

Southpaw Sewing

TIPS FOR LEFTIES—AND THOSE WHO TEACH THEM

I was lucky enough to have a third-grade teacher who gave instructions to lefty students (all three of us) on how to slant our papers when we learned cursive. Right-handed students slanted their papers to the left; we southpaws slanted our papers to the right. It was the only time I received instructions specific to being left-handed. For most of my life, I've figured it out on my own.

This has been especially true with sewing and handwork. That same teacher introduced us to basic sewing, and I immediately fell in love with all things needle and thread. Within a few years, I had taught myself hand embroidery: I bought a book of embroidery stitches and, by looking at the illustrations upside down, I figured out how to sew them as a lefty.

Although most sewing tools and techniques can be adapted to either hand, there were skills I never mastered to my satisfaction. One was to

cut along the pattern line, and another was deciphering pattern layout diagrams. Little did I know that there is some “handedness” to these skills and to the way they are often explained.

With the proper tools and a closer look at graphics, I discovered how to adapt and sew at a higher skill level. Many of the solutions I suggest below will help even right-handed stitchers find ways to make common techniques easier or more comfortable. If you're right-handed and teaching a lefty to sew, I hope you'll consider these ideas. You can help your students bypass the discouragement many southpaws experience when they can't get the results they want by following standard instructions.

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Special tools, revised techniques, and planning lead to greater success and less frustration for left-handed sewists.



Left-handed Cutting Tools

For comfort and accuracy, scissors, shears, and rotary cutters designed specifically for left-handed use are essential.

SHEARS AND SCISSORS

Scissors designated as “left-handed” have been around for a long time, and I used a pair of these so-called left-handed shears for decades. The handles fit comfortably in my hand, but handle design is only half the story. I eventually discovered there are two types of left-handed scissors: Those like the pair I had been using, with a handle contoured for the left hand, and true left-handed scissors.

True left-handed scissors: With a pair of true left-handed scissors, the left blade is raised when you separate your thumb and index fingers to open the scissors. This blade drives the scissors across the fabric. The cutting line is easily visible to the right of the blade, so your cutting accuracy increases. With right-handed cutting shears, I unconsciously angled the scissors to get a better view of the cutting line. This contributed to my cutting inaccuracy. True left-handed shears also reduce hand tension and therefore hand fatigue.

Semi-left-handed scissors: Many lefties have grown accustomed to right-handed scissors from years of practice, and may not be motivated to switch to lefty shears. However, they may find it worthwhile to invest in a fine pair of semi-left-handed scissors (Ciselier.com). These scissors have handles that accommodate a left-handed grip, but the blades are configured as for right-handed scissors. The handle design reduces cutting fatigue.



Left-handed contoured handles and reversed blades make up true left-handed shears.



ROTARY CUTTERS

Once I started using left-handed shears, I recognized the benefits of a rotary cutter designed for left-handed use. Some cutters are configured with the blade on the wrong side or a nut that blocks your view of the cutting line. For greater accuracy and reduced stress on your hand and wrist, look for a cutter that has the option to move the blade to the right side and the fastening nut to the left.

Opt for an ambidextrous model (Olfa, left) or one where the blade can be moved to the right side (Fiskars, right).



