

Hem support

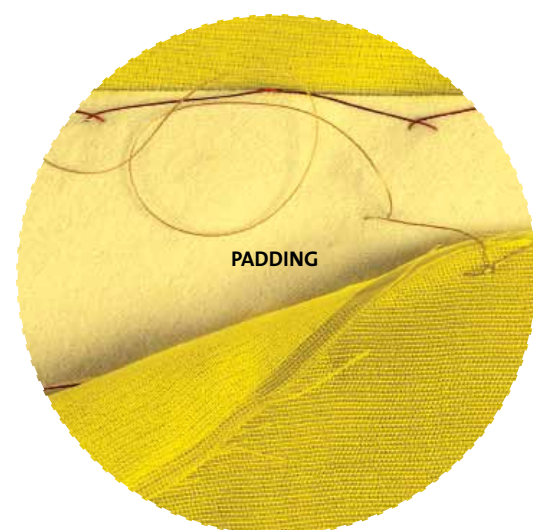
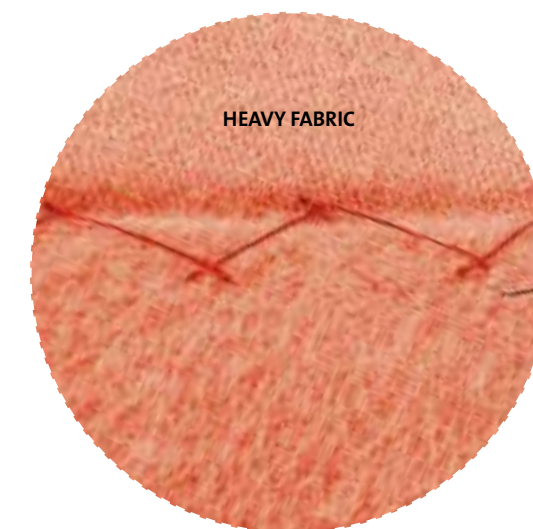
Choose the right technique when hemlines don't behave

Because of their silhouettes or the nature of their fabrics, some garments require reinforcement to form a perfectly shaped hemline. If a hem isn't holding its shape correctly or it's difficult to secure the hem allowance to the garment without it showing on the garment's right side, your hem needs help.

Support is available from a number of sources, using techniques that are easily adaptable and provide a professional-looking finish. Simply put, a hem finishes off the bottom edge of a garment; however, a hem's role can expand greatly beyond that. A hem—and its allowance—can not only add weight and support a particular shape but also do much more.

Here, I outline methods for the best hem treatments for lightweight fabrics, heavyweight fabrics, shaped hemlines, and even hem allowances that are wider than the hemline. With these techniques, you'll be able to sew a perfect hem for every fabric and silhouette.

Contributing editor Susan Khalje is a couture sewing expert.

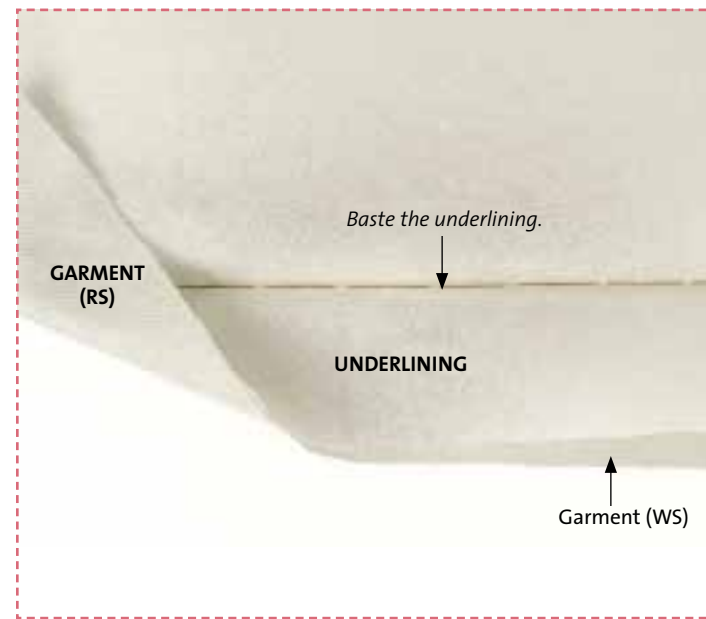


Hide stitches with underlining

Underlinings have an array of functions, and one of their most useful is to serve as a foundation for hand stitches so you don't have to apply the stitches directly to the fashion fabric. Although hem stitches can be easy to apply unobtrusively in some circumstances, such as to the hem of a textured wool skirt, there are other instances in which it's next-to-impossible to hide them, such as on silk charmeuse. An underlining helps hide those stitches easily.

