



# Tailor's Ham

I tell people all the time I'd sooner give up my really good sewing machine than a really good iron.

What?

That's right! In my humble (not-so-much) personal opinion, pressing is 90% of sewing. At the end of the day, you can have the most amazing sewing machine in the world, but if you have a five-and-dime iron and no pressing tools, you're never going to get a good press. And after all is said and done, it's great pressing that makes for a great garment. (And great fabric, and cutting, and sewing...)

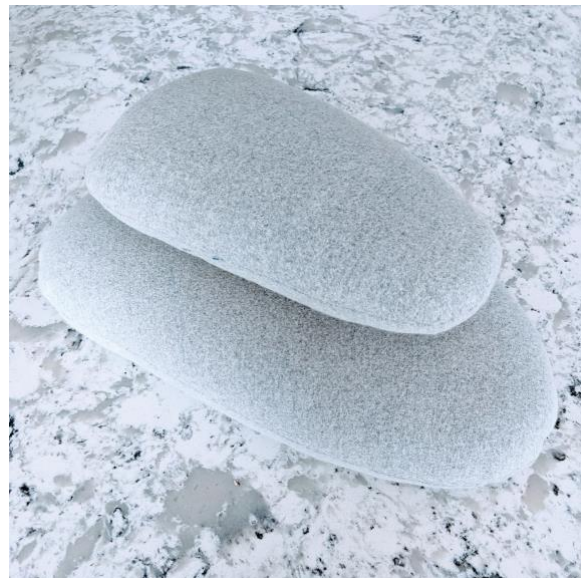
What makes for a good iron? Good heat and good steam. Couple good heat and steam with a long-lived iron, and you'll have a winning combination.

But that's not what this article is all about. Of equal importance to a great iron is a great pressing surface and pressing tools. I find myself notoriously dissatisfied with retail ironing board pads. I can live with the covers. The trick is knowing what to use for the pad. What I found that serves the purpose perfectly is a textile known as silence or bump cloth, or table felt.

Silence cloth (pictured right) is a heavy, double-faced cotton fabric that is napped on both sides. Sometimes used as an interlining for draperies or under tablecloths, it is perfect for padding an ironing board. (It's also great for building out costume components – but that's another story.) or

For an ironing board pad, cut one piece of silence cloth (or two or three – you decide how much padding you want on your ironing board) the size of your ironing surface. Then, simply install your ironing board cover.

Once you've got a good, flat pressing surface, you're almost set. If you're making garments, you'll definitely want a pressing ham. And a sleeve roll. And a tailor's anvil. And a clapper. More on those later!



# What's a pressing ham and why do I care?

A pressing ham (also known as a tailor's ham or a dressmaker's ham – the name derives from the shape) is an oblong object with a nose that is narrower than the seat. It allows you to press items without flattening them. For instance, when sewing a dart into a garment, we are creating shape that contours to the body. When we press the dart, we don't want to lose the countour. So, one of the items we use is a pressing ham to support the shape of the garment. Not only does it support the shape, but pressing hams are filled with sawdust which helps to draw the moisture when steam is applied.

Pressing hams are available for purchase on the retail market. However, I find them quite spongy, and it's inevitable that the size in which they are available – though “standard” – doesn't always serve the purpose as well as you hope.

So, I acquiesced and made a pattern, and now make my own. I'm not sure why I was so reluctant, other than I felt like I really shouldn't have to make a pressing ham. However, on the other side of making one, I'm quite glad that I did. \$eally easy to make, my custom hams are firm, made in fabric that I choose, and the right size for my purposes.

## You need to gather some things...

For this project, you'll need:

Sewing Machine

Sewing Machine Needle Size 80 Sharp

Polyester Sewing Thread

Pins

Fabric Marker

Scissors

Handle Needle and Thimble

Pattern (The last 6 pages of this document, you'll find 4 sizes. The smallest is what you will typically find available in stores. The medium, large and extra large may seem a bit odd at first, but I find them really useful. They often take the place of my ironing board.)

