

All About That Thread

by: Pamela Pandolfi 3/2018

Most of us have gone to the big box stores to pick out the thread we need for sewing or quilting projects. Then we find that it left lint all over our machine. When quilting, the free motion or top quilting looked thick or it broke a lot. When hemming a pair of pants, the stitches broke after the first wash!! Such frustration!! I've learned about threads though my many years of sewing.

Choosing the right thread makes a difference in the outcome of your projects.

I want to share with you my knowledge of threads with sewing clothes to quilting that I have.

Old vs. New

Many years ago, I used "hand-me" down thread (from my grandmother) to machine hem a pair of pants for a customer/friend. I was mortified to discover when the pants were washed the thread disintegrated! This is because the thread becomes "dry" or brittle over many years.

To test if your thread is strong enough to hold a seam together under "stress" (or a few washes), wrap the thread around your fingers like you would dental floss and give it a pull until it breaks. It should take a lot of pressure from your fingers for the thread to break. If you are unsure, take a new spool of thread and test that as well. Compare.

I could guarantee that if you still have thread on a wooden spool, it is not good to sew with anymore. It is a great piece of nostalgia.

All Purpose - Serger - Embroidery

A bunch of years ago, I worked for one of those big box craft stores. It was an eye opener for me to see that people didn't know the difference between All Purpose, Serger, or Embroidery threads.

These are three very different threads for three very different purposes and machines.

Serger thread is a weaker thread on its own. It is unevenly wound and has lots of fuzz on it. It is made that way to go through a serging machine. It is sold on a cone and usually costs less per spool than the all purpose thread. Great deal right?.....Not really. If it is used in a standard sewing machine, it can throw off the tension discs. The fuzz can get to many areas in the machine. Both of these issues will cause the machine to

not work well and need to be in the shop for cleaning and tune-up more often. It costs me \$100 every time I have to bring my machine in just for a cleaning and a tune-up once a year.

Embroidery thread is another weak thread. If you look at it against an all purpose thread, there is a slight shine to it and has a soft, smooth feel to it. It is used when doing embroidery picture designs on t-shirts or monogramming on towels for example. It can go through your standard machine because there are standard machines that have embroidery machine attachments to them. This thread is for design purpose only. It does not have strength to keep a hem in place. Also, the thread will show more because of its shine.

All Purpose thread is the best for everything else? Well, not really. It too has its limits. The weight is usually 40 - 50 (which will be explained in Weight of thread section). It holds up well for most fabric weights (ie: cottons, fleece, flannel, knits, thin denim, etc.). Plus it is great for hand stitching, can be used in a serger, as well as being used in the standard sewing machines. This thread has some issues when you get into the heavier fabrics (ie: middle to heavy denim or upholstery fabrics). There are threads just for this purpose and are labeled as such.

Side story: I worked for a quilt shop that sold sewing machines. This one day when I was demonstrating a machine to this gentleman, I showed him that the machine could sew through several layers of denim using a good quality standard thread. I did this many times with no issues. However, this gentleman all of a sudden took the piece that I had just sewn and pulled apart the denim so the stitches popped without using a lot of force!! My jaw just dropped!

In scrambling for words to say, I used it as a teaching moment. I told him that if this was a true hem and still using all purpose thread, I would use a triple stitch (which was a special stitch in the machine). Plus, I told him about using a heavier thread that is for upholstery or jeans.

Quality of thread

When you buy a new spool of thread, there are various brands of threads. The less expensive brands at the box stores are usually made with shorter fibers. When they go through your machine they will leave lint on and in your machine. I sew every day and like to prolong having to spend \$100 on maintenance on my machine (which I usually have to do 2-3 times a year due to the amount of use).

Side note: Take care of your sewing machine by having it tuned up once a year no matter how little you have been using it. It will keep it running smooth.

From my experience, the higher cost threads tend to be a better quality. The fibers are longer that are twisted together and therefore cause less lint in and on your machine. These brands can be found at quilt shops and directly from the manufacturer on line.

