

sustainable fashion chat

Linen top tutorial

I've gotten quite a few DM's on Instagram and comments on my posts asking about how to get started with sewing a linen top. The beauty of these designs is they are so simple, both design-wise, but also construction-wise. They are a great introduction to sewing your own clothes (no gathering, zippers, buttons, interfacing -- all that scary stuff!) and super-rewarding.

For this tutorial, I'm going to teach you how to sew a top that is somewhat similar to [Elizabeth Suzann's Linn top](#). I've never owned one of these tops, so none of the measurements are directly from ES's design, just the overall idea and aesthetic. It'll look something like this:



I'll put this into bite-sized steps. If you're intimidated, just do one of the steps at a time, and soon you'll be wearing your very own creation!

Ready? Ok, let's get sewing!

Step 1: Gather your materials

1. First off, you'll need a **sewing machine**. No need to buy one if you're just trying this sewing thing out for the first time. See if you can borrow one from a friend, co-worker, acquaintance, etc. Many people have one stashed away that they never use 😊 It doesn't have to be anything fancy. My sewing machine is one I picked up at Sears, over 20 years ago, for about \$150. It's as standard and simple as they come, and I've used it to make clothing, quilts, stuffed toys, you name it.
2. Next, you'll need some **pins**. They will make your life much easier, trust me.
3. **Iron and ironing board**. Again, it's worth having them. You'll see 😊
4. **Scissors**. If you don't have a pair of fabric scissors set aside, it's worth buying a new pair of shears and saving them only for fabric cutting. They'll stay nice and sharp and won't fray the edges of your fabric when you cut. As you can see, I have mine marked with a ribbon so they don't get used for anything but fabric.

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5. Now the fun part - **fabric**. Some great fabrics for this top are pure linen, linen blends, and raw silks. You get to choose the fabric, color and pattern. This is one of the best parts of sewing your own clothes 😊 I picked up a linen fabric from my favorite local fabric store, Silk Road Fibres. If you don't have the benefit of a good local store, I've heard good things about Fabrics-store.com . For this top, I bought 1.5 yards, which should be a generous amount unless you want to make a longer top.
6. **Thread**. An all-purpose thread in a matching color will do nicely. I read some internet advice that silk thread should be used to sew silk fabrics, but I had bad luck with silk thread breaking in my machine and honestly, with thicker raw silks (vs. delicate silk crepes), I think the all-purpose thread is fine.



Step 2: Wash and dry your fabric

That's pretty self-explanatory, but can be a pretty hard step if you're excited to get started. You don't need much detergent at all, just a smidge, and go ahead and dry the fabric on high heat to get it to shrink as much as it's going to. That way your shirt will stay the same size after you've sewn it.

Your fabric will come out of the washer and dryer with all sorts of unraveled knots and tangles coming off if it. Just cut them off.

You may want to iron your fabric if it's super-wrinkled. But if you get it out of the dryer soon after it's dry, it should be relatively wrinkle-free.

