



sewing



Modern sewing machines in a group session.

what is it?

It's binding textiles and fabrics together with a needle and thread - either by hand or with a sewing machine. There are several kinds of basic stitches - some are practical for attaching material, and some are for decorative embroidery. Practical stitches include:

- running stitch: the most basic 'in and out' stitch
- backstitch: for attaching things strongly
- tacking stitch: used for holding material in place when preparing to attach
- slip stitch or invisible stitch: for doing hems or attaching a lining to a coat etc.
- overstitch or overcast: used together with running stitch to stop the edges of scrap fabrics from fraying when doing patchwork or quilting

Cross-stitches and others are used for more decorative work such as embroidery and tapestries, including words and pictures.

Machine sewing is faster and stronger than hand sewing. A sewing machine has a bobbin which creates an underthread and a top spool of cotton which creates a top row of stitches, and the two interlock to provide a strong join. Modern machines can do decorative stitches too.

The origins of sewing are lost in prehistory, but it is one of humanity's oldest skills, predating textiles. Stone-age people sewed together animals skins using bone needles and threads made from animal sinew or gut.

what are the benefits?

Sewing is a very useful skill that allows you to make, repair and revamp clothes and household items, saving money and reducing waste and consumerism. It also allows you to produce garments that are individual, personal and unique. A few generations ago, most people would have known how to sew. Clothes were well-made,

repaired, and could last a lifetime. Perhaps that's why there is such interest in vintage clothing - it's usually high-quality and has stood the test of time. The fashion industry has created more seasons to persuade people to give them money more often, and throw out perfectly good clothes because they're not trendy. There's a movement of conscious young people who want to look good, but who don't buy into the corporate idea of what fashion is. They'd rather make something unique, timeless and durable than dress like a clone in expensive but poor-quality brands.

Sewing can improve well-being. To work at a process from start to finish, and produce something functional for everyday use can be very therapeutic. There's also the social aspect - sewing in groups or with friends and family can bring together people of different ages, and from all walks of life; and shared activities like sewing can help people relax and open up.

There is a movement called craftivism, combining crafts (mainly sewing and knitting) and activism to promote change. E.g. the Craftivist Collective combines a growing project making jams with sewing - cross-stitching a message on the lid covers, supporting Oxfam or Fair Trade campaigns. Sewing by hand uses no electricity - but you can also use a treadle or hand-winding sewing machine. Plus - it's fun.

what can I do?

First you have to get some practical experience - ask family members to show you, attend a course and/or join a local group - try community centres, WI (although don't be intimidated if you're a man; this is the 21st century - women can build houses,



You can sew together patches of scrap material to make an incredible quilt like this.



men can sew), google your town plus sewing groups or craft clubs. You can get needles and cotton from your local sewing supplies / fabric shop, and you can ask if they have classes. Ask family members if they have stashes of fabric or old dresses etc. for you to work on. The older generation can be a mine of useful information, and they might be very happy to pass on skills.

When it comes to getting a sewing machine, you really have to use it first to see if it suits you. So either find someone to let you have a go on theirs, or attend a course where you can try different machines. If you're buying a new one, check that it's sturdy - it should be an investment for life. A 'bargain' machine may be broken in a year's time. It's best to invest in something that's going to last. Different machines can do a range of different stitches. Work out the kinds of things you want to do, and make sure the machine you choose can do them. Older, mechanical machines have a dial for different stitch settings, and more modern, computerised machines have digital controls, and they often seem smoother and stronger.

You can often find old treadle machines on eBay, at car boot sales, in attics or charity shops. They can be quite cheap, so you can have a go and see if they work for you. A second-hand machine often won't come with an instruction manual, so you need to have a bit more confidence that you will know how to thread and use it. Older machines will appeal to people who like to tinker - but try and use it first, to see if there's anything wrong; but even then, it's probably repairable - google your local sewing machine repair specialists, or ask in a fabrics shop. You may be able to share a friend's machine, in which case you won't need to buy one at all. Or of course you could just sew by hand - but it will be much slower. You can certainly hand-darn holes in socks or jumpers - darning is basically sewing with wool - weaving together threads to fill the hole.

When you're ready to start making things, don't be frightened - just have a go. You can start with 'revamping', which is becoming very popular, and you'll learn very quickly. You don't need all the latest equipment, but apart from a sewing machine, what you probably do need are:

- good, strong pair of scissors
- tailor's chalk (can mark fabric and it rubs off without staining)
- tape measure

- good quality thread that doesn't snap easily when you pull it
- some general purpose needles & pins
- cross-stitch needles if you're doing embroidery, which tend to have a bigger eye and a more rounded end
- darning needles with large eyes for wool
- thimble (maybe)

You can often find boxes at boot sales full of this kind of stuff, very cheaply.

Visit the Knitting and Stitching Show in Harrogate, London or Dublin. It's a big melting pot for the sewing and textiles community, with workshops, information and inspiration.

Most importantly, let's not let the big clothing brands tell us what's important. We can invent and revamp and decide what we want ourselves - like the dress on the right (photo: DIY Couture). It's difficult to break free though, and most of us listen to the fashion industry to some extent. They spend a lot of advertising money trying to get people to sneer at the hand-made and telling us what's cool. Let's try and make branded gear uncool. So don't forget to show people what you've made or revamped - let's spread the word.



resources

- lowimpact.org/sewing - information, courses, advice and books, including:
- Kate Haxell, *Me and my Sewing Machine*
- Wendy Gardiner, *the Encyclopedia of Sewing Techniques*
- Alison Smith, *the Complete Book of Sewing*
- diy-couture.co.uk - DIY Couture, visual instructions for making your own clothes
- craftivist-collective.com - Craftivist Collective, 'exposing global poverty and human rights abuses through the power of crafts & public art'
- twistedthread.com - the Knitting and Stitching show, in London, Dublin & Harrogate
- fabrications1.co.uk - Fabrications: gallery, shop, workshops in East London

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