



# Foundational Sewing Practice

## Introduction

Learning a few basic skills in advance will make project sewing a much easier task. In this lesson you will learn to wind a bobbin and thread a machine. Then you will work through five exercises using a Practice Sampler that will help you practice and learn basic good sewing habits.



## Tools, Supplies & Materials

A few simple sewing tools\* and the Foundational Practice Sampler\* are all the items you need to complete these practice exercises.

### Fabric & Notions

- Bright-colored thread
- Foundational Practice Sampler\*

### Tools & Equipment

- Sewing machine
- Bobbins\*
- 4" Sewing scissors\*
- Straight pins
- Small ruler or seam guide
- Seam ripper

## Set up Your Sewing Machine

You will be spending a lot of time at your sewing machine, and you want it to be located where you can sit comfortably.

- You will want to set your machine on a table that is at a height where your arms can be as flat as possible. Try to find the right chair and table combination to be as comfortable as possible.
- You should be sit where the needle on the machine is centered directly right in front of you. Position the foot pedal so that it is in



front of your body. The pedal has a tendency to scoot as you sew. It is better to keep it right in front of you.

\* See Sewing Suppliers List at end of document.



### Winding a Bobbin

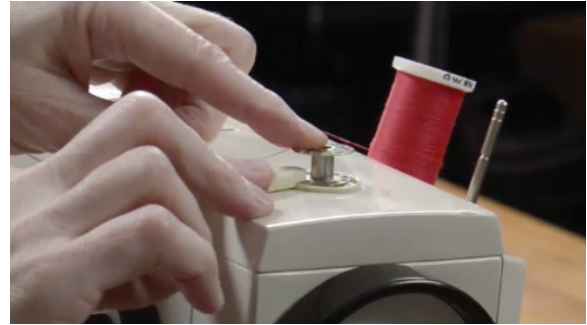
Refer to your sewing machine guide to learn exactly how the bobbin on your particular sewing machine should be wound. Follow all directions, paying attention to the direction of securing and winding the thread. Generally, winding bobbins includes the following steps.

#### Thread the Bobbin

- Place the spool of thread on the spool pin. Pull the end of the thread from the spool, around the spool tension button and to the bobbin.
- Hold the bobbin in your right hand. With your left, push the thread from the center of the bobbin up through one of the holes in the top disk (*above*). Pull the thread through a couple inches.
- Then push the bobbin straight down onto your bobbin winder spindle. Secure it in place by pushing the lock over the base at the bottom of the bobbin (*above right*).

#### Wind the Thread

- Locate the small knob inside the big knob on the hand wheel. Holding the big wheel securely, loosen the small wheel. This will deactivate the needle.
- Holding the thread tail coming out of the bobbin top, press on the foot pedal. The thread will automatically wind around the bobbin. After the thread begins to accumulate, stop and clip off the tail. This will prevent tangling.



- Continue to wind the bobbin. Don't run the machine too fast. The thread should automatically wind evenly up and down between the top and the bottom of the bobbin.
- When the bobbin is full, the lock will pop open and the bobbin will stop turning. Clip the thread.
- Tighten the inner wheel of the hand wheel to reactivate the needle.

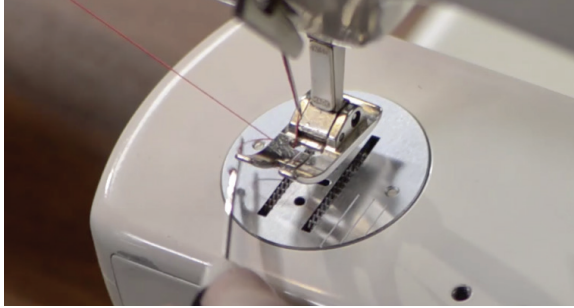
### Thread the Machine

Refer to your sewing machine's guide to see exactly how your particular sewing machine should be threaded. The tension will not feed properly if it is not threaded correctly. Follow all directions, paying attention to the path and direction that the thread will be traveling.

