

Fear of Cutting...

Daryl Lancaster



Magical Bias Dress
Handwoven 8-shaft combination twill, plain weave, supplemental warps.
Hand-dyed warps, cellulose fibres. Daryl Lancaster Pattern

Photos: Daryl Lancaster

I get large numbers of emails from new (and more experienced) weavers who want to move beyond scarves and kitchen towels and make something they can wear. That means that they must weave yardage. The 'rectangles sewn together' look is in again, but I've never subscribed to that school of dress. In fact, I've only ever made one 'bog jacket' in my life, and even then, I instinctively sewed some side seam shaping.

I learned to sew years before I became a weaver. I knew my way around cloth, and was never afraid to cut into it, whatever it was. Weaving just gave me a way to create more interesting cloth. And now that I dye yarn as well, the cloth can get even more interesting. But to make clothing that is well fitted, and well finished, I need to cut into that cloth.

It is easy for me to say, 'Just cut, nothing untoward will happen.' And nothing usually does happen, but I work with cloth that is well sett and well finished because I've learned those skills over the years. It has been stated once or twice that I'm lousy at weaving scarves because I sett them as if they were garment fabric, dense and stable. (Sett refers to density of cloth, i.e. ends per in/cm.) If I want a more drapey flowing fabric, I use a finer yarn. Sett is critical in weaving fabric for garments. As a rule, I look at yarn charts with recommended setts for different structures and go to the largest number and start working from there. I've judged many fashion shows in my career, and looked at many handwoven garments and probably the comment I have most often is, 'It should have been sett denser.' Cloth for garments should be stable enough to support construction details.

Along with the importance of density of sett, is finishing. Typically, when I embark on a piece of handwoven yardage, I use the first half-metre to really explore different wefts, thick, thin, light, dark, ugly, expected, protein, cellulose. I cut that sample off, divide it into three and start the finishing experiments. The first sample goes into my notebook. The second sample goes into a sink, with tepid water, some mild dish detergent or shampoo, and I hand swish it around, rinse and hang to dry. This is minimal finishing. The third sample, I stitch around to prevent unravelling, and toss it in a load of laundry, my regular cycle, with regular detergent, and finish off with a regular dryer cycle. This is maximum finishing. It is hard to know what the interlacement of each of those tested wefts will look like until I see the results of the two extremes of finishing. This heavily influences what weft I'll choose for the yardage.

If the third sample coming out of the dryer is loose and airy, it will probably not hold up well in repeated wearings. It will likely stretch out of shape on the wearer and be more difficult to construct. That warp would benefit from choosing a denser sett.

In garment construction we refer to lengthwise and crosswise grain. Lengthwise grain is synonymous with the warp, and crosswise grain is synonymous with the weft. When I cut into my cloth for sewing a garment, I've already chosen a sett that is supportive of construction details, and I've wet-finished the fabric in some form based on my tests. I mark my pattern paper with a grid if there isn't one. I pin the pattern carefully, lining up the grainlines of not only the warp or lengthwise grain, but also the weft or crosswise grain. It is instinctive to align the lengthwise grainline marking of the pattern with a warp thread.



Puzzle Walking Vest (back)
Handwoven 8-shaft combination structure, twill, plain weave, twill variations, with supplemental warps. Hand-dyed yarns, cellulose warp, wool weft. Daryl Lancaster Pattern



Autumn Plaid Tunic
Handwoven plaid from hand-dyed wool and mohair yarns. Twill.
Drop shoulders, shirt tail hem, kangaroo pocket and hood. Daryl Lancaster Pattern

Rarely do weavers think about whether the weft thread is skewed or not completely perpendicular to a warp thread. And I always cut my pattern pieces singly. Even if there is a centre-back fold, I cut one half and then flip the pattern, or trace a full back when creating the pattern.

