

# How to Sew a Tote Bag With a Recessed Zipper

- Total Time: 2 hrs
- Skill Level: Intermediate
- Estimated Cost: \$20

[Tote bags](#) are always handy to have around. You can use them to haul groceries, carry items on a day trip or weekend excursion, and more. And when you add a zipper to a standard tote, it makes the bag even more functional to keep your items safe and clean. Rather than purchasing a pre-made bag, you can learn how to sew a tote bag with lining and a zipper yourself. Making it yourself allows you to pick fabric that fits your style. These totes even make great personalized gifts. The project requires intermediate sewing skills and a couple hours of your time.

## [10 Free Tote Bag Sewing Patterns You Can Sew Up Today](#)

### What You'll Need

#### Equipment / Tools

- Measuring tape
- Scissors
- Pins
- Sewing machine
- Iron and ironing board

#### Materials

- 1 1/4 yard 60-inch-wide fabric
- 1 yard lining fabric
- 22 inch purse zipper
- 60 inch 1- to 2-inch webbing (for the straps)
- Interfacing (optional to stiffen fabric)
- Matching thread

## Instructions

### **1. Cut the Material and Place the Zipper**

From the main fabric, cut the following:

- Two 21 inch-by-24 inch rectangles for the front and back of the bag
- Two 3 inch-by-24 inch pieces for the zipper section

- Two 6 inch-by-32 1/2 inch pieces for the sides and bottom of the bag

From the lining fabric, cut the following:

- Two 18 inch-by-24 inch pieces for the front and back lining
- Two 3 inch-by-24 inch pieces for the zipper section lining
- Two 6 inch-by-30 1/2 pieces for the sides and bottom lining

Place the zipper right side down on a 24-inch edge of one of the 3 inch-by-24 inch pieces, aligning the edge of the zipper with the edge of the fabric. Using a 1/4-inch [seam allowance](#), sew the zipper tape to the fabric. Repeat using the other 3 inch-by-24 inch piece on the opposite zipper tape.

Place the right side of a 3 inch-by-24 inch lining piece on the zipper, sandwiching the zipper between the fabrics. Sew the lining to the fabric with a 1/4-inch seam allowance. Repeat for the other 3 inch-by-24 inch lining piece on the second side of the zipper.

Sew a seam finish to the sewn edges. Then, press the zipper tape flat, pressing both layers of fabric away from the zipper.

Topstitch the pressed edge to hold the fabric in place away from the zipper. And baste the edges of the fabric and lining together.

## **2. Join the Side and Bottom Pieces**

Take the two 6 inch-by-32 1/2 inch pieces, and place the wrong sides together, matching one set of the 6-inch ends. Sew this 6-inch end using a 1/2-inch seam allowance, and apply a [seam finish](#).

Press the seam to one side. Then, topstitch the seam to the body of the fabric.

## **3. Attach the Sides/Bottom to the Front and Back**

Placing the right sides together, match the seam you just made on the sides/bottom piece to the center of the bottom of one 21 inch-by-24 inch piece. Pin the bottom in place.

Clip the sides/bottom piece at the corners, and align the edges to the top edge of the 21 inch-by-24 inch piece. Pin in place.

Sew the sides/bottom piece to the 21 inch-by-24 inch piece using a 1/2-inch seam allowance. Apply a seam finish.

Repeat for the other 21 inch-by-24 inch piece to attach both the front and back of the bag.

#### **4. Cut the Tote Bag Top**

Pin the top of the bag together. Measure and mark 3 inches from the top of the bag. Cut the top of the bag at the 3-inch mark.

#### **5. Prepare the Bag Top**

Match the seams of the top piece that you cut off with the corners of the zipper section. Sew them together using a 1/2-inch seam allowance. Clip at the corners where necessary to turn the corners. Apply a seam finish.

#### **6. Assemble the Bag Lining**

Assemble the bag lining the same way you assembled the main fabric.

Then, place the lining in the body of the bag with the wrong sides of the fabrics together. Match the seams, and baste the top edges together.

#### **7. Attach the Straps**

On the front and back of the bag, measure in 5 inches from the side seams. Pin the straps at the 5-inch mark. Then, sew the straps to the body of the bag inside of the 1/2-inch seam allowance.

#### **8. Reattach the Top Section**

Open the zipper on the zipper section. Place the bag through the zipper, keeping the right sides of the fabric together.

Align the seams, and reattach the fabric that was cut off the top that now has the zipper attached.

## 9. Topstitch the Top

Turn the top right side out, folding the top of the bag into the bag on the seam line. Press so the seam line is the top edge of the bag. Then, topstitch the top of the bag 1/2 inch from the folded seam line.

# How to Choose a Sewing Seam Finish

Written by  
Debbie Colgrove  
Updated 10/20/19



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Debbie Colgrove

The purpose of a seam finish is to [prevent fraying](#) and maintain the stability of the seam through numerous wearings and washings. Typically, you complete a seam finish after the seam is sewn, but you should choose the type of seam finish you will use before you sew the seam so that you can plan for the appropriate seam allowance. The type of seam finish you choose will depend on the fabric, the strength and type of seam, and the visual effect desired.

