

Hand Sewing Basics: Tips, Tools & Techniques

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Most sewing projects require at least a small amount of hand sewing. If you've left an opening in a seam to turn an item right side out, you may need to hand stitch the opening closed. Hems are often hand stitched. Or, you might need to hand stitch a facing in place. Whatever the task, a bit of hand stitching comes in... well, "*handy*." We've outlined the tools needed along with seven of the most common stitches. Simple drawings and steps show how to do each one.

The Tools

Needle: For information on the right hand sewing needle, our article on [Selecting the Right Needle for the Job](#) gives a great overview of the most familiar hand needle options.

Thread: Most often, you can simply use the same thread for hand sewing that you're using for machine construction. But for additional details, check out: [Selecting the Right Thread for the Job](#).

Thimble: A thimble is optional, but it's helpful with heavier fabrics or when pushing the needle through several thicknesses. [Dritz makes lots of options](#).

Threader: The eyes of hand sewing needles can be teeny tiny. A needle threader gives you a bigger hole to shoot for. There are numerous styles. [Dritz](#) is again our go-to option; they even make a [lighted threader](#)!

Using a Thimble



A thimble protects your finger from pain as you push the needle through layers of fabric. Choose a thimble that comfortably fits the middle finger of the hand you use for hand sewing.

1. Place the thimble on the middle finger of your right hand if you're right handed and vice versa if you're a lefty.
2. Hold your needle between your thumb and index finger.
3. Insert the needle into the fabric, then push it through with the side or end of the thimble.

Hand Stitch Types

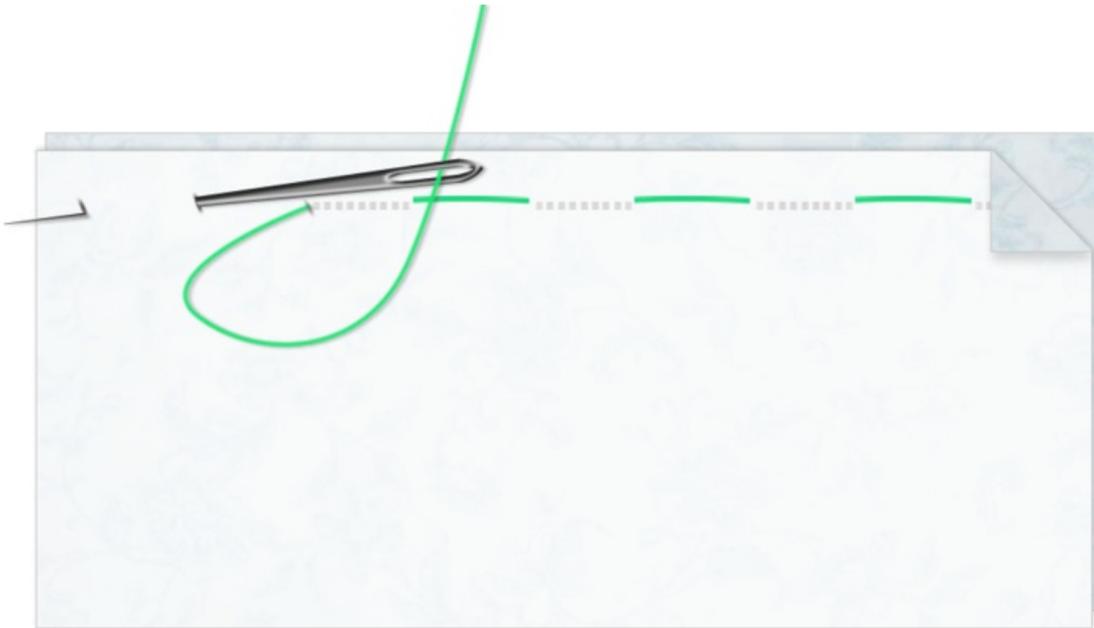
The seven types shown below are just a few of the many stitches that can be done by hand. However, for anyone using a sewing machine for the majority of a project's construction, these stitches should be all you need to fill in those little hand-sew-only tasks.

1. To begin, thread your needle and knot the thread (to learn how to do this, read [Hand Sewing: Thread a Needle, Tie a Knot](#)).
2. Next, determine which stitch to use from the list below.
3. As with machine stitching, when you finish hand sewing, use a securing stitch to prevent your work from coming undone.

