



Some knitters actively avoid patterns that will require sewing. But is seamless always the best way to go?

by *Sandi Rosner*

Seamless sweaters are everywhere, or at least that's how it seems to me. More and more, the patterns I find myself perusing—whether for work or pleasure—share a common element: they're constructed without seams. Top-down, bottom-up, raglans, round yokes, and set-in shoulders—all of these styles can be made without seams. But the simple fact that you *can* do something, doesn't always mean it *should* be done. Don't get me wrong. I like a seamless garment as much as the next knitter. The ability to fashion a three-dimensional object from one continuous strand of yarn is one of knitting's many magical qualities. We all know that pinning pieces together and sewing seams can be tedious and time consuming. There's certainly something to be said for casting off your last stitch to reveal a final, finished garment, but skipping seams isn't the best approach for every design. Here's why:

1. Seams Supply Stability

There's more to seaming than simply holding sides and sleeves together. Seams help a garment hold its shape through washing and wearing and give it structure while on the body.

Some years back, I knit a top using a hand-dyed nylon ribbon yarn. Soft and slinky, the sweater was constructed of mitered squares and was absolutely gorgeous. Two days after finishing it, I wore it to a Ricky Martin concert (don't judge—it was 1999 and he was hot). By the end of the evening, my sexy little top was nearly long enough to be a dress and the deep V-neck was falling off my shoulders, exposing my not-meant-to-be-seen lingerie. Slippery yarn, seamless construction, and gravity had all conspired to create a garment completely lacking in dimensional stability. In short, it was unwearable.

The lesson learned? Knitted fabric is inherently fluid and your choice of yarn can amplify this quality. Fibers that lack natural elasticity—cotton, linen, silk, and bamboo, for example—can cause a finished sweater to stretch, sag and droop. The more drape your fabric has, the more likely it is to stretch out of shape. Add seams and cast-on and bound-off edges and you'll be better able to hold this fluidity in check. Side seams and sleeve seams provide structure that will keep your sweater from growing ever longer. Shoulder seams and a bound-off back neck will prevent droopy shoulders. You may save time by creating a seamless sweater, but what good is that if it stretches

completely out of shape in the first wearing?

2. Seams Simplify Garment Construction

I've encountered many patterns where the planned avoidance of seams results in some pretty convoluted knitting gymnastics. Let's take the example of a fitted cardigan worked in a stitch pattern with a wide repeat. As you knit you'll need to take care to maintain the stitch pattern while working the shaping increases and decreases. If the sweater is made without seams, you'll not only end up working the shaping for the front neck, armhole, and sleeve cap all at once, you'll also have to make sure the stitch pattern stays correct in each of the five garment sections (two fronts, a back and two sleeves). No, thank you. As a general rule, I like instructions that are clear and straightforward. I don't want to have to create a spreadsheet to keep track of multiple shaping operations.

A fitted waist, fitted shoulders, and set-in sleeves give a garment the sharp, modern silhouette we all love to wear. And this shape is much easier to achieve if sleeves are knit separately and sewn in place. Working a sweater in pieces and then seaming them together allows you to keep the knitting simple.

3. Seams Highlight Style Lines

Used as a decorative element, seams can be fashionable as well as functional. Exposed seams on a cotton sweater are a great casual look. Just sew the seams inside-out, so the selvages roll to the outside. Accent them even more by overcasting the seam with a contrasting color yarn. Highlighting the shoulder and armhole seams of a sweater with an applied I-cord, or a crochet chain can mimic piping, adding a fancy dressmaker detail. Think of seaming as another creative element to your work and it will seem like an opportunity for personal expression, not a boring chore.

The Details

So now that you've considered the good reasons for seaming, which seaming technique should you use? For the most part, it's a matter of personal preference. Back stitch, mattress stitch, crocheted slip stitch are just a few of the methods at your disposal. Each has its loyal advocates and passionate critics. The only way to determine which works best for you, not to mention the project at hand, is to try them all.

No matter which seam you choose, it should be nearly invisible and not bulky. I use mattress stitch

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about 90 percent of the time, but will use back stitch when I want the seam to be extra strong. For shoulders, I prefer a three-needle bind-off. Kitchener stitch or other grafting techniques have their fans, but to me these don't really qualify as "seams." Ideally, grafting matches the surrounding knitted fabric, and as a result, it does not provide the dimensional stability needed for joining shoulders.

One final word of wisdom: Don't avoid seams because you lack confidence in your skills. Sewing a good seam takes practice and patience, but it isn't particularly difficult. The how-tos for a few of my favorites are below or [download the pdf](#). Seaming is a skill every knitter should have handy, ready to use when needed.



[Three-Needle Bind-Off](#)



[Shoulder Seam Graft](#)



[Mattress Stitch](#)



[Mattress Stitch on Reverse Stockinette Stitch](#)



[Mattress Stitch/Graft Combo](#)



[Slip-Stitch Crochet Seam](#)



[Inside-out Seam](#)

[Download a handy pdf with *In Praise of Seams* and instructions for all of the seaming techniques.](#)