



in praise of seams

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Seamless sweaters are everywhere, or at least that's how it seems to me. More and more, the patterns I find myself perusing—whether for work or pleasure—share a common element: they're constructed without seams. Top-down, bottom-up, raglans, round yokes, and set-in shoulders—all of these styles can be made without seams. But the simple fact that you can do something, doesn't always mean it should be done. Don't get me wrong. I like a seamless garment as much as the next knitter. The ability to fashion a three-dimensional object from one continuous strand of yarn is one of knitting's many magical qualities. We all know that pinning pieces together and sewing seams can be tedious and time consuming. There's certainly something to be said for casting off your last stitch to reveal a final, finished garment, but skipping seams isn't the best approach for every design. Here's why:

SEAMS SUPPLY STABILITY

There's more to seaming than simply holding sides and sleeves together. Seams help a garment hold its shape through washing and wearing and give it structure while on the body.

Some years back, I knit a top using a hand-dyed nylon ribbon yarn. Soft and slinky, the sweater was constructed of mitered squares and was absolutely gorgeous. Two days after finishing it, I wore it to a Ricky Martin concert (don't judge—it was 1999 and he was hot). By the end of the evening, my sexy little top was nearly long enough to be a dress and the deep V-neck was falling off my shoulders, exposing my not-meant-to-be-seen lingerie. Slippery yarn, seamless construction, and gravity had

all conspired to create a garment completely lacking in dimensional stability. In short, it was unwearable.

The lesson learned? Knitted fabric is inherently fluid and your choice of yarn can amplify this quality. Fibers that lack natural elasticity—cotton, linen, silk, and bamboo, for example—can cause a finished sweater to stretch, sag and droop. The more drape your fabric has, the more likely it is to stretch out of shape. Add seams and cast-on and bound-off edges and you'll be better able to hold this fluidity in check. Side seams and sleeve seams provide structure that will keep your sweater from growing ever longer. Shoulder seams and a bound-off back neck will prevent droopy shoulders. You may save time by creating a seamless sweater, but what good is that if it stretches completely out of shape in the first wearing?

SEAMS SIMPLIFY GARMENT CONSTRUCTION

I've encountered many patterns where the planned avoidance of seams results in some pretty convoluted knitting gymnastics. Let's take the example of a fitted cardigan worked in a stitch pattern with a wide repeat. As you knit you'll need to take care to maintain the stitch pattern while working the shaping increases and decreases. If the sweater is made without seams, you'll not only end up working the shaping for the front neck, armhole, and sleeve cap all at once, you'll also have to make sure the stitch pattern stays correct in each of the five garment sections (two fronts, a back and two sleeves). No, thank you. As a general rule, I like instructions that

are clear and straightforward. I don't want to have to create a spreadsheet to keep track of multiple shaping operations.

A fitted waist, fitted shoulders, and set-in sleeves give a garment the sharp, modern silhouette we all love to wear. And this shape is much easier to achieve if sleeves are knit separately and sewn in place. Working a sweater in pieces and then seaming them together allows you to keep the knitting simple.

SEAMS HIGHLIGHT STYLE LINES

Used as a decorative element, seams can be fashionable as well as functional. Exposed seams on a cotton sweater are a great casual look. Just sew the seams inside-out, so the selvages roll to the outside. Accent them even more by overcasting the seam with a contrasting color yarn. Highlighting the shoulder and armhole seams of a sweater

with an applied I-cord, or a crochet chain can mimic piping, adding a fancy dressmaker detail. Think of seaming as another creative element to your work and it will seem like an opportunity for personal expression, not a boring chore.

THE DETAILS

So now that you've considered the good reasons for seaming, which seaming technique should you use? For the most part, it's a matter of personal preference. Back stitch, mattress stitch crocheted slip stitch are just a few of the methods at your disposal. Each has its loyal advocates and passionate critics. The only way to determine which works best for you, not to mention the project at hand, is to try them all.

No matter which seam you choose, it should be nearly invisible and not bulky. I use mattress stitch about 90 percent of the time, but will use

back stitch when I want the seam to be extra strong. For shoulders, I prefer a three-needle bind-off. Kitchener stitch or other grafting techniques have their fans, but to me these don't really qualify as "seams." Ideally, grafting matches the surrounding knitted fabric, and as a result, it does not provide the dimensional stability needed for joining shoulders.

One final word of wisdom: Don't avoid seams because you lack confidence in your skills. Sewing a good seam takes practice and patience, but it isn't particularly difficult. The how-tos for a few of my favorites can be found below. Seaming is a skill every knitter should have handy, ready to use when needed.

The original article [In Praise of Seams](#) by Sandi Rosner was posted in [Twist Collective's Fall 2011 issue](#).



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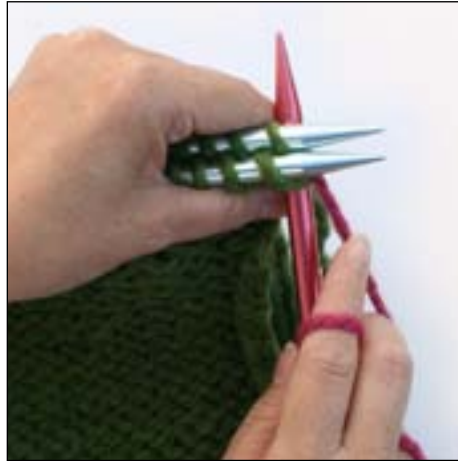
three-needle bind-off

This method is used to join two pieces that have not been bound off.

The pieces to be joined should have the same number of stitches.