- Place the spool of thread on the spool pin. The thread will need to go through several small hooks. Pull the end of the thread from the spool and thread it around and through the hooks in the sequence and direction shown in the manual.
- Then thread the needle. It is *very* important that you thread it in the direction shown in the manual. Pull the end of the thread behind the presser foot a few inches.

### Insert the Full Bobbin

- Open the bobbin case cover. Again, refer to your manual for specific instructions.



- You will need to place the full bobbin in the bobbin case. Many machines have a removable case. The bobbin will need to be inserted in the particular way your manual states in order that the thread will feed in the right direction.
- Place the bobbin in the case and pull the thread through the tension plate on the case. The manual will tell you what path to use. Replace the case securely and close the cover. Leave the tail of the thread hanging out in the trough provided.



- Hold onto the needle thread with your left hand. With the other hand turn the hand wheel toward you. The needle will lower into the throat plate. As it comes back up, the bottom thread will come up with it in a loop.
- Pull on the top thread. The bottom thread loop will come up further. Place a small tool such as a seam ripper under the presser foot into the loop, and pull the tail all the way out (*above left*). Place the bobbin thread behind the machine with the needle thread.

Now you are ready to sew!

## The Practice Sampler

You will need the Foundational Practice Sampler\* to sew these exercises. Fold it in half so the stitching will be a double thickness.

### Developing Good, Basic Sewing Habits

Stitching on the Sampler will help you learn good, basic sewing habits. They will develop as you practice stitching. Set your machine at a regular stitch length of 2 1/2.

#### Exercise 1 – The Straight Stitch

*Lower the presser foot at the beginning of the seam.*

- Place the Practice Sampler under your presser foot on the first practice line, about 1/4" from the fold. Lower the presser foot.

*Hold the threads as you begin each seam.*

- Hold both the top and bobbin threads as you begin. This keeps the threads from knotting and jamming.

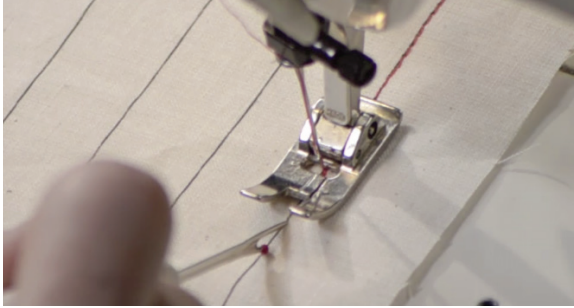
*Backstitch at the beginning and the end.*

Backstitching functions as a knot at the beginning and end of each seam. To backstitch, raise the stitch adjustment knob up to the top.

- At the beginning of the seam, sew 3 or 4 stitches backward. Then sew forward. Try to sew on the line with a straight stitch (*above*).

*Sew with a steady, slow speed.*

- Don't try to speed up until you gain experience.



*Place your hands flat near the presser foot.*

- Hold your hands near the presser foot, but not close enough to run over your fingers! They should be flat on your fabric for control.

*Don't watch your needle as you sew.*

- Keep your eyes on the groove at the center of the presser foot. In this case the practice line should line up with the groove (*above*).

*Backstitch at the end of each seam.*

- When you come to the end of your seam, backstitch 3 or 4 stitches.

*Raise the take-up lever to the top.*

- Turn the hand wheel toward you so that the take up lever is raised to its highest position. This will bring the needle up. Turning the hand wheel toward you helps release the tension. When you begin again, your thread will not pull out of the needle.

*To remove fabric, raise the presser foot and pull the fabric away toward the back left.*

- Now raise the presser foot and remove fabric by pulling it to the side or back of the machine – at about a 10:00 position. Pulling it to the back releases the bobbin tension.

*Clip the threads.*

- Clip both the ending and the beginning threads close to the fabric, then drop them in the trash. This eliminates loose threads everywhere and keeps your project neat.



**Sew the second line.**

Begin as before, placing the practice sheet under your presser foot on the second practice line, about 1/4" from the fold.

- Backstitch, then stitch forward. Sew down the second line, making the stitching as straight as you can.

