

LEARNING MADE EASY



4th Edition

Sewing

for
dummies[®]

A Wiley Brand



Master sewing from
pattern to finished project

Alter, repair & upcycle
thrifed apparel

Sew for your home, kids,
pets & the kid in you

Jan Saunders Maresh

Bestselling author, journalist, and
lifelong sewing sherpa

Foreword by Craig Conover

Author, Lawyer, CCO &
Co-founder of Sewing Down South
Bravo's *Southern Charm* S1-10



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Foreword

I can still remember that feeling when I turned my first pillowcase right side out. I felt fulfilled — joyous even. I was at a period in my life when not much made sense to me, but this simple act of creation quieted all that despairing noise. I could see the younger me, a seventh grader, sitting in Mrs. Hurley’s Home Economics class while she explained how to use a sewing machine. The other boys were goofing off, but I was rapt. In my adolescent mind, sewing slid easily into the space reserved for my other “unmanly” interests, like cooking and gardening. I didn’t expect I would turn to it when I was at a particularly low point in my late twenties; it just sort of happened. I also didn’t expect that sewing that first pillowcase would change my life, but that too just sort of happened.

Whatever has led you to pick up sewing, I want to be the first to welcome you to this incredible community. After starting my home décor company, Sewing Down South, which focused in the beginning on —what else? — pillows, my business partner and I traveled the East Coast, selling our pillows at local boutiques where we met folks just like you. There was the high-school football player who showed me his creations with sheepish pride, and there was the young woman, fighting cancer and bound to a wheelchair, who just wanted to talk about sewing. It was then that I saw how a simple craft had the power to inspire and unite people — young and old, man and woman — from all walks of life. All of this happened because one day I sat down at a sewing machine. Pretty crazy, right?

We never know where our passions will lead us, but allow me to give you a preview of one of the many happy surprises that await. Do you know what’s better than finishing your first sewing project? Giving it away as a gift. It’s like sharing happiness. People understand that when they receive one of our sewn creations, they are getting more than a pillow or a hat or a blanket. They’re getting the time, the focus, the *love* that we put into that item. Sewing is one of the few creative endeavors I know of that usually begins with the future owner in mind: a child, a spouse, or just us. We create *for someone*, and they will be just as happy to receive it as we were in making it. Trust me, you’ll crush gift-giving over the holidays.

I didn’t start to sew because one day I wanted to make it a business. I did it for the joy of creation, of using my hands to turn a collection of material into something useful. I think that gets to the heart of why sewing drew me in the way it did. It is an artistic process, but one that leads to something useful: the blanket to stay warm, the pillow to rest our head, or just a way to jazz up an old garment. As your

skills improve, the range of useful items you can craft will be limited only by your imagination — and perhaps time. When we do it right, the item enters our lives and becomes a part of us. We can create *permanence* with our sewing, salvaging what we own and creating what we need. Sewing stands out as both a skill and an artistic endeavor.

Everything in our modern world pushes us away from creating something ourselves. Most people will never need to know how to stitch a button, hem a dress, or fashion a curtain. By reading this book, you've chosen to rekindle an old-fashioned idea: to make what you use, what you give, and what you love. Whether as a hobby, a passion, or a business, sewing connects you to the act of creation. Embrace the passion that has led you here and get excited about the journey ahead. Sewing might not change your life like it changed mine, but I promise it will lead to many moments of joyful fulfillment.

CRAIG CONOVER
Cofounder, Sewing Down South

Introduction

. Love. To. Sew.

First, there's the instant gratification of creating something unique and stylish using beautiful fabrics and cool tools. Then comes the glory — I get to bask in the praise for my handiwork from family and friends. Plus, whether it's an upstyled top for myself or a new bed skirt for the guestroom, I can make custom pieces that fit perfectly — and save some money in the process. What a hobby!

My goal for *Sewing For Dummies* is that, once you finish a couple of projects, you become as hooked on sewing as I am — or at least want to keep on learning because this book has piqued your interest.