Step 3: Trace and cut your pieces

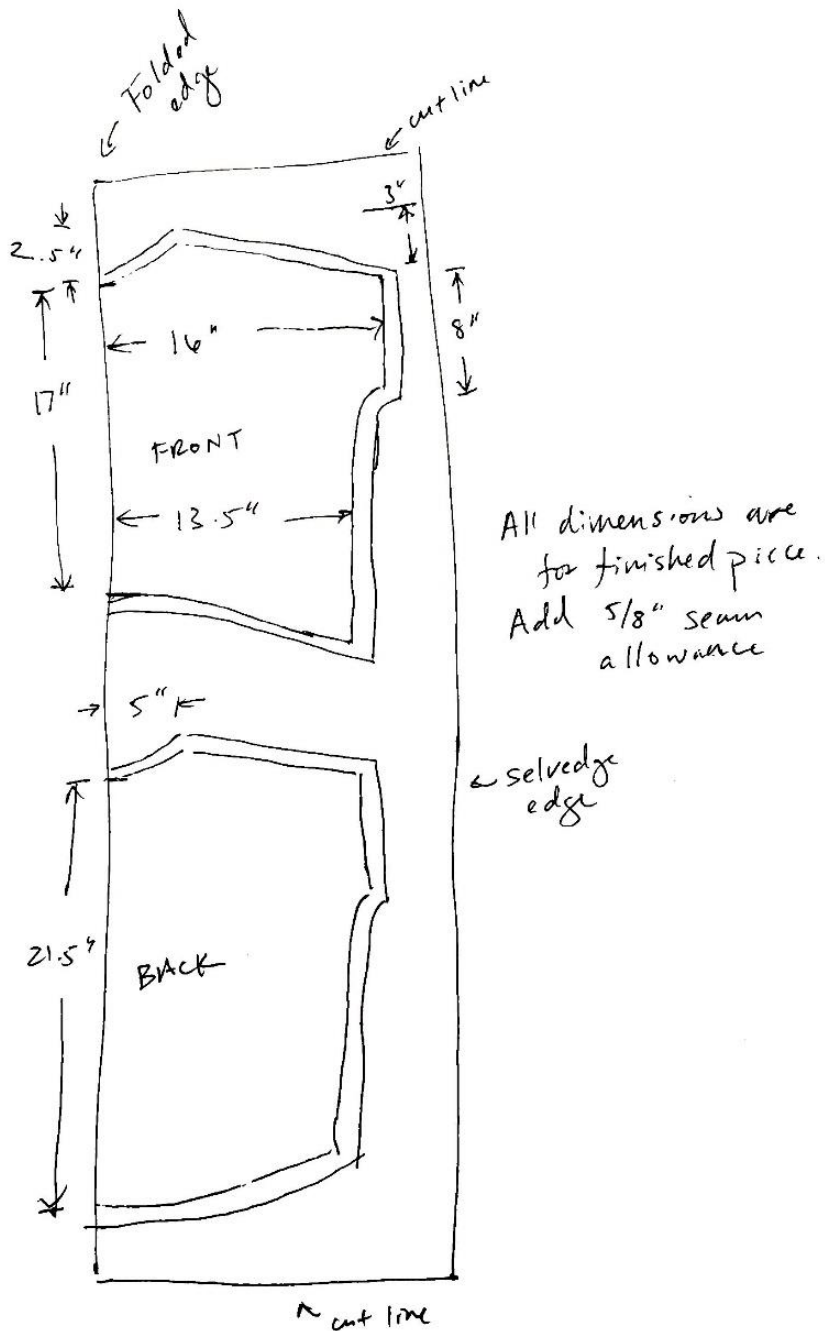
One of the great things about this top is that it is just two easy pieces. The sleeves are integrated into the body of the top so you don't have to deal with separate pieces there.

Tracing and cutting your pieces without a pattern may sound intimidating, but this type of top is super-forgiving, so don't sweat it too much. Here are a few things you can consider:

1. Go through the tops you currently own and see if you want to use any of them as reference. If you really like the neckline on one, for example, you can use that as a guide. If you like the width of another, you can use that as well. Just remember, the width of this piece largely determines the sleeve length, so if you go narrower, you'll get at top with shorter sleeves.
2. I've included the measurements I used for the top on this example here:

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You'll want to fold your fabric in half length-wise. Then sketch out the front of the shirt. I find using a colored pencil in a contrasting color works well. Sketch a line for the actual edge of the shirt, then sketch another line 5/8" outside of that which will be your cut-line.

Wherever your line meets the fold, try to ensure it is perpendicular right at that point, or you'll get a slight "v" when you unfold your piece.

