

# Drivers' Ed for Sewing Machines

How you maneuver curves and turn corners influences your finished garment

by Judith Neukam



**T**here's nothing wrong with being a Sunday-morning-to-brunch kind of driver when you're behind the wheel of an automobile—but a technique tune-up can work wonders for sewing when you're driving fabric over feed dogs. Many sewing problems can be resolved by taking a few driving lessons. These lessons won't just make sewing easier—they'll improve your results.

I'm going to tell you how to drive straight, navigate turns, take corners, jump bumps, and sew seams and edges that will look the way they were intended to. Your success depends on how you use your hands to control the fabric as you sew.

Naturally, you need to develop a feel for your sewing equipment. When you've sewn on a machine for a time, you acquire an intimacy with the way it accelerates and how it sounds—you become familiar with its vibration, pings, and knocks, and you



## Straight sewing requires guides, pivots, and loops

The long seams found on pants legs, and the vertical seams on skirts and dresses should be straight and pucker-free, with seam allowances having a consistent width. Subtle changes in the width of multiple seam allowances around a garment can significantly change the garment's size.

To help you stay on the road for even and accurate seam allowances, most machines have **parallel seam guides** embossed on the throat plate (photo above). Simply **pivot the fabric** left to right or right to left with your hand (photos at right and top right) to keep the fabric edge aligned with the seam guide while the machine stitches.

When you're sewing through two or more layers of fabric, the bottom layer moves slightly faster than the top one, resulting in a misaligned seam. This is because the feed dogs grip and pull the lower fabric under the presser foot, but the presser foot creates a slight resistance on the top fabric. To keep both layers moving through the sewing machine at the same pace, **drape a loop of fabric** over your hand as shown at bottom right.



can hear the difference when it's not running smoothly. Smooth sewing depends on starting with a machine outfitted with the correct needle and thread for the fabric you're using.

Follow my recommendations for driving your sewing machine and you'll achieve extra-fine results in your sewing.

*Judith Neukam is an associate editor for Threads.*

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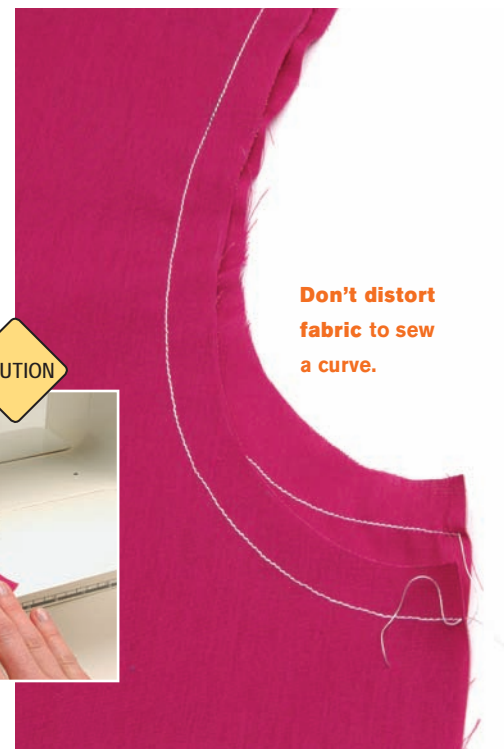
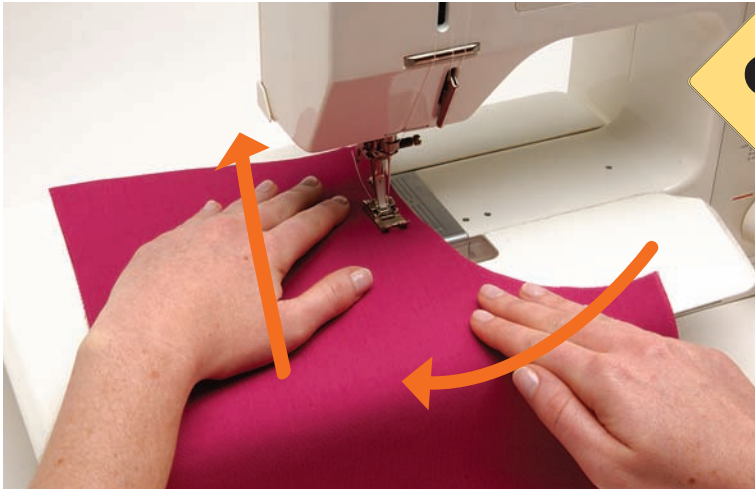


## Take it easy on curves with wrinkle-free maneuvers

Improperly sewn curves can cause necklines that flare away from the body, and armholes that gape, are too tight, or have rough-looking, puckered, or angular edges.