Side note: If you are wondering what threads I prefer to use, I like Superior Threads. They have a wide range of threads for a wide range of purposes. For quilting I like to use Bottom Line, and for my “all purpose” I like So Fine #50. For my heavy-weight projects, I use upholstery thread on my dad’s industrial sewing machine.

That’s all the information for your “standard” sewing threads. The rest of this article will explain more about threads with quilting in mind.

Weight of thread

There are various weights of thread. On the top or bottom of the spool you will find the weight of thread. You might see #40 which is the weight of some “all purpose” threads. The thinner the thread is, the higher the number. For example: #100 weight thread is about as thin as one strand of hair.

Now with that being said, thread is like women’s clothing. One brand that is a #60 weight is different from a second brand that is labeled #60 weight.

The best way to know which brand of thread you like in that weight is to try them out. You can also feel the threads next to each other, but trying them out on a “practice” quilt is the best way to see if you like it.

I like to use Superior Thread’s So Fine #50 weight thread for my piecing. My top stitching/free motion thread of choice is Superior Thread’s Bottom Line #60 or Kimono #100. Bottom Line disappears into the fabric better and allows the beauty of the quilt stand out rather than the quilting in my opinion.

Sometimes I like to use a thread like I would paint and draw with it. In this case, I like to use #30 because I want it to stand out.

Any thread that is heavier than #30 (a lower number) will not be able to be threaded into your machine needle. Those threads are better in the bobbin for bobbin work or couching onto the fabric to create a design.

Monofilament Thread

Monofilament thread comes in a clear and a smoke. I use it on the back of my quilts sometimes so I don't have to change the bobbin all the time. There is a disclaimer I have to mention. Some machine repair technicians will say that the monofilament thread should never be used in a bobbin or in the machine at all. The thread creates heat when it is going through the gears and will possibly melt or warp plastic bobbins and plastic gears and cause havoc with the tension discs. With all of that said, I use monofilament in my bobbin for most of my quilting. Yes, I have had bobbins warp on me.

There are a couple of things you can do to try and avoid issues. Use a good quality of monofilament like Superior, Yli, or Aurafil. These threads will not stretch. You can test it by wrapping it around your fingers like dental floss and slowly stretch. The better quality will break and not stretch. The other brands will stretch before they break.

If you can't do that, use only polyester monofilament #.004. It is more pliable than the nylon version and won't harm your machine as much. Second, be sure to wind slowly to avoid the monofilament thread to stretch. The stretching of the thread onto the bobbin creates more tension on the bobbin and will cause it to warp more. Third, only wind a little on the bobbin at a time. I only use one specific bobbin for my monofilament thread and I only wind it half way. Don't store the thread on the bobbin.

For most of the monofilament threads, you need to be careful with ironing over the thread. It is a polyester thread and will melt with a hot iron. I suggest that using an ironing cloth over your project to protect the thread from the heat.

Metallic Thread

This thread can be hard to work with because it tends to break often if the tension is not correct. I have found that Floriani metallic threads do not break as often when used with a metallic needle. Any metallic threads should be used with a metallic needle to allow the thread to slide through without friction. Metallic threads tend to work best on a tree stand where the thread is coming from the top and there is no tension on the thread at all.

How is your thread wound?

There are only two ways a manufacturer winds the spool of threads. Cross wound and straight wound. Cross wound spools form an "x" when wound. Straight wound spools show the strands stacked on top of each other.

Knowing how your spool is wound makes a difference as to how you place it on the spool pin on your machine. Cross wound spools are good for a horizontal spool pin or a

vertical spool pin. Straight wound is better on a vertical spool pin. Some threads are slippery and are better on the vertical pin so it does not cause a mess.

Troubleshooting

If your thread keeps breaking as you are sewing, here are some reasons why:

1. You may need a needle with a bigger eye in it
2. The thread is too old
3. Thread on the wrong spool pin on machine
4. You may need a new needle
5. Machine tension.

Superior website (superiorthreads.com) has a lot of information on threads if you would like to learn more about them. Here is a link to a chart from the Superior website that may help with which threads to use for what projects:

<https://vw-superiorthreads.storage.googleapis.com/docs/home-machine-reference-guide.pdf>