

Sewing Machine Buying Guide

by Christine Mann

Features to Look for at Every Price Range



If you have looked at sewing machines lately, you know they're loaded with new features and capabilities. Which features do you want? Which ones do you **HAVE** to have? Which ones fit your budget?

The good news is that even the most basic sewing machine can handle projects like making a pillow or sewing a Halloween cape. More sophisticated (and more expensive) machines offer lots of added features to make sewing faster and easier. When you're thinking about which sewing machine to buy, remember that you will likely have this machine for 5 to 10 years or even more. You may get interested in new kinds of sewing over time. If you can afford it, it makes sense to get a machine that can handle new interests you may want to try in the future.

This guide lists the features you should look for at different price levels. Print this list of features and take it with you when you test drive sewing machines at a dealer. Don't forget to check out the presser feet and other accessories that come with a machine you're interested in.

Entry Level Sewing Machine: Features to Look for from \$200-\$400

So you'd like to do some sewing, but your budget is tight and you have to spend carefully. A basic machine made by a reputable company like Janome or Baby Lock will provide everything an occasional sewer needs. Machines at the \$200 end of the price range are mechanical, not electronic. This means that you adjust settings like the stitch width or length by turning a knob or pushing a lever, just like Mom or Grandma used to do. Basic machines offer a limited selection of stitches and features. Here are some things to look for in a low-cost machine:

- **NEEDLE THREADER.** This handy feature saves your eyes and reduces the frustration of trying to fit the thread through the eye of the needle, especially in conditions where the light is less than perfect.
- **SIDE THREAD CUTTER.** This saves you from having to snip off the threads with scissors when you reach the end of a seam.
- **STITCHES** with variable widths and lengths.
- **BUTTONHOLE APPLIQUÉ AND BLANKET APPLIQUÉ STITCHES.** The more apparel sewing or quilting you do, the more you will value these stitches.
- **AUTOMATIC ONE-STEP BUTTONHOLE** that sizes the buttonhole and stitches it automatically. The simplest machines require a four-step manual process. It's a lot easier if the machine sews the buttonhole without manual adjustments.
- **FEED DOGS THAT DROP FOR FREE-MOTION STITCHING.** This is really useful for quilting, thread painting, and collage work.

- **TOP-LOADING, DROP-IN BOBBIN.** This feature is more important than you might realize. A drop-in bobbin has a built-in case, so you don't need to put in a case and make sure it is properly seated. A top-loading bobbin also makes it easy to see how much thread is left in the bobbin and what color. With a front-loading bobbin, you'd have to open up the machine to look. It's easier to clear thread tangles in a top-loading bobbin. And the action of the bobbin is much smoother than in machines with top-loading bobbins.
- **FREE ARM** for sewing waists, sleeves, bags, and other 3-D items.
- **NEEDLE PLATE WITH MEASUREMENTS** to help you guide fabric under the needle.
- **BUILT-IN HANDLE** for carrying the machine around.

At the \$400 end of the price range, sewing machines have electronic controls instead of mechanical ones. Many settings will be preprogrammed for you. You change settings by pushing a button instead of turning knobs or levers. Features to look for in a machine at this price include everything you would find in the less expensive machine, plus:

- **NEEDLE UP-NEEDLE DOWN FEATURE.** This extremely useful feature automatically puts the needle down in the fabric when you stop sewing, so you can pivot the fabric or leave the sewing machine to take a break without losing your position. When you set the machine to stop with the needle up, it automatically stops the needle at the top of its path, which helps avoid thread tangles.
- **CONTROL BUTTONS** located more conveniently on the needle end of the machine, so you can reach them easily while sewing.



Mid Priced Sewing Machine: Features to Look for From \$500-\$1200

If you sneak off regularly to get in an hour or two of sewing, it's worth scraping together the money to buy a more sophisticated sewing machine. For a few hundred dollars more, you can get all the features available on a basic model, plus some very handy added features:

- **LOTS MORE BUILT-IN STITCHES**, including decorative stitches, alphabets, a variety of different automatic buttonholes for different uses and types of fabric, and a bar tack stitch for sewing on buttons and belt loops. Ask about which stitches are available for your favorite style of sewing.
- **MEMORY** for storing your own stitch combinations. This is great for sewing your child's name in his or her camp gear, or for creating cool combinations of decorative stitches to use over and over.
- **KNEE LIFT** so you can raise the needle and presser foot without taking your hands off your sewing.
- **SPEED CONTROL SETTINGS** that can make the machine sew automatically at the speed you choose.
- **START/STOP BUTTON** that lets you sew and stop sewing without putting your foot on the pedal at all. This is really useful for free-motion quilting, because you don't have to worry about maintaining a constant pressure on the foot pedal.
- **THREAD TRIMMER** that automatically pulls the threads to the back of the fabric and cuts them when you finish a seam. This is a real thread saver and a huge convenience when you're sewing lots of short seams.
- **HARD CARRYING CASE** instead of a cheap vinyl case or no case at all.
- **EXTENSION TABLE** that provides a large flat surface or sewing at the level of the sewing machine needle.
- **BUILT-IN INSTRUCTION MANUAL** or sewing guide available on the machine's display.
- **ADDITIONAL PRESSER FEET AND ACCESSORIES** for special types of sewing.



Premium Sewing Machine: Features to Look for from \$1200 - \$3000

If sewing is more like a religion than a mere hobby for you, it may be worth biting the bullet and looking at a top-of-the-line machine. In the top price range, you'll find sewing machines by European makers like Pfaff and Bernina that have all the features of lower-priced machines, plus features designed for the serious sewer:

- **LARGE 10-INCH THROAT** that makes it easier to move bulky quilts around under the needle. The standard throat on lower-priced machines is 7 inches.
- **LOW-BOBBIN INDICATOR LIGHT** warns you when the bobbin thread runs low.
- **VARIABLE PRESSER FOOT LIFT** can automatically raise the foot to several different heights.
- **BUILT-IN DUAL FEED FEATURE** moves all the layers of fabric under the needle at the same rate, so the bottom and top layers don't shift and get misaligned during sewing. This is especially useful for quilting or sewing thick or slippery fabrics.
- **STITCH REGULATOR** that automatically produces uniform stitches during free-motion stitching. This is a big benefit for quilters who haven't mastered the difficult art of perfect freehand stitches.
- **WIDER STITCHES.** Depending on the maker, you can find machines with stitches up to 9 mm wide.

Higher-end machines with European brand names tend to hold their resale value better than machines from less prestigious manufacturers. This can make a difference if you trade your machine in often for a newer model.