Step 1: Start with the pieces on separate needles. Hold the needles in the left hand, with the right sides together. The needles should point to the right.



Step 2: Insert a third needle through the first stitch on the front needle and the first stitch on the back needle. Knit these two stitches together.



Step 3: Insert the needle through the next stitch on each needle and knit these together.



Step 4: Pass the first stitch on the right needle over the second stitch and off the tip of the needle, binding off that stitch.



Repeat Steps 3 and 4 until all stitches are joined, and then fasten off.



shoulder seam graft

As the name implies, this is a good method for shoulder seams and is used to join two pieces that have been bound off. The pieces to be joined should have the same number of stitches.



Step 1: Arrange the pieces flat with the right sides facing up, and butt the bound-off stitches together.



Step 2: Bring a threaded tapestry needle up through the center of the first stitch on the bottom piece.



Step 3: Take the needle across the bound-off edges and bring it down beside the first stitch on the upper piece, then under both legs of that stitch and up the other side.



Step 4: Take the needle across the bound-off edge, bring it down through the center of the first stitch (the same place you came up to start), and up through the center of the next stitch.



Repeat Steps 3 and 4, working across the bound-off edges, until the seam is complete. Adjust the tension of your graft to match that of the surrounding stitches.



mattress stitch

This technique is best used to join two pieces side to side—a side seam or sleeve seam, for example. You'll get the best results if you are consistent in the position of your stitches. I prefer to work between the edge stitch and its adjoining stitch; some knitters prefer to sew in the center of the edge stitch. Either way is fine.



Step 1: Arrange the pieces flat, with the right sides facing up and the edges to be joined next to each other.



Step 2: Bring a threaded tapestry needle up in the first row between the edge stitch and its neighbor.



Step 3: Cross to the opposite piece, and insert the needle in the first row, down between the edge stitch and its neighbor, then come up two rows above.



Step 4: Cross to the other side, go into the same hole you came out of, and come up two rows above.



Repeat Step 4 until the seam is complete. Pull the sewing yarn tight every inch (2.5cm) or so to close up the seam, and then stretch the seam lengthwise to give it a little ease.



mattress stitch on reverse stockinette stitch

This technique is best used to join two pieces side to side—a side seam or sleeve seam, for example. You'll get the best results if you are consistent in the position of your stitches. I prefer to work between the edge stitch and its adjoining stitch; some knitters prefer to sew in the center of the edge stitch. Either way is fine.



Step 1: Arrange the pieces flat, with the right (purl) sides facing up and the edges to be joined next to each other.



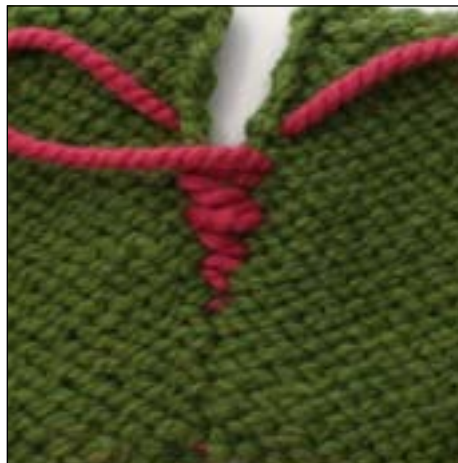
Step 2: Bring a threaded tapestry needle up in the first row between the edge stitch and its neighbor.



Step 3: Cross to the opposite piece, and insert the needle in the first row, down between the edge stitch and its neighbor, then come up two rows above.



Step 4: Cross to the other side, go into the same hole you came out of, and come up two rows above.



Repeat Step 4 until the seam is complete. Pull the sewing yarn tight every inch (2.5cm) or so to close up the seam, and then stretch the seam lengthwise to give it a little ease.



mattress stitch/graft combo

This method is used to join the side of a piece to the bound-off or cast-on edge of another piece such as when sewing a sleeve cap into an armhole.



Step 1: Arrange the pieces flat, with the right sides facing up and the edges to be joined next to one another.



Step 2: Starting with the piece to be joined at the side edge, bring a threaded tapestry needle up in the first row, between the edge stitch and its neighbor.



Step 3: Cross to the opposite piece; bring the needle down beside the first stitch, under both legs of that stitch and up the other side.



Step 4: Cross to the other piece, go into the same hole you came out of, and come up two rows above.



Repeat Steps 3 and 4 until the seam is complete. Take care to compensate for differences between stitch gauge and row gauge; typically, you'll need to join two stitches to every three rows, or three stitches to every four rows to make a smooth seam.



slip-stitch crochet seam

Use this technique for areas where extra strength and stability are desired. For best results, take care to be consistent in the position of your stitches. I prefer to work between the edge stitch and its adjoining stitch.



Step 1: Arrange the pieces one atop the other, usually with the right sides together.



Step 2: Insert a crochet hook through both layers of knitting and pull a loop of yarn through.



Step 3: Insert the crochet hook through both layers of knitting a row or two further along and pull a loop through both the knitting and the loop already on the hook.



Repeat Step 4 until the seam is complete.



inside-out seam

This raised seam creates a decorative accent.



Work the Shoulder Seam Graft, the Mattress Stitch Seam, or the Mattress Stitch/Graft Combo with the wrong sides of the pieces facing you. The edges will roll to the right sides.



For added embellishment, use a contrasting colored yarn to whipstitch along the raised seam on the right side.



To whip stitch:

Step 1: Insert the needle into the bottom stitch of the seam and come up one stitch above on the opposite side and draw the yarn through.



Step 2: Insert the needle one stitch above the first stitch and draw the yarn through.



Repeat in this fashion across the length of the seam.

