**TOTE BAGS: BASICS AND BEYOND**

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**ABOUT ME**

My name rhymes. I’m a retired speech-language pathologist and special educator, originally from New Hampshire and now retired in Belfast with my husband. I come from a long line of thrifty Yankees and love to “use it up, wear it out, make it do, or do without.” I have been sewing for many decades and ran a small business, PinchPenny Threads, with my partner Phoebe Beebe. I started the tote bag project to address the need for reusable bags at food pantries in Waldo County--and to make a dent in my sizable fabric collection.

**FORM AND FUNCTION OF A TOTE BAG**

Think about a bag you reach for most of the time. What do you like about it? Is it comfortable in your hands? Does it have the features, like pockets, that you need? Is it pretty? Washable? Durable? Are the straps just the right length?

Now think about a bag you’ve kicked to the corner. What don’t you like about it? Is it ugly? Ripped? Too small? Too large? Floppy? Cheap-looking? Dirty-looking? Do things get lost at the bottom? Does it leak? Are the straps coming off? Does it have advertising or a logo you don’t like?

Tote bags have:

* front and back
* straps or handles

They may have:

* lining (plain or waterproof)
* pockets
* clips for keys
* closures

**PHOEBE BEEBE’S SEWING SUGGESTIONS**

* Press or iron frequently
* Don’t sew over pins
* Make sure your scissors, shears, rotary blades, pins, and needles are sharp
* Seam allowance: ¼” to ½”
* Snip your thread ends
* Take your time, think things through, measure before you cut
* Work in good lighting
* Once you learn the basics of bag construction, feel free to experiment

**TECHNICAL TERMS**

* Loosey-goosey: loosely woven, wiggly
* Wonky: crooked
* RST: right sides together
* WST: wrong sides together
* WOF: width of fabric (selvage to selvage)
* Selvage: finished edge of woven fabric

**FABRICS**

1. Make sure your fabrics are washable; baggers at the grocery store don’t want to handle dirty bags
2. Wash and dry your fabric before you start. Wash out sizing, dyes, odors. Drying will shrink fabric if it’s going to shrink. Press to make it lie flat.
3. Consider using darker-colored fabrics for the outer bag and lighter-colored fabrics for the lining.

**Fabrics recommended for all sewists**

* Cotton: quilting calico, broadcloth, dropcloth, drapery
* Cotton-polyester blend

**Fabrics recommended for experienced sewists**

* Knitted jersey: stretchy, wonky seams
* Linen: frays, wrinkles, loosey-goosey
* Rayon: loosey-goosey, wonky seams
* Corduroy, velveteen, terrycloth: nap (directional), pile (sheds when cut)
* Plush, fleece, minky: nap (directional), pile (sheds when cut), stretchy, can be wonky
* Wool: shrinks, special care needed
* Denim, canvas, ticking: thick seams, likely to ravel (loose threads) or fray
* Waterproof: special handling needed
* Upholstery: nubby, loosey-goosey, can fray
* Flannel: can be loosey-goosey, can fray
* Burlap: loosey-goosey, sheds horribly when cut, you’ll sneeze
* Shiny polyester (prom dress): very slippery, you’ll swear

**Handles/Straps**

* Material should be sturdy and feel good in your hands
* Sew your own using fabric and interfacing
* Flat webbing: nylon, polypropylene, cotton
* Heavy braid or ribbon
* Rope: can be covered with fabric

**Sources for Fabric and Findings** (zippers, buttons, etc.)

* Your own stash
* Your own closet
* Old textiles
* Friends
* Fabric stores and outlets
* Thrift shops: fabric and clothing
* Yard sales: fabric and clothing
* Quilt shows

**Avoid**

* Threadbare
* Badly ripped or stained
* Smelly/dank

**EQUIPMENT:**

* Sewing equipment: sewing machine OR hand-sewing materials: needle, thread, scissors
* Cutting equipment: rotary cutter, cutting ruler, cutting mat OR yardstick, pencil, shears
* Thread
* Shears
* Scissors
* Pencil or marking pen
* Seam ripper
* Ruler
* Thread: avoid cheap polyester or old spools from thrift shop
* Pins and holder (magnetic or pincushion)
* Iron: steam or spray bottle and pressing cloth
* Chopstick for poking out corners