*Guide the fabric – do not push or pull.*

- Let the feed dog pull the fabric through for you. Guide it through with your hands (*above*). Maintain a steady, slow speed. A faster speed will come with practice. Backstitch at the end. Clip the threads at the top and bottom.

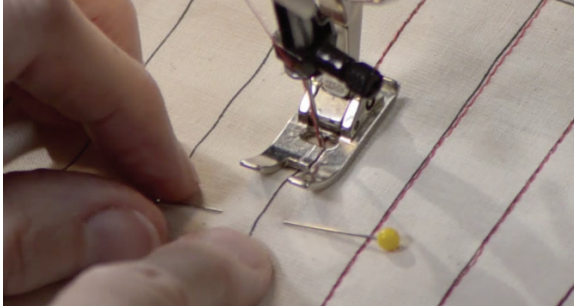
**Continue sewing the next 5 lines.**

- Sew as straight as you can. They say that a straight line is the hardest thing to sew.
- On Line 4, place a few pins across the line before you sew. Most projects have pins to keep the fabric layers from shifting. You need to practice taking them out as you sew.
- The feed dog under the throat plate actually pulls the bottom fabric through the machine, but nothing is pulling the top. So the bottom fabric actually feeds into the machine slightly faster than the top, which can create bunching and shifting.

*Remove pins as you sew – don't sew over them!*

- Sew until the presser foot is up to the pin. Don't pull it out early, and don't sew over it!





- As you approach the pin, sometimes there will be some fullness – a fabric bubble – in between the pin and the presser foot (*above*). If this happens, give the fabric some tension by gently pulling on it from behind. Slowly sew a little closer to the pin (*below*).

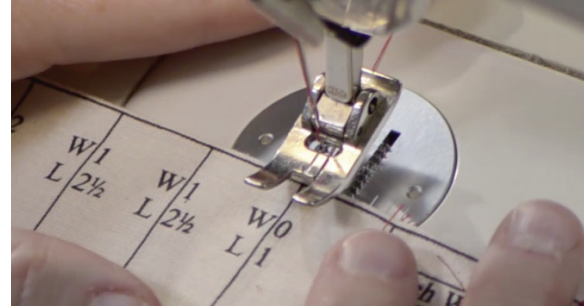
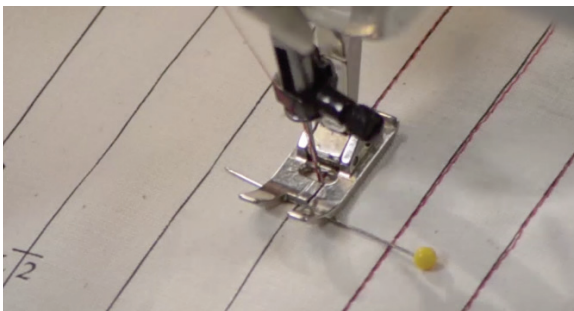
Sewing over a pin can put a burr in your needle, which can disturb the timing of your machine. It is important not to run over them.

- Finish straight stitching that row, removing pins as you sew. Backstitch, remove your sampler and clip your threads.
- Continue to straight stitch on the fifth line, adding pins before you sew.

**Note:** If you need more practice, sew in between the Sampler lines, or sew on a piece of fabric with stripes. Keep practicing until you are comfortable sewing a straight seam. It will be worth your time.

