

Embroidery—The Basics of Getting Started

Fabrics

Really, any fabric or material can be embroidered. To get started and for practice, though, it is best to stick with cotton and linen (something with a loose weave—which will help with seeing stitches and make embroidering easier in general). A great option for practice is a fat quarter which is sold at craft supply stores.

Before embroidering, you will want to wash fabric (like you would before sewing). There are usually care instructions when buying fabric—so it is best to follow those. In general, it is best if you soak the fabric in warm water for a few hours to overnight. However, you can also wash it in the rise, spin cycle on your washer. Then it is best to line dry or lay flat to dry (even if it is dryer safe—it helps with the weave of the material). You will also want to lightly iron the material (following care instructions) to get the worst of the wrinkles out.

You will want your fabric to be several inches bigger than your project—it is easier to trim excess than have a project be too small to be properly finished.

Hoops

Cheap wood hoops will do for embroidering, but they are best for hanging finished projects. There are several other kinds of hoops (even 3D printed ones that are on sale on Etsy), but the next most readily available are plastic hoops. Plastic hoops are more secure and won't splinter in the work or your fingers.

The size of the hoop (by the diameter) that you want depends on ease of use and the size of your hands. 6"-8" hoops are the most popular, but look at larger or smaller sizes to find what works for you. Bigger and smaller hoops will help with larger or smaller projects, but it is more about ease for you and your project.

You might also want to take ribbon or scrap fabric and wrap it around the inner hoop; it will help with creasing the fabric and your stitches if you need to hoop over your stitches on a big project—and is recommended for wood hoops to keep the fabric in place.

Needles

Basically, you want a sharp needle that you can thread.

In the embroidery section of most craft stores is a selection of different needles. The ones labeled “Embroidery,” “Crewel,” and “Chenille” would be the ones to look at (to name a few for beginners). Embroidery and needlecraft needles also vary in sizes with the smallest number having the biggest eye and the larger numbers having smaller eyes—in general. Needles labeled “Tapestry” are blunt for example, and won’t help you for most projects. A lot of it is just finding out what works for you and your project.

You want needles with eyes big enough to thread, but also keep in mind that the needle makes a hole in your fabric, so the bigger the needle, the bigger the hole. And sometimes you are using finer threads or working on detailed projects where a smaller needle with a smaller eye is necessary.

If you are a beginner, try embroidery needles sized 1-5 (or chenille needles for an even wider eye). If you have trouble threading your needle there are several needle threaders for sale. There are several different types of threaders—you won’t want the small wired one since it only works for one or two strands of floss.

Embroidery Floss/Thread

There are several different kinds of embroidery floss in a rainbow of colors and several different brands. Floss can be made from several types of material, but you will mostly find cotton and it is the best kind to start out with. Simple cotton thread is sold at most craft supply stores in skeins. Most floss has six smaller threads wound together.

The main brand of embroidery floss is DMC which is sold at most craft supply stores and online. There are lower quality brands (which are great for practice) for sale too; as well as finer brands. DMC is such a big brand that other brands will have a conversion chart for the different colors.

When cutting off your floss to thread, pull the loose thread from the bottom of the skein; the bottom of the skein having the number for the color. Hold that end in your fingers and pull the skein along your arm from your hand to your shoulder. Cut from there (this would be approximately 2’ depending on your height). This method is a great way to measure out your thread. You don’t want longer thread, because that leads to a greater risk of knots, errors, and bunching.

One thing you can also do is separate your threads for more delicate work. Start from the middle of the cut floss. Separate out how many threads you want to work with. Gently pull apart from the middle of the cut thread—not the ends of the floss.

There are also floss/thread conditioners sold online and at craft stores. This can help with embroidering some thread types.

Marking Fabric

To mark your fabric, for example lines and circles for you to practice embroidery, you will want at least a water-soluble marker—sold at craft stores. They are usually blue and wash off with water (although best to test on a corner of the fabric before you mark it all up). There are also air soluble markers. Both types of markers work best for light fabric and air soluble is great for quick projects. There are other markers that work for medium and dark fabrics (it will say on the package and are usually white or yellow in color). Take a look at markers aimed for sewing and quilting—they might be what you need.