Basting Stitch

A basting stitch is used to temporarily hold together pieces that may shift as you use your sewing machine. When basting, it's a good idea to use a contrasting thread so it's easier to remove the basting stitches after the permanent sewing is complete.

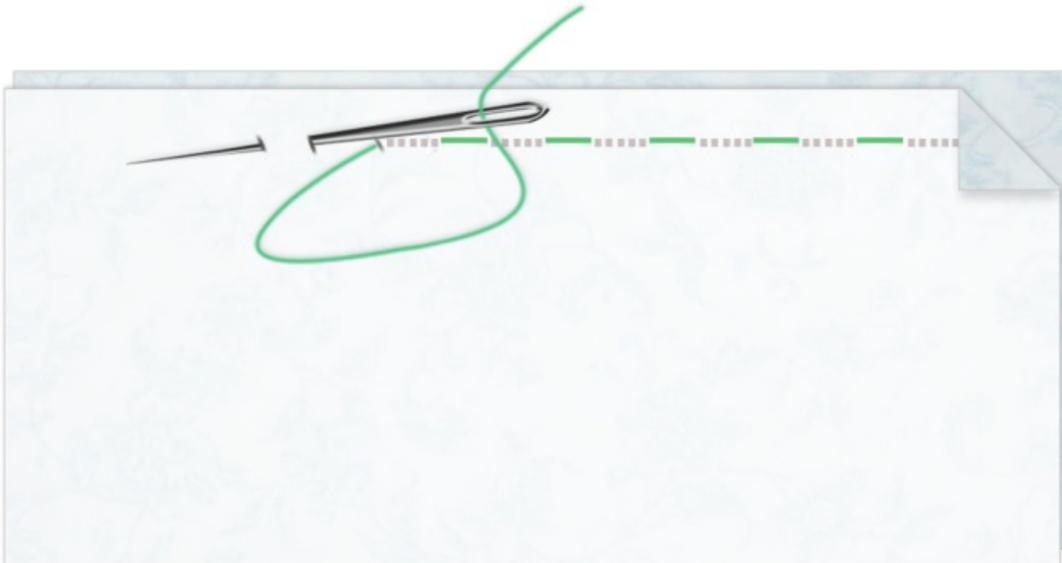
You can certainly use your sewing machine to create a basting stitch, but there are times when it's better done by hand. For example, when you want a stripe or plaid to match across a seam, it helps to have the extra precision of manipulating the two pieces by hand to get perfect alignment. We have [a full tutorial on machine basting](#) for more information on this technique.



1. Weave the needle in and out of the fabric creating the look of a dashed line.
2. Use about $\frac{1}{4}$ " - $\frac{1}{2}$ " stitches with equal length spaces between.
3. Do not lock the stitch at the beginning or the end.

Running Stitch

The running stitch is done in the same way as the basting stitch, but with smaller stitches and with a locking stitch at the end (some people lock at the beginning as well). Use short, evenly spaced approximate $\frac{1}{8}$ " stitches. The actual size will depend on your fabric – smaller stitches for lightweight fabric, wider stitches for heavyweights.