Throughout my professional life and thousands of hours of sewing for myself, my family, and my home, I've gathered these sewing techniques and more — each contributing to my deep passion for the craft. Every time I sit in front of my sewing machine, I reignite this passion.

My deepest wish for you is that when reading this book, you hear my voice cheering you on. And then, the next time you have a beautiful piece of fabric in your hands, and you sit in front of your sewing machine, your passion for sewing will bloom like mine has. Enjoy every moment of your creative journey!

About This Book

Sewing For Dummies, 4th Edition, is a book for anyone who's ever said, "I want to learn how to sew." There's a lot to know about sewing, but I have only so many pages to work with in this book, so I've tried to organize things logically. First I walk you through the sewing process used in making clothing. Then I move on to ways to sew for your home and how to repair and remake existing clothing for a more sustainable wardrobe.

If you're a stone-cold beginner, don't worry — I've got you covered. I'll explain everything you need to know to tackle your first sewing project, starting with the basics. No prior experience is required.

If you've already tackled a variety of sewing projects, there's plenty in this book for you, too. It's packed with tips and tricks that took me *years* (and lots of mistakes) to learn. So, regardless of your skill level, you'll find a selection of projects to enjoy that will improve your sewing skills.

Because it's all about going green these days, I've also taken a fresh approach to this edition. Many projects now start with a pre-loved garment that, with a bit of sewing ingenuity, gets a new life. The rest have been designed to follow the latest fashion trends and our sleek, streamlined, clutter-free lives.

I wrote this book to be your ultimate sewing companion. Don't just shelve it away for future reference — make it a constant companion in your sewing adventures. Keep it within arm's reach so that when a pattern guide sheet instructs you to do something, you can refer to the way I suggest you do it. I promise you'll find the fastest and most efficient techniques to get the job done right.

Onto the best part — this book has more than 80 new instructive illustrations! They say a picture is worth a thousand words, and these visuals enhance the clear, no-nonsense instructions that *For Dummies* books are famous for, ensuring your success. Plus, you still get my favorite sewing techniques and clever shortcuts that took me years to master.

And don't worry — I've made every sewing mistake possible, so you won't have to! So, thread your needle, fire up your machine, and get ready to sew!

As you sew, you'll rely heavily on the trusty tools in your Sewing Survival Kit, which I detail in Chapter 2. I've written this book assuming you have and use these essential tools. So keep it handy and well stocked — you'll need it for just about every project in this book.

You'll also come across instructions you can complete using either a sewing machine or a serger (sometimes both). Now, let me tell you about the serger. This specialized machine is like the microwave oven of sewing. It sews the seam, overcasts the edge, and trims off the excess fabric all at once, saving you loads of time. Although you won't usually create an entire project on a serger, it's a game-changer for speeding up the sewing process.

Foolish Assumptions

As I wrote this book, I made some assumptions about you and your needs:

- » You don't yet know how to sew or are looking for a refresher course.
- » You want to master the basics of sewing.
- » You're on the hunt for tips and tricks to make your sewing projects easier and more fun.
- » You're eager to start sewing as soon as possible.

If this sounds like you, you've picked up the right book!

Icons Used in This Book

Throughout this book, I guide you toward important points by using the following icons:



AUTHOR
SAYS

When I want to give you “my two cents,” I’ve included this icon. My comments range from important details to quick reminders or shortcuts to keep up your sewing momentum while learning and improving your skills.



NICE
TO HAVE

Some sewing tools are essential to sewing, and others aren't essential but are still nice to have as you sew. Try out the tools mentioned next to this icon — you may find one that helps you quite a bit with the sort of projects you like to do.



REMEMBER

Next to this icon you find information you should keep in the back of your mind as you sew. These points are key to creative and efficient sewing.



TIP

The information next to this icon tells you how to do something in the quickest and best way possible.



WARNING

Make sure to read the text next to this icon. It can save you a lot of blood, sweat, and tears.