Sketch it out, making adjustments until you like it, and it matches your desired measurements. Just do the front piece first. Then, take a deep breath, and cut 😊

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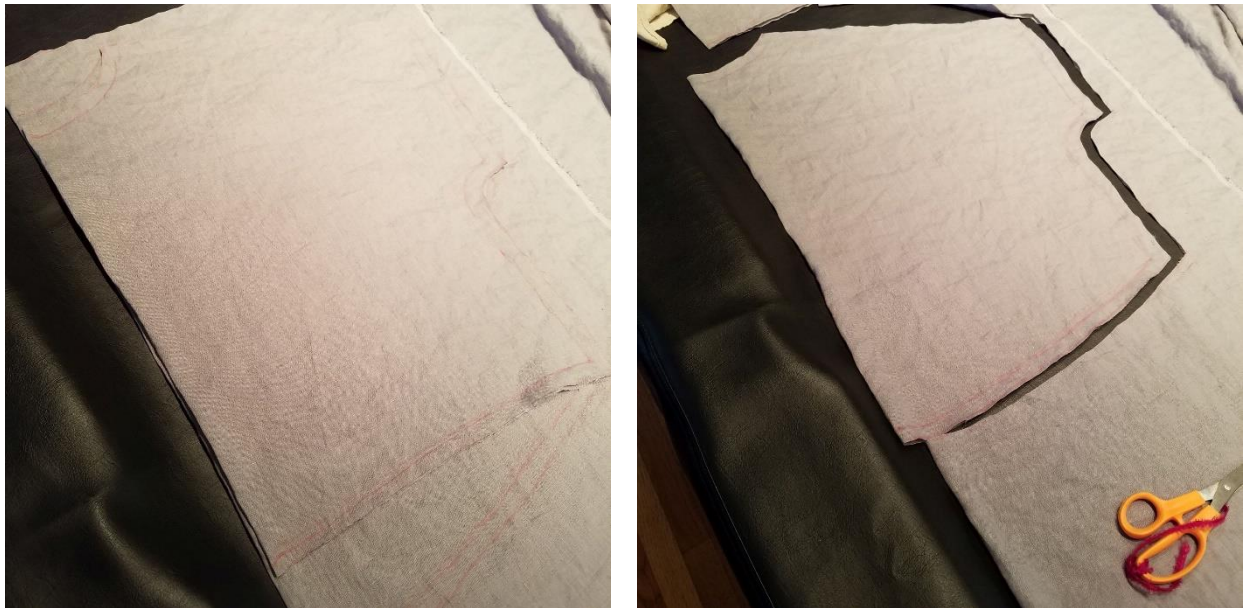
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Now, take the piece you just cut out and using it as a guide, trace out a piece for the back. The shoulder, sleeve and side will be the same as your front. The neckline will probably be a bit different (usually, I have about a 1" difference between how far the neckline dips in the front vs. in the back.) And the hemline will be different since this top has a high-low hem. In this case, the back hem is about 5" longer than the front.

I usually go back and also draw the line sewing line 5/8" inside the line I just traced around the piece, for consistency's sake.

Again, take a deep breath, and cut 😊

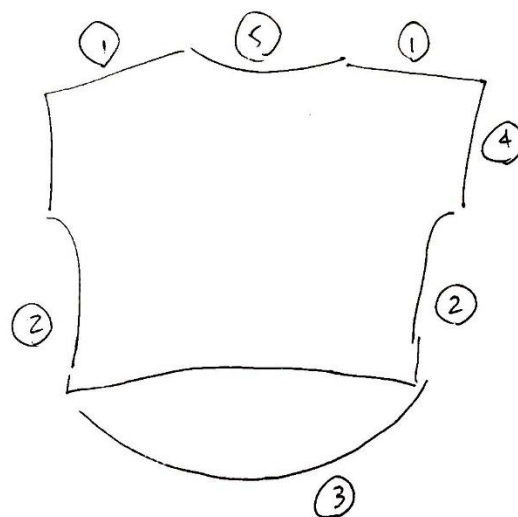


Step 4: Sew the shoulder and side seams

Ok -- if you've never used a sewing machine before, either read the manual or get a friend to help you figure out how to thread it, fill the bobbin, and sew both a straight and zig-zag stitch. You can practice on the scraps of linen you have from step 3. Once you've got that figured out, we can move on to sewing our first few seams.

We're going to sew the seams in this order:

1. Shoulder seams
2. Side seams
3. Bottom hem
4. Sleeve hems
5. Neckline



Seam sewing order

So let's start with the shoulder seams. Put the right sides together (your lines from drawing out the shape of the pieces should be facing outwards.) You might want to pin the seams, just so the fabric doesn't slip out of place while you're sewing. I didn't do that in these pics because linen usually has enough friction to stay in place.