Fabric: muslin (2 under layer pieces cut 1" larger than pattern) and Melton wool (2 top layer pieces, cut 1" larger than pattern):

Small: 10" x 15"

Medium: 13" x 18"

Large: 16" x 21"

Extra Large: 19" x 24"



# And to gather some more things...

**Sawdust** I like to use cedar sawdust (I like the smell!), but any sawdust will do. Cedar sawdust can be a little hard to find (I found it online), and it can also be expensive. However, one of my students was able to help herself to the sawdust at her local hardware store that cuts lumber for customers.

**Spoon** To scoop the sawdust into your ham.

**Muddler** Or something to help tamp down the sawdust. You can also use your fist. You want to make sure it's really compacted.

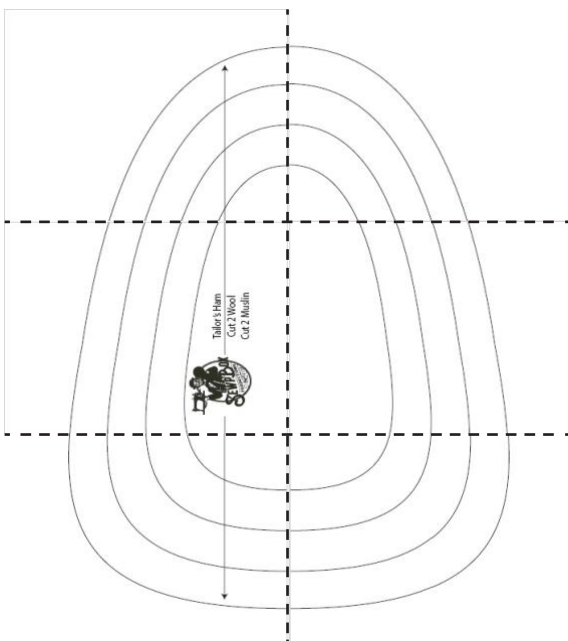
**Flower pot** I found it helpful to place the smaller end of the ham into some sort of container, such as a flower pot, to support the ham while stuffing it with sawdust. For the biggest ham, I have a small wastebasket next to my sewing machine that has an oblong opening – it worked well.



## Let's get to it!

### Preparing the Pattern

The pattern prints on 6 pages. Simply print, butt the edges and tape together. There are no overlaps. (Once printed, I stapled mine to manila (poster board is fine, too) and used a slot punch so that I can mark the pattern lines and still keep all the pattern sizes intact.)





## Cutting the Fabric

Instead of cutting fabric following the outline of the pattern, you'll find it easier to sew if you cut rectangles of fabric 1" larger than the cut lines of the pattern. (Anytime you are sewing curved shapes together, the shapes have a habit of not lining up as precisely as you might like. Cutting a larger size of fabric, tracing the outline to the upper most layer, then sewing on the line helps to mitigate this.)

(The fabric requirements described on the first page describe the measurements needed for all sizes inclusive of the 1" allowance.)

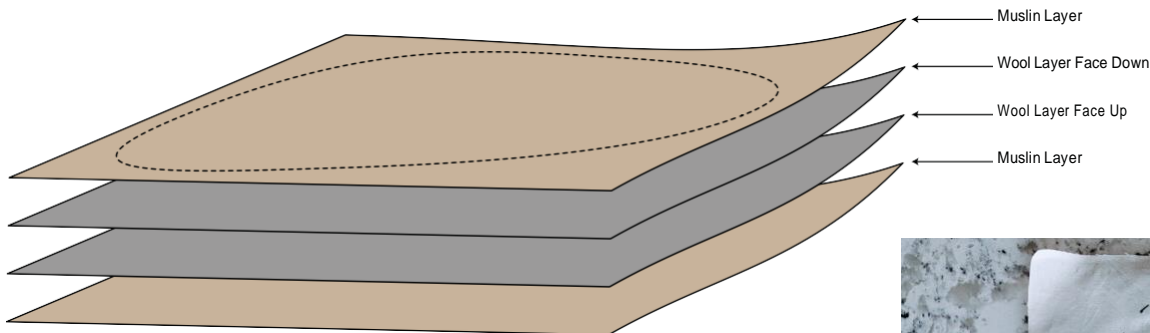
## Tracing the Fabric

Using a fabric marker, trace the pattern to the wrong side of the top layer, as shown below. (Don't tell anyone, but I use a felt marker for this - it's not going to show. And even if you are concerned that it might show, you can sew inside the line slightly.)

