

Me Made Makes

Bag Making Basics

A comprehensive guide covering essential techniques, terminology, and tools for beginners.



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Welcome to the world of bag-making! Whether you're a sewing enthusiast eager to embark on your first bag-making adventure or an experienced bag maker looking to expand your repertoire, this eBook is designed to be your comprehensive guide to mastering the essentials of bag-making. From understanding fundamental techniques and terminology to selecting the right materials and tools, this eBook will equip you with the knowledge and skills needed to create beautiful and functional bags with confidence.

Terminology: What are some fundamental bagmaking/sewing terminology that you will need to know when starting out in bag making?

Straight Stitching: Straight stitching is the most basic sewing technique where the machine creates a straight line of stitches. It's used for joining fabric pieces together, creating seams, and attaching various components of a bag. When constructing seams I usually use a stitch length of around 2.5 or 3 (3 when sewing vinyl or cork)

Backstitching: Backstitching is a technique used at the beginning and end of a seam to secure the stitches and prevent them from unravelling. It involves sewing a few stitches in reverse before sewing forward again.

Pivoting: Pivoting is a technique used to change the direction of sewing when reaching a corner or curve. To pivot, stop sewing with the needle down in the fabric, lift the presser foot, rotate the fabric, lower the presser foot, and continue sewing.

Clipping and Notching: Clipping involves cutting small V-shaped notches into curved seam allowances to reduce bulk and allow the fabric to lie flat when turned right side out. Notching involves cutting out small triangles from seam allowances to prevent puckering and improve the shape of curved seams once the bag is turned through.

Understitching: Understitching is a technique used to prevent facings or linings from rolling to the outside of a bag. It involves stitching the seam allowance to the facing or lining fabric, keeping it securely in place.

Topstitching: Topstitching is a decorative stitching technique where a line of stitching is sewn on the right side of the fabric, usually parallel to a seam or edge. It adds strength, stability, and visual interest to the finished bag. I usually top stitch at a stitch length of 4 or 4.5

Basting: Basting is a temporary stitching technique used to hold fabric pieces together before permanent stitching. It can be done by hand or with a long machine stitch and is helpful for complex construction steps or when fitting gusset pieces in place.

Pressing: Pressing involves using an iron to flatten seams, set stitches, and shape fabric during the construction process. Proper pressing techniques are essential for achieving professional-looking results in bag making.

Interfacing: Interfacing is a type of fabric that is used to add structure, stability, and support to certain parts of a bag, such as the exterior panels, pockets, or straps. It is typically applied to the wrong side of fabric pieces before sewing.

Darts: Darts are folded and sewn triangular or wedge-shaped tucks in fabric that are used to shape flat pieces into three-dimensional forms. In bag making, darts are often used to create volume and shape in the body of the bag or in pockets.

Seam Allowance: Seam allowance is the area between the edge of the fabric and the stitching line. It is the amount of fabric that extends beyond the seam line and is typically used for joining fabric pieces together. Common seam allowances in bag making are $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (6 mm) or $\frac{3}{8}$ inch (1 cm).

Right Side/Wrong Side: The right side of the fabric refers to the side that is intended to be visible in the finished bag, while the wrong side is the opposite side. It's important to pay attention to fabric orientation when cutting and sewing to ensure that the right sides are facing each other as needed.

Gusset: A gusset is a strip of fabric or other material used to add width or depth to the sides or bottom of a bag, creating volume and room for contents. Gussets can be sewn into seams or added as separate pieces.

Boxed Corners: Boxed corners are created by sewing across the corners of a flat bag to create a three-dimensional shape with depth. This technique is commonly used to give bags a squared-off bottom or to create pouch-like structures.

