

Machine Buttonholes Made Easy

Revised by Robin C. Mack Haynes¹

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Buttons and buttonholes add a design element to any garment or function to most home décor projects. But believe it or not, a buttonhole depends highly on the button. The buttonhole's size, shape, and placement always depend on the button—no matter the button type or size. To ensure an accurate buttonhole, it is a good idea to purchase



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the buttons for your project before stitching out the button holes. To determine your buttonhole markings, use the pattern—not the size of the buttonhole—as a guide for the placement. Buttons are sized according to their diameter. However, it's a button's circumference (the diameter plus the height) that determines how large the buttonhole needs to be. For example, a flat 5/8-inch button will probably require a smaller buttonhole than a domed or shank button of the same size.

To determine the circumference, wrap a piece of narrow ribbon, seam binding, or twill tape around the widest part of the button and pin the ends together. The length of your test buttonhole should be equal to half the circumference plus 1/8 inch. If your button is very thick, you may need to increase the size a little more. Test the size before making any buttonholes on your garment (Figure 1).

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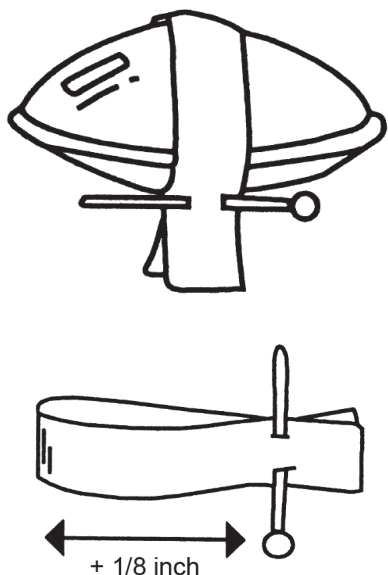


Figure 1. Measure the circumference of the button with ribbon, seam binding, or twill tape.

Today, many sewing machines are programmed with at least one or more buttonholes for a project. Below are some of the buttonholes you may see on a standard sewing machine (Figure 2). The question is—“Which buttonhole do I use?”

Standard Buttonhole. This is the most common buttonhole on garments and home décor. The standard buttonhole should be used on medium- to heavyweight fabrics. No matter the type of machine you may have, this style of buttonhole is generally found on even the most basic machine.

No Bartack Buttonhole. A buttonhole that is rounded on both ends. It should be used only on fine fabrics like silk. The rounded edges, without a bartack, finish the buttonhole edge but do not tear or alter the delicate fibers of the fabric.

Keyhole Buttonhole. A keyhole buttonhole should be used on heavy fabrics and “thick” buttonholes. Some jackets or jeans may require this style. The “keyhole” bottom allows a thick or shank button to move through the buttonhole and thick fabric layers with ease.

Top Bartack Buttonhole. This buttonhole is used on fine to medium-weight fabrics. It is used on children’s garments and women’s fine clothing.

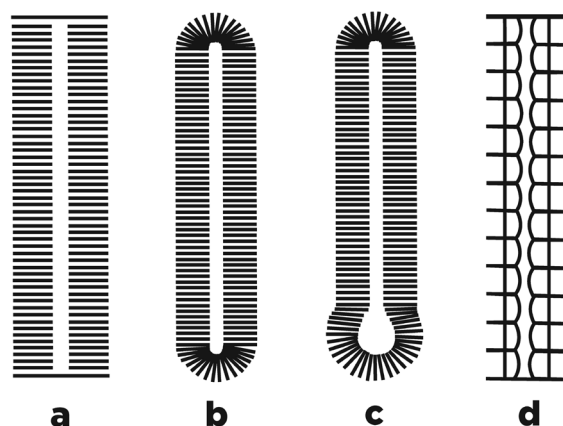


Figure 2. Examples of buttonholes: a) standard, b) no bartack, c) keyhole, and d) top bartack.

