

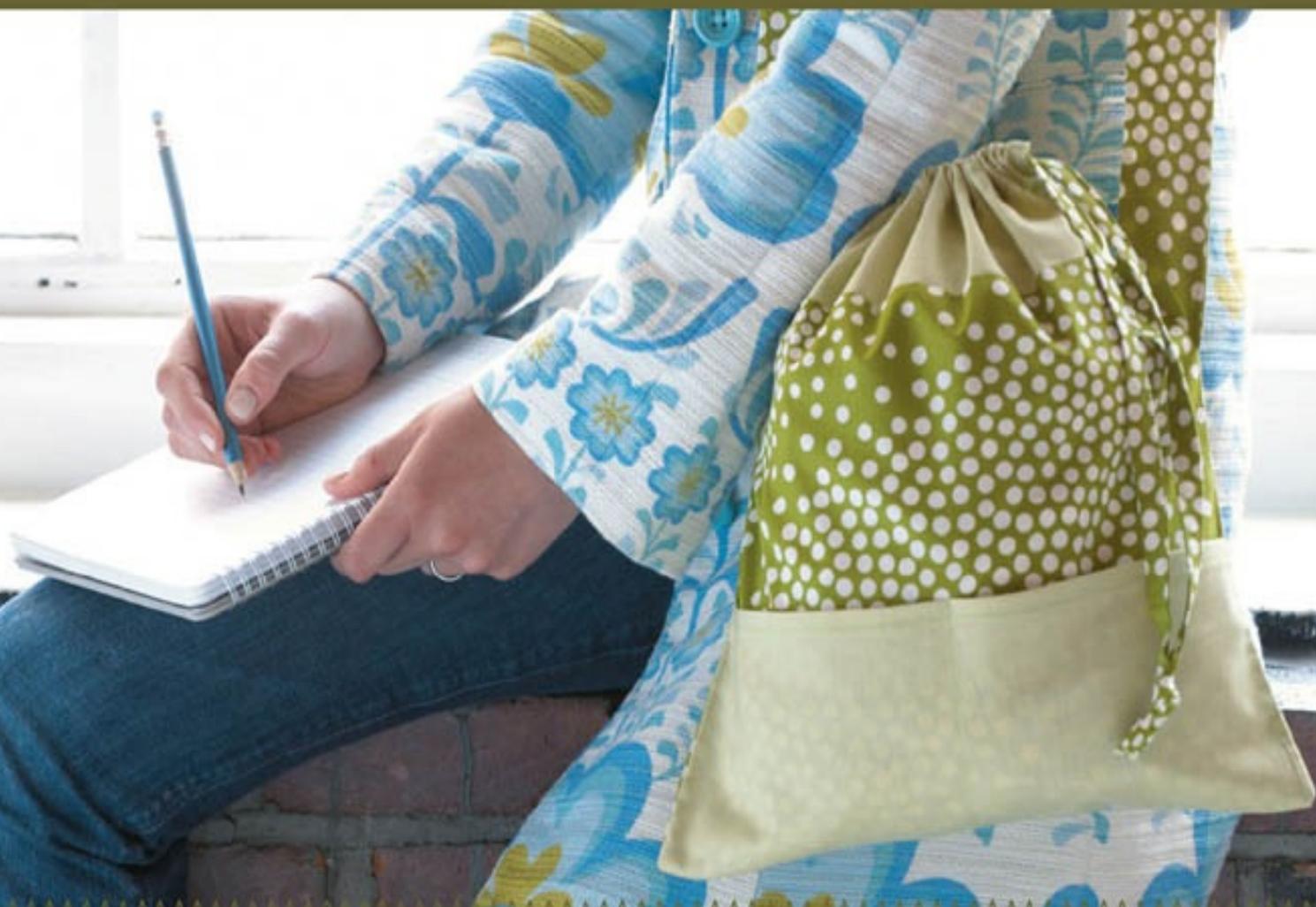
lexie barnes



*sew  
what!*



18 **PATTERN-FREE** PROJECTS YOU CAN CUSTOMIZE TO FIT YOUR NEEDS





*sew what! bags*



# *sew what!* BAGS

**18 PATTERN-FREE PROJECTS  
YOU CAN CUSTOMIZE TO FIT YOUR NEEDS**

lexie barnes



Storey Publishing

*This book is dedicated to all of my teachers — past and present, good and bad — for the valuable lessons they've passed on to me throughout my life.*