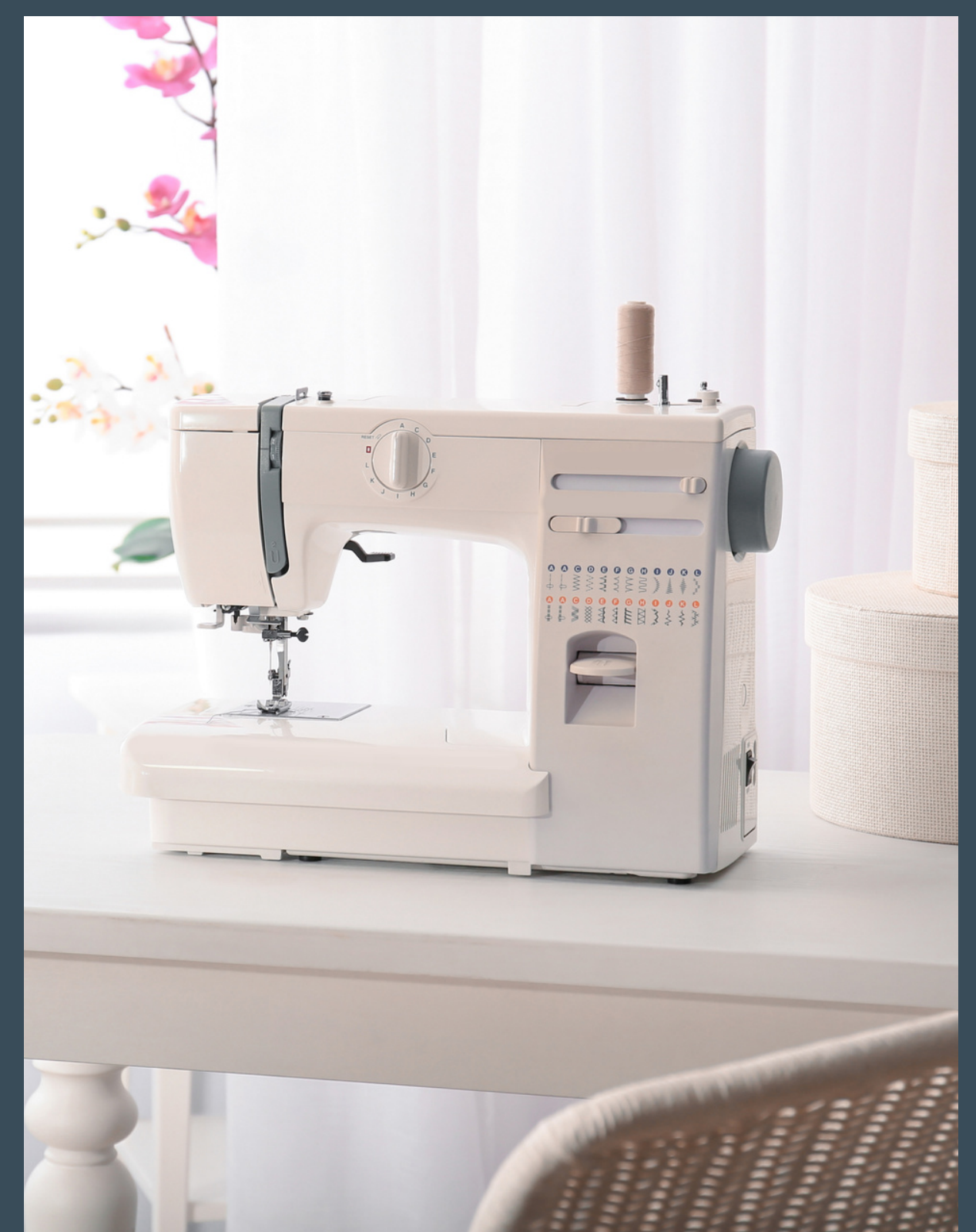
Understanding these terms and jargon will help navigate bag-making patterns, instructions, and tutorials with greater ease and confidence.

TOOLS OF THE TRADE:

What are the essential tools and equipment needed for bag making?

Sewing Machine:

A reliable sewing machine is essential for stitching together fabric pieces, creating seams, and adding decorative stitching. Look for a machine with basic and decorative stitch options, as well as a variety of presser feet suitable for different tasks. A heavy-duty machine is best suited for bag making but this doesn't need to mean buying a really expensive machine, try out machines at a machine shop if possible, vintage singer machines are also a good option for bag making.



