

A Quick & Dirty Guide to Happy Handsewing

I assume you already know what fabric and pattern you're using. Once you have that figured out, happy hand sewing boils down to thread and needle choice. I'm going to break it down for you using the three mainstay fabrics of SCA garb: wool, linen, and silk. If you're using something else, like cotton or upholstery fabric, take your cues from what I'm saying here and you'll probably be all right (though if you're using upholstery fabric, you're likely better off with a sewing machine, unless you have really strong fingers and younger joints than mine).

Fabric	Wool	Linen	Silk
Needle	Fine embroidery needle with a long eye. Chenille needles are probably too big.	Sharps (or fine embroidery needles if you want the larger eye for ease of threading). Betweens will work, but I find them short enough to hurt my fingers.	Very fine sharps, something that will glide between the threads rather than punching through. Replace often; a dull needle or one with a burr will damage your fabric.
Thread	Wool, wool/acrylic blend, or commercial polyester. I prefer wool or a wool blend; they look better and play nicely with the fabric. Don't use silk, it will slice through the fabric	Linen or commercial polyester. Linen thread is not easy to sew with; the slubs can get caught in your needle or pulling through the fabric. Keep it damp if you can; I find it helps with pliability.	Silk or silk-weight commercial thread. Make sure that the needle is not so big that it punches holes that your thread cannot fill.

Bullet Points

- The pointy end goes in the other thing, not your tender flesh.
- Spit takes blood out of fabric.
- A single strand of thread is usually enough.
- I double up wool thread because one strand tends to wear poorly.
- I double everything else because I'm lazy and don't want to rethread the needle when the loose end inevitably comes out of the eye.
- Condition the thread to prevent static and (hopefully) prevent tangles. Beeswax is period. Thread Magic doesn't get sticky in your sewing kit when it gets hot, but it doesn't smell as nice.
- I don't condition wool thread and have never had an issue.
- There are several ways to knot the free end of your thread: make a loop at the free end and pull the working end through, wrap it around your finger and roll it off (I've never gotten this right), or the

quilter's knot method. Pick one. They all do the same thing. If a long tail remains after you make your knot, trim it down so the tails don't get caught in your first few stitches.

- You don't have to make a knot. But given that couture seamstresses make knots, I don't feel bad about doing it.

Choosing a needle

Needle choice makes a big difference in enjoying what you do. I use two types of needles: sharps and embroidery needles. I do have some "straw" or milliner's needles, but the ones I have are a bit more flexible than I prefer.

Sharps are what the name states: sharp. They have a round eye and come in sizes 1 to 12 and 16, 17, and 18. (The smaller the number, the longer and heavier the needle. Sizes 16-18 are called "carpet sharps" and are the longest and heaviest.) I prefer a size 6 or 7 needle for most jobs where I'm using regular commercial thread.

For wool or linen threads, I like to use embroidery needles, usually a size 7 or 8. They have a longer eye than sharps, making it easier to accommodate thicker threads.

No matter what size you choose, there are two things to consider: your comfort, and the suitability of the needle for the thread and the fabric. You don't want to use a thick thread or a thick needle on a fine silk; they'll punch through the fibers and leave big holes. You can test on a scrap of the fabric you're using for the project to see what works for you and for the fabric.

Puncture the Fabric, Not Yourself

I find it important to make sure that the needle I use isn't so short that the end digs into my finger, nor so long that it's length makes it hard to tie off the end when I need to change needles.

Another finger-saver is a good thimble. I use a plastic thimble with deep indentations on the face to catch the end of the needle, and I wear it on the third finger of my left hand, as I am left-handed. Most people wear their thimbles on the middle finger, but experience will tell you what works for you. I like the one I use because it stays in place easily; I always found that a metal thimble would fall off, especially if my nails got a little long. You can find the one that works best for you with a little trial and error. All I have left to say is that I sewed for years without one and thought nothing of it, till I started hand-sewing my garb. Then I got the right thimble for the way I work (a Dritz Soft Comfort Thimble, in case you're curious), and it got much, much more comfortable to sew.

