SEWING Fabric AND Tricky MATERIALS:
Free Guide to Sewing Silk Fabric and Knit Fabric

1. sewing with silk

2. knit knowledge
It’s easy sewing fabrics with unique characteristics. All it takes are a few helpful hints and tailored sewing techniques, plus some stitching practice with the right sewing notions, tools, and supplies. Sewing silk and sewing knit fabrics are two of the most common sewing skills that intimidate sewers. These fabrics can be a bit fussy to work with, but armed with a few key techniques, you can master sewing these tricky fabrics in no time.

We have assembled the key techniques you need for confidently sewing silk and knit fabrics. From the fabric construction details, to techniques for pretreating, cutting, seaming, hems, pressing, and fabric storage—we’ll tell you everything you need to know to sew fabulous projects with these beautiful fabrics.

Here are just a few of the techniques you will learn:

- **Fiber characteristics:** Once you understand how these fabrics are made and why they behave the way they do during sewing, you can easily troubleshoot and adjust your sewing techniques to achieve the desired effect.
- **Cutting techniques:** These fabrics are tricky to cut, so we give you all the cutting tips and tricks you need for accurate and stress-free cutting.
- **Seaming techniques:** Silk and knit fabrics require specific seaming techniques to show off the fabrics to the fullest. We show you step-by-step the best seaming methods for your project.

Use this handy fabric sewing guide when you are using silk or knit fabrics for your next project, and you’ll be sewing them like a pro in no time.

Happy Sewing,

*tricia waddell*

Editor in chief, *Stitch* magazine
The beauty of silk is irresistible, but it has an undeserved reputation for being difficult to sew. A few key techniques and quality tools are all you need to gain silk sewing confidence.

SILK HAS OFTEN been called the “Queen of Fibers,” and rightfully so. It is the standard by which all fibers are measured for beauty, luster, and luxury. Although you may be new to working with silk, it has been cultivated and sewn for millennia. Once you understand how silk handles, a few tips and tricks are all that are needed to master this delicate fabric for your next project.

SILK BASICS
Silk is the only naturally occurring filament fiber. A single cocoon can yield nearly a mile of unbroken fiber when unreeled. As a result, silk fabrics can be produced two ways: as a filament silk, woven from silk reeled directly from intact cocoons, or as a spun silk, woven from spun threads (created with shorter fibers collected from broken, wild, or specialty cocoons).

Of the two, filament woven silks are what we generally associate with silk fabrics. Shimmering silk charmeuse, sheer chiffon, and buttery crêpe de chine all fall into this category. These fabrics are beautifully lustrous, but their fluid nature requires special handling to cut and sew.

Silk fabrics woven from spun threads, including doupioni, matka, and noil, are often the easiest for beginning silk enthusiasts to master. Spun silk fabrics are generally less slippery and easier to handle, but they are also less lustrous and often require additional stabilization or support, because they are prone to sagging and pilling with wear.

CUTTING
The secret to cutting and sewing silk fabrics with ease lies in taking a few precautions to ensure success. Washable silks that are slippery, such as chiffon and charmeuse, can be pretreated with a wash-away liquid stabilizer, such as PerfectSew, to give them stability while cutting. Simply saturate the fabric with the liquid (follow the manufacturer’s instructions) and hang to dry, being sure to keep grainlines straight. Press lightly before cutting.

If the silk is not washable, or you prefer not to use stabilizer, lay out your fabric using a layer of tissue paper underneath it. The tissue will keep the fabric from shifting as you cut. Pattern weights and rotary cutters are often easier to use on shifty silks than traditional dressmakers’ shears, because there is less likelihood of displacing the fabric as you cut.

Loosely woven and less expensive silks perform better if a high-quality light- to medium-weight fusible interfacing is fused to the wrong side of the fabric before cutting. This not only helps prevent the fabric from shifting and distorting while cutting, but it also supports the fabric for more uniform drape, dramatically reduces fraying, and facilitates stronger seams. Always test first when using a fusible interfacing with silk fabrics to ensure that the resulting drape is desirable and that the melted adhesive does not show through.
As a rule of thumb, the finer the fabric, the finer and sharper your tools should be. This is especially true of silks. Here's your tool kit for silk sewing success.

**Shears**
Silk fibers dull cutting blades quickly, so it is extra important to use sharp, quality shears or fresh rotary cutting blades. Serrated shears designed for cut-resistant fibers, such as Aramid, are an excellent choice.