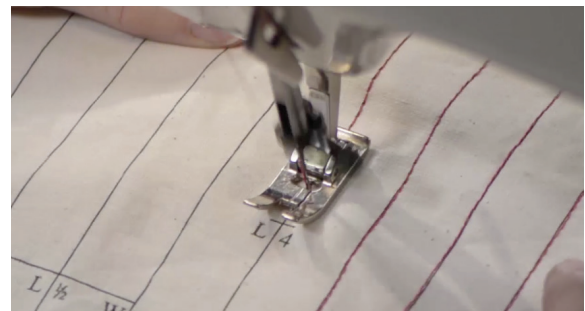
### Exercise 2 – The Zigzag Stitch

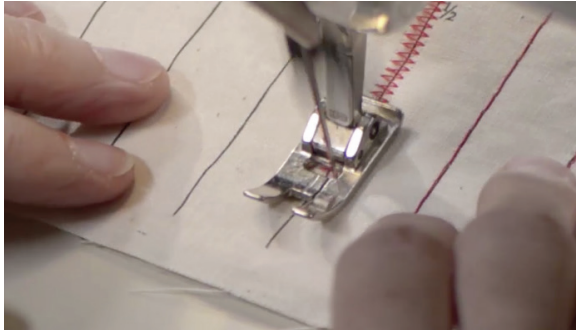
You can zigzag indifferent widths. Locate the zigzag stitch width knob on your machine. The length (L) and width (W) settings you will be using are printed on your Sampler.



### Sew the first zigzag line.

- For the first zigzag line, set the width at 0 and the length at 1 (*above*).
- Start about 1/4" from the folded edge. Hold your threads and backstitch. Then sew forward. This is just a tiny bit of zigzag. Hold your hands near the pressure foot and sew a steady speed.
- As you approach the L2 line, stop with your needle up. Change the stitch length to 2. Continue stitching. Note that the stitch is a little longer.
- As you approach the L3 line, stop with your needle up. Change the stitch length to 3. Continue stitching. This stitch is even longer.
- At L4, change the stitch length to 4 (*above*). This is a gathering stitch. Continue stitching.
- On this stitch, the fabric will go through very quickly and the machine will make great big stitches. End the row by backstitching. Remove the fabric toward the back left and clip the threads on both ends. Keep practicing these good habits with each seam.





### Sew the second zigzag line.

- On the next row, set the width to 1, and the length back to  $2\frac{1}{2}$ . This will produce a small zigzag. Continue to sew down the line, practicing your good habits

*Always raise the needle “up” before you change your stitch width.*

- At the W2 line, stop your machine, raise your needle up and change the width to 2.
- On the W3 line change the width to 3 and continue to sew. Then on the W4 line, change it to 4. This is the widest zigzag.
- On the W  $\frac{1}{2}$  line, lower the width setting to  $\frac{1}{2}$ , just a little above 0. This makes almost a satin stitch (*above*).

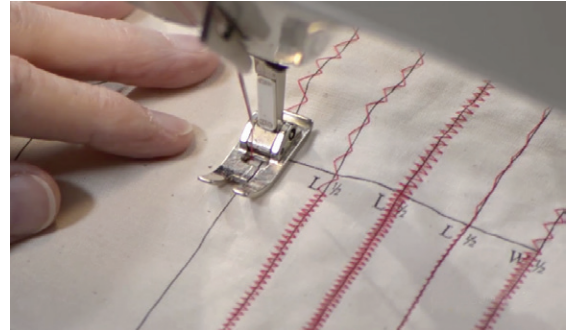
Notice that the stitch length stayed the same on the whole row. It was just the width that changed.

### Sew the third zigzag line.

- Change the width back to 1. Leave the length at a standard stitch of  $2\frac{1}{2}$ . Backstitch and begin to zigzag down the line.

Reminder: Focus on the center groove on the presser foot and the seam approaching it rather than the needle.

- Continue to go down the line, changing the length from 2 to 4 as specified as you sew. Leave the width the same. Notice that you are just changing the length only a little bit, but that the stitches are getting much longer.



- The last stitch length –  $\frac{1}{2}$  – produces a little tiny zigzag. Clip your threads on both ends when you are done.

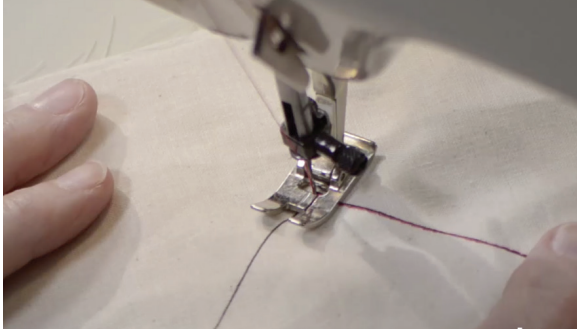
### Sew the remaining zigzag rows.