INTERFACING OR STABILIZERS

Both the button and buttonhole areas of the garment should be interfaced to stabilize the fabric and to prevent stretching. In some situations, it may be necessary to further stabilize or protect the area where buttonholes will be placed. For example, very stretchy fabrics need to be stabilized so the fabric will not stretch when machine-worked buttonholes are required.

At times, adding interfacing to a project is not practical, especially in some home décor like curtains. In this case, use a tear-away stabilizer on the top and bottom of the fabric while stitching out the buttonhole. The stabilizer will stabilize the buttonhole stitches without the appearance of interfacing.

PLACEMENT

For best results, buttonholes should be stitched out based on the pattern you are using. Horizontal buttonholes should extend 1/8 inch over the center front or back toward the garment edge. These buttonholes are best for closely fitted garments and styles without a placket. Jackets, coats, or other outerwear are sewn with horizontal buttonholes to allow the button to glide in and out of the fabric without destroying the fabric (Figure 3).

Vertical buttonholes should be sewn on the center front or back lines and are best for garments with a banded or placket opening. Generally, this type of buttonhole is found on blouses or shirts. Sewing the buttonhole vertically takes up less room on the garment (Figure 4).

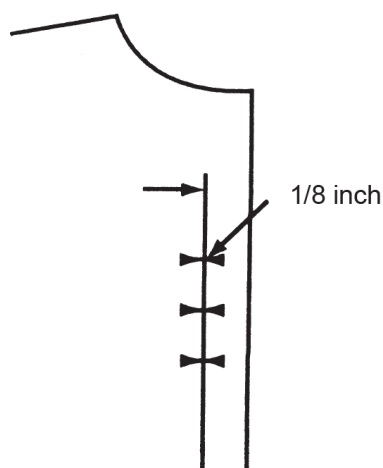


Figure 3. Horizontal buttonholes should extend 1/8 inch over the center front or back toward the garment edge.

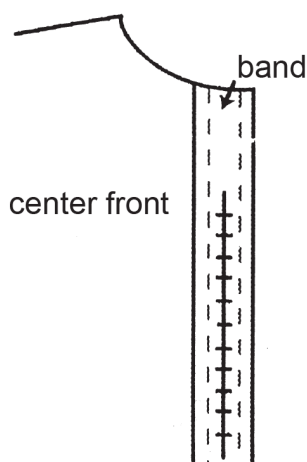


Figure 4. Vertical buttonholes should be sewn on the center front or back lines.

If the pattern was lengthened or shortened, the buttonhole placement must be altered. Other adjustments must be made if different-sized buttons are purchased.

- Pin the front and back pattern pieces together at the shoulder stitching line. Place the pattern on your figure with the center front of the pattern to your center front.
- Mark the “bra line” on your pattern. A button and buttonhole are needed at the bra line to prevent “gapisis,” or gaping at the bust (Figure 5).

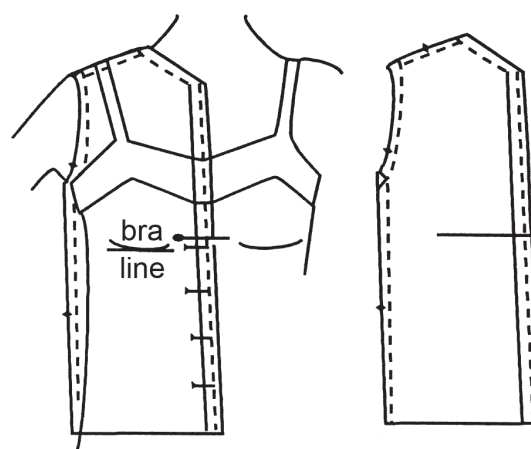


Figure 5. Mark the “bra line” on your pattern.