A pencil will do the trick as well though you would need to erase the markings.

Scissors

There are embroidery scissors sold at craft supply stores (in the embroidery section and the scissors section), but small, pointed, and sharp scissors will work. You might also want some fabric scissors (scissors whose only job is to cut fabric) nearby to trim fabric as needed.

Patterns/Designs

The terms “pattern” and “design” are different, but are frequently interchangeable when it comes to embroidery. Mostly, designs are frequently an image or a letter that you can put on your fabric to embroider. Some are sold and some are free on various craft websites (check the validity of websites to make sure you are not infringing on copyright). You can also make your own or use images that are in the public domain. Patterns will generally include designs and will tell you which stitches and what DMC colored floss to use.

There are multiple ways to put a pattern or design on to the fabric—aside from the methods mentioned earlier. There is tracing carbon paper that sewers use (you place the carbon paper on top of the fabric then the design on top and trace the design with a blunt point). There are also

iron on-designs that can be purchased or made (those designs are permanent on fabric). You could also use embroidery stabilizer (sold at craft stores) or tissue paper and trace the image onto the stabilizer then baste stitch the stabilizer or tissue paper onto the fabric (a great method for darker or thicker materials). Side note—embroidery stabilizer “stabilizes” your project and keeps your stitches from getting moved around or warped (it is ideal to use when embroidering on knit fabric).

Set-up

Place the inner hoop down. Place your fabric face up over the hoop. Then, place the larger part of the hoop (with the screw) on top of the fabric and inner hoop. Secure the fabric by screwing the outer hoop tightly. You will want to go along the circle, gently tugging the fabric to keep the fabric evenly taught. You should be able to make a faint drum sound on your fabric. You can keep the excess fabric out of the way with safety pins or clips to keep you from accidentally stitching the excess—which is a several minute diversion to fix. When working on a project, take a moment periodically and re-stretch around the hoop as needed (but be careful about keeping the weave even).

If you aren't going to be embroidering for several hours, it is best to take the fabric out of the hoop for the night to keep the hoop creases from becoming permanent and messing with the weave of your fabric.

Stitches

There are dozens of stitches from all over the world. Many are based off of more simple stitches, so learn the basic stitches and you can build off of those to create more complicated designs. No stitches or steps are included in this packet. There are several resources attached that explain and demonstrate stitches.

Other Notes

There are a few other things that crop up with embroidery that are worth mentioning. There are two “methods” to embroidering, the stab method and the sewing method. Some stitches work best with one or the other and some work with either. The stab method relates to stabbing the fabric and pulling the floss all the way through before the next stitch. Basically, one stitch at a

time. The sewing method is a smoother process and instead of pushing your needle all the way down, situate the needle to where you need to stitch next.

There is also a debate on knotting or finishing your floss line with a tail. Do what works for you. Knotting will do the trick, but if you are worried about it showing through, which it can do, or coming undone, you will want to try the tail method. It is up to you.

Also, people who are left-handed will essentially reverse the steps to suit them.

Finishing a Project

Wash by hand (or the gentle cycle on your washing machine) to clean up the fabric and remove marks or stains—pending fabric instructions. Line dry, ideally—to help preserve the stitches and weave.

To iron, lay the fabric finished side down on the ironing board. Stick to the middle heat on your iron (and pay attention to the fabric care instructions). You will either want your fabric to still be a little damp or you can spritz it with water to help generate steam to iron it (this is also dependent on your iron settings). Iron around your fabric and the stitches. You don't want to iron over the stitches because that can mess with your final design (especially if your stitches are more 3-dimensional). You can place a spare scrap of fabric or a pressing cloth over your stitches and just place the iron over your stitches for a second and move around your design, lifting and pressing, not moving around on the fabric.

There several different ways to frame your work, if you so choose. You can secure it to stretched canvas, re-hoop, or make something with the finished fabric, such as a pillow or patch.