- Begin the fourth row with width at 2 and the length at 1.
- Continue to change the settings as shown on your Sampler as you sew the remaining zigzag lines (*above*).
- Practice all good sewing habits as you sew. Remember to raise the take-up lever every time you change the width. Watch the center groove. Always backstitch at the end. Remove the sampler away from the machine toward the back left. And clip both sets of threads, discarding them in the trash.

### Exercise 3 – Pivoting on a Corner

In several of the projects you will be sewing, you will be turning a corner, so you will be pivoting the fabric.

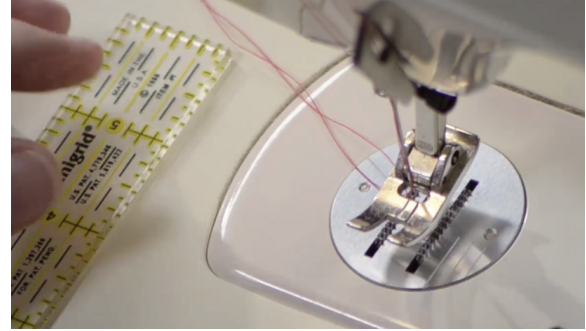
- Set the stitching back to a straight stitch, with the width at 0 and to a regular length, of  $2\frac{1}{2}$ .
- Start the pivot practice line by back stitching at the beginning. Be sure to hold your threads. Try to sew straight, staying on the line. Sew towards the corner, watching carefully as the needle approaches the point. When the needle goes down into the fabric on the corner line, stop sewing.



- Lift up the presser foot. Pivot the fabric to follow the line. With the needle down through the fabric layers, they will not move or shift. Put the pressure foot back down (*above*).
- Sew to the next corner line, slowing down as you approach the corner point. You may want to use your hand wheel to [walk](#) your machine the last couple stitches. (Remember to always turn the wheel towards yourself.)
- If your last stitch doesn't go *exactly* into the corner, you can adjust the stitch slightly by lifting up the presser foot and then *carefully* moving both layers of fabric just a tiny bit to the right point. Once the needle is down through the fabric, pivot the fabric.
- Continue to sew on the line, pivoting the corners. Backstitch the ends and clip the threads.

#### Exercise 4 - Sewing with a Seam Allowance

Most of the time, you will actually sew on a line. You will normally use your seam allowance guide. Most patterns are marked in the beginning with the seam allowance for that particular garment or project.



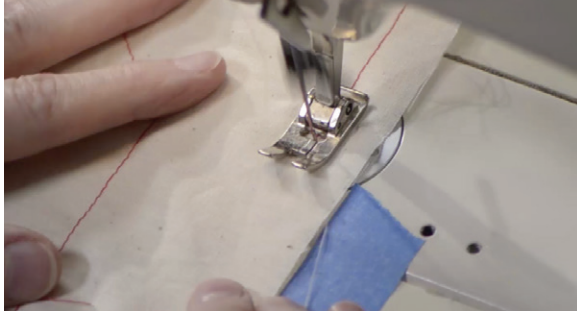
Use the seam allowance guide built into the throat plate of your machine. It is usually just to the right of the presser foot (*above*). The grooves are normally located at  $\frac{3}{8}$ ",  $\frac{4}{8}$ " and  $\frac{5}{8}$ ".

If you are not sure of the measurement on yours, measure it with a small ruler or seam guide. Start where the needle goes down into the fabric and measure to the grooves.

#### *Sew a consistent width seam allowance.*

- On the other edge of your sampler, place the fabric to sew a  $\frac{3}{8}$ " seam allowance. Line up the edge of the fabric with the  $\frac{3}{8}$ " groove. Use a normal straight stitch.
- Holding your threads, start about  $\frac{1}{4}$ " inch from the fold (*lower left*). Backstitch, then sew forward. Sew down the edge, keeping the edge of the fabric on the  $\frac{3}{8}$ " groove in the throat plate. Remember, don't watch the needle – watch the seam allowance guide.
- This is something you want to practice a lot. Take strips of fabric and sew down the edges, guided by the seam allowance guide.  
**Note:** Accuracy in seam allowances is what you want for your garments and projects.
- If you would like to have a little bit better guide to see by, run a piece of painter's masking tape alongside a ruler, extending below the guide on the sewing machine table. This tape will not leave a residue when you remove it and will give you a nice, big guide to run your fabric along.