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You may find that edges don't line up 100% when you get to the end (hey, we're only human!) Don't sweat it, just trim the edges even after you're done sewing (yes, this is fly-by-the-seat-of-your-pants sewing. That's why it's so fun!)



After sewing the shoulder and side seams, go back and zig-zag stitch in the seam allowance. That will keep the linen from fraying too much. If you have a serger, you can, of course, skip this step. Here's how my seams look after the zig-zag stitch:



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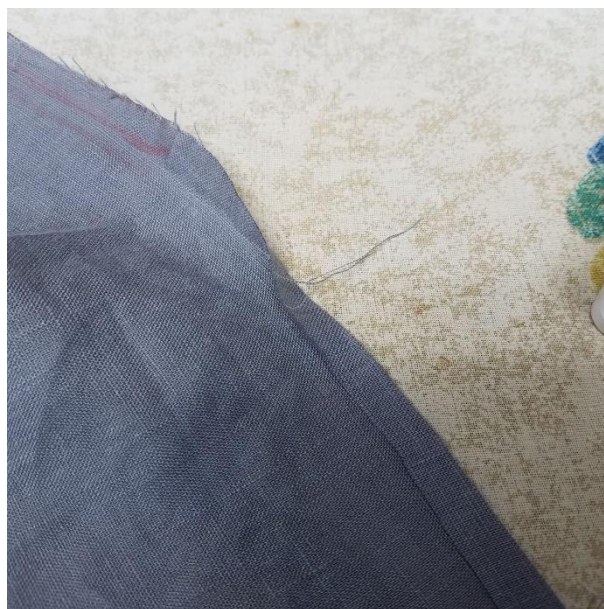
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Then go back and trim some of the excess from those seams.



Step 5: Press and sew the bottom and sleeve hems

It's time to get that iron out. If you're using linen, go ahead and let it get nice and hot. It will put a beautiful crease in the linen. We're going to do a double-fold hem, which is just like it sounds. Go around the bottom edge, folding and pressing about 1/4" of the raw edge towards the wrong side of the top:



Once you've gone around, do it again, folding and pressing again towards the wrong side. This will hide the raw edge inside the hem:

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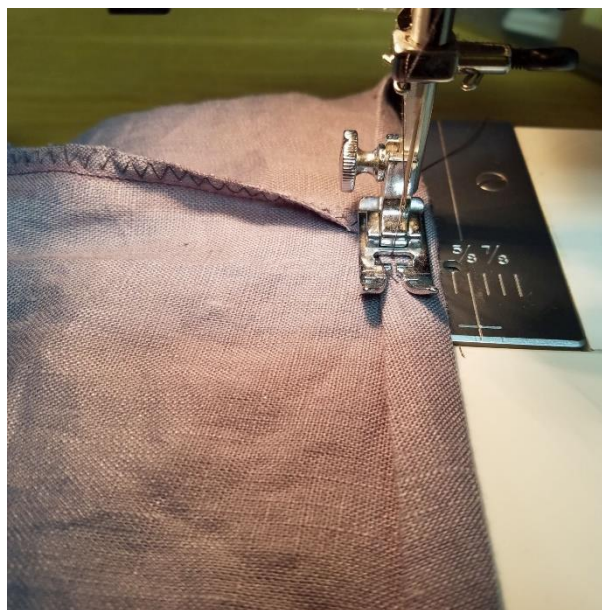
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Next, do the armholes. They are a bit trickier, so don't sweat it too much. I've found the best technique is to get some tension on them, and flip the edge over, holding it down on the ironing board and pressing. My edges usually wobble a bit between 1/4" and 1/2". Just press it nice and neat. That's the important part! Do it twice, same as you did with the bottom hem.



Then, sew the hems down, following about 1/8" in from the folded edge. Again, if you're a beginner, you might want to pin them before sewing. If you're more experienced, linen is pretty well-behaved and you can probably skip the pinning.



