

The French Seam Field Card

A one-page reference. Print it. Tape it next to your sewing machine.

THE EARNED-FINISH TEST

Before you French seam a project, ask three yes/no questions. Two or more **yes** answers = use the French seam. Otherwise, a clean serged or zigzag finish is enough.

1. Will the inside of the seam be visible (sheer or unlined)?
2. Does the fabric fray heavily when handled?
3. Will the garment be washed often and stressed at seams?

SEAM ALLOWANCE MATH

A French seam uses your **entire** pattern allowance. Skip the math, lose the fit.

5/8" pattern → First pass 3/8", second pass 1/4"

1/2" pattern → First pass 1/4", second pass 1/4"

3/8" pattern → Add 1/4" to pattern *before cutting*

FABRIC PAIRING CHART

GREEN LIGHT French seam shines	YELLOW LIGHT Workable, slow down	RED LIGHT Use a different finish
Silk chiffon Organza Voile Batiste Cotton lawn Lightweight cotton Rayon challis Lightweight linen	Mid-weight linen Cotton shirting Crepe de chine Loose-weave cotton Light viscose Silk satin (slippery)	Denim Canvas Heavy wool Fleece Quilting cottons (often too stiff) Any knit fabric (French seams are for wovens only)

THE 6-STEP PROCEDURE

1	Test on a scrap. Cut two strips of your project fabric. Sew a full French seam on the scrap. Fresh size 60/8 or 70/10 universal needle for lightweights. Re-thread top and bobbin. Lower top tension by half-increments if it puckers.
2	Pin WRONG sides together. The counterintuitive step. Right sides face outward as you pin. Slippery fabrics (silk, chiffon): pin every inch. Stable cottons: every two inches.
3	Sew first pass at 3/8". Straight stitch. Backstitch at start and end. Sew slowly so the fabric feeds without dragging. Don't skip the seam allowance math from above.
4	Trim to 1/8". Sharp scissors. Trim cleanly. Handle the cut edge as little as possible — overhandling causes fresh fraying that pokes through the finished seam.
5	Press flat, then press open. Up-and-down pressing motion, not sliding. Pressing is construction, not finishing. Press the seam allowance flat first, then press it open.
6	Fold right sides together. Sew at 1/4". Trimmed raw edges are now sandwiched inside the fold. Fold sits exactly on the edge. Stitch at 1/4". Press the finished seam to one side (usually toward the back).

TROUBLESHOOTING QUICK-FIX LIST

PROBLEM	FIX
Raw edges poking through finished seam	Trim closer (1/8"), handle cut edge less, or sew second pass at 5/16" to catch stragglers.
Seam puckering	Tension or needle. Drop top tension by half-increments. Install fresh 60/8 or 70/10 needle. Re-thread.
Lumpy or twisted seam	You skipped pressing or pressed wrong direction. Press first pass open BEFORE turning.
Garment came out too tight	Allowance math was skipped. No fix on cut fabric — recut. Next time, do the math FIRST.
Curved seam won't lie flat	Trim closer (1/16"), sew in 2-inch sections, press each section over a tailor's ham.
Closed sleeve, can't reach second pass	Push the sleeve through itself to expose the seam. Fold, sew, push back through. It's fiddly, not wrong.
Seam doesn't stay flat after washing	Press finished seam firmly to one side with steam. Topstitch close to seam line if it must stay anchored.