

Hand Embroidery Stitch Guide

A free, start-to-finish guide for total beginners

- 6 essential stitches, staged from easiest to hardest
- A materials list with a free-to-cheap budget tier
- One sampler project you can finish in one sitting
- Common mistake fixes for each stitch

What You Need to Start

You do not need a full embroidery kit to learn these six stitches. Start with the free tier below, then add tools only once you know which stitches you enjoy.

Free or nearly free

- Cotton scrap fabric (an old pillowcase or tea towel works)
- Any needle with an eye large enough for regular thread
- Regular sewing thread or embroidery floss
- A pencil or fabric marker to draw practice lines

Worth adding once you know you'll keep going

- Embroidery hoop (keeps fabric taut, makes even stitches easier)
- Embroidery floss in a few colors
- Embroidery needles (slightly larger eye than sewing needles)

Skip for now

- Specialty threads (metallic, silk)
- Fabric stabilizers
- Pre-printed embroidery patterns

How to Practice Without Wasting Fabric

Use one piece of scrap fabric as a sampler. Draw six rows with your pencil, one row per stitch. Work each stitch three times in its row before moving to the next. Keep thread tension loose. Over-pulled stitches are the most common beginner tell, not lack of skill.

The 6 Stitches, in Order

Learn these in sequence. Each stitch builds a skill the next one needs. Do not skip ahead to satin stitch before running stitch feels steady.

1. Running Stitch

Best for: straight lines, outlines, simple borders

1. Bring the needle up through the fabric at point 1.
2. Push it back down a short distance ahead at point 2.
3. Bring it back up further along the line, and repeat.
4. Keep every stitch and every gap the same length.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: uneven stitch length. Fix: lightly mark dots along your line first, then stitch dot to dot.

2. Backstitch

Best for: lettering, strong outlines, fine detail

1. Bring the needle up one stitch-length ahead of your starting point.
2. Insert it back down at the start of the line, behind where you began.
3. Bring it up again one stitch-length ahead of that stitch.
4. Repeat, always stitching backward into the last stitch.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: gaps between stitches. Fix: insert the needle into the exact same hole as the previous stitch, not beside it.

3. Stem Stitch

Best for: curves, flower stems, rope-like lines

1. Bring the needle up at point 1.
2. Insert it a short distance ahead at point 2.
3. Bring it back up halfway between points 1 and 2.
4. Keep the working thread on the same side of the needle every time.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: switching thread sides mid-line, which breaks the rope effect. Fix: always keep thread below the needle (or always above).

4. Split Stitch

Best for: thicker outlines, filling small areas

1. Work a short straight stitch first.
2. Bring the needle up through the middle of that stitch, splitting the thread.
3. Insert it a short distance ahead to make the next stitch.
4. Repeat, always splitting the previous stitch.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: pulling too tight, which flattens the split look. Fix: keep tension relaxed so the split stays visible.

5. Satin Stitch

Best for: filling small shapes solidly

1. Bring the needle up at one edge of the shape.
2. Insert it directly across at the opposite edge.
3. Bring it back up right beside your first stitch.
4. Repeat closely side by side until the shape is filled.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: attempting large shapes, which makes stitches loose and uneven. Fix: keep satin stitch to small shapes only; use

6. French Knot

Best for: dots, texture, flower centers

1. Bring the needle up through the fabric where you want the knot.
2. Wrap the thread around the needle twice, holding it taut.
3. Insert the needle back down a hair's width from where you started (not the same hole).
4. Hold the wraps in place and pull the needle through to the back.

Fix-it note

Common mistake: the knot pulls all the way through. Fix: never re-enter the exact same hole, and keep the wrapped thread taut un

Your Practice Sampler

Draw six rows on your scrap fabric, roughly one inch apart. Label each row (in your head or lightly in pencil) with one stitch. Practice each stitch three times before moving to the next row. Use the guide below to track your progress.

Row 1: Running Stitch

Practice space, three reps minimum

Row 2: Backstitch

Practice space, three reps minimum

Row 3: Stem Stitch

Practice space, three reps minimum

Row 4: Split Stitch

Practice space, three reps minimum

Row 5: Satin Stitch

Practice space, three reps minimum

Row 6: French Knot

Practice space, three reps minimum

When You're Done

Once all six rows feel steady, you have finished your first sampler. That is a completed project, not just practice. Keep the sampler as a reference for tension and stitch length before you start your first real design.