STUDY OF LEFTIES

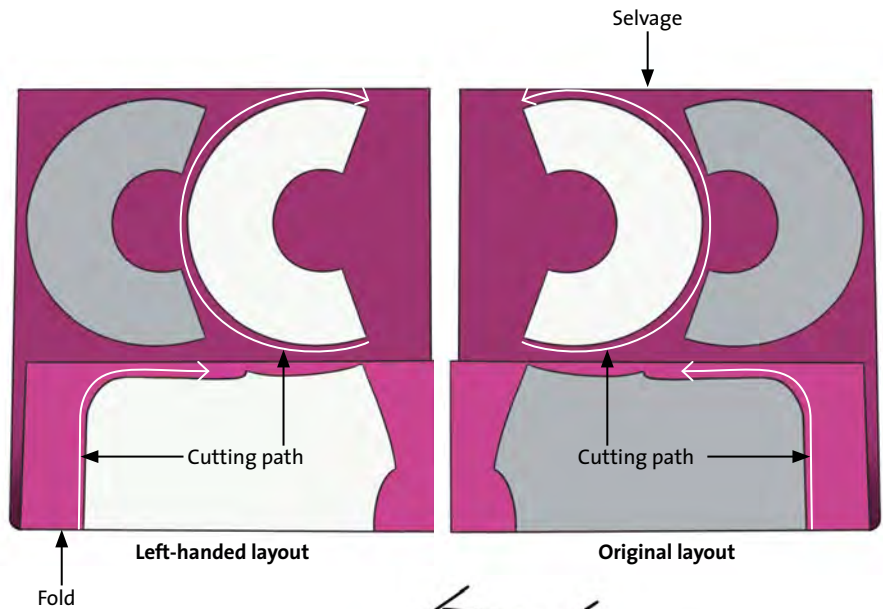
A research study of surgeons, published in the *Journal of Physical Therapy*, validated my experience: The study found that lefties flexed their wrists more and had higher levels of cutting inaccuracy when using a right-handed pair of scissors. The same study found that wrist flexion decreased and cutting accuracy increased when left-handed people used true left-handed shears.

Pattern Layout

If you're left-handed, customize a layout to favor a more natural range of motion. Your joints and muscles will thank you.

The change to left-handed cutting tools raised my awareness of how I lay out a pattern in preparation for cutting fabric. From my earliest sewing days, my natural inclination was to lay out my pattern so the garment hems are on my left—and this is often not the way the layout diagram is shown. In general, I prefer to move from left to right as I work my way along the fabric, and to cut along each major piece's hemline first, then turn my hand to the right to cut the side seams. Cutting from left to right allows for a clean cut along the grainline and preserves the weave of the fabric. It also reduces wrist flexion.

If the pattern's layout diagram places the hemlines to the right, I suggest reversing the orientation of the pattern pieces on the fabric. Your revised layout doesn't have to be a mirror image of the diagram; you need to pay attention to whether a pattern piece needs to be turned upside down.



Sewing Space Setup

Your work will be more efficient and comfortable if you take into account where you place your most-used tools relative to your sewing machine.

There are several options for rearranging a sewing space to accommodate lefties. If your sewing space permits, purchase a longer sewing table. Place the sewing machine to the right, leaving sufficient space for tools to be stored to the left and behind the machine, where they will not get in the way of your fabric as you sew. This placement eliminates stretching and turning to reach your tools.

In a smaller space, try a clamp-on computer mouse tray that swivels under the sewing table when you need to get it out of the way (Amazon.com). Place it to the left of the machine. There are also sewing tables designed to place your sewing machine on the far right, with storage compartments on the left.



A clamp-on tray keeps essential tools at your (left) fingertips while you're machine-sewing.