*And to my parents, Ramsay and Gary Klaff, for allowing me to learn things in my own way.*

***The mission of Storey Publishing is to serve our customers by publishing practical information that encourages personal independence in harmony with the environment.***

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# **Contents**

## **ACKNOWLEDGMENTS**

## **INTRODUCTION**

### **CHAPTER 1**

*How to Use This Book*

### **CHAPTER 2**

*Sewing Basics*

### **CHAPTER 3**

*Warm-up Projects*

*Eyeglasses Case*

*Tissue Pouch*

*Grocery Bag Tube*

*Map Sack*

*Zippered Wristlet*

### **CHAPTER 4**

*Totes*

*Tiny Tote*

*Reversible Tote*

*Tool Tote*

### **CHAPTER 5**

*Drawstring Sacks*

*Ditty Bag*

*Backpack*

*Sling Sack*

### **CHAPTER 6**

*Messenger Bags*

*Personal Purse*

[DJ Bag](#)

[City Satchel](#)

**[CHAPTER 7](#)**  
**[Organizers](#)**

[Tool Apron](#)

[Artist's Roll](#)

[Tool Holster](#)

[Caddy](#)

**[RESOURCES](#)**

**[INDEX](#)**

## **Introduction**

*Listen to the Mustn'ts, child, listen to the Don'ts.*

*Listen to the Shouldn'ts, the Impossibles, the Won'ts.*

*Listen to the Never Haves, then listen close to me.*

*Anything can happen, child, Anything can be.*

— SHEL SILVERSTEIN

There is nothing like creating something of your very own. The satisfaction born from having an idea — mapping out a plan, tackling the obstacles, and then, at last, holding up the finished product — is immeasurable. This book shows how to use your head, some basic materials, and your own personal style to create fabulous bags again and again — exactly the way you want them, without any patterns, templates, or fussy, stuffy rules to hem you in.

For my part, I can't stand to read instruction manuals, stick strictly to a recipe, or follow the steps exactly as they are written anywhere. If there are too many steps, I'll skip them. If the instructions are too wordy or full of jargon, I'll ignore them and find my own way of doing things. In this book, from the first project to the last, you'll be able to jump right in and start sewing. You'll find simple steps and streamlined projects — fabulous bags you can make on your own to suit your taste, skill level, and style.

A note on fear: It's okay to be afraid to start a project. It's okay to read the book for a while or just look at the pictures until you feel ready to jump in. The trick is that you have to jump in at some point. Like swimming or skydiving or picking up a pencil for the first time — like anything worth doing — you have to start somewhere. Start today. Start now. Don't worry about getting it right or making the perfect bag. It's likely that the first thing you make may not be perfect ... but you will still treasure it.

In a box somewhere is the very first, very ugly, yellow shirt I had to make for a costume class back in school. It's awful. The experience was terrifying and the class was lousy. But in the end, no matter what it looks like, I made a shirt.

Knowing I could start and finish that project has paved the way for me to create a great many things over the years. If I had caved in to fear on that very first project, I never would have moved on to get where I am today. And if you had asked me back then if I thought I would end up a handbag designer, I would have laughed. The safety net will appear just when you need it. So jump.



## CHAPTER 1 *How to Use This Book*

**YOU CAN READ ALL OF THE INFORMATIONAL STUFF** up front — or you can jump ahead to the projects and refer to the guidelines when you need them. You can also start with the first project and go through them all in order or you can skip around. Choose your own challenges and make what you like, when you like. But I do recommend skimming through everything first, just so you have an idea of where to find what you need later.