Beyond the Book

Want another handy sewing tool? Then read my Cheat Sheet at www.dummies.com or even print it off and keep it where you can find it (like on the bulletin board or wall near your sewing station). This guide is packed with the information you need when you need it, such as how to shop and coordinate fabrics for an outfit and how to harmonize your fabrics to outfit your home. You'll also find a reference for choosing the right needle for specific fabrics in both the American and the European equivalent needle sizes. Handy. Handy. Handy. To get the Cheat Sheet, visit www.dummies.com and type **Sewing For Dummies Cheat Sheet** in the search box.

I created more fun sewing projects than this book could accommodate. Fortunately, they're available to you at Dummies.com! Visit www.dummies.com/go/sewingfd4e to access the supply lists and instructions for the additional projects, including clutch handbags, pillow shams, a tablecloth, pajama bottoms, and more!

Where to Go from Here

If you're new to sewing, begin your journey with chapters in Parts 1 and 2. These sections offer essential information to get you started. Once you've grasped the basics, feel free to jump around the book, exploring the different types of sewing and the projects that catch your eye.

1
Ready...Set...Sew!

IN THIS PART . . .

Understand what tools will enable you to come out with a project that's the envy of your friend circle. I tell you about the most important sewing tools (out of thousands) so you can buy the best quality you can afford and have the most useful tools in your Sewing Survival Kit.

Figure out how to make your sewing machine purr, how to get needles that glide through the fabric without skipping a stitch, and what type of thread to use to tie it all together.

Discover the fabulous world of fabrics and patterns. This dynamic duo takes your journey from *meh* to *marvelous*!

- » Prioritizing sewing as your next “Big Thing”
- » Peeking at the sewing process — stitching, seaming, and finishing touches
- » Understanding the penny-wise perks and eco-friendly benefits of the craft

Chapter **1**

The World of Sewing from 30,000 Feet

Why sew? For starters, it’s fun. There’s nothing quite like the thrill of making something useful and beautiful and then basking in the “oohs and aahs” from friends and family. Also, what you learn about fabrics, fibers, and fashion helps you in other areas of your life. I talk about this more in the “Understanding fabrics and fibers” section later in this chapter.

Sewing can be a rewarding hobby or a productive pastime. You can sew Halloween costumes, teddy bears, prom dresses, and purses. Think of the fashions in home décor. A tablescape isn’t complete without some great-looking linens — that you can make, of course. You can update your house by making a wardrobe of pillows with a set of covers for every season or by sewing a new duvet cover. And gifts? Prepare to be the hero who rolls up with a handmade throw or a basket brimming with hand-stitched napkins.

If you’re looking for more of a sewing challenge, you may want to learn about quilting. It’s a subset of sewing that’s popular and creative, and you end up with a beauty to wrap yourself in or a smaller wall-hanging. Because quilting is such a large part of the world of sewing, it has its own place in the *For Dummies* library. Check out *Quilting For Dummies* by Cheryl Fall (Wiley).

My hope is that after you get to know more about this creative endeavor and have some success with the projects in this book, you'll spread your wings and investigate the larger world of sewing.

If you are new to sewing, make sure to read this chapter. It's an overview of what you'll need for any sewing project — the tools and fabrics, plus a bit about your sewing machine. Next I cover the process —like preshrinking the fabric, choosing a pattern, and the importance of pressing as you sew. Finally, I explain the basics of turning a flat piece of fabric into a usable piece for yourself or your home or to upcycle an item that keeps it from the landfill a bit longer.

Sewing isn't just creating; it's adding your signature flair. So grab that thimble. It's time to make the mundane magnificent!

Getting Started: Gathering Tools, Fabric, Pattern, and Your Sewing Machine

You could whip up a five-course meal over an open fire with old, beat-up pots and pans, but let's be honest — it wouldn't be much fun. The same goes for sewing. Trying to tackle a project with dull shears, crooked pins, and a basic hand needle might leave you less than inspired. In this section, I guide you through the essential tools and materials needed to make your sewing experience a success and a lot of fun.

Using good tools

For me, the joy of sewing is having quality tools at my fingertips. Sure, good tools are an investment, but if you're serious about learning to sew, nothing gets you closer to success than the pleasure of using a quality tool that works perfectly every time you use it. Not sure if you'll like sewing but still want to try it? Take a sewing class at your local fabric store or sewing machine dealer where you can use great tools and quality equipment.

