that the fabric is not cut with the knife.



- Turn up the hem the desired amount and slip-stitch.



- For hems in A-line garments add a machine gathering stitch next to the finished edge.
- Pull the gathering thread until the hem lies flat against the skirt and slip-stitch.



Zigzag Stitch

- Finishing two raw edges together
 - Sew the seam with a straight stitch.



- Set the zigzag stitch about 1/8 inch wide.
- Make the zigzags close together, but not a satin stitch.
- Zigzag close to the straight stitch so that there is about an 1/8 inch raw edge.
- Trim the seam close to the finished edge.



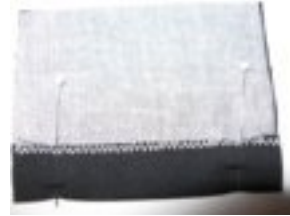
- Press the seam to one side.



- Finishing single edges in hems and casings
 - Sew near the edge to be finished.



- Turn up the hem the desired amount and slip-stitch.



- For hems in A line garments add a machine gathering stitch next to the finished edge
- Pull the gathering thread until the hem lies flat against the skirt and slip-stitch.



Pinking Shears

- Small curves such as those on sleeves and necklines of doll clothing are difficult to cut with pinking shears.
- Pink the seam close to the raw edge. The measurement from the peak of the pinked edge to the stitch should be almost 1/4 inch.
- These seams may be pressed open unless they are inside an elastic casing.



- The Pinked edges may be pressed in the same direction so that the machine stitching is visible inside the garment. The edges must be pressed in one direction if they will be inside an elastic casing.

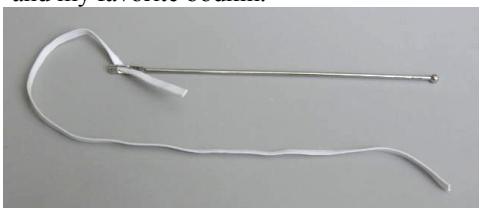


Using a seam sealant to finish seams

- Lay the cut pieces that you want to treat on a sheet of wax paper.
- Squeeze a few drops of seam sealant onto the wax paper. I have tried applying the sealant directly to the fabric, but I always ended up with too much on the edges. Too much sealant makes the fabric edges stiff and difficult to sew through.
- Use a toothpick to apply a small amount to the outside edges of the fabric pieces.
- To make the sealed edges softer, after the sealant has dried, soak the treated pieces in a bowl of water. After five or ten minutes remove the fabric from the water. Blot the pieces and let air dry. Press. The fabric is soft and easy to sew. This soaking step is optional.
- These seams may be pressed open unless they are inside an elastic casing.

Inserting Elastic into the Casing

- For doll clothes I always use one eighth inch elastic and my favorite bodkin.



- Use your whole length of elastic. Do not cut it until it is secure on both sides of the casing. Use a bodkin to pull the elastic through the casing.
- If a seam is inside the casing, the two seam edges should have been finished together and pressed to one side. The bodkin should travel over the stitching first and then over the two seams.



- Pull the elastic through the casing with the bodkin.
- Release the elastic from the bodkin and secure the released end to the casing by sewing through it several times.



- Check the pattern instructions for measurement. Gather the casing fabric over the elastic to the desired length without stretching the elastic.
- Try the garment on to check the size.

- Secure the second side of the elastic to the second casing opening by sewing through it and the casing several times.

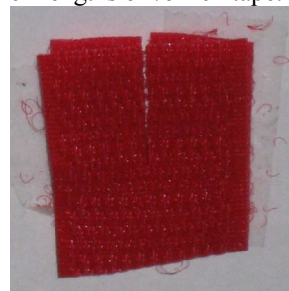


- Cut off the excess elastic.

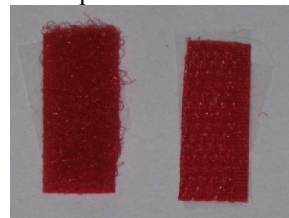
Closing the Back With Hook and Loop Tape

I like to close garments for small dolls with short pieces of hook and loop tape. In this method the left and right sides of the closing will be side by side like a zipper closing rather than overlapping like closings with buttons or snaps. I do not use the overlap method for hook and loop tape in these patterns, because the overlapped closing is too thick on such small dresses.

- Use your favorite method to finish each side of the opening.
- Press each finished side of the opening ½ inch to the inside.
- Take a 1 inch length of ¾ inch wide hook and loop tape. The hook side and the loop side of the tape should be fastened.
- Split this tape in half lengthwise so that there are two 1 inch lengths of ¾ inch tape.



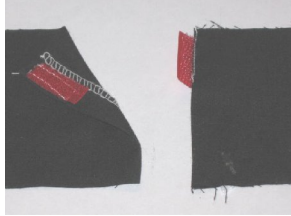
- Separate the tape into the hook and loop sides.



- Take the hook side of one of the tape pairs and lay it face up partly under the right side of the opening at the top of the opening. About ¼ inch of tape should stick out of the opening and about ⅛ inch of the tape should be under the fabric edge of the opening. The bumpy hook side of the tape should be touching the fabric at this ⅛ inch overlap.
- At the edge of the right back opening stitch through the fabric and the tape.
- Lay the first piece of loop tape completely inside

the left side of the back opening. The loops should be out and the smooth side of the tape should be against the fabric.

- Stitch down the tape through the fabric.
- At $\frac{1}{8}$ inch from the bottom of the tape, pivot the needle and stitch a few horizontal stitches.
- Pivot the needle again and stitch back up the tape.



- For garments that need a second strip of hook and loop tape measure one half inch down from the first piece of loop tape and sew the second piece of tape in the same manner as the first tape.



- I like to use snag free Velcro®. The snag free variety sticks to itself, so you don't need to worry about hook and loop sides. To use this type of tape, split a single one inch length of tape in half lengthwise so that you have two narrow one inch lengths. Use one piece in place of the hook side and one piece in place of the loop side in the above instructions.

Closing the Back with Snaps

If you prefer an overlapped closing, use small snaps.

- Press under $\frac{1}{2}$ inch at back left closing and $\frac{1}{4}$ inch at back right closing.
- Overlap right over left $\frac{1}{4}$ inch.
- Check fit on doll before applying snaps.
- Use two to four snaps to close dress.