Preparing Fabric for Cutting

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By Elizabeth K. Easton, Extension clothing specialist


Before you cut, study your fabric. Note the fiber content, the type of weave or knit and the care instructions which accompany it. Also look for surface problems such as creases and uneven color or texture.

Make it thread perfect

Make your fabric thread perfect. Woven fabric is composed of two sets of yarns (threads) running at right angles to each other. The lengthwise yarn, called warp is referred to as grain or grainline. The selvage is the finished lengthwise edge on each side of the fabric. The crosswise yarn (thread) runs horizontally and at right angles to the warp and is called weft or filling. This is the crosswise grain.

Knit fabrics consist of one or more systems of threads formed into interconnected loops and generally running in the same direction. There are two main types of knit fabric, warp knit and weft knit, so designated because of the direction in which they are constructed.

Knits do not have a grainline like wovens, but most knits have a noticeable lengthwise rib which serves as a grainline.

Whether woven or knit, the fabric should be thread perfect before the pattern pieces are placed on it. You cut, sew, press and fit in relation to grain. Make sure the edges are straight and even and that all lengthwise threads are parallel with the edge of the fabric. Crosswise perfections can be determined by cutting along a prominent crosswise thread. The cut end of a knit fabric should form right angles to the lengthwise edge of the fabric.

Never tear fabric to straighten ends because doing so tends to stretch the fabric or pull it off grain. To draw a thread, clip through the selvage and pull a crosswise thread until the fabric puckers. Slide the pucker ahead of the shears. Cut along this thread across the entire width of the fabric.

Fabric sometimes is rolled on the bolt with uneven tension. Correct this by folding the fabric lengthwise with right sides together. Match the ends and the sides and pin the two layers together at intervals of about five inches. Wrinkles which appear indicate the degree of off-grain condition. Steam pressing may be sufficient to correct the problem.

Washable fabrics may be straightened during the preshrinking or pretreating process. Dry the fabric in the manner it will be dried during use. Do not allow to become completely dry. Do not use clothespins. Never dry in a breezy place. Fold the slightly damp fabric on a flat surface and align the edges.

Some fabrics are subjected to irregular tension or pressure during printing or finishing and are permanently off grain. Inspection of fabrics before purchase is recommended. Try to avoid buying a printed fabric on which the design is printed off-grain.

Preshrink the material

Labels tell you what to expect in the way of shrinkage. Whether the fabric is washable or dry cleanable will determine how to preshrink. Double knit fabrics made from synthetic yarns may not shrink, but pretreating them is advisable to realign yarns and remove wrinkles, creases or excess dye.

Many dry cleanable fabrics may be preshrunk simply by giving them a thorough steaming. This is a wise precaution to take on any wool fabric because some woolens have been finished with a glaze that is removed by steam. This will insure uniform appearance.

Wool fabric not labeled preshrunk or which has a higher percentage of shrinkage should be steamed at a professional or self-service dry cleaning plant.

A blend containing a large percentage of wool should be shrunk by the wool method.
The "London Shrink"

If you decide to preshrink, try the "London Shrink" method, which has a three-fold purpose: (1) to shrink, (2) to restore grainline and (3) to avoid an uneven finish on fabric after garment is constructed.

Procedure.
1. Straighten fabric (see procedure above).
2. Baste stitch across ends.
3. Wet a sheet thoroughly in warm water. Remove excess water and fold sheet lengthwise.
7. Allow to remain 6-8 hours until wool absorbs all moisture.
8. Unfold. Wool will feel uniformly damp. Sheet will feel dry.

Washable fabrics which are not labeled preshrunk should be folded carefully and placed in cool water to soak. When the entire fabric is wet, gently squeeze out the water and hang the folded fabric over a towel bar. When dripping stops either tumble or air dry the fabric as you plan to dry the finished garment.

Silk fabric should not be preshrunk. If it is off grain, straighten by pressing with a warm iron.

Consider the entire garment. Interfacings, linings, tape, hair canvas and trim should also be preshrunk.