**OPTIONAL EQUIPMENT:**

* Pinking shears
* Small hammer for pounding thick seams
* Wonder clips or hair clips
* Fusible bonding (ex. Stitch Witchery)
* Sewing machine feet: ¼”, walking, zipper

**SEAM FINISHES**

An unlined bag will have a visible seam inside. It may be OK, or the fabric may ravel and fray. Here are some seam finishes:

* Stitch seam, then stitch again within seam allowance; trim
* Stitch seam, then use pinking shears to trim away seam allowance
* Stitch seam, then zigzag stitch within seam allowance
* Stitch seam, then press under raw edges and topstitch each edge
* Stitch seam, then sew overcast seam on raw edge

**CLOSURES**

* Zippers: not covered here as the construction is somewhat different
* Snaps: sew on, magnetic, 4-part; may be attached with special pliers
* Buttons with elastic or fabric loop
* Velcro

**INTERFACING/BATTING**

* Gives shape to your bag, handles/straps, pockets
* Make sure it’s washable
* Variety of weights, materials, and functions (ex. insulating, like Insul-Brite)
* Sew-in or fusible (ex. Pellon light or medium weight fusible)

1. **T-SHIRT BAG**

A simple bag; it will be stretchy, so don’t use it for heavy watermelons.

Materials: clean t-shirt, cutting equipment, marking pen, dinner plate, pins, iron, sewing equipment

1] Turn t-shirt inside-out and spread it on cutting surface.

2] Place plate as if to make neckline bigger, trace around plate, cut on this line through both front and back of shirt. This makes your top opening.

3] Cut off sleeves just outside the shoulder seam. This makes your handles.

4] Decide how long you want bag to be. Mark and cut off bottom of shirt, leaving ½” seam allowance.

5] Pin bottom edges together and stitch across. Do not stretch or pull fabric. You should be able to use a regular needle with a slightly longer stitch.

6] **Make a box bottom:** At one bottom corner, pull fabric to make a right triangle 2-3” high; press; stitch across base of triangle; press triangle toward bottom seam allowance; tack (with a few stitches) point of triangle to bottom seam allowance.

7] Repeat step 6 with other bottom corner; this will make your bag sturdier.

8] Turn bag right-side-out. Done!

**B. “DAY CAMP” BAG**

A simple bag that a child can sew by hand. Lacks finished look at top of side seams.

Materials: fabric for front, back, and handles; sewing equipment, cutting equipment, thread, scissors, pins, iron

1] Cut two rectangles for front and back, ex. 16” wide x18” tall

2] Cut two rectangles for handles, ex. 5”x20”

3] **Make handles:** press fabric WST in half the long way; open and press each long side WST toward center fold; press fabric RST in half the long way (you will have 4 layers approximately 1+¼” wide); stitch the length of the handle 2 or 3 times; repeat to make second handle

4] Make band at top of bag: WST press down 1+½” from top of 18” piece; press under ¼”

5] Stick ends of handles under this band, approximately 6” apart, being careful not to twist handles; pin or stitch in place

6] Pin across ¼” part you turned under; stitch across; press

7] Pull handle up and out, topstitch to band so it will stay in place

8] Repeat steps 4, 5, 6, and 7 for second 18” piece

9] RST pin front to back around sides and bottom; stitch; press

10] Turn right-side-out; press; topstitch around band, keeping handles up and out of the way

**C. UNLINED BAG**

This is how a basic tote bag is constructed. Learn to make this and you can create almost any kind of bag.

Materials: fabric for body of bag, pocket, and handles; sewing equipment, cutting equipment, thread, scissors, pins, iron, chopstick

1] Cut one rectangle for body of bag (front and back), ex. 32” wide x 18” tall

2] Cut two rectangles for handles, ex. 5”x20”

3] Cut two rectangles for pocket, ex. 8”x8”

4] Make handles: see Day Camp Bag step 3

5] **Make pocket:** place 2 8” squares RST, pin around all 4 sides, stitch around all sides, leaving 3” gap; turn right-side-out through gap, poke corners out with chopstick; press; close gap by hand-stitching, fusing, or topstitching

