

Sewing on a Budget

When people find out that I sew many of my own clothes, and clothes for my girls, they usually ask if it really saves you any money. I admit that I did not start sewing to save money. I started sewing our clothes because it was becoming very difficult to find affordable, nice looking, and modest clothing for my daughters and myself. Sometimes I would get lucky at a garage sale, thrift store, or Resale store. Sometimes I would even find something good at a regular clothing store. However, I think the designers of pre-teen girls fashions are completely out of touch with reality. In a day when girls in this age group are commonly seen on milk cartons, in Amber Alerts, and are victims of heinous crimes, why design clothing for this age group that looks like something a High Class hooker might wear? It is absolutely sickening to me to see some of these outfits. Even my girls say, "Why do they make clothes like that? They don't even look nice on me?" Therefore, we do a lot of sewing here.

Sewing your own clothes can be a savings, but it also can cost a lot in the little things. The notions (buttons, zippers, snaps) and trims can add up, and good quality fabric is not always affordable.

Here are my Top Ten Tips to Sewing on A Budget:

10. Sew what you can't find at Garage Sales, Thrift Stores, and Resale Shops
If money is your main concern, you usually can find cheaper items via resale. If you are looking for something specific, if you are an odd size, need a certain color, length, or style, then sewing will usually be the better choice.

9. Buy your trims and notions on sale.

These include buttons and lace, bias tape, snaps, zippers. If you have a selection of patterns you use, keep a card in your purse of how many and what sized buttons you need, what size zippers, how much lace, trim, bias tape, etc. If you catch this stuff on sale, it will add up.

8. Cheap Fabric usually Shrinks and Sometimes it Falls Apart--Only buy what is a good value!

Just because is cheap, doesn't mean it is a good value. A good value will last through many washings in the machine, doesn't need special care, won't shrink, and won't fall apart. It will be easy to work with too!. When you buy fabric, check the weave. If it looks like it is a big weave in the grain of the fabric, it will likely shrink, especially if it is cotton. Check the ends. If it is fraying badly at the cut ends, it will likely do this in your garment. Whenever I purchase cheap fabric, I buy up to 50% more, and I prewash it when I get home. Then I iron it out flat, before cutting out my pattern. There is nothing more annoying than investing some

hours working on an outfit, only to have it shrink the first time you wash it! If a material is going to fall apart, you will see signs of that when you pre-wash it too. You may have lost your investment in the fabric, but at least you didn't waste your time sewing with it too.

7. 100% Polyester Thread Usually Breaks--don't buy it

I have tried to save money by buying cheap thread, and I usually regret it. It is very frustrating to have to stop every few stitches to re-thread your machine when the thread breaks. It is even more frustrating to have to constantly restitch seams in your outfits because the threads break through use. We won't even go there about wearing a pair of coulottes, bending over, and hearing all of the stitches in the back seam pop free! It is worth the extra few cents to purchase some Dual Duty thread.

In fact, if you are sewing something really nice, such as the Renaissance dress I sewed my friend Toni, and are using fine quality material, invest in some nicer thread too. For any nice projects, I always use Güterman thread. It may cost a little bit more, but the quality is wonderful, the color selection is fabulous, and I have yet to fix any broken seams in any project that I used Güterman thread. (no they are not paying me to say this).

6. Don't Be a Fabric Hog

Buy only what you need now, unless you have a very specific project in mind for it, and time to accomplish it. If you buy things because you like it and it is on sale, you will soon need an addition on your house to store all of it. You will also, likely, buy fabric in the wrong quantities if you don't have a specific project in mind. It is better to wait.

5. Keep it Simple

Sew within your skill level. It is also better to keep to simpler projects even if you are a more skilled seamstress. I would never find the time to sew for myself and four daughters (and a son on occasion) if I picked out complex patterns, full of pleats and ruffles and buttons. Except for occasional special occasion outfits, we stick to skirts with elastic band waists, dresses that go right over your head (no buttons and zippers), simple pajamas and nightgowns with elastic bands and no buttons or zippers. I avoid things with too many gathers.