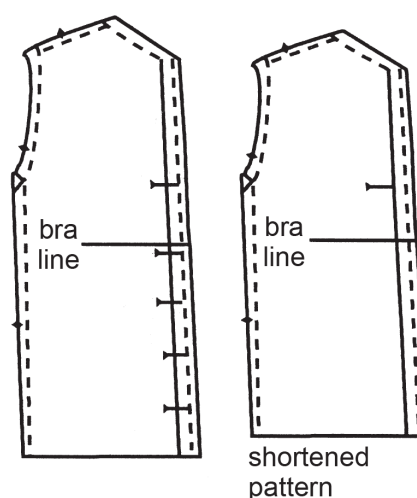


Figure 6. If the pattern was lengthened or shortened, the buttonhole placement must be altered.

Reposition the buttonholes if a buttonhole is not marked at the bra line. Keep these spacing guidelines in mind:

- If the pattern was lengthened, mark the same number of buttonholes below your waistline as indicated on the pattern (Figure 6).
- If the pattern was shortened, you may need to eliminate a buttonhole so the spacing is not too close together.
- Place a buttonhole at the bra line.
- Standard buttonhole placement is 2 to 3 1/2 inches apart.
- Use a seam gauge to accurately space the buttonholes.

TRANSFERRING THE MARKINGS

There are several methods of transferring buttonhole markings to the garment. Use the one most suited to the fabric. Here are some suggestions:

- Use transparent tape to mark where to begin, end, and place the buttonhole (Figure 7).
- Draw a line using a fabric marking pen, making sure to draw horizontal and vertical lines.
- Use pins to mark the beginning and ending line of the buttonhole (Figure 8).
- An expanding sewing gauge can be used to transfer markings to a garment or home décor project. This tool expands evenly to create marking points without having to manually move a ruler or piece of chalk/marketing pen.

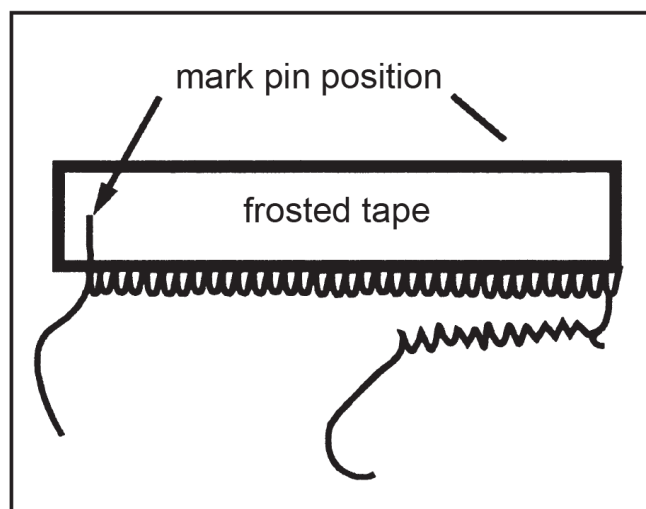


Figure 7. Transparent tape option.

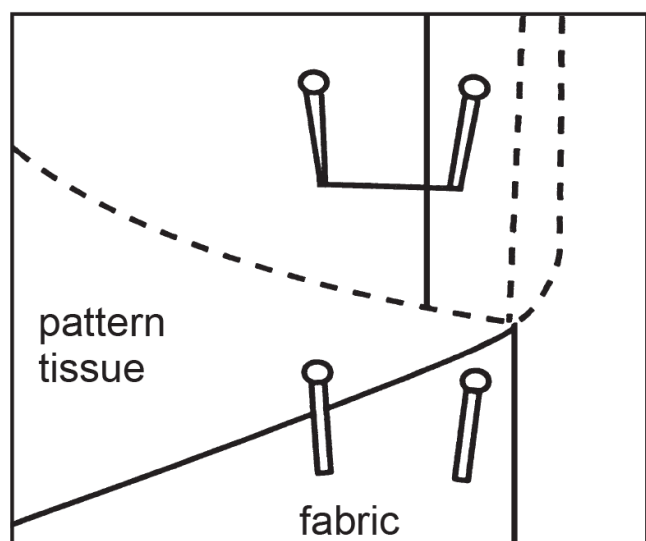


Figure 8. Pins used to mark buttonhole placement.