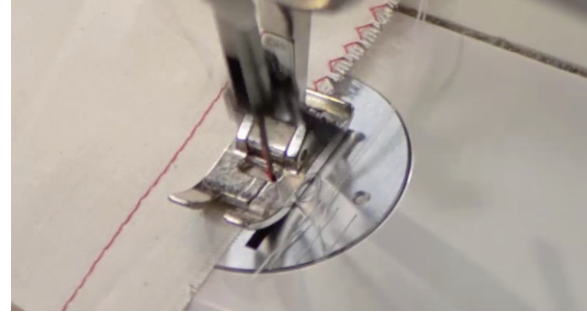


- Turn the fabric around and sew the another straight seam, this time using a  $\frac{5}{8}$ " seam allowance (*above*).

### Exercise 5 - Zigzagging a Raw Edge

One of the main reasons to zigzag is to finish off a raw edge. Fabric does fray, and the more you wash it and use it, the more it frays. If you zigzag correctly, you can stop most fraying from taking place.

- Turn the stitch width to 3, and the stitch length to 2. For a thicker fabric, you might want to consider setting the width at 4.



- This time, line the edge of your fabric up with the *opening in the front right side of the pressure foot*. You will be stitching along the edge (*above*). As you sew, the *zig* stitch will sew on the fabric, and the *zag* will go off the edge. This encases the raw edge of the fabric so it can't continue to fray.
- Guide the fabric through, keeping the edge of the fabric aligned with the opening in the pressure foot. Try to sew nice and straight. Backstitch. Clip the threads on both ends.

You are now finished with the sampler and ready to go on with your projects!

## A Review of Good Sewing Habits

- Sit centered in front of the needle on the machine.
- Position the foot pedal in front of you.
- At the beginning of each seam:
  - Lower the presser foot
  - Hold the threads
  - Backstitch
- Sew a consistent-width seam allowance.
- Sew with a steady, slow speed.
- Place your hands flat near the presser foot.
- Guide the fabric under the needle – do not push or pull.
- Don't watch your needle as you sew - watch the seam guide
- Remove pins as you sew – don't sew over them!
- Always raise the needle "up" before you change your stitch width.
- At the end of each seam:
  - Backstitch
  - Raise the take-up lever to the top
  - Raise the presser foot and remove the fabric away toward the back left.
  - Clip ending and beginning threads
- To turn a corner, lower the needle and pivot the fabric.

Review this video: [Foundational Sewing Practice](#)

Watch the next video: [Project 1: Tissue Holder](#)



## Questions about Sewing?

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Submit any questions for Cindy or Crissa in the Q&A section on the course homepage or post it to our blog at [www.sustainlife.org/blog/category/sewing/](http://www.sustainlife.org/blog/category/sewing/)

## Sewing Suppliers

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### Simply Fabrics

6408 Gholson Road  
Waco, Texas 76705  
254.829.7119  
[info@simplyfabrics.com](mailto:info@simplyfabrics.com)

*The Foundational Practice Sampler is available through Simply Fabrics. Or, you can make your own by downloading a diagram.*

## Additional Videos

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### Beginning Sewing

- Introduction to Sewing
- Introducing the Projects
- Notions & Fabrics
- Sewing Machine
- Cutting Methods

### Project Videos

- 1 Tissue Holder
- 2 Shoe Bag
- 3 Gift Bag
- 4 Double Drawstring Bag
- 5 Bag Caddie
- 6 Bread Cloth
- 7 Basic Pillowcase
- 8 Lined Drawstring Bag
- 9 Pillowcase with Contrasting Band
- 10 Flange Pillow
- 11 Tote Bag
- 12 Lined Apron