

# Sheer Success

By Martyn Smith

Lightweight or sheer fabrics are the bane of most sewers lives. A non-sewing wearer isn't aware of the grapple and graft that goes into achieving perfection with such fabrics. Skills in dealing with these fabrics are only learnt over years of cutting and stitching them, but once these skills are learnt sewing with sheers doesn't seem quite so daunting. Eveningwear is still full of sheer floaty fabrics and today's daywear fashion allows these fabrics to be worn as well.

## Preparation

A fitting with seams lightly tacked is essential for any garment but more so for a lightweight or sheer one. These sorts of fabrics only like to be handled once and unpicking seams is not really an option for 90% of them. A toile of the garment in a similar fabric can be a big help as this eliminates the need to double-handle the actual garment. Making a sheer garment up as soon as it's cut is the ideal situation as this lightweight fabric has a tendency to fall apart or distort at a mere glance after being cut out.

Cutting out these sorts of garments can be a nightmare for some! Dull blades on the cutting shears or even rough hands and nails can make for a very frustrating time. Ensure the fabric has been washed and lightly pressed before cutting to ensure that any shrinkage caused by either heat from the iron or washing has been dealt with first off.

**HINT:** To make sheer or flimsy fabric behave during cutting out and making up, spray the entire fabric with an 'iron-on' starch as this will give body to the fabric, make it crisp when cutting and seaming and ensure that all visible stitching lines are perfectly straight. Rinse the garment after construction and no one will be any the wiser! Dark fabrics may need a soak if the spray starch has made them look a little patchy.

The major factor when stitching up a sheer or lightweight fabric is seam strength. Due to the nature of these sorts of fabric, seam slippage is often the reason for seams coming adrift when being worn. Ladder-like runs and seams pulling apart in areas of duress are the most common visible signs, and if the garment is over-fitted for the fabric, this is even more likely to happen. Choosing the right seam finish is really important!

## Seaming

There are two common seam finishes for these sorts of garments:

a) The lap-felled seam

If a 1.5cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) seam is used on the pattern it is easy to convert this to a 1cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) lap as the pattern doesn't really need to be adjusted. To perform this type of seam, the underneath layer of fabric firstly requires a 1cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) stay-stitch sewn in from the raw edge to act as a placement line for the raw edge of the top layer, which is sewn with a 2cm ( $\frac{3}{4}$ in) seam. See photo 1. The staystitching is removed when the seam is pressed to form the lap, before stitching from the right side of the garment. See photo 2. This seam is strong and flat.