## Layering the Fabric

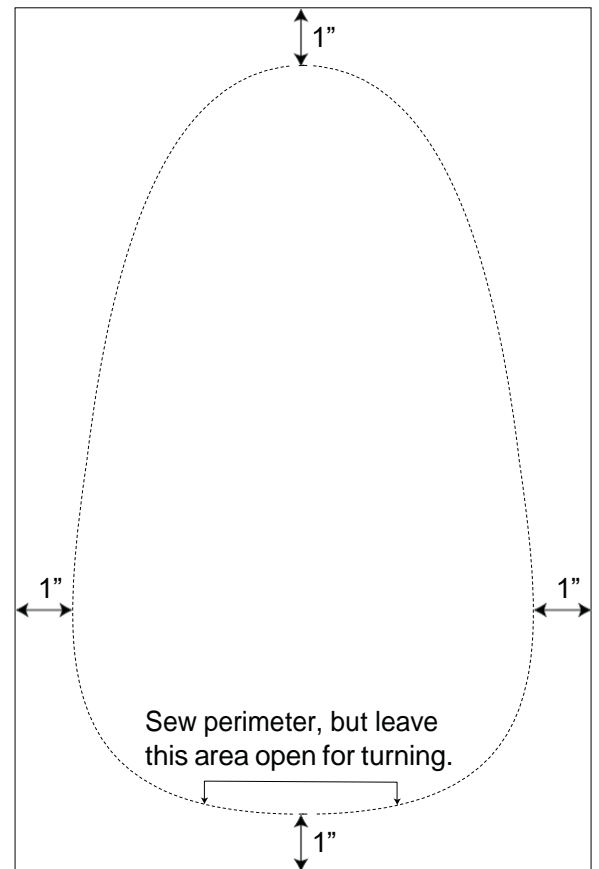
Before sewing, layer your fabrics in the following order, from bottom to top:

1. Inside Layer (muslin)
2. Outside Layer (wool, face up)
3. Outside Layer (wool, face down)
4. Inside Layer (muslin)



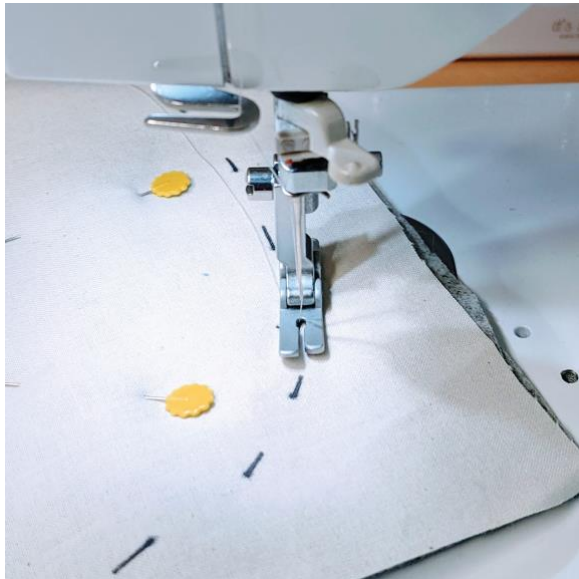
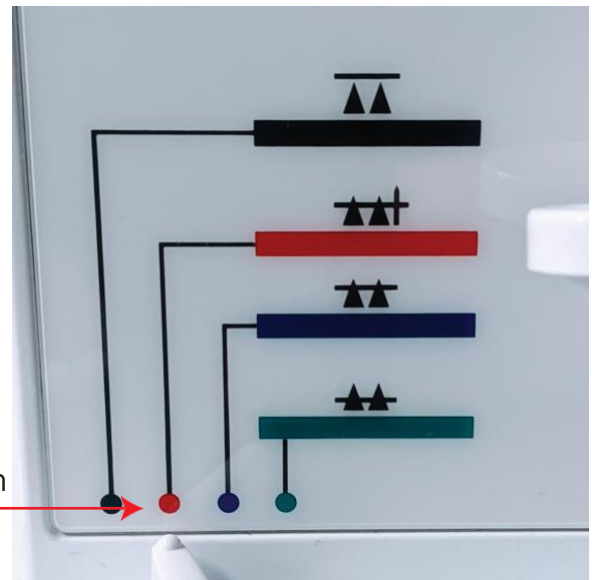
## Pinning the Fabric