Needles:

Various types and sizes of sewing machine needles are needed for different fabrics and projects. Universal needles are a good starting point, but consider having specialty needles such as Denim, Leather and Microtex Needles.(see previous ebook on needles for further info)

Thread:

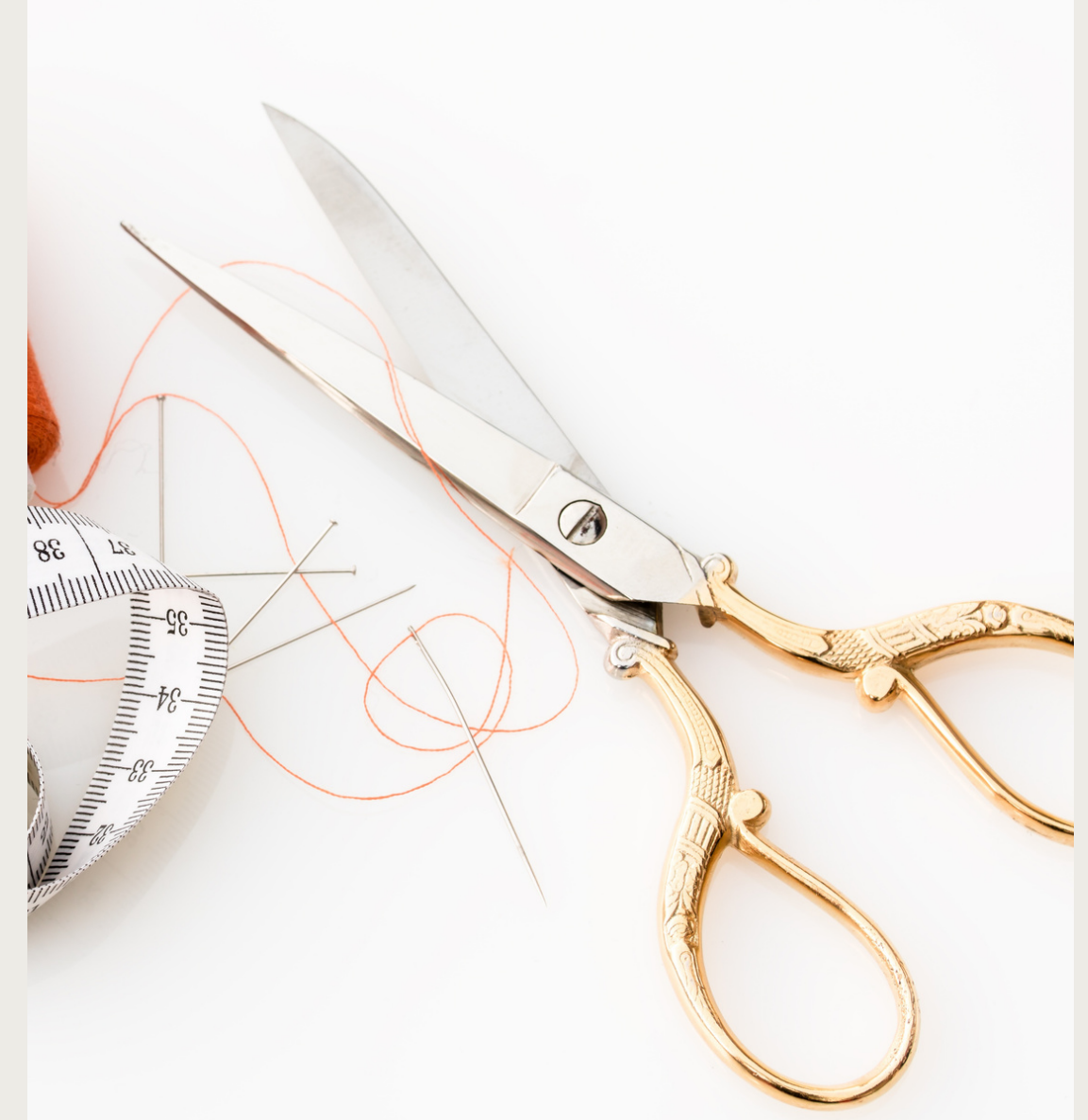
High-quality thread in a variety of colours is essential for sewing seams and topstitching. Choose thread that matches or complements your fabric for a professional finish. Threads suitable for bag making in domestic machines are standard 120s polyester thread such as moon(coats) or gutermann thread, some domestic machines sew well with tex 45 (60s) thread but it's worth trying a reel first before investing in lots of colours. Tex 70 (40s) nylon or polyester is used in industrial machines.