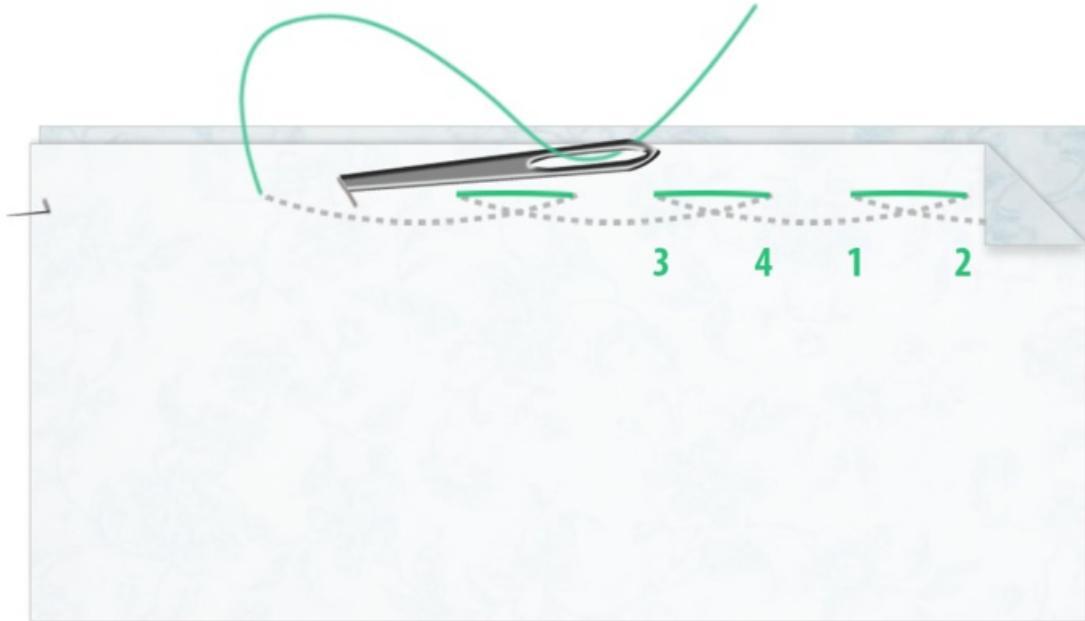


The running stitch mimics what is done on a sewing machine. A machine's precision and tightness is better, however, the running hand stitch is helpful for quickly mending a seam that has come apart. It's also good in very small spaces where it can be hard to get with a sewing machine or when making very teeny seams, such as for doll clothes. Remember, this is the stitch that held most clothing together prior to sewing machines, so it's an oldie *and* a goodie!

Backstitch

The backstitch creates a very strong seam. It's often used on heavy or dense fabrics or to repair a seam.

Begin at the right end of the opening and work right to left.



1. Bring your needle up through the fabric at point 1.
2. Insert your needle and go down through the fabric at point 2.
3. Bring the needle up through the fabric point 3.
4. Insert your needle and go down through the fabric at point 4.
5. Repeat until you reach the end of your opening.

Overcast Stitch

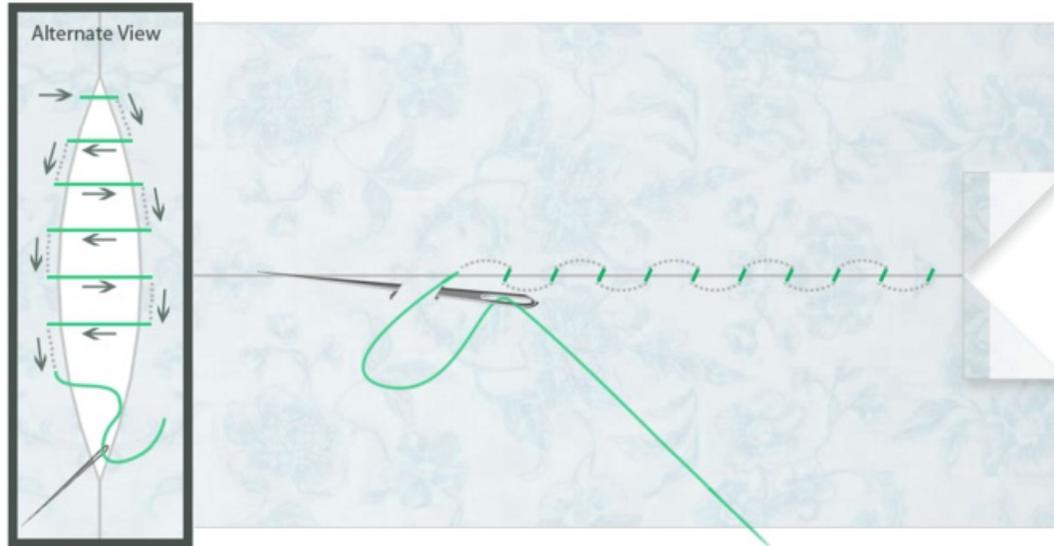
The overcast stitch (sometimes called a whip stitch) is used to finish cut edges on fabrics that tend to ravel, such as linens and gabardines. Your sewing machine may have an overcasting stitch that will save you hand sewing time. This stitch can also be used to close a tear when mending. It's also a super fast way to close an opening that will be hidden – it's really too "messy" of a stitch to use if the seam closure will show on the right side of the project.



