

# A Pin *for* Every Purpose

A pin is not just a pin. Consider its five parts: head, point, length, thickness, and metal content.

by Carol Laflin Ahles

**P**ins may be the tiniest of sewing tools, but they take on big, important jobs. They hold pattern pieces in place, anchor seam allowances as you sew, fit fabric on the body, and secure all sorts of squirmy trims, delicate sequins, and miniscule beads. If, like many of us, you take for granted the pins that pepper your pincushion, I urge you to take a good hard look—from head to point—at each of those little bits of metal. There are many, many pins on the market—some are quite unusual and wonderful. What is the reason for all of these choices? One pin can't successfully tackle all fabrics and sewing tasks. Simply stated, different jobs require different pins.

## Any pin is just the sum of its parts

The seemingly endless variety of straight pins can be daunting, unless you break each pin down into its five main components: head, point, thickness, length, and metal content. Just figure out what your needs are in each of the five areas, then seek out a pin with those qualities.

I suggest that you buy a few basic styles for the kinds of sewing you do most, such as dressmaker, extra-fine, and quilting, and then think of the other pins as problem solvers. In other words, if you come across a situation where your stash of basic pins can't handle a particular project, such as appliqué, supplement with appliqué pins. And with every pin you purchase, it's a good idea to keep a portion of the packaging somewhere in your sewing room, and tape one sample pin onto the label as a reference.

When you run out of your favorites, you'll have all the information you need to replenish your stock.

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*Carol Laflin Ahles would like to thank Teresa Settles and Dianne Giancola at Prym-Dritz, Sarajane Johnson and Cheryl Savini at Quilters' Resource, Mr. Jan Carr at Clover, Clotilde, and Kay and Steve Lancaster.*

## Why the tomato?

According to folklore, placing a tomato on the mantle of a new home guaranteed prosperity and repelled evil spirits. If tomatoes were out of season, families improvised by using a round ball of red fabric filled with sand or sawdust. The good-luck symbol also served a practical purpose—a place to store pins. These days, a strawberry-shaped emery often comes attached to the tomato. It is filled with silica, which cleans and sharpens pins and needles.

# Head

The head is the most recognizable part of a straight pin. What it is made of dictates if it can be pressed, and the shape determines when you should use it in the construction process.



**WARNING:**  
Some plastic pin heads can melt under a hot iron and adhere to the fabric.

## Flat

Also called “no head,” this pin may be pressed with a hot iron. It’s also good for handwork, as thread doesn’t get caught on it. A flat head can be difficult to see on busy or textured fabrics, however.

## Plastic

Ball-shaped plastic heads come in different sizes and colors, and may be pearlized. Wide, flower-shaped plastic heads are the easiest to spot, and because they are flat, they come in handy when you need to lay a ruler or tape measure over a pinned area. They are also a good choice for lace, eyelet, and loose weaves, as the large heads won’t slip through the holes in the fabric.

## Glass

This small, ball-shaped head is fairly easy to see, and won’t melt when touched with an iron.

## Metal

Metal balls aren’t common, but they can be pressed with an iron without fear of melting.



**From left to right:**  
Flat; pearlized plastic, plastic flower-head, ball-shaped plastic; glass (yellow and blue); and metal (brass and silver).

## Tip:

### Use only the best—toss the rest

If a pin becomes bent, dull, or rusted, don’t hesitate to throw it out. A less-than-perfect 1¢ pin can wreak havoc on your \$10-, \$20-, or \$40-a-yard fabric.



**Every pin needs a home.** With its shut-tight lid, the magnetic dispenser at left is the best way to transport pins, and the lid grabs a few pins every time you open it. Although called a magnetic pincushion, the tool at right is really just a magnetic dish. Fill it with pins and flip it upside down—not one will wriggle free. You can also toss a pin in its general direction and the magnet will draw it in.



(continued on the following page)



**Pincushions can take on a variety of whimsical shapes.** To break away from the traditional tomato, try a stuffed purse or a flower mounted on a golf tee. The lanolin in the felted wool cushion at right lubricates and protects pins from rust and corrosion.



## Point

The points of pins should slide cleanly into fabric without causing snags or unsightly holes. Different fabrics require different types of points.