Cutting Tools:

Fabric Scissors:

Sharp, quality scissors are essential for cutting fabric accurately. Invest in a pair of fabric scissors specifically designated for fabric cutting to avoid dulling the blades.



Rotary Cutter and Cutting Mat:

A rotary cutter and self-healing cutting mat are excellent tools for cutting straight lines and curves with precision, especially for quilting cottons and other lightweight fabrics.

Pinking Shears:

Pinking shears have serrated blades that create zigzag edges, which help prevent fraying on fabric edges and seam allowances.



Measuring and Marking Tools:

Rulers and Measuring Tape:

Clear rulers and measuring tape are essential for measuring fabric, marking seam lines, and ensuring accurate cuts and seam allowances.



Fabric Marking Tools:

Fabric chalk, disappearing ink pens, and washable fabric markers are useful for transferring pattern markings and making guidelines on fabric.

Pressing Tools:

Iron and Ironing Board:

A steam iron and sturdy ironing board are essential for pressing seams, setting stitches, and shaping fabric during construction. Choose an iron with variable temperature settings and a steam function.

Pressing Ham and Sleeve Roll:

These specialised pressing tools help shape and press curved seams, darts, and gussets for professional-looking results.

Pressing Cloth:

A pressing cloth or pressing sheet protects fabric from direct heat and prevents shine or scorch marks, especially when pressing delicate or textured fabrics.

Fasteners and Closures:

Zippers:

An assortment of zippers in various lengths and colours are essential for adding closures to bags. Choose quality zippers suitable for bag making projects.