1. To overcast by hand, start on one side of the edge you want to finish.
2. Make a series of equally-spaced, diagonal stitches that loop around the edge of the fabric.
3. How close together you keep the stitches depends on your task. For example, mending stitches would be quite close, almost one on top of the other.

Slip Stitch or Ladder Stitch

This is the hand stitch we find most useful. A slip stitch is used to create an invisible seam between two folded edges, or a folded edge and a flat edge. You can use a slip stitch for bindings, to close a lining, for the final stitches on a stuffed pillow, or to apply appliqué invisibly.



1. Iron the folds flat.
2. Slip your threaded needle inside the fold to hide its knot.
3. Bring the needle out through the folded edge.
4. Push the needle into the opposite fold directly across from the fold where it came out.
5. Slide along inside this opposite fold about $\frac{1}{8}$ " - $\frac{1}{4}$ ", then push the needle out.
6. Bring the needle straight up from where it came out and insert into the opposite fold.
7. Continue this back-and-forth-and-slide pattern until you reach the end of your opening.

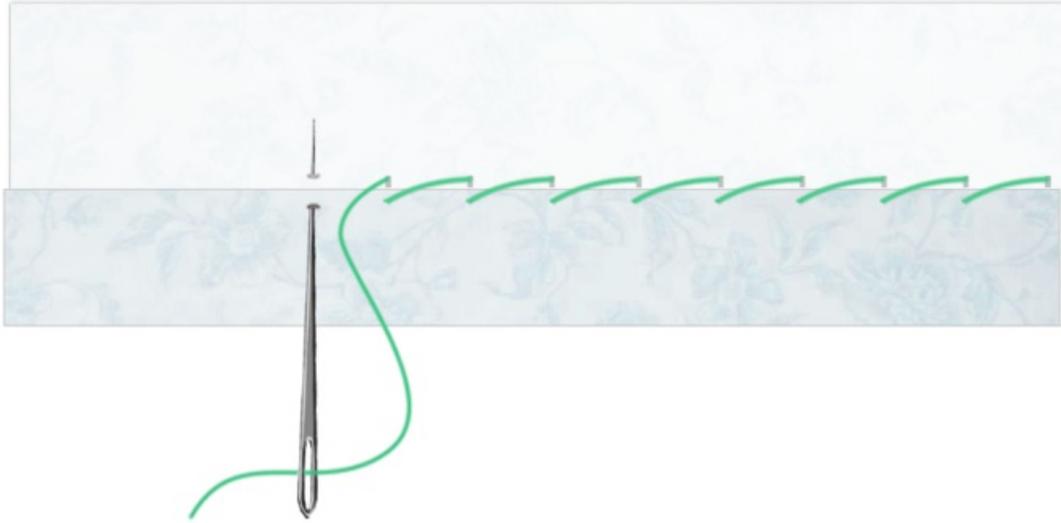
As shown in the drawing above, as you cross from folded edge to folded edge, you are creating the look of the "ladder" that gives the stitch its name.

The smoother and tighter your stitches and the better the match of your thread to your fabric, the more invisible the stitches will appear. We have [an extended tutorial on this pro finish](#).

Blind Hem Stitch

If your sewing machine can create [a blind hem stitch](#), you'll find it superior and faster than blind hemming by hand.

As above with the Ladder Stitch, the trick is to pick up just a tiny bit of the fabric with each stitch. In combination with a matching thread, the visible part of the stitch will be minimized.



1. Slip your threaded needle inside the fold to hide its knot.
2. Bring the needle out through the folded edge of the hem.
3. Using the point of your needle, pick up just a few threads from the flat fabric against which the hem is sitting (this is the tiny stitch that will be seen on the right side of your project).
4. Push the needle back into the folded edge of the hem.
5. Repeat for the length of the hem.

Securing Stitch

Regardless of the type of stitch you use, you will need to finish with a securing stitch to prevent your work from coming undone.

1. Take one small backstitch and make a loop over the point of the needle.
2. Pull the thread through the loop to create a knot, cinching it at the base of the fabric.
3. For a stronger lock, repeat the process to create two or three small knots.

As mentioned above, we have a full tutorial on threading and securing: [Hand Sewing: Thread a Needle, Tie a Knot](#)

Sewing Tips & Tricks

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