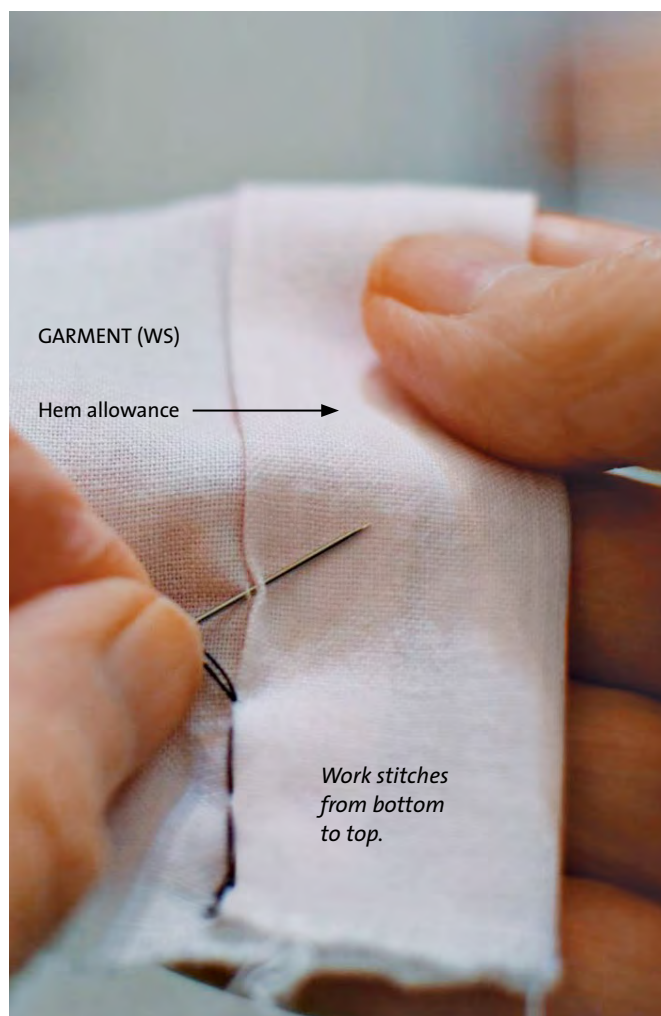
Hand Stitching

Stitching instructions are almost always demonstrated for right-handed sewists, although on YouTube.com, you may find the occasional lefty video. Below are lefty versions of three common hand stitches.

HEM OR OVERCAST STITCH

1 Use this stitch to create a sturdy hem. Begin by pressing up the hem allowance; finish the allowance's raw edge as desired. Below, it is folded under. Depending on how large the garment is, you may prefer to lay it on a table with the hem edge toward you, and work left to right; alternatively, hold the fabric in your right hand with the edge to be sewn toward your left hand. When I am holding the fabric in this position, I prefer to work from bottom to top.

2 Secure the thread between the hem layers. Then hold the needle with the thread to your left and the needle angled toward the hem fold. Pick up two or three threads of the garment close to the hem allowance's top fold. Insert the needle through two or three threads in the fold. Pull the thread through securely but not too tightly. Repeat to complete the hem, then secure the thread.

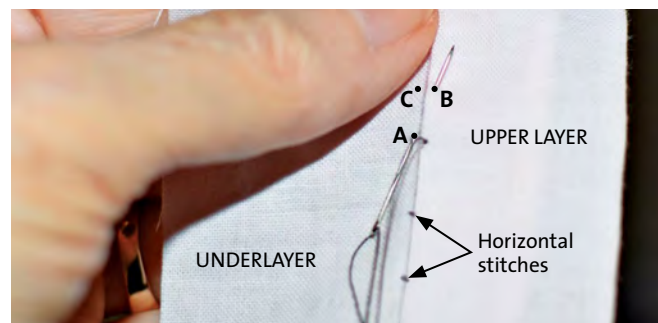


FELL STITCH

1 Apply this stitch to fasten one fabric layer atop another, as in a hand-installed lining or an appliqué. Hold the work in your right hand with the overlapping edge toward the left. You'll work from bottom to top. Sew an anchor stitch, and bring the needle up through all the layers, close to the edge of the upper layer.

2 Set the first stitch. Insert the needle into the fabric to the left of the upper layer's edge at an angle (A) and bring the needle up $\frac{1}{2}$ inch up the seamline and $\frac{1}{16}$ inch to the right of the upper layer's edge (B). Pull the thread through the fabric.

3 Proceed with the seam. Insert the needle $\frac{1}{16}$ inch across the upper layer's edge (C) to create a $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch horizontal stitch. Then angle the needle beneath the fabric and bring the needle up into the upper layer, as in step 2. Continue to complete the seam, and secure the thread.



BLANKET STITCH

The trick to successfully executing the blanket stitch is to insert the needle from the right side to the wrong side. You can work this stitch right to left but may find the following left-to-right method easier. Hold the work with the edge away from you. Insert the needle $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the fabric edge (A) while holding the thread across the edge with your right hand. Bring the needle up, with the thread held behind the needle (B). Pull snugly. Space your stitches approximately $\frac{1}{2}$ inch apart across the length of the fabric.