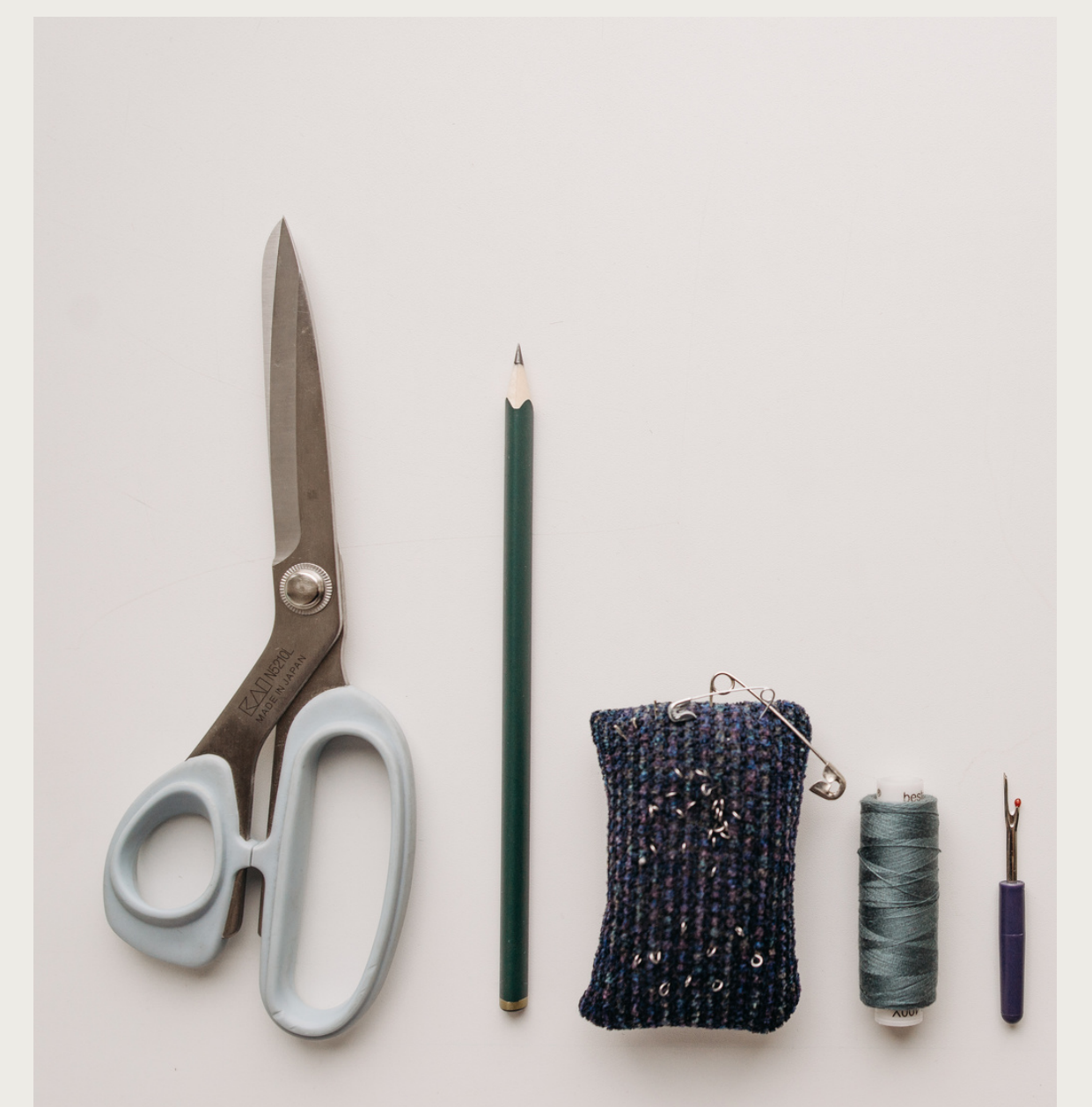
Snaps, Buttons, and Magnetic Closures:

These hardware options are used for securing bag flaps, pockets, and straps.



Interfacing and Stabilisers:

Various types of interfacing and stabilisers are used to add structure, stability, and support to bag components. Common types include fusible interfacing, sew-in interfacing, and stabiliser for firmness or padding.



Specialised Bag-Making Hardware:

D-rings, swivel clips, sliders, and other hardware are used for attaching straps, creating adjustable features, and adding decorative accents to bags.



UNDERSTANDING FABRICS

How do different types of fabrics behave when used in bag making, and what considerations should you keep in mind when selecting fabrics for your projects?

Fabric Weight: Fabric weight refers to how heavy or lightweight a fabric is, typically measured in ounces per square yard (oz/yd²) or grams per square meter (g/m²). Heavier fabrics, such as canvas or denim, provide more structure and durability, making them suitable for sturdy tote bags or backpacks. Lighter-weight fabrics, like quilting cotton or linen, are ideal for softer, more casual bags like hobo bags or pouches.

Stability: Stability refers to the fabric's ability to hold its shape and resist stretching or sagging. Some fabrics, like canvas, denim, or upholstery fabrics, have inherent stability due to their tightly woven or stiffened construction. These fabrics are suitable for structured bags that require stability and support. On the other hand, lightweight or loosely woven fabrics, such as silk or chiffon, may lack stability and may require interfacing or lining to add structure to the finished bag. Lighter weight fabrics can be given more structure by using interfacing to make them more durable.

Stretch: Some fabrics have stretch or elasticity, meaning they can be stretched in one or both directions. Fabrics like knits, spandex, or jersey have inherent stretch, however, fabrics with stretch may be difficult to use in bag making and may require special handling and construction techniques to prevent distortion or stretching out of shape during sewing. Interfacing to eliminate the stretch is a good technique if you have a fabric you want to use that has stretch to it.