A few things to think about when you sew the armholes:

- Be obsessive about checking whether you are sewing the other side of the armhole into your seam. You only want to be sewing the seam allowance, but the other side of the sleeve has a way of sneaking under the sewing foot.
- Don't fret if you do sew it in, just rip the seam out where you've caught the other side, and then continue on your way.
- Consider starting to sew the hem from the armpit and then around. Then, if you have any extra gathers or pleats, they'll be in a more inconspicuous part of the shirt.

Step 6: Pre-sew, press, and sew the neckline

- This is the trickiest step, and the one where I'm breaking from the 'proper' way to sew a neckline. What you should really do is a [bias binding](#) here. I'm just lazy. Still, the necklines on my shirts lay reasonably well, and I don't have to fiddle with making the bias tape,
- First step is to pre-sew an edge all around the neckline. Just go around the neckline, about 1/4" in from the edge. You aren't sewing anything to anything here. Just running the sewing machine through a single layer of fabric:



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- OK, then get your trusty iron out again. Using the sewn line as a guide, press the fabric in towards the wrong side. When you get all the way around, fold and press again (just like the double-fold hem for the bottom and armholes.) It's pretty curvy, but just take it in short increments and it should be fine.

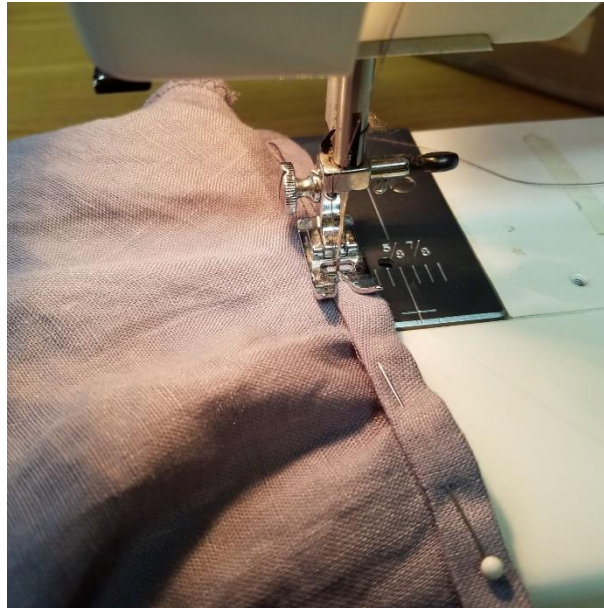


- Now here's where you really want to use pins. Pin the edge all the way around. It'll look something like this.



- And now the trickiest part -- slowly and carefully stitch your way around the neckline. The biggest thing you want to avoid is sewing any pleats into the fabric, especially ones that will show in the right side. Just keep flattening the material out, smoothing it, and convincing it this is what it wants to do. Try not to stretch it too much.

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- And here's what you'll end up with, which looks like a nightmare and is why the right way to do this is with a bias binding:



- However, the trick I've found, at least with linen, is that a good pressing will flatten things right out. Just take the iron sideways, from the bottom towards the neckline, and press it down. Here's how mine looked after a pressing:

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- You'll notice that, despite being careful, I managed to sew a tiny pleat in at a very noticeable place (left of center in the image.) To fix something like that, rip out the seam at the pleat and about 1/2" to either side. Then re-sew, from the right side, overlapping with the previously existing seam line by 1/4" on either side and making sure the fabric lays flat and doesn't get pleated again. Then give it a good press with a hot iron. All fixed!

Step 7: Press and try it on!

Yay! Give your top the once over with your iron and try it on. I hope you love it!

If not, here are a few other tips:

- Give it a wash and another press. This really does wonders to settle all the seams in place and let the fabric know what it's supposed to be doing. I've found this makes the garment hang and drape better. Wearing it around will help with this too.
- If it's too wide or too long, you can re-sew and re-trim and of your seams. You're the maker now, and you can edit your creation 😊

Here's my finished item:



Please leave a comment and let us know how it goes for you. Wear your new top with pride. You made it yourself. Who knows what you'll make next? Happy sewing!!