Once a garment section is cut from the cloth, before removing the pattern piece, I put in lots of thread marks to indicate match points, darts, and other places that would ultimately be helpful when actually constructing the garment. I cut my cloth right side up, so I can clearly see any irregularities in the weaving, skipped threads, treadling errors, etc. Sometimes an error doesn't show on the right side of the cloth, so I don't worry. The thread marks will then show up on the right side, giving me a better orientation of what is the right side of the cloth and what is the wrong side of the cloth, since many handwoven fabrics look the same on both sides. I carefully lay the garment section to the side and continue cutting.

Probably the most often asked question that comes into my inbox, is how to secure the edges of the cloth that has been cut. The answer for this is so broad that I could write an entire book on the subject, but instead, my COVID project was to create a series of videos on sewing garments from handwoven cloth. There are 80 videos on my YouTube channel, The Weaver Sews, and the most often viewed video is one called 'Keeping the Cut Edges from Unraveling': <https://youtu.be/-T4yJk7Tv7k>

My answer is always, 'It depends...' Typically, I don't do anything until I'm ready for the seam finish, which is usually one of the first steps after staystitching. The choice of seam finish will depend on the garment silhouette, (coat versus summer top), whether the garment is lined, the fibre content (fulled wool versus slippery Tencel), and the ultimate look of the finished garment. Test the fit of any garment pattern first by making it in an old bedsheets. This test garment, called a toile, is an important step. I probably wouldn't make a summer top out of fulled wool, but most of us have been dressing ourselves long enough to get a feel for what kind of cloth works for a specific silhouette.

The sequence of construction is somewhat modified with a handwoven fabric. Staystitching is always first, to stabilize the seamline of an area cut off-grain, which is any area that does not follow a grainline, whether warp or weft. Shoulders are typically cut off-grain, so they don't follow either a warp or a weft thread. These seamlines need to be stabilised by stitching close to the seamline with normal machine stitches, stitching with the grain, meaning widest to narrowest, highest to lowest. In the case of a shoulder area, it is typically higher by the neck, and drops toward the armhole. Staystitching should be done, just inside the seamline, approximately 3mm from the seamline, starting from the neck and moving down towards the shoulder. There is a video on this as well, 'First Steps: Stay Stitching and the Hong Kong Seam Finish': <https://youtu.be/Ab0Y1d6RI6M>

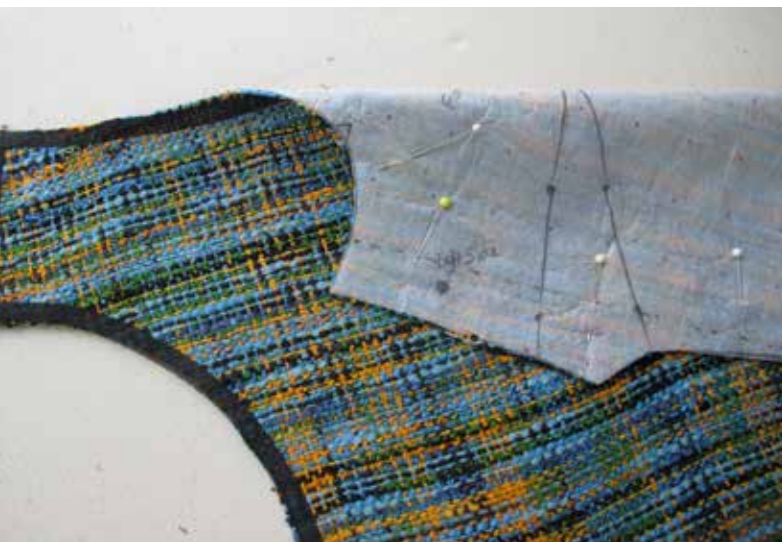


Fig.1. Plain weave, mixed cellulose yarns. Strips of crosswise cut fusible knit interfacing will stabilize shaped edges like a neckline. Daryl Lancaster Pattern

