

How to Sew a Simple Heavy Duty Tote Bag

Start to finish, beginner friendly, no zippers required

sewing.com | Free printable pattern guide

This guide walks you through one heavy duty canvas tote bag, from cutting your fabric to sewing the last top stitch. It uses boxed corners for a flat bottom and reinforced straps so the bag can carry real weight, not just look sturdy on the shelf.

What You Will Need

Fabric and Supplies

- 1 yard heavy weight cotton canvas or duck cloth, 10 to 12 ounce weight
- 1 yard medium weight woven fusible interfacing
- Matching all purpose or heavy duty polyester thread
- Sewing machine needle: size 90/14 or 100/16 (topstitch or denim needle)
- Fabric scissors or rotary cutter, ruler, fabric marking pen
- Iron and pressing surface
- Straight pins or fabric clips

Cut List

- 2 body panels, 18 in wide x 16 in tall (front and back)
- 1 base panel, 18 in wide x 5 in tall
- 2 strap pieces, 4 in wide x 26 in long
- Interfacing to match each fabric piece above

Finished Size

Approximately 17 in wide x 15 in tall x 5 in deep, with 24 in drop straps.

TIP

Wash and dry your canvas before cutting. Canvas shrinks more than quilting cotton, and pre-washing keeps your finished bag from warping the first time it gets wet.

Step by Step Instructions

Step 1: Interface Every Piece

Fuse interfacing to the wrong side of both body panels, the base panel, and both strap pieces. Use a pressing cloth and medium heat, and hold the iron in place for about 10 seconds per section instead of sliding it, so the canvas does not shift or scorch.

Step 2: Sew the Straps

Fold each strap piece in half lengthwise, right sides together, and stitch down the long edge with a half inch seam. Turn each strap right side out, press flat with the seam centered on the back, then top stitch both long edges. This top stitching is not decorative. It is what keeps the strap from stretching out of shape under a load.

Step 3: Attach the Straps to the Front and Back Panels

Measure 4 inches in from each side edge of the body panels and pin the strap ends there, raw edges even with the top edge of the panel. Stitch the strap ends in place with a 3/8 inch seam, then go back and sew a 1 inch box with an X through the center at each strap end. This bar tack style reinforcement is the single most important stitch in the whole bag for preventing strap failure.

Step 4: Join the Body Panels to the Base

With right sides together, pin one long edge of the base panel to the bottom edge of the front panel. Stitch with a half inch seam. Repeat to attach the other long edge of the base to the back panel. Press both seams open.

Step 5: Sew the Side Seams

Fold the assembled piece right sides together so the front and back panels line up, with the base panel forming the bottom. Stitch down both side edges, through the base panel corners, with a half inch seam. Backstitch firmly at the top of each side seam, since this is a second high stress point on the finished bag.

Step 6: Box the Corners

At each bottom corner, match the side seam to the base seam so they form a straight line, creating a small triangle of fabric at the point. Measure 2 inches from the point along that line and draw a stitching line straight across the triangle. Stitch on the line, backstitching at both ends, then trim the excess triangle a half inch beyond your stitching. This step is what gives the tote a flat, stand up bottom instead of a floppy sack shape.

Step 7: Finish the Top Edge

Fold the top raw edge over 1/4 inch and press, then fold again 3/4 inch and press. Pin in place all the way around, checking that the strap ends are caught securely inside the fold. Top stitch close to the inner folded edge, then sew a second row of stitching 1/4 inch above it for extra strength at the point where the straps meet the bag body.

Step 8: Turn and Press

Turn the bag right side out through the top opening. Push the boxed corners out firmly from the inside so they sit flat, then press the whole bag, top edge included, so all your seams sit crisp before the first use.

TIP

If your machine struggles to sew through the layered corners in Step 6, hand turn the wheel through the thickest section instead of using the foot pedal. This protects your needle and keeps your stitch line even.

Care and Use

Spot clean with a damp cloth for everyday marks. For a deeper clean, hand wash in cool water and hang

dry, since machine drying can shrink canvas unevenly over repeated washes. Avoid overloading past 15 to 20 pounds regularly. Even reinforced straps have a limit, and swapping to a webbing strap is the better choice for anything heavier on a regular basis.

Author: [EDITOR: BYLINE PENDING]

This guide is provided free by sewing.com. Affiliate links, where present on the site, are marked and disclosed per page. Pattern instructions and measurements are original to sewing.com. Please do not resell or redistribute this PDF.