Besides the fabric and pattern, here's what will make your sewing experience a real pleasure:

» **Measuring tools for small and large areas of a project:** I love my 6-inch adjustable sewing gauge, my flexible vinyl tape measure, and the see-through 24-inch and 36-inch T-square rulers with ¼-inch increments.

- » **Cutting tools for cutting out your project:** I use 8-inch bent-handle dressmaking shears, 5-inch scissors for trimming smaller areas, and embroidery scissors for clipping and ripping out unwanted stitches. For long and straight cutting, the pizza cutter-type rotary cutter with a cutting mat to protect the table is the best.
- » **Marking tools to show you how to turn a flat, shapeless piece of fabric into something useful:** You need a marking tool for dark-colored fabrics and one for light-colored fabrics. I have two favorites. For dark fabrics I like the disappearing dressmaker's chalk that washes out with water. For light fabrics, I use an air-soluble marker. Keep in mind that the ink disappears within 24–48 hours, so don't mark your fabric and go on a two-week vacation!
- » **Pins and pin holders:** My favorite pins for 90 percent of the sewing I do are 1¼-inch glass-head pins often referred to as *quilting pins*. To keep my pins from ending up all over the place, I use two magnetic pin catchers: one for the ironing board and one on the cutting table. I also like a wrist pin cushion with a felt cushion so my pins are portable.
- » **New hand and machine needles:** After some use, needles wear out and need to be discarded. As far as hand needles go, specialty needles are available for just about every hand-sewing task. I most often use self-threading needles for basic hand sewing and easy repairs. I used these even before I needed reading glasses because the thread just clips into place — no squinting and poking thread ends through a microscopic eye required.
- » **Thread to hold everything together:** Be sure not to skimp on the thread — when you see three spools for \$1, run away. The quality of that thread isn't worth the spool it's wound on. Read more about choosing quality thread in Chapter 2.
- » **A good sewing machine to enjoy the sewing experience:** I said you need a *good* machine, not an *expensive* one — and it doesn't have to be new. Just buy it from a reputable sewing machine dealer that can offer you reliable service and lessons if you need them. Check out Chapter 21 for more information.
- » **A serger — if you discover that you like to sew and want to take your newfound skill to a new level you might want a serger.** You don't need a serger but it makes the sewing process faster and more streamlined, like the microwave oven does for cooking. For more on what a serger can do and why you might want one, see Chapter 5.
- » **Iron and ironing board:** If you want to sew, you must have an ironing board and a steam iron. When looking for a steam iron, find one that *does not* automatically shut off when you're not using it. If your iron shuts off automatically, then every time you want to press a seam, you must wait until the iron comes up to temperature, which is a real time-waster.



TIP

I spend some time in Chapter 2 sharing my favorite tools with you, so check it out.

Understanding fabrics and fibers

Among the perks of learning to sew is gaining more knowledge about fabrics and fibers and how they respond to washing (or not), wearing, and pressing. Ultimately this knowledge makes you a savvy shopper of ready-to-wear garments. So what's the difference between *fiber* and *fabric*?

Fabrics are woven or knitted yarns, which are created by twisting fibers together. Whether the fabric is all wool or a cotton-polyester blend, each fiber has its unique advantages and disadvantages, which makes one better than others for a particular project. (See more specific information about the most common types of fibers and fabrics in Chapter 3.)

If you aren't sure about your fabric choice, the sales associate at your local fabric store is a great resource for locating just the right fabric for the project. Most have knowledge it would take you years to learn, so don't be shy. Ask for help, tell them what you want to make, and ask for their best advice. This can save you time and guide you on your way to success.



TIP

Your time and effort are worth something. Spend your sewing time wisely by buying the best fabric you can afford and the best fiber for your project and your lifestyle. See Chapter 3 for more on choosing the best fabric for a project.