### **A DESIGN PRINCIPLE**

Sewing without a pattern may seem like a scary prospect to some ... and liberating to others. Personally, I like the freedom and flexibility of pattern-free sewing. I want a bag to work for me, not the other way around.

*This book is based on the same simple design principle that I use every day:  
Build the bag from the inside out.*

## **How It Works**

**THINK BEFORE YOU CUT.** Before you begin a project, ask yourself what you'll be carrying in your new bag. You don't need a pattern or template. Just your own eye and an understanding of your needs:

- ◆ *Will this bag be for daily use or for something specific?*
- ◆ *Do you carry a lot of gear with you: phone, keys, gadgets, pens, and notebook?*
- ◆ *Do you want to fish around in your bag to find your phone when it rings? Or would you like a dedicated phone pocket? Where would you like that pocket to be — on the inside of the bag or on the outside, where you can get to it faster?*
- ◆ *Do you need to get to your checkbook easily? Or your lip balm?*
- ◆ *Will you be carrying heavy books or lighter, fragile craft supplies?*
- ◆ *Maybe you want something multipurpose?*

You may be looking to whip up a simple all-purpose tote. Even though you don't need to map out pockets or embellishments yet, you might want to think about the length of the straps.

- ◆ *Are you 5'1" or are you 5'10"? The answer will affect how long your straps should be, especially if you are lugging something at your side by the handles.*
- ◆ *Do you like a bag to hang low on your hip? Or do you like it tucked under your arm?*

Experiment with options. Once you know your preferences, you can make notes to save time later. Nothing will be as fixed or precise as working with a pattern, but that doesn't mean you can't get what you want. You'll love watching your own style and preferences evolve.

**STRUT YOUR STUFF.** Go get everything you plan to carry in your bag. Lay it all out and measure it right on the fabric. Eyeball it, to start. Then, to give yourself something more concrete to work from, grab some graph paper and a pencil. Look at your goodies spread out on the fabric and make a sketch — and I don't mean it has to be pretty. It just needs to be accurate and to scale. (*See Graph, Paper, Scissors! on page 14*) By doing this, you can get a good idea of what the shape and size of the bag will be. That's really all the "pattern" you'll need.



In my first year as a designer, I was working on some sketches at my parents' house. I drew the bags in detail, with all of the dimensions "spec'd out." I worked all weekend and I was just in love with the bags I was creating. After preparing my sketches and some notes to send off to a pattern maker, I proudly showed my work to my mother. With a puzzled look on her face, she asked, "You know the dimensions you have there don't match the shapes of those bags, right?" I was horrified! I had measured out sizes that made sense to me and had drawn shapes that pleased me — but I hadn't matched them up together! So I learned that weekend how to put graph paper to good use. And taught myself (okay, Mom helped!) how to create designs that made sense.

### **GRAPH, PAPER, SCISSORS!**

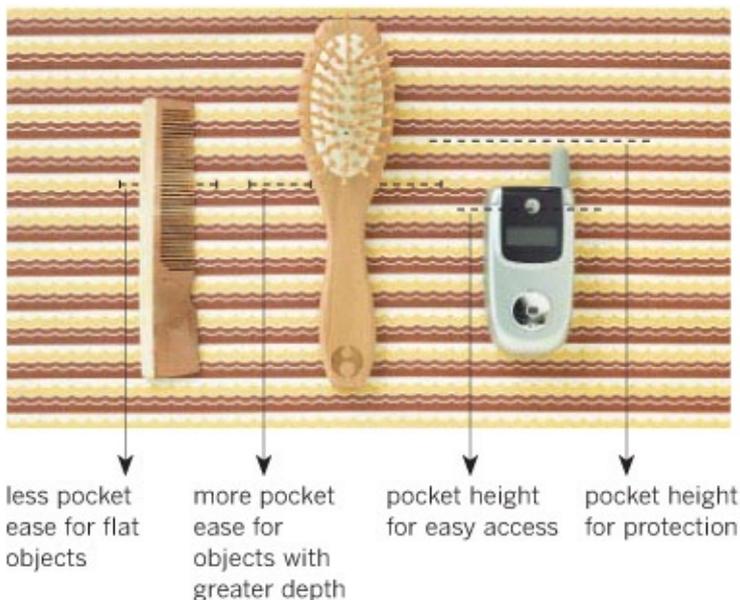
Graph paper is great because it allows you to design to scale. You can easily see and adjust the proportions of what you are designing and keep track of your measurements. The kind I like to use is divided into  $\frac{1}{4}$ " squares, but it comes in other sizes. Using the  $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-square graph, you can decide what scale you want to use. For instance, if  $\frac{1}{4}$ " = 1", each box will represent 1". To draw a bag that is 15" across, you would draw a line that is 15 squares long.