**Needles**
Microtex needles, also known as "Sharps," are the best choice for silk fabrics. The ultrafine point is perfect for passing between filament fibers. A 70/10 is a good mid-range needle size. Replace the needle immediately if it shows signs of dulling, such as pulling threads or making a popping sound when it strikes the fabric.

**Pins**
Invest in good-quality fine glass-head pins or silk pins for sewing silk. Dull, standard-gauge pins can snag silk fibers and leave puncture marks.

**Markers**
Tailor’s chalk and non-wax tracing paper work well for marking silk. Avoid all air- and water-erasable markers because they can leave a permanent mark.

**Thread**
Use a high-quality polyester or silk thread. Silk thread is preferred, because it is less likely to leave thread marks if removed, but it’s not necessary. Mercerized cotton is also acceptable, but it has greater “drag” through the fabric, because of the staple length of the cotton fibers.

**Types of Silk Fabrics:**
1. Crêpe de Chine
2. Georgette
3. Noil (raw silk)
4. Satin Charmeuse
5. China Silk/Habotai
6. Douppioni

**When to Dry-Clean**
**Dry-Clean Your Silk If:**
- The fabric is highly prone to shrinkage, such as crêpe de chine.
- You want to retain the original finish and hand of your silks.
- The silk is loosely spun or abrades easily.
- The silk is brightly colored and likely to bleed.
- You are using interfacings or other materials that may not be compatible with washing.

**How to Handwash Silk**
Fill a basin with lukewarm water. Add a small amount of mild soap (not detergent) or shampoo. Add your silk, and very gently agitate to thoroughly wet the fabric. Silk is weaker when wet, so handle carefully when washing. Let rest for a few minutes, and then allow the water to drain. Gently rinse out the soapy water and then carefully squeeze out the excess; do not wring. Roll the silk in a towel to soak up any excess water, and then hang or press with a medium iron to dry.
SEAMS AND HEMS
Silk fabrics need special consideration when choosing seam construction. In some cases, such as shantung and douppioni, the fabric is prone to slippage at the seams. Because of this tendency, it is recommended to use at least a ½” (1.3 cm) seam allowance to prevent seam failure. In the case of sheer silks, such as chiffon, georgette, and organza, the transparency of the fabric demands a seam that is attractive inside and out. See the How-tos at right for the best seams for your silk fabric type.

Hemming silks can be intimidating when sewing lightweight sheers. The secret is to staystitch along the first fold line. The stitch strengthens and stabilizes the fold line for the hem, making it easier to press and turn.

CARING FOR SILK
Technically, all silk fiber is washable, because water is used to process silk fabrics. However, the dyes, finishes, and even degree of fiber twist used to create silk fabrics can cause undesirable results when the silk is washed.

Some silks will bleed when washed. Often, this is simply the excess dye in the fabric. Some silks will shrink noticeably, especially those with crêpe yarns such as crêpe de chine. Technically, silk fiber does not shrink, but the weaving tension and yarn structure may cause the fabric to contract when immersed in water. Silks with a firm hand, such as douppioni, often soften considerably when washed. And loosely woven silks, such as Habotai and china silk/gauze, may not be

French and flat-fell are self-finished seams that protect the raw edges of the seam allowance from abrasion. Use a Hong Kong finish or triple-stitched hem for unlined silk garments. For lined garments, finish seam allowances by pinking or use a zigzag stitch.

FRENCH SEAM Pin the pieces wrong sides together and stitch a ⅜” (1 cm) straight seam. Trim the seam allowances to ⅛” (3 mm). Fold the fabric right sides together along the stitched seam and press. Stitch along the original seamline (now ¼” [6 mm] from the fold), encasing the raw edges. Press the seam to one side.

FLAT-FELL SEAM Fold the seam allowance over toward the right side on one piece and toward the wrong side on the adjoining piece. Insert the folds into each other so that both pieces are facing right side up (see below, both raw edges are now encased and hidden). Edgestitch along each fold to finish. [See a Web tutorial on sewing flat-fell seams at interweavestitch.com.]

