

Better Pressing

From basic to advanced, a range of tools for high-quality results

BY ANN STEEVES

The key to garments that look crisp and professional is simple: Press everything as you sew. Proper pressing helps ensure that your home-sewn garments don't look poorly finished.

A basic iron with steam is just the beginning. For the best pressing results on all types of garments, you need specialized tools. Some pressing aids are absolute must-haves for every sewer, while others perform a single key function for specific pressing tasks. Still others are aspirational tools more common in industrial tailoring shops and other professional settings than in the home-sewing studio. Any combination of these pressing aids can take your finished garments to the next level.

This guide divides pressing aids into four groups. They range from the basic necessities for every pressing station (level 1) through tools that enable a higher level of finesse in a garment's finish (levels 2 and 3) to luxury tools to splurge on when you win the lottery (level 4).

Ann Steeves owns the online fabric shop *Gorgeous Fabrics.com*, and has many useful videos on YouTube (www.youtube.com/user/gorgeousfabrics).

SOURCES

<i>Banaschs.com</i>	<i>IslanderSewing.com</i>
<i>BBlackAndSons.com</i>	<i>SewTrue.com</i>
<i>BergenTailorSupply.com</i>	<i>WardrobeSupplies.com</i>
<i>GoldStarTool.com</i>	<i>Wawak.com</i>

A basic steam iron is a pressing essential (Maytag SmartFill Iron, Storebound.com/maytag, \$69.99).



LEVEL 1 The necessities

Every sewer's pressing station should be equipped with four tools. Without these basics, your ability to finish and shape garments is inadequate, leaving the completed items with an inept appearance.

Iron

An iron doesn't have to be expensive or fancy. A basic model with steam is just as effective as one that costs hundreds of dollars. Auto shutoff is a good safety feature, but it is annoying to have an iron cool down minutes before it's needed again or even during use. The auto shutoff function can be suspended in some models, and irons are available without auto shutoff.

Expect to pay: \$30 to \$99

Ironing Board

A good-quality ironing board can be purchased at big-box home or sewing stores for a reasonable price. I prefer a larger board with a thickly padded cotton cover. Choose one with a tapered end for pressing small areas more easily. Teflon covers reflect the heat back into the garment, but I prefer to control the heat myself, so I choose cotton-covered boards.

Expect to pay: \$40 to \$200

Pressing Ham

A basic ham is shaped like its edible namesake. One side is covered in cotton and the other in wool for control over a variety of fabric types. Use the cotton side when pressing cotton, silk, linen, and other smooth-faced fabrics. Use the wool side for flannel-faced fabrics like wools and fleece. A pressing ham is ideal for shaping curved seams and darts. Buy the largest ham possible to press larger areas at once.

Expect to pay: up to \$13

Press Cloth

Every pressing station needs a press cloth or three. I make mine from white silk organza, which is tough and resists high heat. A press cloth protects delicate fabrics and protects your iron from glue residue when applying fusible interfacing. A good press cloth should be translucent, so you can see the project underneath for greater accuracy. Mark the press cloth you use for fusing "this side up/down" to prevent transferring glue to your iron's soleplate.

Expect to pay: \$6 or less



Rowenta Pro Compact Ironing Board (RowentaStore.com, \$199.90)



Dritz pressing ham (JoAnn.com, \$12.99)



Silk organza press cloth (from the Threads stash)

LEVEL 2 Tools for an improved finish

Once you have the basic equipment, a few specialized items can make pressing tasks easier and ensure higher-level results. Add these tools to your collection over time as needs arise, and watch your skills and confidence improve.

Sleeve Board

A sleeve board lets you press a longer seam (such as an underarm seam) without repositioning the garment. The most useful model provides a wide board and a narrow board joined at one end by a brace. The two boards accommodate different sleeve types. The narrower one is great for knit tops and blouses. The larger surface is useful for jackets, coats, and pants. Avoid sleeve boards that fold down; they have hardware in the middle that makes sleeves bunch up. Expect to pay: \$24 to \$55

Tailor's Ham

One of my favorite splurges is a tailor's ham. It's a larger, more substantial version of the standard pressing ham. It has wool and cotton sides. Its various curves mimic most of the human body's curves; you can even purchase specialty-curve tailor's hams. Buy a ham stand (Amazon.com, \$15) to hold the ham in different positions and make pressing curved seams and surfaces easier. Expect to pay: \$50 to \$100

Clapper

A clapper is a classic tailor's tool used to set seams. It is often a curved block of hardwood with a flat bottom and top. My favorite clapper is a plain block of maple from my husband's woodworking days. It doesn't need to be fancy, as long as the surface is smooth with no burrs or splinters. To use it, press open the seam allowances using lots of steam and little pressure. While the seam is warm and moist, apply light pressure with the clapper. Hold it until the fabric cools. Voilà! You've got a beautifully set seam. Expect to pay: \$19 to \$27

Seam Roll

A seam roll, sometimes called a sleeve roll, is a handy prop for the pressing station. It looks like a cylindrical cousin to the pressing ham, with a cotton side and a wool side. It slides easily into most sleeves, enabling you to press seam allowances open without putting unwanted creases in the garment. Expect to pay: \$6 to \$10



Sleeve board (Wawak.com, \$18.95)



Tailor's hams (left: made by Threads; right: StitchNerdCustomShop.com, \$80.00)



Clapper (IslanderSewing.com, \$24.99)



Dritz seam roll (CreateForLess.com, \$8.99)