If you want to make a life-size paper cutout, you'll want a 1:1 scale (meaning  $\frac{1}{4}$ " =  $\frac{1}{4}$ "). For bigger bags, you'll have to tape several sheets together to draw it out. It's fun to cut out your "paper bag" and play with it so you can see how you like it before stitching up the real thing.

**HOW DO YOU MEASURE UP?** A simple way to make sure your bag fits you well is to take a look at what you already own. Do you have a favorite handbag or backpack? Measure the length of the straps and use that measurement as a standard for your personal fit. Working on the apron or holster in this book? Grab a belt from your closet or an apron from your kitchen, and check the length to see how long your waist belt needs to be. Don't forget to add a few inches to that measurement so you can tie it — about 12" to 14" on each side is enough for an average bow.



**EASE INTO IT.** When planning your pockets and pocket panels, be sure to lay out the objects that will go into them and to measure them carefully. Make the pockets a little shorter than the items you want easier access to (like pens and such) and higher for things that you want to tuck in and protect (like your new camera). For all pockets, you'll want to add ease (a little extra breathing room) to your core measurements. For instance, a pocket for your comb can be pretty flat, but if you're packing a hairbrush, you'll want a pocket with a little more space to allow for the depth. It will be easy to see what you need once everything is laid out in front of you.



### ***Testing 1-2-3***

Sometimes, you might want to test out your design before making the final project. It's a good way to try things out while you are developing your design skills. Here are a few ways to see how you're doing.

1. **OH SEW PRETTY.** If you are an experienced sewer, you can make a mock-up bag out of muslin or other inexpensive fabric to test your bag design before making the final version. This can help you save money and time on your final project, so you don't

make mistakes on the fabulous imported fabric you just fell in love with!

2. **KNOW WHEN TO FOLD ‘EM.** A fun way to test out your design is to map out your bag and then fold your fabric to the size and shape you’d like it to be. But don’t cut the fabric yet — this is just a test! Simply pin it together the way you think it should go. For this, I recommend safety pins, rather than straight ones. They’ll hold the mock-up together safely so you can play with it without getting pricked by straight pins. This kind of test bag may be a little bulky and it won’t be as pretty as the real thing, but you can get a good sense of where you’re headed. You can try out pockets, strap lengths, embellishments and other playful options. Once you’ve patched it together the way you want it to be, make some notes and then get sewing.



3. **THE PAPER CHASE.** Here’s an even easier test. I lay out my goodies, draw my sketch on graph paper to get the scale right, then draw or trace the bag onto plain paper and cut out the pieces. Then I stitch up the paper! Sometimes, I even skip the sewing: I just staple and/or tape the pieces together. To this day, I use this test method. Sometimes I’ll reduce the scale to make a miniature version of the bag so it will be more manageable. Often, I use my kids’ construction paper or scrap paper from my recycling bin. It’s cheap, easy, and quick. You can tell right away if you’ve got a good design or if you need to go back to the drawing board.

### ***Inspiration***

A terrific tool that I highly recommend is an idea board or notebook. In my studio, I dedicate an entire wall to this. At home, I keep binders full of ideas and inspirations. In the binders, I categorize the pages so I can find what I’m looking for later.