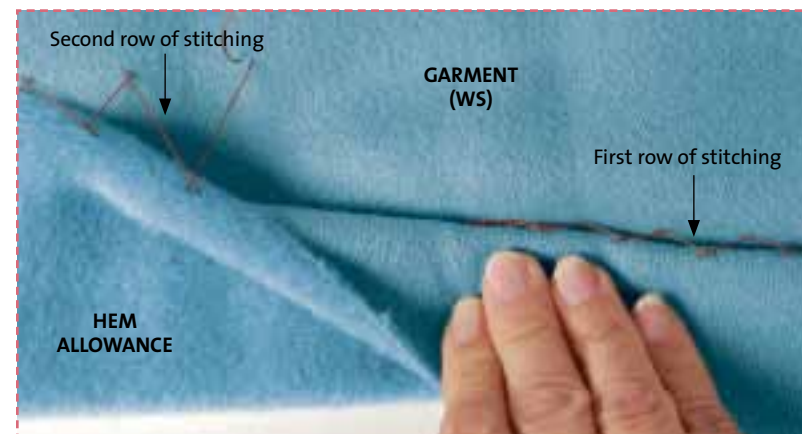
Underlinings are applied to entire garment pieces. They are typically basted to the fashion fabric's wrong side along the seamlines. There are many fabrics you can use for underlining, but silk organza is often my first choice because it's cheap, easy to work with, and produces crisp results.

Slippage between the fashion fabric and the underlining along the hem foldline is sometimes a problem. One way to make sure things stay put is to place a row of basting stitches right along the foldline through both layers, as shown at right. Press the hem allowance so the stitching is toward the garment's inside. It's important to keep the stitches very loose; otherwise, they pucker and distort the hemline.



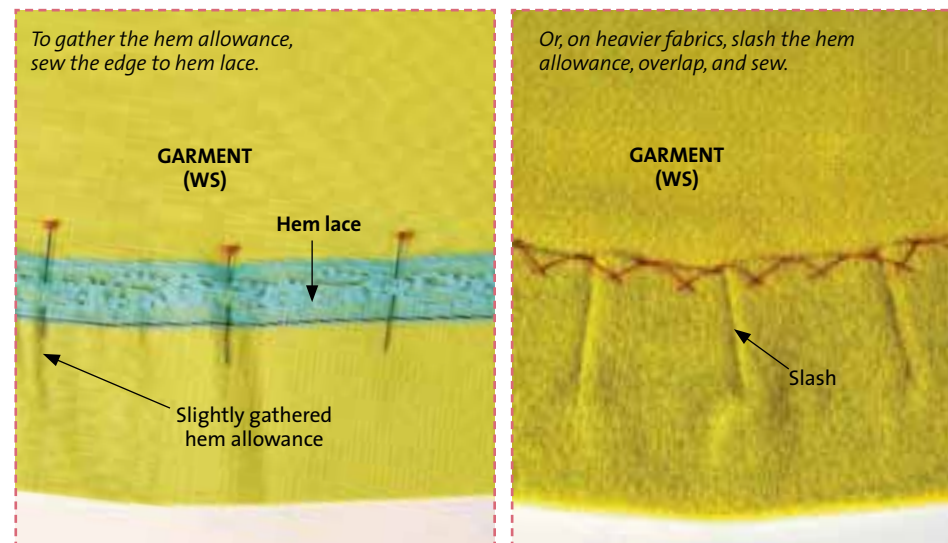
Support heavy fabric with an extra row of stitches

Heavyweight fabric can get bulky and cause distortion as it pulls away from the garment because the hem allowance needs a little support. Two rows of stitching can be useful here; sew one about midway in the hem allowance and a second near the top edge, as shown at right.



Secure a full hem allowance

Full-circle skirts have larger circumferences on the edges that have to turn up into smaller circumferences in the hem allowances. To solve this problem, you can gather the hem allowance by sewing the edge to slightly stretched hem lace (the only trick is determining the amount of gathering that's needed). Or, you could take tiny darts or tucks along the hem allowance. Making little slashes in the hem allowance so that the hem allowance overlaps at each cut is also effective. Choose the technique that best suits the fabric bulk and how visible these treatments are from the garment's right side.