I handle each garment section as little as possible. If I sense that the section will start to unravel, if it is a slippery rayon, I might choose to stitch right on the edge of the garment section, all the way around, taking care to stitch in the direction of the grain, as described above, again widest to narrowest, highest to lowest. If I sense that the fabric will distort before I can really construct a certain area, like a scoop neck, I'll fuse a 1cm wide strip of a fusible knit interfacing cut in the stretchy crosswise direction, right along the edge of the cut garment section, so it gives and moulds around pattern shape. (Note: knit interfacings do not have grainlines the way we think of grainlines in woven structures. Tricot knits are stable in the lengthwise direction, and stretchy in the crosswise direction, that is the end cut off the bolt.) I've often done this with the pattern still attached (Fig.1). Since thread markings are done on the right side of the cloth, there is nothing in the way to keep me from fusing a knit strip around the edges of the garment section on the wrong side.

In some cases, for garments needing more body, or in the case of garments intended for outer wear, I might decide to fuse an underlining to the entire garment section. I always use a knit construction for my fusible underlining since it moulds well into the back of a handwoven cloth yet still allows movement within the cloth, keeping it stable and supported.

Most often, I do nothing to the edges. I staystitch where appropriate and move straight onto the seam finishes. Those might include a Hong Kong seam finish (see video reference on p.13) for an unlined jacket, or I might use a strip of bias cut 15 denier nylon tricot (typically used for lingerie) and just encase the edge of the area that needs a seam finish (Fig.2).

Hemming a handwoven fabric was one of my favourite discussions when I used to do technical critiques of garments in a conference fashion show. Many weavers get this wrong. I have a video specifically on hemming techniques, which clearly shows the problem when the top of the hem facing is stitched directly to the back of the garment cloth. A nasty ridge shows on the front of the garment where the outline of the hem facing was attached. Instead, hems should be attached lower down, with a loose catchstitch behind the binding or edge finish of the hem facing, so the hem floats on the surface of the outer fabric and leaves no ridge (Fig.3).



Fig.2. 8-shaft combination plain weave, twill, and supplemental warps, hand-dyed yarns, 15 denier bias cut nylon tricot knit seam finish. Daryl Lancaster Pattern



Fig.3. Plain weave, mixed cellulose yarns. Hemming behind the binding with a loose catchstitch to prevent a ridge showing through to the right side of the fabric.

One other really important rule of thumb when constructing handwoven garments is the knowledge that most handwoven fabrics will ease and grow, no matter how well they are sett and wet-finished. Our bodies act like giant steam irons, emitting heat and moisture as we wear the garment, and yarns become flattened out over time. This means that a garment that fitted well when constructed will likely relax and feel more comfortable over time, sometimes even loose, but more importantly, choices in construction need to recognize this issue. For example, unless a garment fabric has been stabilised with a fusible underlining, I always make sure my linings hang free of the bottom of the garment, secured only with a couple of loose French tacks. This allows the handwoven garment the opportunity to give, without being restricted by a lining.

Yes, handwoven fabrics can present some challenges when constructing a garment, but ultimately cloth is cloth, and even among commercially available cloth, each garment, pattern and cloth selection will present a wealth of opportunity to explore. Garment construction is a skill set that takes lots of practice, and patience, whether the cloth is commercial or handwoven. Ultimately, there is nothing more gratifying or satisfying than wearing something that came from your own hands.

About the author: Daryl Lancaster, a handweaver and fibre artist known for her award-winning handwoven fabric and garments, has been constructing garments for more than half a century. The former Features Editor for *Handwoven Magazine*, (over 100 articles and digital content) frequently contributes to various weaving and sewing publications. She blogs and offers a complete line of digital sewing patterns for handweavers from her website and shares her expertise through her YouTube channel *The Weaver Sews*.

Website: www.daryllancaster.com



Chaos Shirt
Handwoven 8-shaft combination twill, plain weave, supplemental warps. Hand-dyed yarns, cellulose fibres. Daryl Lancaster Pattern