Point Presser

The clapper has a cousin called a point presser. It is made of hardwood and provides a narrow, flat surface with a point at one end like a ship's prow. It is used when pressing open seam allowances in corners and tight places, such as collars. You can buy versions that have a tailor's clapper as the stand, giving you a double-duty tool. Expect to pay: \$30 to \$37w

Spray Bottle and Dauber

When you need greater control over the amount of moisture used during pressing, two tools are invaluable: a spray bottle of water and a dauber. Any spray bottle purchased from a drugstore, big-box, or beauty supply store will do the trick. Using a spray bottle, you can control the amount and location of moisture on a seam. I use mine with my press cloth to achieve great results. A dauber is a rolled up piece of wool or a natural sponge that you dip into water and then daub (or dab) directly on the area to be pressed. This gives you precise control over the amount of moisture you use. Daubers are especially useful on woolen garments and are extensively used throughout the tailoring process. Expect to pay: less than \$7

Needle Board

If you sew velvet or other napped fabrics, there are a few tools that make life easier. One is a needle board. This is a flat board covered in short metal needles, like a porcupine. It supports velvet and other napped fabrics, enabling you to press them without leaving impressions or flattening the fabric's pile. Needle boards come in two sizes: 5 inches by 13 inches, and 6 inches by 24 inches. However, you can use a thick, fluffy terry cloth towel instead of a needle board. Use a light hand when working with either tool for good results. Expect to pay: \$60 to \$230



Point presser and clapper (IslanderSewing.com, \$36.99)



2-ounce travel spray bottle (similar: ContainerStore.com, \$1.29) and natural sponge (Michaels.com, \$4.99)



Needle board, 5 inches by 13 inches (BBlackAndSons.com, \$175.00)

LEVEL 3 Advanced & specialty aids

Some tools may not get used daily, but they make a big difference when you need them. Mention these tools when asked, “What do you want for your birthday/anniversary/holiday gift?”

Tailor’s Board

A tailor’s board is made of hardwood and has multiple curves and angles. It looks a bit like an evil artist’s palette, with a larger surface for pressing flat areas, several curves that match various seams, and a built-in point presser. Some also come with a clapper. You can purchase padded cotton covers that turn it into a transportable pressing station.

Expect to pay: \$25 to \$79

Extralong Seam Roll

For full-length or longer garments, such as wedding gowns, an extralong surface for pressing skirt seam allowances comes in handy. You can make one yourself for next to nothing from a sturdy cardboard fabric tube, commonly used for home decorator fabrics. Cover the tube with several layers of any spare cotton fabric, and hand-stitch the cover closed. You can position it under a very long seam at any angle (useful if the gown is hanging from the ceiling while you work) and press.

Expect to pay: \$0 (Ask for an empty tube at a local fabric shop.)

Shoulder Stand

A tailor friend introduced me to the shoulder stand. This tool, made of hardwood, is shaped like a shoulder’s curve and is heavily padded. It is a mainstay of bespoke tailors, and it has gained popularity in the home-sewing community. The shoulder stand changed my pressing forever. I use it to shape the shoulders on everything from tailored jackets to knit tops.

Expect to pay: \$55

Pressing Mitt

A pressing mitt is like a mobile, miniature ham. Slip your hand into its pocket, then slip your mitt-covered hand under a seam to be pressed. The mitt’s thickly padded surface protects your fingers, letting you get into curves in small areas that are otherwise hard to reach.

Expect to pay: \$10 to \$38



June Tailor tailor’s board
(NancysNotions.com,
\$69.00)

Extralong seam roll (made by Threads)

Shoulder stand (Etsy.com/
shop/LHDesign, \$55.00)

Pressing mitts
(StitchNerdCustomShop.com,
\$38.00)

Photos: (p. 65, top; p. 69) courtesy of the manufacturers; all others, Mike Yamin.

LEVEL 4 Luxury items

These pressing aids are good investments for professional sewers who need high-efficiency equipment that help improve performance. Otherwise, put these specialty, big-ticket items on your wish list for that lucky day you win the lottery.

Steam Press

If you want to block fuse, a steam or clamshell press is really helpful. A steam press provides consistent heat, steam, and pressure over a larger area than any iron can. It’s particularly useful for applying interfacing to yardage and for applying fusible fleece to craft projects before cutting.

Expect to pay: \$150 to \$500

Steamer

At \$150 and up, a steamer is not a necessity in any sewing room, but it is useful for pretreating fabric and for garment care. Instead of sending yardage to a dry cleaner to pretreat, you can use a steamer to shrink it and remove wrinkles. Steamers can take wrinkles out of fusible interfacing without risk of it adhering to a surface. Used extensively in retail stores, steamers remove wrinkles from every type of fiber without any worry of scorching or impressions.

Expect to pay: \$150 to \$300

Gravity Feed or Steam-Generating Iron

These irons generate hours of steam from their 1-liter to 5-liter reservoirs, and they don’t automatically shut off, allowing you to work on your project without having to wait while your iron “wakes up.”

Expect to pay: \$100 to \$600 (or more)

Vacuum Board

A vacuum board is the ultimate splurge for setting creases and seams. It provides suction and blowing air to remove moisture from your garment, giving you a crisply set crease in tailored garments and a wrinkle-free finish in tailored and soft garments.

Expect to pay: \$300 to \$600



Reliable Aria 200 steam press
(ReliableCorporation.com,
\$499.00)

Jiffy Steamer J-2000
Personal Steamer
(JiffySteamer.com,
\$219.00)

Rowenta Pro Precision Perfect Steam
Station (AllBrands.com, \$299.99)

Reliable 500VB Vacuum
and Up-Air Board
(ReliableCorporation.com,
\$499.00)