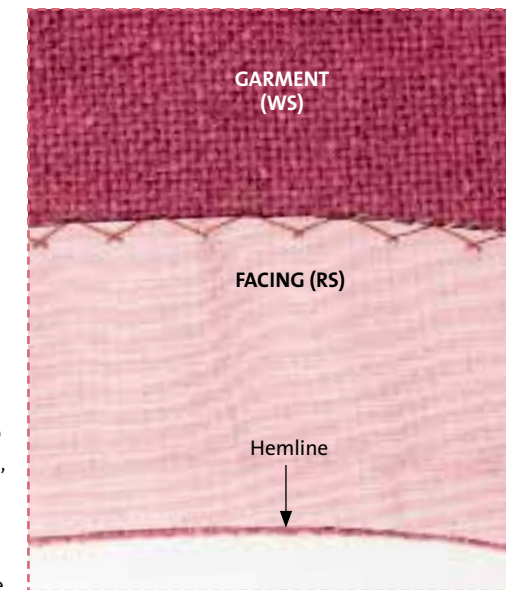


Photos: Sloan Howard

Face an unruly or unusual hem

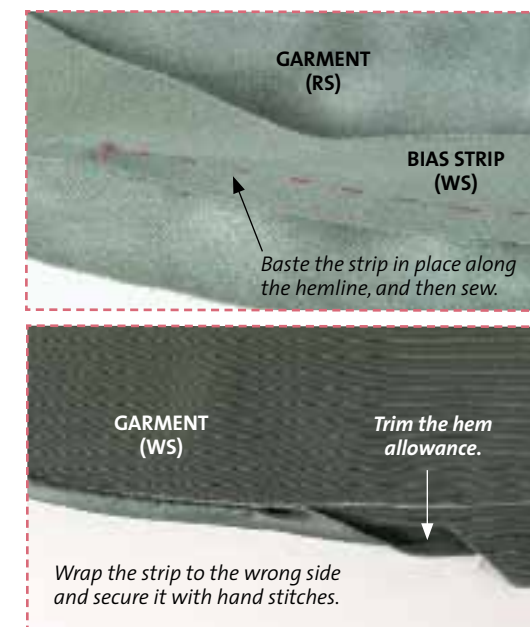
Sometimes, when you have an uncooperative fabric or an unusually shaped hemline, a separate facing is the best option. Adding a facing is the ideal way to make up for an inadequate hem allowance, but it can also help when you're dealing with a full hem allowance or one with a pronounced curve. Facings can be created from the fashion fabric (if weight or bulk aren't a concern), but it's often easier to create a facing from a strip of fabric.

You can use a strip of fabric cut on the bias (shape it with your iron to match the hem's contour), but sometimes it's easier to cut a piece of fabric that matches the grain of the fashion fabric. Use the hem area itself as your pattern, or refer back to your paper pattern. Machine-stitch it into place, right sides together, with a 1/4-inch seam allowance, and press the seam allowances towards the facing. Then, press the facing to the inside, and secure its top edge with hand stitches.



Bind with bias strips for definition

When hemming a garment such as a full-circle, floor-length silk charmeuse skirt, which isn't underlined (aligning two such unstable layers would be a nightmare) and turning up a hem allowance wouldn't be very pretty, bind the hem by basting and sewing a self-fabric bias strip along the hemline. Baste the strip in place along the hemline, and then sew it. Trim the hem allowance and wrap the strip to the wrong side. Hold the inner edge of the binding in place with tiny fell stitches, so there's little chance of stitches getting caught on anything.



HEM FUNDAMENTALS

When sewing a hem, it's important to treat the raw edge correctly and then master the stitches required to secure it. Here are a few tips to help you get the look you want.