HONG KONG FINISH Using 1” (2.5 cm)-wide bias strips, place a bias strip right sides together with one seam allowance, raw edges aligned. Keeping the other seam allowance and garment fabric out of the way, sew with a ⅛” (6 mm) seam allowance. Press the bias strip over the seam and then fold it over the seam allowance edge to the back (no need to turn under the raw edge of the bias strip; it will be left exposed on the underside of the seam allowance). Pin in place, then stitch in the ditch from the right side of the seam allowance to secure the underside of the binding in place.

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able to withstand even mild agitation in water without losing their integrity. So it is important to pretest fabric samples if there is any doubt of suitability.

If you plan to wash your silk after construction, prewash your silks before construction. When you choose to wash your silk, you must be willing to accept the possibility that even if shrinkage isn’t an issue, washing will likely soften and perhaps lighten the color of the silk over time. That being said, extra softness is often desirable, and washable silk has the advantage of easy care.

STORING SILK
Of all the natural fibers, silk is the most susceptible to UV damage. Avoid hanging beaded silks because the weight of the beads will slowly tear the silk apart over time. For best results, keep your silks clean and lay your precious silk things in an acid-free box away from direct light in a dry room.

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TRIPLE-STITCHED HEM
Stitch ¼” (6 mm) from the raw edge, then press 3⁄16” (5 mm) toward the wrong side so that the line of stitches runs near the edge of the fold (1⁄16” [2 mm]). Stitch 1⁄8” (3 mm) from the folded edge, then trim the raw edge close to this second stitch line. Roll the hem toward the wrong side to enclose the raw edge (one row of stitching will still be visible). Finish by stitching once more directly over the visible stitch line.

RESOURCES
For more tips and techniques for sewing with silk, check out:

- Sewing with Silk with Katrina Walker, CD-ROM workshop by David Page Coffin. katrinawalker.com
- All About Silk, a Fabric Dictionary & Swatchbook by Julie Parker. raincitypublishing.com

This simple and luxurious Velvet and Silk Cowl from Erin Harris can be found at shop.sewdaily.com.
Stretch your sewing knowledge and learn the essential tips and tricks for sewing with knits.

Text DEEPIKA PRAKASH

From the liquid drape of jersey to the coziness of sweater knits, knit fabrics are highly varied and versatile. Once you learn how to adjust your sewing techniques to their unique construction and stretchability, you’ll see how easy it is to sew amazing knit projects all year-round.

CONSTRUCTION JUNCTION
Knit fabrics are made by interlooping threads or yarns with each other resulting in ridges that run lengthwise or crosswise. The loops in the fabric allow knits to stretch. In contrast, woven fabrics created by interweaving two sets of strands horizontally and vertically on a loom are thinner and more stable.

Knits can be constructed as single-knit or double-knit fabrics. You can easily distinguish a single-knit fabric from a double-knit fabric by inspecting both sides. Single-knit fabrics such as jersey will have small vertical ribs on one side and horizontal loops or “purls” on the other (generally, the loop side is the wrong side). Double knits such as interlock and rib knits have vertical ribs on both sides. Another way to distinguish between the two is by pulling the fabric across the stretch. Single knits will curl toward the right (rib) side while double knits will lie flat.

KNOW YOUR KNITS
The key characteristic of knit fabric is stretchability. When choosing a knit for your next project, you need to know how much it will stretch and how well it will hold or recover its shape.

Knits can have one-way stretch (lengthwise or crosswise) or two-way stretch. With one-way stretch knits, pay attention to where you have the most stretch when you lay out your pattern pieces. You want to place the maximum stretch where you need it most. Generally, the most stretch will be found in the crosswise direction.
and you'll usually want that stretch to wrap around the body, so place the grainline parallel to the lengthwise grain. It's always a good idea to check the stretch in both directions and note any special pattern instructions regarding directional stretch. Two-way stretch fabrics have spandex or Lycra in them and are typically used for swimwear and activewear. They stretch in both directions up to 75 percent. The type of fiber (e.g., cotton, wool, bamboo) used in the knit will also affect the stretch (see sidebar on page 9). Machine-knitted sweater fabrics can be comprised of a variety of fibers and can be tightly or loosely knitted resulting in a wide range of stretchability.

Because all knit fabrics have some degree of stretch, patterns designed for knit fabrics have what is called “wearing ease.” Based on the type of knit recommended in the pattern, the pattern may have a little to a lot of wearing ease—or, in some cases, even negative ease (the finished garment will be smaller than the body size). In the case of negative ease, the fabric stretches to fit the body.