There are great ideas all around you. Rip out pictures from magazines, find swatches or paint chips, anything that strikes your fancy. Keep them up on your board for inspiration. When you are working, look up at it. See what shapes you picked. Which colors are you most into these days? Have you been dying to play with polka dots? Even if you think you don’t have a personal style yet — you probably do. You just need to let it surface!



If you are going through magazines, you can use a technique I call the “flip and rip.” I go through the magazine really quickly, just flipping through it. When something catches my eye — a color, pattern, shape, vibe, or what-have-you — I rip out the page. Those are the images that hit me first and fast. I don’t stop to ask myself what I like in the picture, I just rip it out and keep flipping. That page goes up on my board (or in a notebook) until I use the inspiration or I grow tired of the image. Every few weeks, I like to strip the board and put up new ideas for inspiration. I tend to file the old images away, but you don’t have to. The best ideas will stick with you.

## **SEWING TOOLS**

Here’s what you need to get started. The basic tools are easy to find at your local fabric store. You can order online, but be sure to ask any questions you have and check the return policies *before* you make your purchase. There are a few things you don’t want to skimp on, like needles, shears, and of course, your sewing machine. If you find a deal that looks too good to be true, it very well may be. Talk to the shop clerk or owner and get the skinny. Buyer beware = sewer prepared!

### ***Assumptions***

We assume that you have a basic sewing machine and know how to use it. With so many different sewing machines out there, we can’t give specific instructions on how to operate yours. Refer to your manual if you need to. If you don’t have a manual, you can find one online (*see* Resources) or invite a friend or family member to help get you started. The rest is just practice.

Once you can thread your machine and fill the bobbin, you can pick up your scrap fabric and practice some stitching. Most of the projects in this book don’t require zippers, but if you’d like to add them, you’ll need a zipper foot. If you want to add buttons to anything you are making, your machine may have a buttonhole attachment. Get familiar with your machine, your manual, and how all of your attachments work. All of the projects in [chapter 2](#) are made from scraps, so once you are comfortable with the basics, you’re good to go.

## MISSING MANUAL?

If you've inherited or bought a second-hand sewing machine that doesn't have a manual, all is not lost. You can often locate and order a manual for your machine online. Just do a search for the brand name and model number of your machine.

### ***Your Sewing Kit***

In addition to your sewing machine, you will want to have the following items on hand:

- ◆ *good pair of sharp shears used only for cutting fabric*
- ◆ *pair of pinking shears (which make a zigzag edge) to finish seams*
- ◆ *rotary cutter, mat, and cutting ruler for long straight lines*
- ◆ *small pair of scissors for clipping and trimming*
- ◆ *straight pins and a pincushion*
- ◆ *magnet (a great tool for picking up spilled pins)*
- ◆ *tape measure, sewing ruler, or yardstick; seam gauge*
- ◆ *variety of hand-sewing needles*
- ◆ *variety of sewing-machine needles*
- ◆ *seam ripper*
- ◆ *safety pins*
- ◆ *dressmaker's chalk or disappearing fabric markers*
- ◆ *steam iron and ironing board*
- ◆ *point turner (see Cutting Corners on page 21)*
- ◆ *weights: paperweights, cans, or any small items with some heft to hold down pieces of fabric while you are pinning and cutting*



**NEEDLES AND PINS.** Sewing-machine needles can get dull after only a few hours, so check them regularly for burrs and dull points, and always have spares available. Who wants to run out to the store for replacements while in the middle of a project? They come in a variety of sizes and types. Smaller needles are better for lightweight fabrics, and larger needles should be used on heavier fabrics like denim or canvas. You can start out with a size 12 and go up or down from there. Pick up a package of assorted sizes to keep around. You can check your sewing machine manual for guidance on how to choose the right needles or you can ask someone at your neighborhood fabric shop.



Long straight pins with very big heads and very slender shafts are the best for most fabrics. Pins with glass heads are easier to see. Try not to leave pins in fabrics for weeks — you'll be amazed at how fast some nonrust pins will rust! A good pincushion or two makes it easy to grab a pin when you need one — or try a magnetic pin holder.