Durability: Consider the intended use and durability requirements of the bag when selecting fabrics. Bags that will be subjected to heavy use, such as tote bags, backpacks, or diaper bags, may benefit from durable, abrasion-resistant fabrics like canvas, denim, vinyl or nylon. For occasional or decorative bags, lighter-weight or delicate fabrics may be suitable.

Texture and Finish: The texture and finish of the fabric can impact the overall aesthetic and feel of the bag. Smooth, sleek fabrics like leather or faux leather create a polished, sophisticated look, while textured or embellished fabrics like tweed or jacquard add visual interest and dimension. Consider the desired style and appearance of the bag when choosing fabrics with specific textures or finishes.

Print and Pattern: Fabrics come in a wide range of prints, patterns, and colours, allowing for endless creative possibilities in bag making. Consider the scale, direction, and placement of prints or patterns when selecting fabrics to ensure they complement the design and proportions of the bag.

Care Instructions: Pay attention to the care instructions provided for the fabric, especially if the bag will be subjected to washing or cleaning. Some fabrics may require special care, such as hand washing, dry cleaning, or low-temperature ironing, which can affect the maintenance and longevity of the finished bag.

When selecting fabrics for bag making projects, you should experiment with different types of fabrics to understand their unique characteristics and how they affect the construction and performance of the bag. It's also helpful to start with simpler projects and gradually tackle more complex designs as your confidence and skills grow.

CHOOSING INTERFACING AND STABILIZERS

What role does interfacing and stabilisers play in bag making, and how do you choose the right types for your projects?

Interfacing and stabilizers play essential roles in bag making by adding structure, stability, and support to fabric components, enhancing the durability, shape, and overall quality of the finished bag. Here's an explanation of their roles and how beginners can choose the right types for their projects:

Interfacing: Interfacing is a material that is applied to fabric pieces to add stiffness, body, and support. It is commonly used in areas of bags that require extra reinforcement, such as the exterior panels, pockets, or straps. Interfacing comes in various weights and types, including fusible (iron-on) and sew-in options.

Fusible Interfacing: Fusible interfacing has an adhesive side that is activated by heat and pressure from an iron, bonding the interfacing to the fabric. It is convenient and easy to use, providing instant adhesion without the need for sewing. Beginners often prefer fusible interfacing for its simplicity and quick application. However, it's essential to use the appropriate heat setting and press carefully to avoid puckering or bubbling in the fabric.

Sew-In Interfacing: Sew-in interfacing does not have adhesive and must be stitched to the fabric. Sew-in interfacing is suitable for fabrics that may be damaged by heat or require extra stability beyond what fusible interfacing provides.

Woven Interfacing: Woven interfacing is made from woven fibers, similar to fabric, but often with a tighter weave and higher thread count for added stability and strength. It gives drape to a fabric and because it has a weft and weave it behaves in the same way as fabric this is my preferred interfacing for most of my bag pieces.

Non- Woven Interfacing: Non-woven interfacing is made from synthetic fibers that are bonded together rather than woven into a fabric-like structure. Non-woven interfacing has a smooth and consistent texture without a visible grain, and it may have a slightly papery feel, because of this non woven interfacing can crease quite a bit which is difficult to remove once your bag is 3 dimensional this is why i prefer to only use non woven interfacing in pieces such as card slots or zipper facings where I want a crease to be maintained.



STABILISERS

Stabilisers are materials that are used to add structure, strength, and shape to specific areas of a bag, such as handles, straps, or decorative details. Unlike interfacing, which is applied to the entire fabric piece, stabilisers are often used in smaller, targeted areas to reinforce or support specific features.

Fusible Web: Fusible web is a thin, adhesive sheet that is activated by heat and pressure to bond fabric layers together. It is commonly used to attach appliqué or decorative elements to bags, providing a secure bond without the need for stitching. Fusible web comes in various weights and types, including lightweight, medium-weight, and double-sided options.