When it comes to hemming garments, I use my rolled hem attachment on my machine and zig zag a simple rolled hem. Yes you can see the stitching on the top, but I either make it an "accent" in the design, or make it blend in. Unless it is a super fancy dress, I don't have time to blind stitch my hems! In fact, even on my nicer outfits, I have just been doing some decoratively top stitched hems, and it works fine. Trust me, no one notices. Your home ec teacher is not grading this, so

you can fudge it.

4. Finish your Seams on Lower Quality Fabric

Finish your seams--especially if you are using cheap fabric that may fray. If you have a serger, serge all of your seams. If you have just a regular zig-zag machine, after you have sewed your seams, go back and zig zag your two seams together. You can then either press them to one side and leave them that way, or decoratively topstitch them flat. After you get good at sewing, you will learn by feeling fabric which material must be finished, and which ones you can just leave your seams as is. I find that serging seams doesn't take too much extra time, but improves the quality of the garment.

3. Store your Stuff Neatly

Have a method to the madness. It is no savings to have a stockpile of notions and fabric if you can't find anything. I usually keep individual long term projects in clear plastic tubs with snap on lids. Uncut Fabric can either be stored in those tubs, or hanging on a pants hanger in a closet. Notions can be stored in small plastic tubs or in empty glass jars with lids. Keep all of your needles together. Get one of those thread organizers! (while you are hanging your thread, toss all of the 100% poly thread!).

2. Improvise When You are Able

Eliminating time consuming, complex techniques or techniques that involve extra materials can save time and money, making you more likely to sew your own clothes and actually enjoy it.

I hate putting in sleeves that involve gathering the tops. It never looks right and takes too much time. So, I do "Tshirt Sleeve Seams" on all of my garments, when I am able. That means, I leave the side seams of the bodice open, then sew the open sleeve, right sides together, to the sleeve opening on the bodice (laying flat). Then, starting at the waistline of the bodice, I sew the side seam up to the cuff of the sleeve in one seam. Yes, your home ec teacher would probably not like that trick either. It makes sleeves a lot easier, especially on children's garments, where the armholes are very narrow!

I also hate gathered waists on dresses. They add 20 pounds and I am pudgy enough without it! :) What I do, is I alter my pattern by laying the bodice front next to the skirt front. I center the skirt. Then I carefully fold down the sides of the skirt on each side, so it tapers at the waist, instead of being straight up and down. I try to make this taper gradual, from the top of the skirt to the calf, so it doesn't look awkward. The fit is much better for my body type.

Then there's zippers and buttons. I am pretty good at button holes and zippers, but they do take time. Children don't usually care for buttons or zippers, or snaps, hooks, or any other closures for that matter. Unless it is an important part of the design, and the garment is form fitting, I just leave them out. Oh my! Can you do that? Sure. Just be sure to alter your pattern to eliminate the allowances for the buttons and zippers, and keep that as one whole piece. I usually avoid outfits with any of those time-consuming details. The exception being Vests for my son, the Sport Coat I made for my son, and the ankle-length Woolen Cape I sewed myself (I found it necessary to have some buttons on my winter coat for obvious reasons).

1. Expensive Gadgets are no Substitute for Lack of Skill

I have a cheap sewing machine. I bought it on Clearance. Before that, I had a cheap Kenmore that was on it's last leg the entire 12 years it served me. As with cooking, gadgets are marketed as a means of improving your end product without you actually learning how to do it properly. Usually the old fashioned way of doing something is no more complex than using a gadget. Sometimes it is far simpler. Focus on improving your skills, not amassing gadgets and expensive machines.

The only exception to this would be in cutting tools. A good pair of scissors (frequently sharpened, either with a personal sharpener, or professionally) are a greater value than cheap ones, and if you quilt, a Rotary cutter, mat, and ruler are a must. The more accurately you cut something out, the more accurately you can sew it. I prefer Fiskars brand scissors and rotary cutters. I have fibromyalgia, and sometimes my hands don't do what I want them to do :-), but the Fiskars spring action scissors don't give me hand cramps when cutting things out. I have a large pair and a smaller pair of embroidery scissors. I also find their rotary cutter works smoother than other brands, and replacement blades are easy to come by.

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