Buttonholes

by Wendy McKinnon
Introduction

Buttonholes can be stitched automatically by machine using a sensor buttonhole foot, or you can be in control by using a basic buttonhole foot and deciding when you have reached the desired length. The first gives you buttonholes all exactly the same, the other method requires absolute accuracy on your part. Then, there is the bound buttonhole, a real couture finish and an opportunity to be your own designer but, usually, results in getting the dusting or washing done before one finds sufficient courage to begin. The bound buttonhole requires a little practice, but you will find it worth it!

Practice is the only secret when it comes to sewing the perfect buttonhole whether an automated machine stitched, or tailored buttonhole! Always! Always practice sewing your chosen buttonhole method on a sample piece of the fashion garment (including the same interfacing/s) and never straight onto the garment.

Always begin by sewing the bottom buttonhole first as it is less noticeable if you end up with a ‘glitch’, then work your way up!
**Placement**

Measure button using a piece of twill tape or a piece of selvage. Wrap the tape around the diameter of the button. Remove button and flatten tape. Measure width (tape is folded in half) and add 3mm or 1/8” ease – to allow the button to slip through the buttonhole without stretching or distortion. Hint! Don’t skip this step as buttons vary in thickness; some have shanks; some are domed or fancy!

Whilst commercial patterns provide marked positions for buttonholes, this doesn’t mean they are in the right place for you. You may have made pattern alterations; you may have a large bust, etc. Buttonholes need to be positioned at points of stress first and foremost, and then the remainder placed an equal distance apart on either side of the stress points.

It is easy to work out an equal distance between buttonholes without having to do any calculations. Take a piece of elastic (I prefer non roll as braided elastics can twist and become misshapen) and, using a permanent marker, mark a series of vertical lines on the elastic, eg 4cm apart.

Place the elastic with a mark against a ‘definite stress placement’ buttonhole and gently stretch out the elastic and transfer the markings for the remainder of the buttonhole placements. Easy! (You may need to anchor one end of the elastic to give you two free hands.)
Commence measuring buttonhole placement, total length, starting 3mm or 1/8” past CF (centre front) or, above button in the case of vertical placement.

Remember when working out buttonhole placement, that you are measuring from the seam allowance, not the cut edge.

Firstly, we must draw a ladder down the front of the garment on the interfaced side. Mark the right front for a woman and, the left front for a man. Remembering the rules [above] draw a line parallel to the CF, 3mm beyond the CF, towards the front cut edge. Draw another line parallel to the first line the finished length of your buttonhole. Create the rungs of the ladder by drawing placement lines at the desired position for each buttonhole, at a right angle to, and between, your two parallel lines.

Buttonholes should be positioned at right angles to CF where they are the strongest. In the case of plackets or button bands on the outside of a garment, the buttonholes should be positioned vertically down the centre (as illustrated above).

Position top buttonhole, at neckline, a button’s width down from the neck edge.

Position a button at bust to avoid gaping. Hint! If to do so would spoil the style lines of your garment, consider placing a hidden [flat] button at this point on the garment and sew a buttonhole in the facing, underneath, at the corresponding position.

Always position a button at waistline, unless a belt is to be worn, in which case a button should be evenly placed on either side of the waistline.

A button must be placed at the breakpoint on a garment (shirt, blouse or jacket) with a revere collar (where the collar turns back on the garment).

Before you start, remember that buttonholes must be interfaced, with a layer of interfacing either attached to the facing or the garment itself – depending on type of interfacing used.

Now we have worked out where to place buttonholes, how do we get professional looking buttonholes like ready to wear?
Machine stitched buttonholes

When making buttonholes on knit fabrics be sure to include a cord of either crochet cotton, or doubled sewing cotton. Look at the back of your buttonhole foot and locate the little ‘finger’. Secure the cord at the back of the buttonhole foot by hooking it over the finger, and stitch over the cord pulling the cord through to the underside at completion by use of a hand sewing needle. Knot ends and cut extra length off. This will prevent the buttonhole stretching.

Some machines stitch the buttonhole automatically (Warning! make certain you know which direction the machine will sew – will it start by reversing, or, will it sew forward?). Other, older models, require you to measure the length of the button manually and to tell the machine when to stop satin stitching (by pressing the reverse button) before it sews a bar tack, followed by completing the second arm of the buttonhole.

1. Ever had the problem of stitches sinking into the fabric? Place a layer of water soluble stabilizer both under and on top of the garment, at the buttonhole placement, before stitching. After stitching, remove the stabilizer by tearing away from the finished stitching (this is made easy by the fact the machine needle has perforated the stabilizer as you have sewn).

2. Some of the modern machines, among their many styles, give you a buttonhole with a wider [centre] opening through which the button will pass; choose that style if you have a woollen garment and large button combination, the buttonhole will not distort as the button is pushed through.

3. To prevent those ‘hairy’ bits of fibres showing after you have cut the buttonhole open, first you need to seal the fibres. Place an amount of liquid seam sealant, eg Fray Check™ onto a scrap of paper. Using the end of a toothpick, dip into the sealant and run a line of the sealer along the inside of the uncut buttonhole and let it dry (it won’t take long). You must use the sealant sparingly and let it just bleed into the stitches. Finish by pressing both sides of the garment (using a pressing cloth).