b) The French seam

With wrong sides together (assuming the pattern is using a



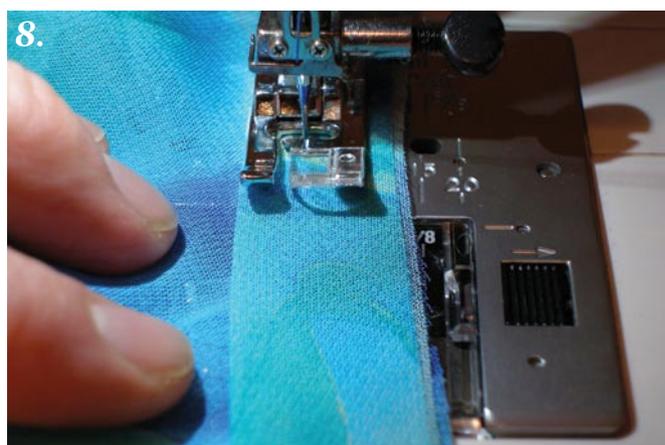
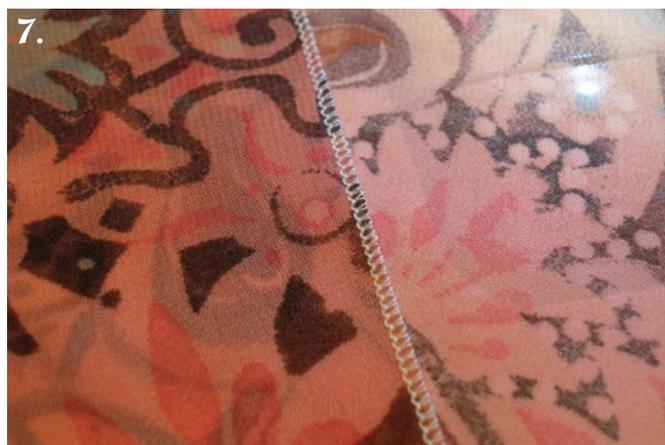
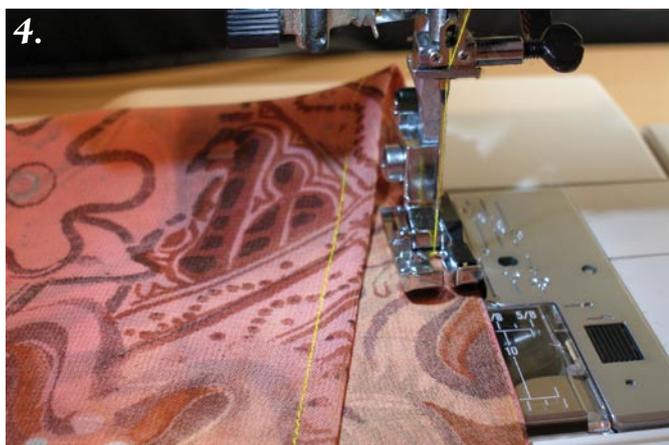
1.5cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) seam allowance), stitch a scant 1cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) seam and then trim the seam back to half its value. [See photo 3.](#) Press this trimmed seam to one side and turn so the right sides are together, then sandwich the raw seams by stitching 6mm ( $\frac{1}{4}$ in) in from the folded edge. Using a  $\frac{1}{4}$ in quilters' foot with a side blade helps keep your stitching looking perfectly straight. [See photo 4.](#) These two seams should be used instead of just overlocking the raw edges as a sheer garment looks unsightly with the overlocking showing through.

### Edging

Finishing edges can also be an irritation for some, but with a little planning and practice, all will be good and very professional looking.

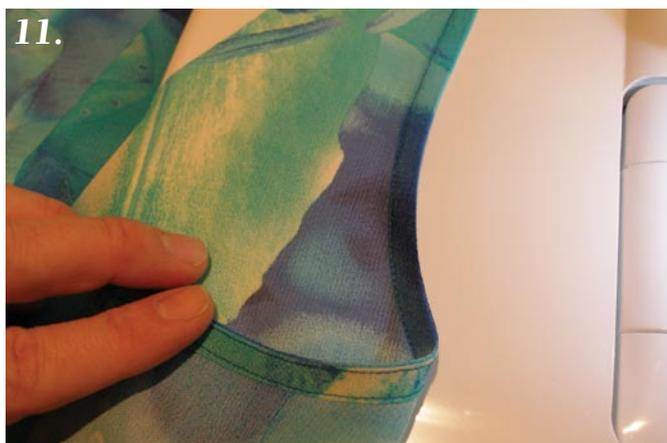
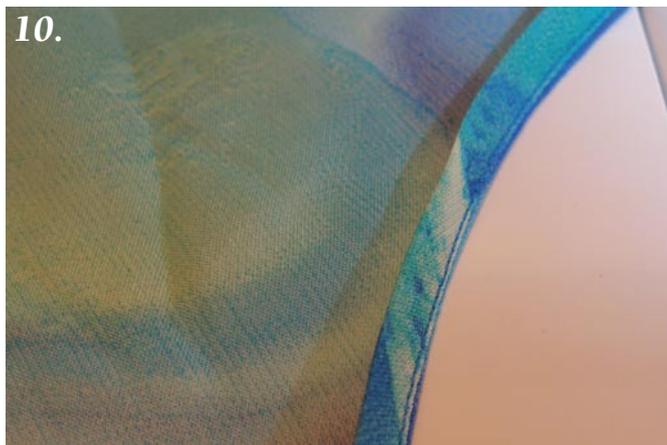
Binding edges like the manufacturers do takes time to learn, even with a purpose-designed foot. [See photo 5.](#) Using these feet may seem easy but every fabric reacts a little differently when fed through the collar of the binder, so it is a matter of testing before using on the garment. It looks easier than it is but the finish is stunning once mastered. A staystitch on the edge of an armhole or neckline will definitely stop these areas being stretched when being bound. Pressing will settle a curve and set it into shape once bound.