**SCISSORS, SCHMISSORS.** Technically, you call them scissors when the length is 6" or less and the finger holes are the same size. Shears are usually 7" to 12" long, with one larger finger hole (to fit two or more fingers). Whether you are using scissors or shears, it is important that they are comfortable and fit your hand. You'll want something that feels good to you, is easy to open and close, and isn't too heavy. To keep fabric shears sharp, do not use them to cut paper, cardboard, aluminum foil, or hair!



### CUTTING CORNERS

- ◆ Although building a collection of cutting tools is helpful in the long run, you can actually get by with one pair of shears (a.k.a. scissors), as long as they are very sharp.
- ◆ A tape measure is good for anything you're measuring, except when you're using a rotary cutter. You really need to use the cutter with a mat underneath, and a ruler designed for the task. (*See below.*)

◆ A chopstick makes an excellent point turner (for pushing out corners when turning a stitched bag right side out). You can also use the eraser end of a pencil. But I don't recommend a pointed knitting needle; it could poke holes — yikes!

◆ If your iron doesn't have a steamer function, you can use a spray bottle and mist your fabric while pressing.

**ROTARY CUTTERS AND MATS.** A rotary cutter and mat are excellent tools for all your sewing projects. They allow for speedy, tidy cutting and produce a perfectly straight line every time. But it's important to use them carefully. A rotary cutter is a very sharp tool with a round blade that is used to cut fabrics. It should only be used with a rotary-cutting mat, to protect surfaces from being damaged, and nonslip rulers designed for use with your rotary cutter and mat. Protect your precious fingers or you'll have to take a long break from your fun projects!



**SEAM RIPPER.** This small, must-have tool is used to unpick stitches without cutting into fabric. Great for opening seams, cutting off buttons, and taking out basting stitches.

**THREAD.** Thread comes in a variety of weights and types. Typically, you want to match the fiber content of your thread to your fabric. For the projects in this book, an all-purpose polyester or cotton-wrapped poly thread will do the trick. If you are using different types of fabrics on one project, you should match the thread to the heavier fabric. If you want to match the color of the thread to your bag, go for the dominant color in the print. And if you don't find an exact match, go a shade darker to hide the thread. Lighter colors will pop and be more noticeable. That said, feel free to use thread as a decorative feature. A contrasting thread color is a great way to add spice to an otherwise simple bag. When in doubt, always turn to the staff in your local fabric shop — it's better to ask for help than to suffer the consequences.



**CLOSURES.** In this book, the bags either self-close (the Tissue Pouch), or have a drawstring (the Ditty Bag and Backpack), a tie closure (the Tool Tote), a zipper (the Zippered Wristlet), or a flap (check any of the messenger bags in [chapter 6](#)). But there are plenty of other ways to close a bag. You can use buttons and buttonholes, snaps, buckles, Velcro, hooks, clasps, and so on. If you are looking for a greater challenge, go ahead and modify your bag to add a more complicated closure.

#### NOT-SO-INVISIBLE MARKERS

Not all marking pencils, pens, and chalk will work on all fabrics. Read the manufacturer's directions and test the marker or chalk on a scrap of fabric before using it on your projects. Make sure the chalk or marker doesn't bleed through or stain your fabric.

## FABRIC FACTS

Choosing fabrics is fun and exciting — but it can also be overwhelming. The key is to take your time. Whether you are browsing online or in your local fabric shop, take the time to look at everything. Take it all in. No matter what you are looking for, I urge you to make friends with the shop owners and staff. They know so much and are often your greatest ally in finding the very best materials for your projects. Once you start sewing, you'll be back again and again, so it's nice to get to know the people in your favorite shops.

#### RIGHT SIDE, WRONG SIDE

The right side of a fabric is the side on which the design or motif is printed. This is what you see on the outside of a bag. The wrong side of the fabric is the back or unprinted side. This is what you see on the inside if your bag is not lined.