Getting the sewing notion

Most fabric stores have a notions wall that's full of specialty tools and sewing stuff. Notions range from pins, needles, scissors, shears, and measuring tools to buttons, bra hooks, collar stays, and iron-on knee patches. The notions needed for a particular project are listed on the back of your pattern envelope, so when in doubt, look there to find out what you need. Don't be afraid to ask for help locating things. What you need may be hidden in plain sight.

Pondering the pattern

Fabric stores have over-the-counter displays and catalogs of patterns that you can browse through. The internet brings sewing patterns home and puts the right project just a keystroke away. Type in the project you want to make with **sewing pattern** after it to find tons of choices. Internet searches also make investigating independent pattern designers easy.



TIP

Choose a pattern designed for your skill set. If a pattern says it's easy, the instruction writers often still assume you have some knowledge of sewing, so if you're a true beginner, choose patterns for beginners. If you don't, you may become discouraged and never sew again! Simplicity Pattern Company (<https://simplicity.com>) is an umbrella for all the major pattern brands, such as "The Big 4" of Simplicity, McCall's, Vogue, and Butterick. When visiting this website, you also see Know Me, New Look, and Burda Style patterns.

After you choose the pattern, check out the front and back of the envelope for important information: what fabric works best to achieve the results pictured on the front of the envelope, how much fabric to buy for the garment size you're making, what you need in the way of trims and notions (see the preceding section), and the front and back views shown in easy-to-read line drawings.

Inside the envelope is an instruction sheet commonly referred to as the *pattern guide sheet*. It shows you which pattern pieces you need to use for a specific version of the pattern (several versions or views may be packaged in one pattern), shows you how to lay out the pattern pieces on the fabric, and gives you step-by-step instructions for putting the project together. Even though I've been sewing for years, I still refer to my pattern guide sheet to be sure that I haven't forgotten to do something. You can read more about working with patterns in Chapter 4.

Use this book to supplement the pattern guide sheet instructions. Many times pattern instruction writers assume that you know how to make a dart or sew in a zipper and may leave out information essential for your success. If the only darts you know about are those you throw, the "Shaping" section of this chapter can clue you in. And if you don't understand what the instructions on the guide sheet tell you, look up how I recommend you complete a particular technique. I'm confident that trying it my way will get 'er done, and you'll pick up the skills and the lingo as you work through the project.

So where to begin? In the following section I break things down and give you a general idea of where you're headed. Think of this as your sewing GPS at the mile-high view.

Sizing Up the Sewing Process

Like any new endeavor, sewing has its own vocabulary, skill set, and process. After you decide on a project, select your pattern and fabric, and collect the notions and tools you need, the sewing process follows the basic steps outlined in this section to complete a project.

As you look over the rest of this chapter, it may occur to you that a lot happens before you actually sew things together. Have you noticed that it takes a long time for road crews to prepare to lay a new road and then almost overnight it's in and you're cruising smoothly along your merry way? That's how it is with sewing. When you get your fabric and pattern; lay out, pin it down, cut, and mark your pattern pieces; fuse on the interfacing; and finish the fabric edges; you're two-thirds of the way finished. But I'm ahead of myself.

Here's a quick breakdown of the sewing process and the creative journey of making a project from scratch.

Preshrinking fabric

After getting home from fabric shopping, preshrink your washable fabrics so the finished project won't shrink any more after it's washed. (You can find the whys and hows of preshrinking in Chapter 3.)



TIP

If life gets in the way and you have to set your project aside temporarily, still preshrink the fabric when you bring it home. That way you don't have to remember whether the fabric is "needle ready" when you are.

Finding the right pattern pieces

Most patterns have a couple of variations included. Each variation is called a *view* and requires specific pattern pieces. Check out the pattern guide sheet to see what pattern pieces are needed for the view you're making, and then cut those pattern pieces apart from the large sheet of printed pattern paper and set them aside. Read more in-depth about this in Chapter 4.