An alternative to binding an edge is a rolled-hem, but again this foot takes a little practice to use and doesn't like going over seams, bulk or raised patterns. This technique is great for finishing hems and ruffles. [See photo 6.](#) A very commercial garment finish these days that's quick and easy



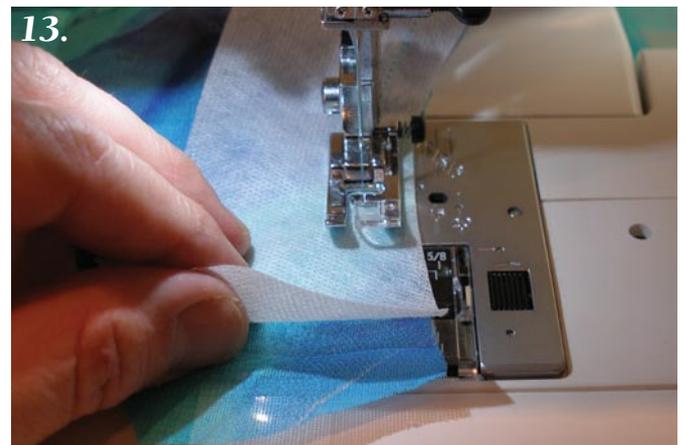
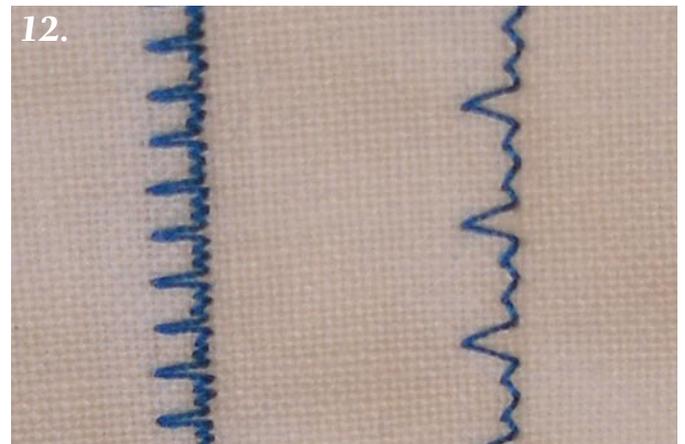
is the 3-thread rolled-hem done by an overlocker; it's just a matter of learning the appropriate setting for your overlocker. See photo 7.