## Types of Seam Finishes

Seam finishes can range from no-sew options to more elaborate techniques, but even the simplest finishes can effectively control fraying.

- **Pinked seam finish:** This is a no-sew seam finish created by simply cutting the fabric with special scissors called [pinking shears](#).

- **Clean finish:** This is a simple straight stitch. It can be combined with a pinked finish (cutting the raw edge with pinking shears) for additional resistance to fraying.
- **Zigzag seam finish:** This alternative to a straight stitch finish is made with a zigzag function on a [sewing machine](#).
- **Flat felled seam:** This is a double line of stitching that encloses the seam allowance into the seam so the allowance is not visible. It can be made with a sewing machine in one step (if the machine has this capability) or with a standard straight stitch machine.
- **French seam:** This produces a clean finish that hides the raw edge. It is popular for lightweight and sheer fabrics.

## Fabric Type

A fabric prone to fraying, such as a loosely woven fabric, will require more sewing in the seam finish than a tightly woven fabric that does not fray. Conversely, some fabrics, such as polar fleece, do not require a seam finish at all. However, in a garment, you may want to add a seam finish to “tame” the bulk of the seam. These basic finishes are suitable for most fabric types and where the seam will not be visible in the finished product:

- Pinked seam finish
- Clean finish
- [Zigzag seam finish](#)

## Strength and Type of Seam

In most cases, a crotch seam on a pair of pants will take more abuse than a side seam on the same pair of pants. It is advantageous to secure the crotch seam with a seam finish that will strengthen the seam as well as prevent fraying.

A second row of stitching, as in a clean finish and a zigzag seam finish, will strengthen the crotch seam and prevent embarrassing moments:

- Clean finish
- Zigzag seam finish
- Flat felled seam

## Visual Appeal

Although seam finishes are inside the garment, there are situations where the seam finish will be seen. One example is an unlined jacket that is worn open in the front so that the inside of the jacket may be visible. A seam finish on such

a garment should appear finished and have visual appeal more than the seams in a lined jacket:

- Clean finish
- French seam
- Flat felled seam

## Sewing Machine Limitations

Some sewing machines are not capable of sewing a zigzag stitch, but you can substitute with any seam finish that uses straight stitching:

- Clean finish
- French seam
- Flat felled seam

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## Using a Zigzag Seam Finish

Written by  
Debbie Colgrove

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A zigzag seam finish is simply zigzag stitching applied to the raw edge of a seam allowance on a seam that you sew. A sewn seam is not complete until you apply a seam finish to prevent the seam from becoming weak due to the [fabric fraying](#). A zigzag seam finish can be used on almost any seam to enclose the raw edge and prevent fraying if you have the option of sewing a zigzag stitch with your [sewing machine](#).

## How to Use the Zigzag Seam

Vary the [stitch width](#) and stitch length to prevent extra bulk that may prevent the seam from laying neatly or may cause extra bulk that would show through to the correct side of the seam when it is pressed. The goal of the zigzag stitching is to enclose the threads of the fabric and prevent those threads from fraying away from the fabric. Adjusting the stitch width and stitch length allows you to control how much of the threads are enclosed and how much bulk the zigzag seam finish is creating.

The larger the threads or fibers are that make up the fabric, the larger you will want your stitch length and stitch width. For example, think of the heavy fibers that make up burlap or canvas fabric, in comparison to a quilting cotton fabric. In order to enclose a good amount of the fibers that make up the burlap fabric, you will need a wide and long stitch; however, very fine cotton would require a thinner and shorter stitches in order to encapsulate the threads making up the fine cotton fiber.

Your seam finish should not be any more visible than the actual seam, from the outside of the garment. Always choose the type of seam finish you will use for the type of fabric and the visibility of the seam through the fabric. Very sheer fabric may be better sewing with a [French seam](#), and when a very strong seam is desirable on heavy fabric, a [flat felled seam](#) may be the best choice.

## Step by Step

- [Sew the seam](#), using the seam allowance that is called for in your pattern directions.
- Press as directed.
- Set your sewing machine to a zigzag stitch and test the stitch on a scrap of fabric, sewing the edge of the scrap just as you will on the seam allowance.
- Sew the stitch so that the right side of the stitch goes "just" off the edge of the fabric, enclosing the threads of the fabric. [Set a seam guide](#) to watch so that you can sew straight. If you are watching the sewing machine needle, it is almost impossible to sew straight, especially when you are sewing a zigzag stitch with the needle moving right and left while creating the zigzag stitch.
- If the seam is pressed to one side, treat the seam allowance as one piece. If the seam allowance is pressed open, treat each part of the seam allowance separately.
- Press the seam again once you have finished sewing the seam finish.