

Getting Ready to Sew

By Lady Margherita da Fiorenza

As one of my favorite television characters likes to say, proper preparation prevents poor performance. It's hard to take the time to do all the preliminary steps when you're excited about starting a project, but the increase in quality and decrease in frustration makes it worth it. These steps will help you head off common problems before you begin to sew.

Pre-wash your fabric and trim.

If you intend to clean the garment (for the sake of others, please do clean your garments!) then you need to pre-wash all of your fabric and trim. Different fabric shrinks at different rates. It's heartbreaking to carefully make a garment, and then wash it and find out that the sleeves are now three inches above your wrists and the trim is all puckered because it shrank at a different rate than the fabric it was attached to. As a general rule, I like to do my pre-washing and drying at the harshest settings that I ever anticipate using on the garment. For general purpose cotton garb that will be worn outdoors or while doing potentially dirty activities like cooking, I wash in hot and dry on high (even though I do most of my laundry in cold water). For more delicate fabrics, adjust accordingly. I like to wash the whole length of fabric before I cut out the pattern pieces – that way there are only two edges to fray in the wash.

Some fabrics may be treated with chemicals for wrinkle or stain resistance, added luster, crispness, etc. Pre-washing these fabrics may remove these treatments and make the fabric look quite different than it did before. If you are concerned about how the fabric will hold up to washing, cut a swatch a few inches square and treat the edges so they don't unravel (I use a simple zigzag stitch). Measure it, then wash it on the settings you intend to use. Compare the measurements (to see how much it shrinks) and the appearance of the fabric to make sure you are happy with how it will look after washing.

To wash trim without tangling it, you can either hand-wash it in the sink or wind it around a waterproof card and put it in a mesh bag to put it in the washing machine. I like to use a knee-high nylon stocking, knotted at one end, as a bag to wash trim. You will probably need to iron your trim and fabric after you pre-wash it.

Buy all the supplies you'll need at the beginning of the project.

Get sufficient thread, needles, bobbins, interfacing, etc. at the beginning of the project to last the whole way through. It's annoying to have to stop in the middle of sewing to run to the fabric store or the Wal-Mart to buy another packet of needles or more green thread.

Pre-load your bobbins.

Bobbins are so inexpensive that you should keep a number of extras on hand. At the beginning of a project, load several bobbins with the thread that you will be using. When you realize that the bobbin has run out (this always seems to happen to me at the end of a long seam that I realize too late I've sewn with an empty bobbin) you can just pop another one in, without having to stop what you're doing and unthread the machine to wind up another bobbin.

Stop fraying before it starts

Some fabrics fray a little, some fray a lot. Usually you will be able to tell pretty quickly which kind you are working with. I've actually had fabrics that frayed so much that I had to re-cut a piece because the whole seam allowance had frayed away while I was pinning it into place. To save yourself a lot of hassle, take steps to stop your fabric from fraying before you start to sew. There are a number of ways to do this:

- Trim raw edges with pinking shears. These special shears cut the fabric in a zigzag pattern. Fabrics that have mild to moderate fray work well with pinking shears.
- Sew around the edges of the pieces. You could use a straight stitch (for fabrics that don't fray much) or a zigzag stitch (for fabrics that fray more.)
- Use a chemical stabilizer to stop fraying. This is sometimes a lifesaver when working with fabric that is very prone to fray. The most common commercial product for this is called Fray-Check. However, you can also use a water-soluble glue (many sewers swear by Elmer's white glue!) that will keep the edges from fraying until you finish them, and then wash out when you wash the garment (another reason to finish your seams!)

Maintain your machine.

Keep your machine free of lint and dust, either by using the brush that came with it or by the canned air that you use to clean computer equipment. Oil the machine regularly, following the instructions in the manual. Take it to a repair shop (for some reason, sewing machines and vacuum cleaners are often repaired at the same shop) every two years or so for maintenance. You wouldn't expect your car to run for years on end without having the oil changed or the tires rotated... the same is true for your sewing machine.