Recoverability is the fabric's ability to hold and return to its original shape. Do you have a T-shirt that has lost its shape after a certain amount of washing and wearing? Take a look at the label. It most likely doesn't have any Lycra. Even a small percent of Lycra in the fabric can do wonders for a fabric's recoverability.

**PRETREATING**

The rule of thumb for pretreating any type of fabric is to wash it the way you plan to wash the finished project. If it's a knit you've never worked with before, wash a 6” × 6” (15 × 15 cm) test swatch first. Prewash not only to preshrink the fabric but also to remove any sizing (a chemical finish applied to many fabrics during the manufacturing process), dust, and other particles before it hits your sewing machine. Cotton and polyester knits can be pretreated in the washer and dryer. Wash rayon knits using the gentle cycle set on warm and tumble them dry on very low heat. Silk knits should always be handwashed in mild soap and air-dried. Handwash and air-dry or dry-clean your wool knits because agitation in the washing machine can cause the wool to felt.

**SEAMS AND HEMS**

When seaming knits, you have a couple of options. If you use a conventional sewing machine, use a zigzag stitch (0.5–0.7 mm width and 2.5–3 mm length) or a stretch stitch (refer to your sewing machine manual). Alternatively, you can use a three- or four-thread serger, which seams and finishes the edges all in one step (generally a three-thread serger is the most effective).

One of the best things about sewing knits is that you don't have to finish the seam allowances because they won't fray like woven fabrics. However, if you want the inside of the garment to look as pretty as the

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**FURTHER READING**

Since cotton jersey has great stretch, no elastic is needed for a comfortable waistband. This project can be found in the Spring 2011 issue on page 58.
Knits can be made from a variety of fibers, including cotton, wool, silk, bamboo, rayon, and polyester. Each one will have a unique “hand” or drape. Here are some characteristics of different fiber-based knits.

**COTTON** If you’re sewing for babies and kids or looking for T-shirt material, cotton knit is your best option. It’s a generally stable knit, so it holds its shape well, making it easy to sew. And it’s machine washable.

**WOOL** When you pick up a wool knit, you’ll immediately feel the warmth. It’s usually heavier in weight, and like cotton it’s easy to sew because a wool knit also tends to be relatively stable. Consider lining it with a softer knit because wool can be a little scratchy.

**SILK** When it comes to drape and shine, nothing beats the luxury of a silk knit. It’s soft and comfortable to wear, lightweight, drapes beautifully, and looks gorgeous!

**POLYESTER** The most widely available knit fabric, polyester comes in a variety of vibrant colors and prints. The surface is very smooth, making it slightly difficult to identify the ribs. Garments made from polyester knits travel well because they don’t wrinkle. However, polyester fabrics don’t breathe, so consider this factor in your fiber choice.

**NYLON** When you think of a nylon knit, think swimwear. Nylon knits are usually shinier than polyester knits. They have 75 percent or more stretch, allowing you to sew with negative ease for swimwear or other close-fitting garments.

**RAYON/BAMBOO** Rayon is a regenerated cellulose fiber that can be made from wood, paper, cotton fiber, or bamboo. The process results in a smooth and silky fiber that not only drapes beautifully, but also breathes, so it’s comfortable to wear.

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**CHOOSEING THE RIGHT KNIT FIBER**

1 | Cotton interlock knit
2 | Wool jersey
3 | Double knit
4 | Cotton jersey
5 | Rayon knit with Lycra
6 | Silk jersey
7 | Rib knit
8 | Bamboo jersey

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Visit sewdaily.com
SEWING NEEDLES FOR KNITS

Here’s a reference guide to the different types of sewing-machine needles you can use for knits:

A **ballpoint needle** is made specifically for sewing knits. Because the point is rounded, it goes between the ribs instead of breaking the fibers. This needle is especially useful on knits that snag easily.

A **stretch needle** has a medium ball point that prevents skipped stitches. It’s used most often for highly elastic fabrics such as those used for swimwear and as well as for other fabrics with a high percent of Lycra.

A **Microtex sharp needle** is for microfiber (very fine) knits. It has a very tiny sharp point that creates precision topstitching and prevents skipped stitches.

A **universal needle** is the most widely used needle for sewing woven as well as stable knits. It has a slightly rounded point, and size 75/11 works for most fabrics.