Be sure the markings are on-grain. Mark appropriately for horizontal or vertical buttonholes.

Mark the buttonhole placement on the right side of the fabric. You can do this during the cutting and marking stage when you transfer all the other markings, or you can wait until just before you are ready to make the buttonholes. Even if you marked the placement lines when you cut out the garment, it's a good idea to check them when you're ready to make the buttonholes.

SOME BUTTON AND BUTTONHOLE BASICS

- Whenever possible, stick to the size of button recommended for the project. The size should be indicated on the project instructions or notions list.
- If you can't find a button you like in the right size, don't select a button that is more than 1/8 inch larger or smaller. Otherwise, the buttons will either look out of proportion on the garment or the buttonholes must be respaced.
- To make sure buttonholes are accurately placed, begin stitching horizontal buttonholes at the marking closest to the garment edge; begin stitching vertical buttonholes at the marking closest to the upper edge of the garment.
- Always make a test buttonhole first on a scrap of fabric. Use the same number of layers (fabric, interfacing/stabilizer, facing, etc.) as the project will have.

TIP

If your fabric doesn't feed evenly through the machine, try using a piece of nonwoven stabilizer or tissue paper underneath. If your fabric is very sheer or very fragile, try putting the tissue paper underneath and on top. It's easy to tear it away once the buttonholes are completed.

STITCHING THE BUTTONHOLE

Know the foot you may need for your machine as well as the settings. If you have never done buttonholes, refer to your owners manual. Depending on your machine, some may do an automatic buttonhole while others may require a manual change of the dial to move through the stitching process. If available, use a buttonhole foot rather than a standard foot for more consistently sized holes (Figure 9).

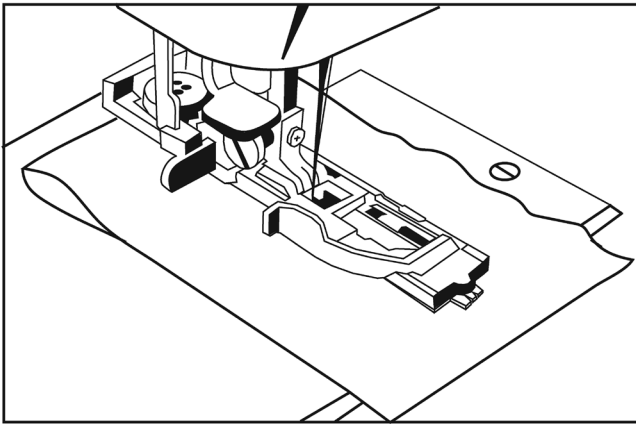


Figure 9. Buttonhole foot.

CUTTING THE BUTTONHOLE OPEN

Once all the buttonholes are stitched, cut them open using a razor blade, a buttonhole cutter, or a pair of small, sharp scissors. Start at the center and cut toward each end. To prevent cutting too far, put straight pins at each end of the buttonhole opening; place pins inside the end bar tacks. It is a good idea to err on the small side of cutting. Once you have cut through, try the button. It should fit easily into the cut hole. If not, cut slightly into the buttonhole until the button fits easily (Figure 10).