Hooping a Finished Project

Re-hoop your project for how you will want it to look like. Flip it over so the completed side is face down. Trim excess fabric but leave a few inches around the circle and fold the fabric inward. Pleat and pin the fabric. Do a running stitch around the circle of fabric, making sure to catch the pleats. Optional, but afterwards you can cut a circle of felt and glue it to the hoop edge to cover the stitching and the pleats—so they aren't so vulnerable. There are also small stands where you can place the hoop in (and hide the screw) for sale at craft supply stores. You can even glue ribbon or paint along the outside of the hoop.

Related Information

Attached are reference materials and related titles. Some of these will contain stitch names and how-to steps (there are even videos online that can give you a visual demonstration on how to embroider a stitch). All books are in Fort Bend County library system and can be placed on hold. There are also YouTube video channels listed that teach embroidery or give a visual demonstration on a project and there are also several websites and blogs that discuss embroidering and offer other tips and tricks that you could look at.

Related Titles—Stitches

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- Dixon, Louise. *Firefly's Step-By-Step Encyclopedia of Needlecraft: Patchwork, Embroidery, Quilting, Sewing, Knitting, Crochet, Applique: Plus Dozens of Projects With How-to Instructions*. Firefly Books Ltd., 2011.
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- Gerlings, Charlotte, and David Woodroffe. *Embroidery: a Beginner's Step-by-Step Guide to Stitches and Techniques*. Design Originals, an Imprint of Fox Chapel Publishing, 2013.
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- Trott, Pat. *Three-Dimensional Embroidery Stitches*. Search Press, 2011.
- Wyszynski, Linda. *The Complete Photo Guide to Needlework*. Creative Pub. International, 2012.

Related Titles—Project Ideas

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- Bayard Marie-Noëlle, and Charlie Abad. *Embroidery: Techniques & Patterns.* Sterling, 2007.
- Crow, Eleanor, and Faye Robson. *Embroidery: a Maker's Guide.* Thames & Hudson, 2017.
- Cusick, Dawn, and Megan Kirby. *The Michaels Book of Needlecrafts: Knitting, Crochet & Embroidery.* Lark Books, 2005.
- Czepuryk, Kristyne. *S Is for Stitch: 52 Embroidered Alphabet Designs + Charming Projects for Little Ones.* Stash, 2013.
- Envoldsen-Harris, Carina. *Mandalas to Embroider: Kaleidoscope Stitching in a Hoop.* Search Press Ltd, 2018.
- Gula, Kristen, et al. *200 Embroidered Flowers: Hand Embroidery Stitches and Projects for Flowers, Leaves and Foliage.* Sewandso, 2018.
- Hart, Jenny. *Embroidered Effects: Projects and Patterns to Inspire Your Stitching.* Chronicle Books, 2009.
- Higuchi, Yumiko. *Simply Stitched with appliqué: Embroidery Motifs and Projects with Linen, Cotton, and Felt.* Zakka Workshop, 2017.
- Hoey, Aneela. *Little Stitches: 100+ Sweet Embroidery Designs - 12 Projects.* C & T Publishing, 2012.
- Hoey, Aneela. *Stitch & Sew: Beautifully Embroider 31 Projects.* Stash Books, 2018.
- Lyne, Sonia. *Mini Hoop Embroideries: over 60 Little Masterpieces to Stitch and Wear.* Search Press, 2019.
- Nicholson, Nancy. *Modern Folk Embroidery.* David & Charles, 2016.
- Pendray, Shay. *Shay Pendray's Needlecraft Projects.* Sterling Pub. Co., 1996.
- Ray, Aimee. *Patchwork Embroidery.* Lark Books, U.s., 2016.
- Vogelsinger, Nichole. *Boho Embroidery: Modern Projects from Traditional Stitches.* Lucky Spool Media, LLC, 2016.

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- DMC. “DMC.” *You Tube*, YouTube, 2011, www.youtube.com/user/DMCThreads/videos.
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Online Resources—Websites and Blogs

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