Pin inside of the pattern to secure the layers.





Baby Lock Accomplish  
Pin feed setting



### Sewing the Layers

When sewing multiple layers, using a walking foot will help the fabric layers to feed together successfully. (On my Baby Lock Accomplish, I have a pin-feed feature that serves the same purpose as the walking foot. I use this feature all the time!)

Using a short stitch length of about 2.5 mm, sew on the line. (If you like, make two rounds of stitching to really secure the edge.) Leave the larger end open so that you can successfully turn the ham to the face side. I like to leave at 3"- 4" if possible so that I can get my big hand in to pack the sawdust.

### Trimming the Seam Allowance

Once sewn, trim seam allowance to 1/4" around the perimeter except at the opening (leave this area a little longer - 1/2" is fine.) I like to use my pinking shears for this - it makes the seam allowance less bulky.



Turn the ham right-side-out.



### Time to Pack the Ham

Now, it's time to start packing the sawdust into the ham. Retrieve your chosen receptacle to support the ham. Use a spoon, a scoop - whatever works! - to start filling the ham. After every 4 or 5 heaping teaspoons, tamp the sawdust firmly into the ham.





### Time to Close the Ham

When you've finished filling the ham, lay one raw edge flat. Lap the folded edge of the other raw edge back to cover the first raw edge, and slip stitch the opening closed. It doesn't have to be pretty (What?? Of course it does...), but as long as you take reasonably small stitches, you'll be surprised at how nice it looks when you are done.)



Once you close up the ham, it's likely to be a bit misshapen. Don't hesitate to mould and knead it into a shape that is more pleasing.

Now that you've made a pressing ham...

There's no reason not to add a sleeve roll - it's even easier.

1. Cut two inner layers 5" x 18" and two outer layers 5" x 18".
2. Round the ends. (I use the edge of a glass for the rounded corners.)
3. Layer the sleeve roll as you did for the tailor's ham. Pin all layers together.
4. Leaving one side open at center for about 4", sew around the perimeter 1/4" from the edge.
5. Before turning, grade the seam allowances at the corners to help them finish more cleanly once turned to the face side.
6. Turn right-side-out once completed (no need to trim seam allowances.)
7. Fill and finish, just like you filled and finished your pressing ham.





## And... What exactly is a tailor's anvil?

A tailor's anvil (you'll also hear it referred to as a tailor board) is an amazing pressing tool. Built sort of like a modern art project, it's got a myriad of contours and points to allow you to get into areas of a garment that are challenging at best to press.

For some reason, it's no longer manufactured broadly. There are some independent wood workers who make them, and you can find them online. Since most people have no clue what it is, you can also find used ones on eBay.



## And the Clapper?

When pressing, we often first apply a bit of steam. Steam helps to relax the fibers in the fabric. Relaxed, steamed fibers are easier to press into a desired shape or position.

Once steamed and positioned, the seam benefits from being set. To set the seam, we need to remove the moisture from the fibers. Enter the clapper. After pressing the seam into position, we place the clapper over the seam and exert a little pressure. The hard wood of the clapper draws the moisture from the fabric, and the pressure sets the seam.