Heavyweight Stabilizers: Heavyweight stabilisers, such as Decovil or peltex are used to add rigidity and structure to bag handles, straps, or base panels. They help prevent sagging, stretching, or distortion in areas that receive the most stress or weight.

Water-Soluble Stabilisers: Water-soluble stabilisers are temporary materials that dissolve in water, leaving behind only the stitched design or shape. They are often used for supporting embroidery, appliqué, or free-motion quilting on bags, providing stability during stitching and then dissolving away for a clean finish.

When choosing interfacing and stabilisers for bag making projects, you should consider factors such as fabric weight, project requirements, desired level of structure, and personal preference for fusible vs. sew-in application. Most patterns have recommended materials to use and I would advise to follow the designers suggestion especially when making a pattern the first time, once you gain experience and learn how fabrics, interfacing and stabilisers work together then experiment to your heart's content and see what beautiful results you get.

READING AND UNDERSTANDING PATTERNS

Reading and understanding bag patterns is essential for beginners to successfully complete their bag making projects. Here's a guide to help beginners interpret bag patterns effectively:

Pattern Markings:

Notches: Notches are small triangular markings on pattern pieces that indicate where pieces should be aligned and matched during assembly. Matching notches ensures accurate seam placement and proper shaping.

Grainline: The grainline arrow indicates the direction of the fabric's grain, usually parallel to the selvage edge. Aligning pattern pieces with the grainline ensures that the fabric stretches or drapes correctly and that the finished bag hangs properly.

Seam Allowance: Pattern pieces often include lines or markings indicating the seam allowance, the area between the stitching line and the edge of the fabric. Beginners should be aware of the specified seam allowance and use it as a guide when cutting and sewing fabric pieces.

Cutting Layouts:

Layout Diagram: Bag patterns typically include a layout diagram showing how to arrange pattern pieces on fabric for cutting. Beginners should pay attention to grainline placement, pattern piece orientation, and any directional prints or nap in the fabric.

Pattern Piece Labels: Each pattern piece is labelled with a corresponding number or letter to identify it within the pattern. Familiarise yourself with the pattern piece labels and refer to them when following cutting instructions and assembly steps.

Assembly Instructions:

Step-by-Step Instructions: Bag patterns usually include detailed written instructions guiding beginners through each step of the assembly process. Beginners should read the instructions carefully and follow them sequentially to ensure proper construction.

Illustrations or Diagrams: Many bag patterns include visual aids, such as illustrations or diagrams, to complement written instructions and provide additional clarity. Refer to these visuals to understand specific techniques, constructions, or finishing details.

Specialised Techniques: Bag patterns may include instructions for specialised techniques, such as inserting zippers, creating pockets, or attaching hardware. You should take your time to understand these techniques and practise them on scrap fabric before applying them to the main project.

Finishing Details: Bag patterns often include instructions for finishing details, such as topstitching, edge finishing, or adding closures. Pay attention to these details, as they contribute to the overall appearance and durability of the finished bag.

By familiarising yourself with pattern markings, cutting layouts, and assembly instructions, you can confidently navigate bag patterns and successfully complete your bag making projects. It's essential to take a systematic approach, follow instructions carefully, and seek clarification or assistance when needed to ensure a rewarding sewing experience. Using groups on facebook to ask for help and advice is a great way to get help if you are struggling with a particular step in a bag pattern as well as utilising resources such as YouTube for tutorials. Additionally, starting with simpler patterns and gradually progressing to more complex designs can help build skills and confidence over time.

TROUBLESHOOTING COMMON ISSUES

Here are some common mistakes or challenges that you might encounter when making bags, along with troubleshooting tips to address them:

Thread Tension Problems

Symptoms: Uneven stitches, loose or loopy stitches, or thread breakage.

Troubleshooting:

Check the tension settings on your sewing machine. Adjust the upper thread tension as needed, following the manufacturer's recommendations.

Ensure that the machine is threaded correctly, with the thread passing through all necessary guides and tension discs. Rethread the machine with the presser foot raised and the needle in the highest position, this will ensure there is no tension on the tension discs as you thread the machine.