**The technique for driving** around both inside and outside curves is to sew them as if the fabric is a stiff, inflexible paper. You can't stretch or bend it as you sew, requiring you to use your whole hand to control the direction of the fabric. One hand controls the fabric to maintain an accurate seam allowance, while the other hand gently directs the fabric through the arc of the curve. The upper left photo shows how you **drive the fabric through a concave curve** in the direction of the arrows. In the middle photo, the right hand fingers steer the fabric around the curve and to the right from behind the needle. The bottom left photo shows how to use your hands to **drive the fabric through a convex curve**. In all cases, when you're driving curves, use your hands and fingers to direct and follow the original shape.

**Problems occur** if you distort the fabric as it goes through the needle in a way that changes the original shape of the curve. The tendency to straighten a concave curve as it is being stitched causes the curve to shorten, which can make a neckline or armhole too tight. In the bottom right photo, I've placed a curve that was straightened during sewing under a curve that was sewn properly, notice how the same curve shortened as a result.



**Don't distort fabric to sew a curve.**



## For sharp corners—drive to a point and pivot

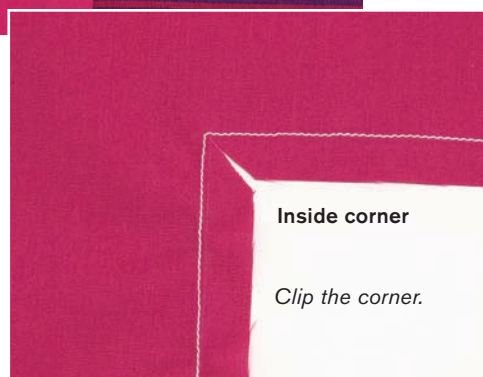
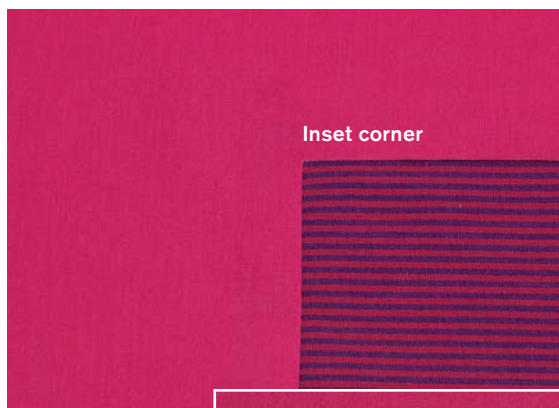
There are all sorts of corners: 90 degrees, 45 degrees or less, inside, outside, and inset—you see them on front openings, lapels, and pockets of blouses, jackets, and coats.

**Sewing a corner** is often a matter of sewing along a line to a marked point, positioning the needle down into the fabric, lifting the presser foot, pivoting the fabric to the desired angle, lowering the presser foot, and recommencing to sew. This method works best for inside corners or inset corners like the ones shown at right.

**For a well-sewn outside corner**, such as a collar point, add an extra step. Stop sewing the seamline a stitch or two before you reach the end point. With the needle down, pivot across the point as shown at right, take two or three stitches, and pivot again to follow the opposite seam.

**Compare the points** shown in the photos below when the fabric is turned right-side out. The squared-off corner on the left has a much sharper finished point than the example on the right, which was sewn by pivoting at the point.

**All corners benefit from** a shorter stitch length ( $\frac{1}{4}$  inch before and after the point). These smaller stitches support the fabric when the corner is trimmed or clipped.



**A squared-off corner results in a sharp point.**

**A pointed corner results in a blunt point.**

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## Two ways to jump bumps

When seams intersect with a waistband or hem, or you otherwise come to a point with a many-layered bump to sew over, it's easy to get high-centered. When this happens, your machine usually jams at the top of the bump because the presser foot isn't level with the feed dogs (see photo at near right). Most often, this results in a snarled mess of threads to cut out of your machine and your garment.

By always keeping the sole of your presser foot parallel with the feed dogs, you can drive right over these bumps without skipping a stitch. To keep your presser foot level, **use a shim** designed for this purpose, such as a Jean-a-ma-jig or Seam Buster (below the middle photo). However, you can just as easily **use a folded scrap of fabric** to raise the low end of the foot, as shown in the top and far right photos on the facing page. **Slide the folded scrap** under the heel of the presser foot and stitch until the toe of the foot drops—then position the scrap under the toe and drag it along as you continue sewing until the heel drops.

