



# Fabrics 101: Embroidering on Sweater Knits

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## Products Used

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Sparrow Winter Trio (Sku: ESP24277-1)  
A Toile Sunflowers Design Pack - Lg  
(Sku: EDPI2245-1)

I've noticed a chill in the air and have started to swap out the summer garments in my closet for my warmer autumn and winter gear. This means heaps of sweaters in all styles and textures. Cashmere and wool, zipper fronts and crewnecks - I have quite a collection due to the frosty Minnesota winters. I was recently asked if it was possible to embroider on sweater knits. And to that, I say, "You betcha!" (That's Minnesotan for "Absolutely!")

Sweaters were traditionally made from wool (either sheep or alpaca). But today's sweaters and knits are found in cotton, synthetic fibers, or various combinations of the three.

These are the names of some of the wools commonly that pop up on labels: angora, cashmere, merino, and mohair.

Due to their elasticity and drape, knits can fit comfortably without needing a tailored fit -- and they can be roomy, and still cozy. Heavy sweaters are great for keeping out the cold, while lighter sweaters are perfect for protecting wearers from a cool breeze.

In reviewing the history of sweater knits, it's interesting to note that it's only been worn as a fashion item for about 100 years.

## Steps To Complete



The creation of knit cardigan sweaters is credited to James Thomas Brudenell, the 7th Earl of Cardigan. A British military commander during the mid-1800's Crimean war, he was to have started the front closure sweater trend that quickly spread across the British Isles and over to France. For many of us, the most famous cardigan-wearing celebrity has to be children's television show host, Mr. Rogers, who changed his cardigan at the beginning of every show.

Aran sweaters, from the western coast of Ireland, were knitted in early 1900's by a group of women determined to sell them for income. The heavy, cable-patterned sweaters of wool were being sold in the United States by the 1950's, when houses and cars were better heated, and ultra-heavy winter coats were replaced by sweaters, ponchos, and shawls.

In the fashion world, sweater knits became ultra-feminine in the 1950's with angora sweaters full of lovely collars and embellishments. Fashion icon Jacquelyn Kennedy loved this style. The following decades brought sweater coats, long-belted sweaters for men and women, argyle patterns and cashmere luxury.



Soft and cuddly, hearty and warm, there is no doubt that sweater knits are fantastic for beating the cold in a sweater, throw, or pillow form, but, they are not without flaws. They can be notorious for stretching, shrinking, retaining odors, and snagging.

With cotton and chenille, watch out for shape retention issues. Chenille is highly water sensitive, while silk knits may retain odors.

Most commonly, though, sweater knits are known for snagging and pilling, especially merino, wool, chenille, silk, rayon, and acrylic versions. Reduced friction can help minimize pilling - something to remember when layering coats and jackets over sweaters.





When embroidering on sweater knits, there are plenty of needle options. I have used 75/11 sharp needle, a ball point needle, a universal needle, and plain old embroidery needles. Ball point, universal, and embroidery needles have tips that are more rounded than sharp sewing needles. The rounded tips mean that the needle pushes the knit fibers aside to make a stitch, whereas the sharp needle will cut through the fibers. When working with very thin knits, rounded-tip needles are recommended to avoid holes in the fabric.

However, needles with rounded tips can result in embroidery that's not as crisp. The examples below are with hearty, sturdy knits, and I used a 75/11 sharp sewing needle with great results.

Sweater knits can handle almost any type of design, but texture and the draping of the fabric do need to be taken into consideration. Lightweight knits, such as cashmere, drape beautifully when embellished with light designs such as toile, redwork, or those that have plenty of open space. On the other end of the spectrum, when choosing a design for a ribbed or more loosely woven knit, a complex design is necessary so that it's not lost in the space or texture of the knit.

Since many sweater knits are now blended with stretchy, synthetic fibers, such as lycra for additional elasticity, I recommend using cutaway stabilizer for knit embroidery. It will best support the fabric during the embroidery, and also through wearing and washing. The stitches will be nice and crisp, and even if the fabric is a stretchy knit, there will be no puckering or dimpling.

For knits with a slightly more open weave, to prevent the stabilizer from showing through, use a no-show stabilizer, such as Floriani's No-Show Mesh. That's a nice, sheer stabilizer, strong enough to support the fabric.

I have one additional stabilizer step for sweater knit embroidery. Whether you use cutaway or the No-Show Mesh stabilizer underneath the fabric, I also use a topping (water-soluble stabilizer). This prevents the stitches from sinking down into the knit. If you're stitching on dry-clean only or cashmere knits, you probably won't want to launder the item to remove the stabilizer. Instead, use a wet cotton swab (or your

When embroidering on ribbed or textured sweater knit, pre-stretch the fabric prior to embroidering. This ensures that the embroidery and fabric will lie properly when the sweater is worn. To do this, turn the sweater inside out, spray a piece of medium weight cutaway stabilizer with temporary adhesive, and smooth the stabilizer onto the back of the area to be embroidered.



Hoop the fabric and stabilizer together somewhat loosely, and then pull the fabric on the left and right sides of the hoop stretching it to the point that it will stretch when worn. Be sure to pull the fabric as evenly as possible so that the ribs on the fabric are even. Tighten the hand screw on the hoop and again smooth the fabric onto the stabilizer to secure it in place.



Next, lay a piece of lightweight water-soluble stabilizer on top of the fabric and embroider the design. I used Sulky Solvy water-soluble stabilizer for this project.



After the design has finished stitching, trim away the cutaway stabilizer from the back of the embroidery leaving 1/2" excess around the edge of the design. Then, tear away the excess water-soluble stabilizer from the top of the design. To remove any small bits of stabilizer, wet your fingertips with water and gently brush the stabilizer away. Once the stabilizer is all removed, the sweater will contract and pucker.



The solid, filled design - [Sparrow Winter Trio](#) - shows up beautifully and does not sink into the fabric and ribbing.



For smooth, tightly woven sweater knits, hoop the fabric with medium cutaway stabilizer that has been sprayed with adhesive. Also include one layer of the lightweight water-soluble stabilizer on top of the fabric (hooped or unhooped) before stitching.



The [light and airy toile sunflower designs](#) dance wonderfully down the side of the sweater and still allow the lightweight knit to drape well.

Different types and combinations of sweater knits will have different care instructions. As always, I would recommend checking the label first for directions. Many recommend dry

cleaning only, but for the ones that advise hand or machine washing, I find these techniques to work well.

Use lukewarm water and mild soap or detergent for either hand or machine washing on the gentle cycle. Do not put the garment in the dryer, but wrap it in a towel to squeeze (not wring) out as much water as possible. Stretch it back into shape and then block, or lay flat to dry on a sweater drying screen or fiberglass window screen suspended across two chairs.

If you accidentally shrink a favorite sweater, there are a couple of options that can help restore the garment to its original size. 1) Soak it in a tub with a mixture of hair conditioner and water, and gently reshape and dry. 2) Gently boil the item in a solution of 1 part vinegar to 2 parts water for 30 minutes. Rinse with cool water and squeeze out the excess. Dry flat.

One further suggestion, when storing knit items (especially wool), place them in a sealed container such as a sweater bag or cedar chest to protect them from artificial light, moisture, and moths.

### **Stitching tips for sweater knits:**

|               |                                                                                                                                           |
|---------------|-------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------------|
| Needle        | 75/11 sharp needle; an embroidery needle may also be used                                                                                 |
| Stabilizer    | Cutaway (2.5 ounce)                                                                                                                       |
| Design Choice | Dependent on type of knit; choose light designs for tightly-woven knit, and more complex and filled designs for knits with a loose weave. |