A **stretch twin needle** features two needles mounted on one shaft. It’s used to create two rows of topstitching simultaneously to finish hems.

Most patterns for knit fabrics have ¼ to ½” (6 mm to 1 cm) seam allowances. If the pattern has larger seam allowances, trim them down after seaming unless a specific reason is given for maintaining them. Often, there’s no need for those bulky seam allowances!

Hemming knits couldn't be simpler. On a conventional sewing machine, turn under the hem allowance and use a wide zigzag or a decorative stretch stitch. Or you can sew a twin-needle hem. To do so, you’ll need two spools of matching thread and a stretch twin needle. Following the threading directions for twin-needle sewing for your sewing machine, thread both needles in the same color and wind the bobbin with wooly nylon (wooly nylon thread is available for Sergers and embroidery). Set your machine to a 3 mm straight stitch or suggested stretch stitch for twin needles and slowly topstitch. Wooly nylon thread on the bobbin will allow the hem to stretch as you move.

PRESSING

When you press knits correctly, your seams can be almost invisible. First, press on the stitching line, burying the stitches in the fabric. Next, press open the seam allowances or press them to one side. Make sure that you don’t slide the iron while pressing or you’ll leave ironing marks. Lower the iron to the seam and then lift it to move to a different area. Adjust your iron’s temperature based on the fiber content of your fabric and use lots of steam. Check to see whether the knit is prone to shine marks by pressing first on a test swatch. If you get marks, use a press cloth on top of the fabric.

TROUBLESHOOTING

If you’re new to sewing with knits, anytime you encounter one of the following issues, you’ll be tempted to give up in frustration. We’ve all experienced this response! Take a deep breath, relax, and refer to these troubleshooting tips for help.

● **My fabric curls while I’m sewing!** This is just what certain types of knit fabrics do naturally. If it bothers you, using spray starch followed by light pressing can help straighten that edge temporarily while you sew. **Design Tip:** Use that curling edge to your advantage! Stretch the fabric a few times and you’ll notice it curls even more. Softly curled edges make great neckline finishes!
● **My fabric layers shift while I’m sewing!**

It’s important to control fabric layers as you sew. To achieve that control you must sew **slowly**. Stop and check to make sure the fabric edges are aligned, then sew again. If you’re still having problems, check the pressure on the foot. Too much pressure can result in puckered fabric and too little will cause the fabric to slip. A walking foot can also help keep fabric from shifting.

● **My seams or fabric edges are getting pulled into the machine!**

Working with a lightweight knit? This problem is bound to occur once in a while. Stop the machine. Hand turn the wheel so the needle is in the up position, clip the threads, and pull the fabric out. Try switching to a straight-stitch foot, which will give the fabric more grip and let the needle go in more smoothly without pulling to the bottom. Also check to make sure that you’re using the right type of needle. I recommend using a new needle for every project. For tricky knits, you can also cut the fabric with a larger seam allowance (up to 1” [2.5 cm]) than the pattern calls for so it’s easier to sew. After the seaming is completed, you can trim the seam allowance.

● **I have skipped stitches!**

Stitches are skipped when the needle isn’t able to pierce the fabric cleanly and as a result doesn’t come in contact with the bobbin thread to form a loop. Solution? Switch to a microtex sharp needle for dense fabrics. And, of course, always make sure that you are using a new needle, because a dull needle will cause problems no matter what type it is.

● **I have puckered stitches!**

Stitches pucker because your fabric isn’t feeding evenly, meaning one layer is being pulled in faster than the other. To see if your machine is feeding properly, cut two strips of fabric the same length and run them through the machine. Are they aligned when you’re through? If so, your machine is working well; if not, check your machine’s manual and learn how to adjust the feed dogs. If that doesn’t solve the problem, try reducing the pressure on the foot of your machine.

**CARE + STORING**

Because knits have a tendency to stretch out, keep them folded in a drawer. Skirts can be hung in the closet using skirt hangers. Sew hanger loops (easily made with some pretty ribbon) at the waist of skirts and at the shoulder seams of knit tops and dresses to preserve their shape. Store unsewn knit fabric folded or rolled on tubes.

**DEEPIKA PRAKASH** is the founder and president of PatternReview.com, an online sewing community of sewists just like you. Find many more tips on sewing with knits in PatternReview’s recently published book, 1,000 Clever Sewing Shortcuts and Tips.