### Sharp

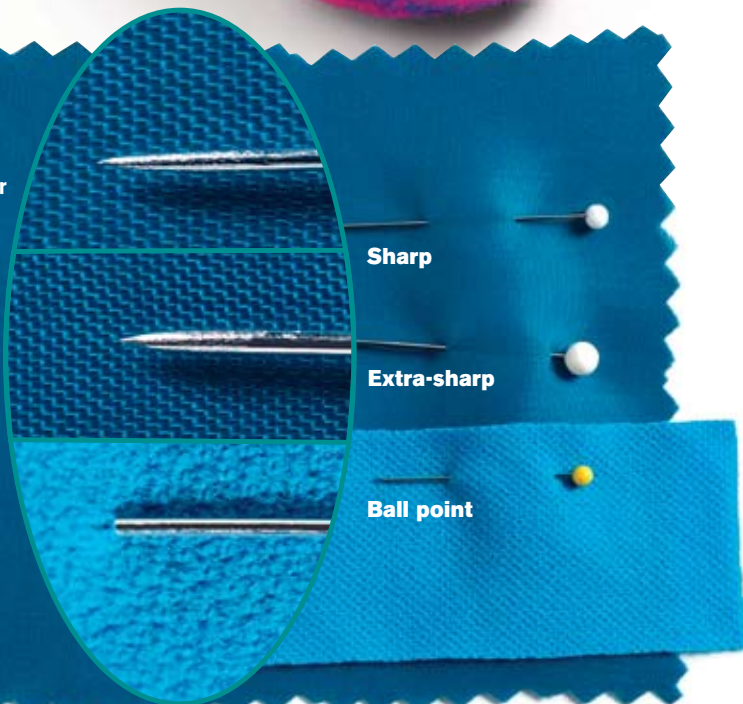
These all-purpose points are a fine choice for loosely woven, medium-weight, and heavy-weight fabrics.

### Extra-sharp

More defined and tapered, this point passes cleanly through delicate fabrics.

### Ball point

Created especially—and only—for knits, this point is rounded so it slips between the loops of the fabric and doesn't pierce or pull the yarns.



## Length



Some sewing projects require long pins, other ventures may do better with short, stubby pins. Pin length used to be listed on packages as sizes (size 12 =  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch long, etc.), but most pin manufacturers now just list the actual lengths.

### Appliqué/sequin

This  $\frac{1}{2}$ - to  $\frac{3}{4}$ -inch length is the best choice for applying appliqué, trim, or sequins, as you can position many pins close together (far left). Long pins, in comparison, overlap awkwardly (left).

### Dressmaker/all-purpose

If in doubt, reach for this medium-length ( $\frac{1}{16}$ - to  $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch) pin. It is appropriate for all sorts of garment sewing.

### Quilting

Made especially for pinning through many layers of fabric and batting, this  $\frac{1}{2}$ - to 2-inch pin is also garment-friendly, as its long length hardly ever slips out of place.

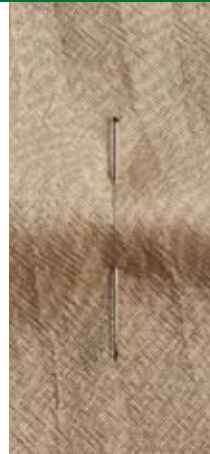


## Thickness

To avoid marring fabric with pin holes, choose the thinnest pin to accomplish the task at hand. Unfortunately, we discovered that the naming convention, as it relates to actual diameters, isn't consistent among manufacturers. So the best thing to do is roll a pin between your fingers to gauge its actual thickness.



**.4mm**  
The thinnest traditional pin we found was a .4mm "Patchwork Pin (Fine)" by Clover. It passes beautifully through the finest of sheers.



**.5mm**  
Called "extra-fine," "super-fine," "silk," or "satin," these .5mm pins are recommended for fine, lightweight fabrics, including some sheers.



**.6mm**  
Most all-purpose pins are labeled "fine," and are best paired with medium-weight fabrics.



**.7mm or .8mm**  
Although harder to find, these diameters are great for thicker fabrics like heavy wools, denim, and quilted layers. But they do leave large holes in their wake.

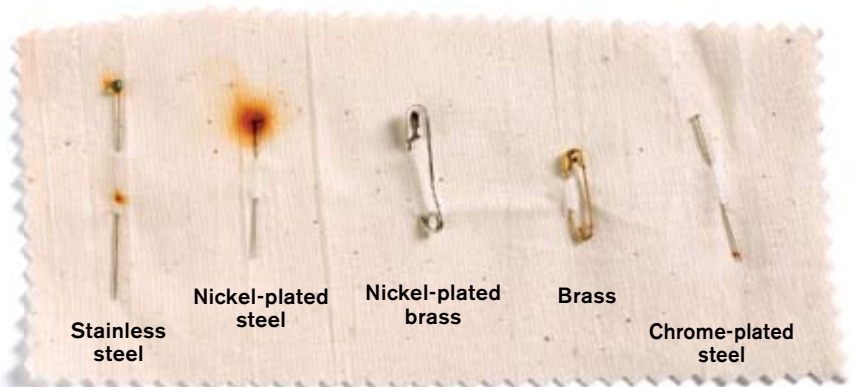
## Insect pins: superfine and rust-resistant

Forget bugs, this very skinny (size 00 = .3mm) and flexible spring steel pin is a great choice for fine fabrics. Originally created for insect collectors and entomologists, the double-coating of black enamel—to, yuck, resist insect fluids—makes them easy to see, plus they're rust-resistant.