Laying out the pattern on the fabric

Most fashion fabric comes in two widths: 45 inches or 60 inches wide. The pattern guide sheet has a suggested pattern-piece layout for the width of the fabric you're using. (See "Understanding fabrics and fibers" earlier in this chapter.) This is the most important step because if you lay out and cut something crookedly or incorrectly, no amount of sewing, ironing, begging, or pleading will make the fabric behave the way you want it to. Learn the dos and don'ts in Chapter 4.

Pinning and cutting

When you have the pattern pieces arranged on the fabric, pin each pattern piece to the fabric ready for cutting. As you cut out each pattern piece, notice any special markings such as darts or larger-than-normal dots. If you see those, place the cut pieces that need to be marked in one stack and those that don't in another. Read on to learn why.

Marking

Even though you may not know what the random pattern markings mean at this point, as you proceed through the project, the guide sheet instructions will tell you. When in doubt, transfer the mark from the pattern paper to the fabric. Chapter 4 gives you several methods to do this. If you don't, you'll waste a bunch of time sifting through the pattern paper pieces you've removed from the fabric to find and mark something you should have done in the first place. (Trust me here — I've made the mistakes so you don't have to.)

Interfacing

After cutting out the pattern pieces and marking them, your guide sheet may tell you to cut interfacing for several of the pattern pieces. Some patterns even give you separate paper pattern pieces for the interfacing. But what's interfacing, and why should you care about it?

Certain places on a project need a little extra stability. Examples are collars, sleeve cuffs, waistbands, and the fronts of shirts or jackets that have buttons and buttonholes. If what you're wearing has a waistband, look at the two separate pieces of fabric creating the outside and the inside of the band. Between these two layers of fabric is a third piece of fabric called *interfacing* that keeps your waistband from stretching out of shape and that keeps the hooks and eyes, buttons, or snaps from pulling off the fabric. So even though this may seem like an unnecessary step and extra expense, interfacing gives your project a professional finish and provides excellent wear. Read more about interfacings and how to use them in Chapter 3.

Pressing for the best shape

One of my tailoring professors at the New York Fashion Institute of Technology said, "As you sew, have a love affair with your iron." By that time I had been sewing for 14 years and didn't give my iron much thought, but she was right. The best way to ensure a professional-looking project is to press every seam and press it well. Learn more about this pressing subject in Chapter 5.

Moving On to the Needle and Thread

Pieces of fabric are joined by using a needle and thread to stitch them together in a way that forms a shape. Stitches are done by hand or machine, and some stitches work better than others for a specific job. See Chapter 5 for the breakdown of the most common hand and machine stitches.

Finishing the edges first

If you use a fabric that ravels, you need to treat the edges of the fabric in some way to stop it from raveling. This treatment is called *finishing* the edges, and you do it before you sew the seams. You can finish the edges either with pinking shears, for that delightful zigzag cut that's impervious to unraveling, or by overcasting the edges with a sewing machine or serger. Discover what works best for your project in Chapter 6.

Shaping

You shape a piece of fabric — especially when sewing clothing — by nipping in a little here or letting out a little fabric there. So before you sew most pattern pieces together, you need to shape them with darts, gathers, or tucks so they conform to the particular body part they cover.

To both nip in and let out at the same time, you sew a *dart* — a little triangle-shaped wedge of fabric that's wide at one end and is stitched to a point at the other end. After the dart is pressed, it turns that flat, lifeless piece of fabric into something that conforms to the shape of your waist, bust, knee, or elbow so the fabric can move with you and be comfortable.

Need a nip here and a lot more fullness there? Then sew a tuck, which has a similar purpose to a dart except that the fabric is taken in, stitched in a straight line, and open (rather than coming to a point) on one or both ends. Adding gathers and elastic are other ways of putting shape where you want it. Learn all about these shape-shifting techniques in Chapter 9.

Seaming

When two pieces of fabric are stitched together it is called a *seam*. Seams can be straight, curved, or turn a corner. After you sew a seam, you press and iron it into submission so that a flat piece of fabric can be transformed into something that follows the contours of your body or a piece of furniture. What happens if you make a mistake? No worries. Unwanted stitches can be ripped out in several ways. You can find out more about seaming, pressing, and ripping in Chapter 6.