Threading a needle

You can use a needle threader if you need to; no shame in that. They just irritate me, so I take my glasses off if necessary to see what I'm doing. Some people lick the thread, some people lick the eye of the needle. I generally don't need to do either, and if my thread gets so frayed that I need to lick it to make it coherent enough to get through the eye of the needle, I trim it.

One super important tip I can give you is about threading the needle with a fuzzy yarn, like wool.

Licking it doesn't help. All you get is sad, soggy fuzz.

Fold the yarn over the needle and pinch the loop tight against the needle with your thumbnail. Pull the needle out, still pinching the yarn, and then insert the loop into the eye of the needle. This prevents you from going mad trying to poke fuzz through the eye of a needle and actually gets the needle threaded.

How Much Thread?

The length of thread that you should use varies. Don't use more than you can comfortably handle, which you'll figure out with experience. Also be aware of how your thread wears in the needle; if you find the unused thread is getting worn and ragged from being pulled through the fabric as you sew, use shorter pieces so you don't end up sewing with thread that won't hold.

Making a knot

My favorite method is the quilter's knot (also known as a tailor's knot; it depends on who you ask). Hold the threaded needle with the point facing away from your hand. Place the end of the thread between the needle and your forefinger, with the cut end of the thread away from you. Wrap the thread around the tip of the needle and slide it down to where the thread is trapped between the needle and your finger, gently pulling out any slack. Pinch this coil of thread between your thumb and forefinger and pull the needle out, drawing the thread through the coil to create a knot at the end.

A tutorial with pictures can be found here: <https://www.craftsy.com/blog/2015/10/how-to-make-a-quilters-knot/>

Famous Last Words

So now you're about ready to sew. The last word of wisdom I will impart is something that I learned from my Laurel, Duchess Anna Tarragon. When you prep and thread a needle for sewing and you're going to do a lot of it, prep and thread several needles. That way, when you get on a roll, you don't have to stop your flow to thread another needle; you can just grab another and keep going. By the time you've used up, say, five needles, you should get up and stretch anyway.

I hope this helps. Enjoy your sewing!

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Sources

Linen thread: I use 60/2 linen thread sold for lacemaking, sold by Vävstuga, in Shelburne Falls, MA.

- Dyed: <http://store.vavstuga.com/product/yarn-bock-lin-lace-60-2-dyed.html>
- Bleached: <http://store.vavstuga.com/product/yarn-bock-lin-lace-60-2-blch.html>

Wool thread: I prefer Genziana, which is currently only available in Canada.

- <http://www.tristan.bc.ca/cart/product.php?productid=16430&cat=49&page=1>
- http://store.hamelsfabrics.com/stores_app/Browse_dept_items.asp?Shopper_id=9867810647269867&Store_id=360&Page_id=17&categ_id=10806&parent_ids=0%2C6%2C115&name=

Silk thread: I usually use Gutermann silk, which is available all over the place. I get mine at Joann Fabrics.

Linen Fabric:

- Fabrics Store: <https://fabrics-store.com/> They put different colors and weights on sale every day.
- Gray Lines Linen: <http://www.graylinelinen.com/> I'm told that their Judy linen is comparable to the medium-weight linen from Fabrics Store.

Wool Fabric:

- Osgood Textiles, 333 Park St, West Springfield MA: <http://www.osgoodtextile.com/> Closed Saturdays
- eBay: do a search for wool fabric; you can get some amazing deals if you know what you need
- Fabric Mart Fabrics: It can be a little hit or miss, but if you get their emails and work the sales, you can score some great fabric. <https://www.fabricmartfabrics.com/home.php>

Period Appropriate Fabric (fancy weaves you just don't see that often domestically)

- <https://www.wooltrade.cz/en/home/> -- I'm told it can be a bit scratchy
- <https://www.etsy.com/shop/Nornilla> -- TO. DIE. FOR. GORGEOUS. Wool and silk.
- <https://www.handelsgillet.com/?v=7516fd43adaa> -- some amazing wools
- <http://www.sartor.cz/> -- truly incredible historical silk brocade patterns
- <http://patterns.sartor.cz/custom-patterns/> -- custom historical patterns in limited runs