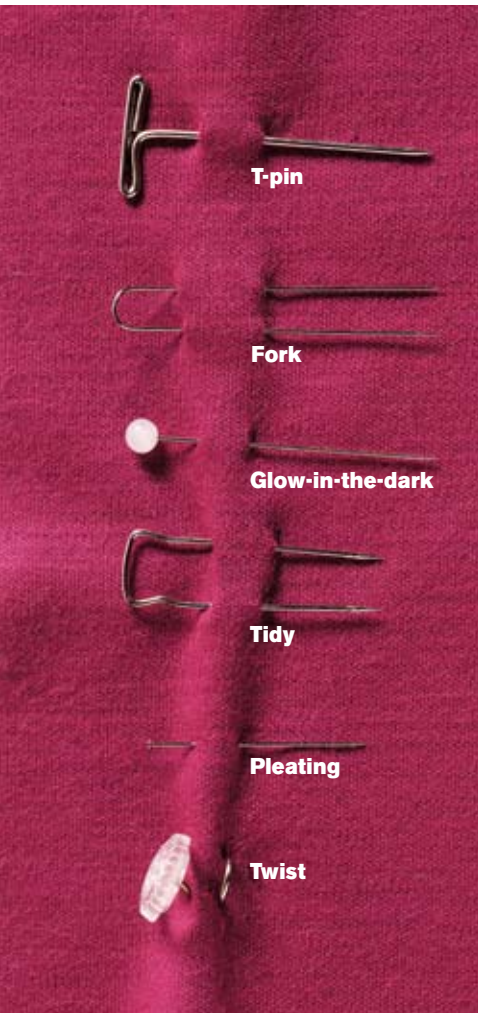
## Metal content

A pin's content is important, especially if you are allergic to certain metals. There are six types: stainless steel, nickel-plated steel, nickel-plated brass, brass, and chrome-plated steel, which is the strongest option. If you aren't sure of the metal, test it with a magnet; stainless steel and brass pins won't cling.



**Put through a salt-water test, only nickel-plated brass passed.** To test the rust-resistance of various metal types, we spritzed each pin with salt water. The results were surprising, as nickel-plated and chrome-plated steel should only rust if the plating is damaged; stainless steel should offer the best resistance. Brass tarnishes, but any residue washes out.

**THE BOTTOM LINE:** Never leave any pin in fabric for very long, especially if you live close to the ocean's salty environment.



## Specialty pins

For certain projects, you need special pins. The ones shown here aren't always available at the local sewing shop, so you may need to order them.

### T-pin

This 1¾-inch-long thick pin can pierce and hold hefty upholstery and outdoor fabrics.

### Fork

Fine and 1⅝ inches long, this two-prong pin curves up at the end, which allows you to pin hard-to-handle fabrics, like lining, without lifting it. Also use to align stripes and plaids.

### Glow-in-the-dark

If you drop this pin, simply turn off the light, and look for its glowing head.

### Tidy

Similar to the fork pin, but flat and square. It was created to secure doilies, arm covers, and slipcovers to furniture.

### Pleating

This fine, strong, sharp pin doesn't look all that special, but is 1 inch long, which allows you to perfectly pin out pleats.

### Twist

The thumbtack-like plastic head and short corkscrew shaft hold slipcovers and mattress pads in place.

## Find it here

### Brush Hollow Studio

(felted wool pincushion on p. 26)  
Ewesful.com

### Carol Ahles Fine Heirloom Tools

(pewter pincushion below)  
CarolAhles.com

### Clotilde, LLC

(pins; magnetic pincushion on p. 25)  
Clotilde.com

### Clover Needlecraft, Inc.

(pins)  
Clover-USA.com

### Color Me Patterns

(pincushion patterns)  
903-868-3105

### Indigo Instruments

(insect pins on p. 27)  
Indigo.com

### Nancy's Notions

(pins and pincushions)  
NancysNotions.com

### Prym-Dritz Corporation

(pins; finger pincushion on p. 25; spool and purse pincushions on p. 26)  
Dritz.com

### QuiltSmiths

(pincushions)  
QuiltSmiths.com

## Safety pins won't wriggle free...

...or stab you as you sew. They are available in a range of metals and colors, as well as sizes: size 00 (¾ inch long), size 0 (7/8 inch long), size 1 (1⅛ inches long), size 2 (1½ inches long), and size 3 (2 inches long).



### Skirt

Also known as a kilt pin, this decorative pin holds skirts and kilts closed.



### Button

The bump in this pin holds delicate, nonwashable buttons temporarily in place.



### Curved

The bend makes basting quilts easy, and ensures that the layers never shift.



### Traditional

These pins can be used for sewing, quilting, and crafts.

