Understanding Wool Fabrics

TESTING YOUR WOOL FABRIC FOR SHRINKAGE

Wool fabrics and wool blends vary a lot, and it’s a good idea to assess each one before you begin working with it. I do not automatically pre-shrink all of my wool fabric before sewing it, because I know from experience that much of it has been pre-shrunk or pre-treated to prevent shrinkage. Instead, I cut a swatch of any fabric that I’m suspicious of and test it for shrinkage. It only takes about five minutes to perform the shrink test. In the beginning, you might want to test each wool fabric that you purchase: by assessing the results, you’ll start to figure out which wool fabrics are likely to shrink and which are not.

To test for possible shrinkage, cut a 3” square of fabric (don’t use the selvage). Put it on a piece of paper, draw exactly around the perimeter of the square, and indicate on the paper and on the fabric the length-of-grain direction.
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A swatch of wool crepe before being steamed.

Now take the fabric sample to the ironing board and thoroughly steam it.

This is how I do it. I have a gravity feed iron, so I can apply continuous steam for as long as I desire. I hold my iron about an inch over the fabric and steam it for 10 to 15 seconds or so; then I turn the fabric over and steam it again. Next, I press it lightly: this is to apply heat; I let the iron touch the surface of the fabric, but I take care not to apply pressure (I don’t bear down on the iron) because I don’t want to mash the fabric.

If you don’t have prolific steam capability, you can get plenty of moisture into the wool sample by using a cotton press cloth. I use an old cotton handkerchief, but any clean, soft, light-weight cotton that
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will absorb a lot of water will do. Thoroughly wet the press cloth – really saturate it – and squeeze the cloth just so that it is no longer dripping. Place the wool fabric swatch on the ironing board and lay the wet press cloth over it. Now, touch the surface of your very hot iron to the wet press cloth: you’ll hear a sizzling sound as the heat of the iron turns the water in the press cloth into steam. Hold the iron so that its sole plate is lightly resting on the press cloth, but don’t bear down on the iron. You’ll probably feel like you’re actually holding some of the weight of the iron. Steam the wool fabric swatch in this manner for 5 to 10 seconds, then turn it over and repeat (you may need to wet the press cloth again). Allow the heavily steamed wool swatch to dry. Then place the swatch back on the piece of paper with the drawn box, orienting it correctly.
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The same wool swatch steamed to pre-shrink. Note that there has been a slight amount of shrinkage in the length-of-grain.

If the wool sample fits precisely back into the box drawn on the paper – i.e., there’s no space between the edges of the wool and the lines forming the box – then you know that there was no shrinkage at all. In all likelihood, this means that the fabric was pre-treated. If this is the case, I usually go right to the cutting table, only pressing the wool fabric to get rid of any wrinkles.
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If you’re still hesitant for any reason, then give the fabric a light steaming and allow it to dry before cutting it out.

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