6] Decide where you want pocket (on front or back of large rectangle); center pocket on front or back with top of pocket pointing towards top of bag; pin in place; topstitch around two sides and bottom of pocket

7] Place RST of 32”x18” to make a rectangle 16”x18”; pin side and bottom seams; stitch; press

8] Make a box bottom: see T-Shirt Bag steps 6 and 7

9] Make band at top of bag: WST press down 1+½” from top; press under ¼”

10] On front of bag: stick ends of one handle under band on front approximately 6” apart, being careful not to twist handle; pin or stitch in place

11] Repeat step 10 for back of bag

12] Pin around part you turned under ¼”; stitch around; press

13] Pull handles up and out, topstitch to band so they will stay in place

14] Turn bag right-side-out; press

15] Pulling handles up and away from bag, topstitch around band

16] **Topstitch sides:** pinch an imaginary line from one bottom corner up to top of band; press; pin; topstitch close to edge (¼”) from bottom to top

17] Repeat step 16 with other three bottom corners; this will give shape to your bag

**D. LINED BAG**

You already know most of the steps for this bag; there is some magic involved in turning the bag right-side-out. Trust and believe!

Materials: fabric for body of bag (outside), lining, pocket, and handles; sewing equipment, cutting equipment, thread, scissors, pins, iron, chopstick

1] Cut one rectangle for body of bag, ex. 32” wide x 18” tall

2] Cut one rectangle for lining, ex. 32” wide x 18” tall

3]] Cut two rectangles for handles, ex. 5”x20”

4] Cut two rectangles for pocket, ex. 8”x8”

4] Make handles: see Day Camp Bag step 3

5] Make pocket: see Unlined Bag step 5

6] Decide where to put pocket, on body of bag or lining; center pocket with its top pointing toward top of bag; pin in place; topstitch around sides and bottom of pocket

7] Place RST of body fabric to make a rectangle 16”x18”; pin side and bottom seams; stitch; press

8] Make a box bottom: see T-Shirt Bag steps 6 and 7

9] Turn body of bag right-side-out; press

10] Pin ends of handle even with top of bag front 6” apart, being careful not to twist handle, let it hang down

11] Repeat step 10 to attach handle to back

12] Stitch all handle ends in place

13] Stitch lining: repeat step 7, leaving a 4” gap at the middle of the bottom seam

14] Create box bottom for lining: repeat step 8

15] With RST, push body of bag down into lining, matching up the 4 bottom corners; push handles down and out of the way between body of bag and lining

16] Rearrange bag and lining if needed so the two top edges line up; match the side seams of bag and lining; pin the two layers together all around the top edges, making a tuck if one piece has a little extra fabric

17] Carefully stitch all around the top edge, backstitching over handle ends; press

18] Turn bag right-side-out, reaching through the gap and pulling the bag and handles all the way out through gap; shake everything out; reach inside and poke out bottom corners; lining will look upside down; trust and believe!

19] Close gap in lining by topstitching, hand-stitching, or fusing

20] Push lining back into bag and match up bottom corners; press

21] Pulling handles up and away from bag, topstitch around band

22] Topstitch sides: see Unlined Bag steps 16 and 17, being careful to catch lining in the fold you’re stitching

**E. WATERPROOF/WATER-RESISTANT BAG**

Follow directions for Lined Bag, using a waterproof or water-resistant fabric for the body of bag or the lining. Waterproof fabrics may contain toxic chemicals, may be eco-friendly, may be food-safe: know what you’re using.

* Usually comes with sewing directions, or ask retailer
* Usually requires a sharp, thin needle (ex. Microtex, size 70/10 or 80/12)
* Usually is sensitive to heat (don’t press it directly)
* Don’t poke holes in it: don’t stitch pocket on it; use pins in seam allowances only; use Wonder Clips, hair clips, low-tack tape when sewing
* Expensive; try different stitching techniques on a scrap before making a whole project; try using a longer stitch
* Vinyl: can be sticky: try using a Teflon or roller presser foot
* PUL: polyurethane laminate fabric: washable, breathable, often used for diaper covers; fairly easy to work with; regular presser foot
* Other choices: ripstop nylon, oilcloth, microfiber, pleather, Gore-Tex

**NOW GO SHOPPING!!**