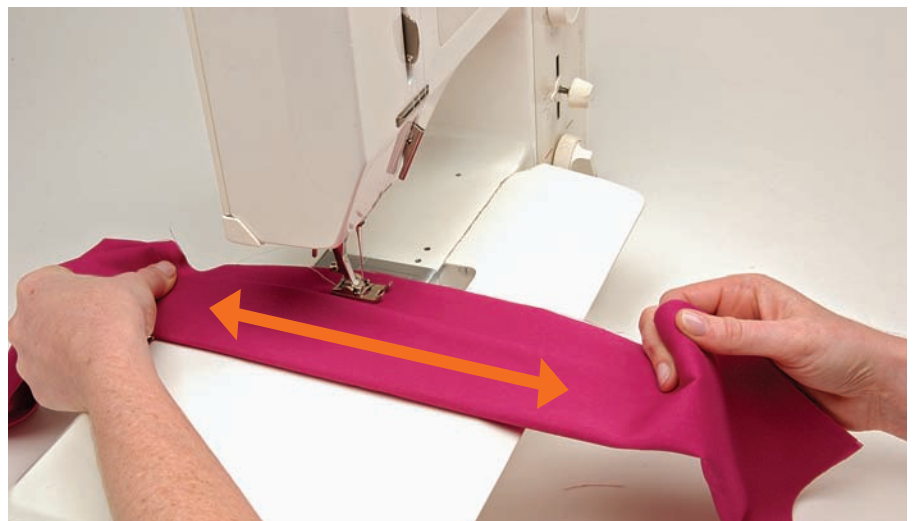


## Taut sewing pulls in two directions

**Taut sewing involves pulling** the fabric forward and backward simultaneously as you sew. This practice intentionally removes the slack from the fabric to produce an ultra-smooth seam or uniform topstitching on woven fabrics, or to create a lettuce finish on knit or bias edges.

However, if you pull the fabric too hard, you will overpower the feed dogs, which often causes the needle to break because the pressure on the fabric bends the needle, which then hits the throat plate and snaps. The goal is to **pull the fabric in opposite directions** enough to tighten it but

not so much that you lose a neutral tension—meaning a balance of pressure in both directions. By maintaining an equal amount of pressure on the fabric as it passes under the needle, the feed dogs control the movement of the fabric as they should. If you are in the habit of taut sewing all the time, break it, or you'll continue to break needles.



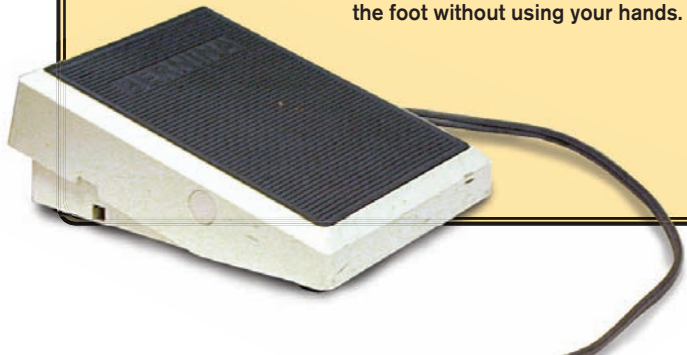


**You can purchase shims where notions are sold.**

## A presser-foot lift simplifies the journey

Machines come with wonderful features to make driving easier. One is the foot control that takes a half stitch when you heel-tap the control, enabling you to either raise or lower your needle position. Some machines offer a needle up/down button that performs the same function but requires a finger to operate.

A hands-free method of lifting the presser foot is another such feature. On some machines, the presser foot lifts automatically when you stop sewing—just enough to pivot your fabric—but not so much that you lose control of it. Other machines offer a **knee-operated presser foot lifter** (above photo at right), which enables you to lift and lower the foot without using your hands.



If your machine doesn't already have this feature, you can add an **after-market foot-operated presser foot lifter** to your current machine. For more information about a Universal Presser Foot Lifter visit [PresserFootLifter.com](http://PresserFootLifter.com) or write J.I.M. Enterprises, 1048-A Brown Ave., Lafayette, CA 94549.

With these two features, you can maneuver corners, curves, and tight spots without ever taking your hands off your fabric to hand-crank a stitch or needle position. They allow you to just leave the driving to invisible hands.