Test the tension on a scrap piece of fabric before sewing on the main project. Make small adjustments until the stitches appear even and balanced.

Pattern Fitting Issues

Symptoms: Bag components don't align properly, seams don't match up, or the bag looks misshapen or disproportionate.

Troubleshooting:

Double-check that you've printed out the pattern correctly, open with adobe acrobat and print at 100% transferred any markings accurately.

Measure and compare your fabric pieces to the pattern dimensions to ensure accuracy.

Pin or clip fabric pieces together before sewing to check for fit and alignment. Make adjustments as needed by trimming or easing in excess fabric.

Fabric Puckering:

Symptoms: Fabric gathers or puckers along seams, especially when sewing lightweight or stretchy fabrics.

Troubleshooting:

Use the appropriate needle and stitch length for the fabric type. For lightweight fabrics, use a smaller needle size and shorter stitch length to minimise puckering.

Consider using a walking foot or a specialised presser foot designed for specific fabric types, such as a Teflon or roller foot.

Hold the fabric and guide it evenly through the machine while sewing to prevent uneven tension and puckering.

✔ Uneven Stitching or Seam Allowances

Symptoms: Inconsistent seam widths or stitching lines, resulting in crooked or wavy seams.

Troubleshooting:

Mark seam lines and seam allowances accurately on the fabric before sewing, using fabric markers, chalk, or seam guides.

Sew slowly and steadily, guiding the fabric along the seam line to maintain a consistent seam allowance.

Check the alignment of fabric edges before sewing to ensure they are straight and even, adjusting as necessary.

✔ Difficulty Turning or Pressing Corners

Symptoms: Sharp corners are difficult to turn or press neatly, resulting in bulky or uneven corners.

Troubleshooting:

Clip or notch seam allowances at corners before turning to reduce bulk and allow the fabric to lie flat.

Use a blunt object, such as a stiletto or point turner, to gently push out corners and edges without poking through the fabric.

Press corners carefully with an iron to shape and define them, using a pressing ham or sleeve roll to support curved areas.

Patience, practise, and attention to detail are key to mastering bag making techniques and improving sewing skills over time




RESOURCES FOR FURTHER LEARNING

Looking to further your bag making skills can explore a variety of resources, including online tutorials, books, and classes. Here are some recommendations:

Online Tutorials	
YouTube	There are numerous bag making tutorials available on YouTube, covering a wide range of techniques and projects.
Blogs	Many sewing bloggers share free bag making tutorials, tips, and patterns on their blogs. Books.
"The Better Bag Maker	An Illustrated Handbook of Handbag Design" by Nicole Mallalieu: This book provides detailed instructions and techniques for creating professional-quality handbags, with tips on design, construction, and finishing.
"Sew Bags	The Practical Guide to Making Purses, Totes, Clutches & More; 13 Skill-Building Projects" by Hilarie Wakefield Dayton: This book features a variety of bag projects suitable for beginners, along with step-by-step instructions and helpful illustrations.
"Handmade Style	23 Must-Have Basics to Stitch, Use, and Wear" by Anna Graham: This book includes patterns and instructions for a range of stylish bags, pouches, and accessories, along with tips for fabric selection and customization.

Communities	
Local Workshops and Classes	Check with local fabric stores, community centres, or sewing studios for workshops and classes on bag making. In-person classes provide hands-on instruction and the opportunity to learn from experienced instructors while connecting with other sewing enthusiasts in your area.
Online Sewing Communities	Joining online sewing communities and forums, such as Facebook and Instagram can provide valuable support, advice, and inspiration for beginners. Bag makers often share tips, project ideas, and resources, making it a great place to connect with fellow sewists and learn from each other's experiences.

A stack of several books is placed on a dark wooden shelf. The books are of various thicknesses and colors, though the colors are muted due to a blue overlay. The text is centered over the books in a white, serif font.

By exploring these resources and actively practising your skills, you can continue to grow and improve their bag making abilities, gaining confidence and proficiency with each project.



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