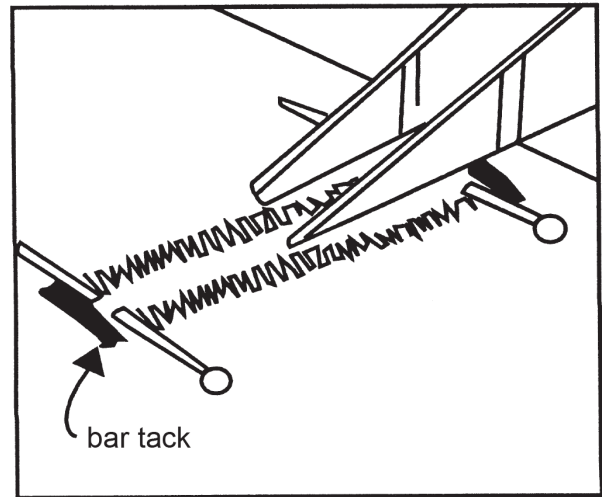
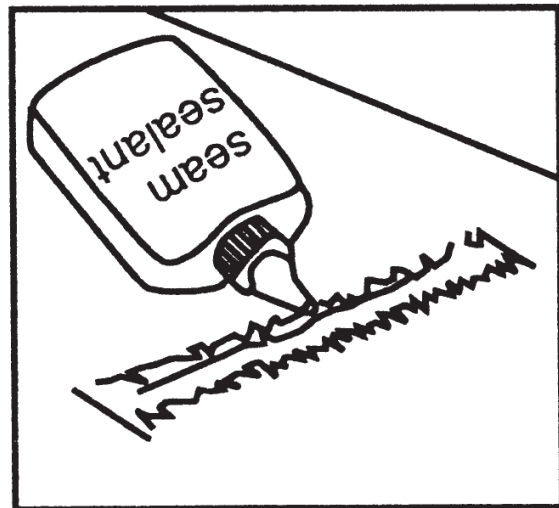


Figure 10. Cutting buttonholes open using a pair of small, sharp scissors.

TIP

If, despite all your good intentions, stitches are cut when opening the buttonhole, repair the damage with a dot of seam sealant. The seam sealant should be added along the stitches, especially at the cut line, to prevent any raveling.



TO LOCATE THE BUTTON POSITION

- After making the buttonholes and cutting them open, lap the garment edges, matching center, so it looks like it's buttoned.
- For a horizontal buttonhole, stick a pin through at the center front or back marking, 1/8 inch in from the end of the buttonhole (Figure 11).
- For a vertical buttonhole, insert the pin 1/8 inch below the top of the buttonhole.

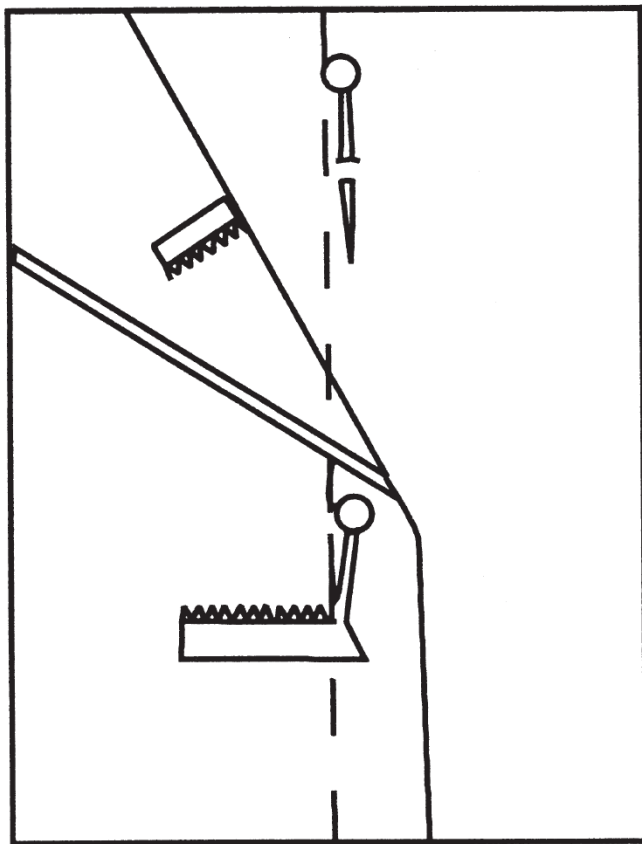


Figure 11. For a horizontal buttonhole, stick a pin through the center front or back marking.

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