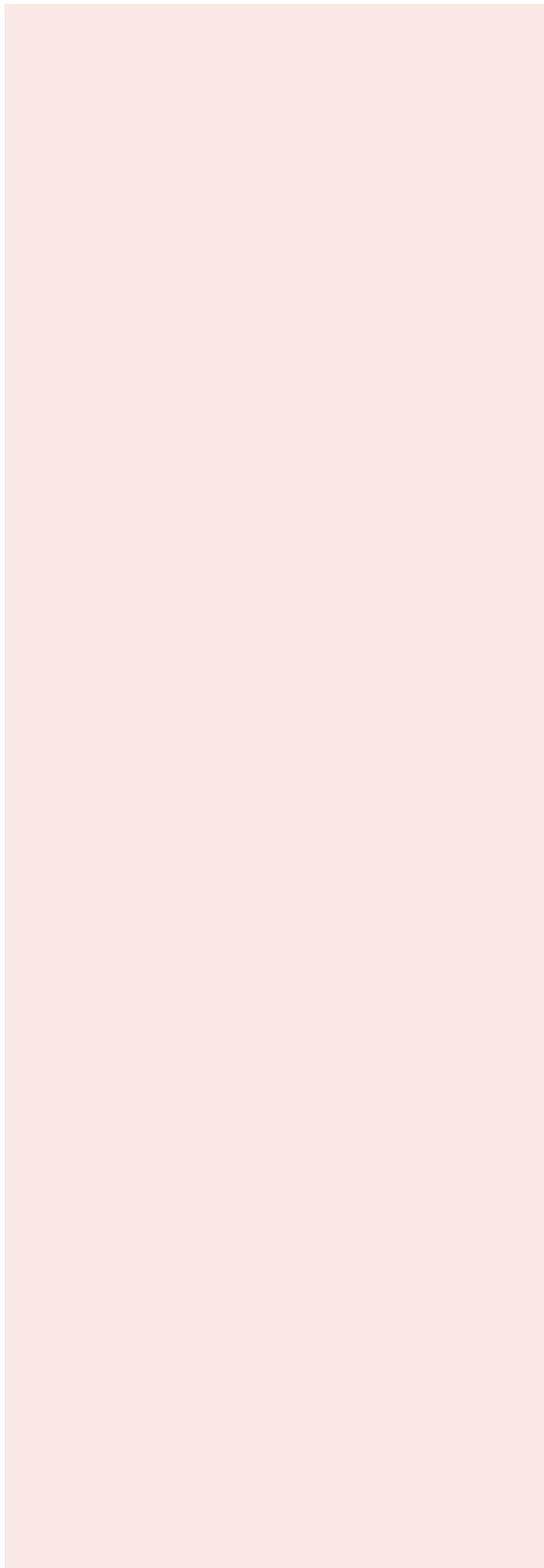
Another easy finish ideal for neckline and armholes on a lightweight or sheer garment is a narrow 'bias-faced edge'. Stay-stitch within the seam allowance of all seams to be faced as this prevents the curves stretching out of shape. For a 1.5cm ( $\frac{3}{8}$ in) seam allowance, cut a bias strip 5cm (2in) in width and to the desired length needed (a join may be necessary to achieve the required length). Fold the strip to half its width (wrong sides together) and press lightly. Place the folded strip to the wrong side of the garment, aligning all raw edges, and stitch in place. See photo 8. Trim the seam allowance to a scant 6mm ( $\frac{1}{4}$ in) or even slightly less. See photo 9.



Under-stitch and press into shape. See photo 10. Stitch the binding in place from the right side of the garment (again use a  $\frac{1}{4}$ in quilters' foot with a blade on the edge for perfect stitching). See photo 11. This finish is a stunning finish to any garment!

When a contrast edge is needed but the edge needs to remain soft, a Picot finish can be appropriate? Heirloom sewers use techniques similar to this to get the finest of edge finishes and they are stronger than they look, but still drape softly. The stitch to use is the stretch blind-hem stitch. See photo 12. Make this stitch is as wide as desired (4 – 5) and condense the stitch to a loose buttonhole setting (.5 or .6, depending on your machine). Stitch some water-soluble stabiliser to the seam (cutting the stabiliser the same shape as the curve it's being sewn on to, eg. armhole or neckline). See photo 13.





Turn the seam to the underside (like a facing) and with an open-toe Appliqué or Satin-stitch foot, apply the Picot stitch to the turned edge. Make sure the narrow zigzag stitches hit the garment edge and don't miss. See photos 14 and 15. Trim away the excess stabiliser from the outer edge and with a pair of appliqué or duckbill embroidery scissors, trim back the underside (both the fabric of the seam allowance and the water-soluble stabiliser. See photo 16.

The final look, once washed out in cold water, gives a delicate crochet-type edging and, if the thread used is high sheen rayon or polyester, it will give a shimmery highlight on the edge. See photo 17. This finish is very time consuming but the end result is worth the effort.