4. After sealing the buttonhole, carefully cut the opening – either using a buttonhole chisel and block of wood placed underneath, or using a quick unpik. Placing a pin across each end of the buttonhole (just inside the bar tack at either end) will ensure you do not cut too far.
Remember to create a shank (if your button doesn’t already have one) when sewing on the button by either using the button elevator on a point turner, or by placing a toothpick or match under the button while sewing on. This will allow your button to sit nicely above the garment closure, instead of being pulled through partially (the length of the shank depends on the thickness of your garment/facing combined).

**Bound buttonholes - introduction**

There are many methods to making a classic bound buttonhole. The only step that doesn’t change is how to mark the buttonhole placements. I am going to share with you my two favourite methods of sewing these little gems of buttonholes!

Now, imagine you are sewing a letterbox opening (we will call it a ‘windowpane’) and you are going to post a letter in it! Good, now you are smiling!

You are going to sew a rectangle and you must count the number of stitches at both ends and make sure they are exactly the same number.

Always commence sewing the rectangle for your windowpane in the centre of one of the long sides.
Bound buttonholes - method one

This is a multiple ‘patch’ bound buttonhole, creating a faced opening with separate patches to form the buttonhole ‘lips’.

1. You will need a patch, cut out of silk organza fabric (thin non-iron interfacing can also be used), 6cm wide and 4cm longer than the length of the buttonhole. In the centre of the lengthwise patch, draw a line. Draw a box [centred] 3mm above and below this line, the length of your finished buttonhole, to form a rectangle (this is the basis of your buttonhole).

2. With right sides together and the patch centred over the horizontal bar of the ladder; use pins (placed vertically through all layers) to make certain you have matched the centre line and length, exactly. Pin the patch in place.

3. Sew around the rectangle, through all layers.

4. Cut through the centre line (just as you do with welt pockets) within 5mm (or more, if fabric is thick) of each end of rectangle. Clip into corners, diagonally.

5. Pull patch through on to wrong side. Press carefully. You have now made your windowpane.

6. Make lips out of two rectangles of straight (or bias) fabric (in the same fabric or a contrast depending on how creative you wish to be) each 5cm wide and 2.5cm longer than the length of the buttonhole.

7. Place the two rectangles right sides together and machine baste through the centre. Folding on the basted line, press each rectangle, wrong sides together (you now have two ‘lips’ basted together at the centre).

8. Attach the lips by placing them behind the faced windowpane; ensuring they are centred.

9. Fold back the garment at the short end and stitch, carefully, through all layers, including the triangle, which was made when you cut the slit.

10. Repeat this process for the lengthwise sides of the buttonhole, stitching through all layers.

11. After a press, carefully remove the basting that holds the lips together in the centre.

12. Pat yourself on the back and repeat the process as many times as you have buttonholes!
Bound buttonholes - method two

This is a single ‘patch’ bound buttonhole, which forms the buttonhole ‘lips’.

1. Cut one rectangle of fabric, 5cm wide and 2.5cm longer than the length of the buttonhole. Interface.

2. Lay the patch, right sides together, centred over the buttonhole placement on garment front.

3. Baste through both layers, along the centre line.

4. Baste through both layers; either side of the centre line, exactly twice desired finished width, ie. 3mm finished, therefore, basting line will be 6mm from centre, on either side.

5. Fold each side of the rectangle gently pulling against the basted line, one at a time, towards the centre and press. Pin each lip to stop it shifting.

6. Shorten stitch length by half a stitch. Stitch from the wrong side of the garment where you can see exactly the length of the buttonhole marked on the interfacing. Sew 3mm (if that is your finished width of the lips) from the centre line; reverse stitching at either end to secure. Do not sew beyond the upright lines of your ladder, ie each side must be exactly the length of your buttonhole.

7. Turn back to the right side of the garment, and make sure the fabric lips are out of the way of the centre line. Carefully cut down the centre line through the patch only effectively cutting it in half.

8. On the garment only, cut down the centre into each corner (as per Method 1 step 4).

9. Remove basting.

10. Pull through to the wrong side of the garment and gently ease the folded lips into place.

11. Fold back the garment at the short end of the buttonhole and stitch, carefully, through all layers including the triangle, which was made when you cut the slit.

12. Press.
Bound buttonholes - finishing the back

In all cases, once you have sewn the front facing to the garment, mark the ends of the lips with pins.

Use one of the following options to create an opening in the garment facing which corresponds in location to each buttonhole in the garment.

1. Sew a conventional stitched buttonhole in the facing and then attach the lining to the facing (if used).

2. Cut a slit in the facing, at the appropriate placement that corresponds to the garment buttonhole; turn under the edges and then hand sew in place to the back of the bound buttonhole.

3. Make another windowpane in the facing using a silk organza patch, cut diagonally to each corner, pull through to facing wrong side, and press.

Bound buttonholes - design options

1. Contrast coloured lips and a fancy, unexpected, button.

2. Combinations of different length buttonholes.

3. Odd coloured, contrast lips.

4. One long buttonhole (welt opening) with multiple buttons.

5. Instead of a rectangular shape, an oval, circle and triangle have been used.