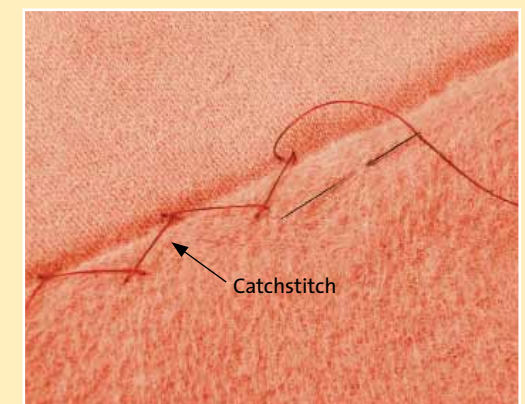
STABILIZE THE RAW EDGE

If a hem allowance is covered with a lining, you typically don't need to do anything to its raw edge. If the hem allowance is visible, stabilize it. You can apply hem lace or hem tape or try hand-overcasting. Regardless of which treatment you choose, make sure you don't create any sort of ridge or thickness that's visible from the garment's right side.

SECURE WITH CATCHSTITCHING

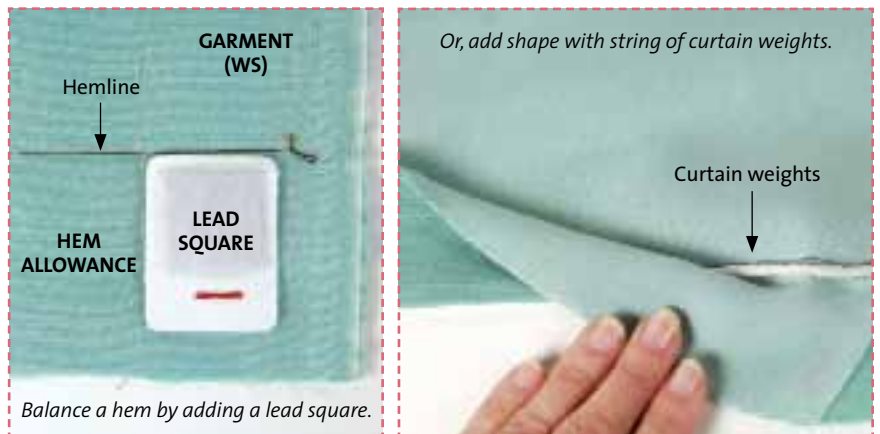
Catchstitching is ideal for hems; the interplay between the directions of the thread balances the layers and keeps the hem allowance absolutely flat against the garment. With the catchstitch, there isn't any shifting that sometimes occurs when a hem allowance is whipstitched into place. The downside is that an awful lot of thread is visible. But, as long as the stitches are covered with a lining, catchstitching is quick, sturdy, and easily variable in size.

Regardless of the stitch you choose, always secure your stitches with an extra stitch every so often; that way, if the hem stitches catch on something, you won't rip out the entire hem.



Add weight for balance

Weights help a garment hang properly on the body and provide a well-defined hemline. This is particularly useful on garments that swell away from the body like a full skirt in a heavy fabric or that has a defined drape or train. To balance the hem, hide small, flat, fabric-covered lead squares in the hem allowance. Or, try resting chain or a string of curtain weights (small lead pellets encased in a narrow knitted tube) inside the hem fold. Gently tack the weights in place to prevent them from shifting.



Create structure with horsehair

Nothing provides an uncrushable curve the way horsehair does. It's often used in wedding gowns, but it can also be used in less formal garments. In gowns, a narrow strip $\frac{1}{2}$ inch wide or so) is sometimes sewn at the hemline, turned to the inside, and tacked at seam allowances. Wider, stronger horsehair can also be used to shape parts of curved hems, such as the curved part of a mermaid hem. These wider, easier-to-shape versions come with a thin string threaded along one edge that you pull to shape and curve the horsehair.

Horsehair is actually no longer made from horsehair; it's made from braided nylon. But, it's still far too stiff to turn under when you're finishing the ends, so you have to cover the cut ends with a little strip of fabric. The sharp threads have a way of working through fashion fabric and linings if they aren't controlled. I prefer to stitch horsehair on by hand; it's fairly flexible, and it can be slippery to machine-stitch. When used inside a regular hem, it needs to be tacked along both edges (a catchstitch works well). Be sure to cut the hem allowance wider than the horsehair so the horsehair is covered once the hem allowance is in place.



Insert padding for soft support

To create a gentle fold in coat-weight fabrics and velvet garments, add padding to a heavy hem. Padding cut on the bias adds support and produces a soft fold instead of a hard crease.

First, catchstitch a strip of padding fabric such as cotton flannel to the hem. Make the strip as wide as the hem allowance, and place it approximately $\frac{3}{4}$ inch in from the raw edge. Then, fold up the garment hem, and catchstitch the raw edge to the padding only.

