

THE BASICS OF CORSET BUILDING

by

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A Handbook for Beginners



The following pages are part of the first edition of a new book written by Linda Sparks of Farthingales. This is just a sample that we hope will catch your interest and show you the quality of the material in the finished book.

You may place your order online at www.farthingales.on.ca/corsetbuildingbook.html or www.farthingales.on.ca/books.php

THE BASICS OF CORSET BUILDING

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Section One: Tools and Materials for Corset Building



1. Tools

Our discussion won't include machines, only hand-held tools. How many tools you have in your sewing kit will depend on what you sew most often. Most of us have **thimbles**, various **hand-sewing needles**, measuring tape, **tracing wheels**, **thread snips** and scissors – the basics. To build a corset you need all of these and a bit more. For those of you who are new to sewing we'll start with the basic tools listed above, then expand upon them and add a few new ones. Details on exactly how the tools are used will be found in other chapters. This list is to give you an idea of what tools you may need to acquire.

Thimble

Everyone knows what one looks like but it's surprising how many people don't know how or when to use one.



Why should you use a thimble?

Because you can't sew efficiently without one and doing so can be dangerous; particularly when sewing a corset or any other fabric that may be difficult to get a needle through.

The thimble protects the middle finger of your sewing hand and gives you more power to push the needle through the fabric. Proper sewing technique requires that you enter the needle into the fabric while holding the needle between forefinger and thumb (Illustration A) and then follow through by pushing the needle through the fabric using your middle finger (Illustration B). The head of the needle can be very fine and even thicker needles can still puncture your finger before they go through all layers of fabric – if you don't use a thimble for protection. Puncturing your finger will be painful, but worse; it will cause you to bleed and that means you'll get blood on the corset.

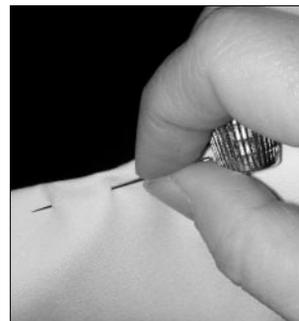


Illustration A

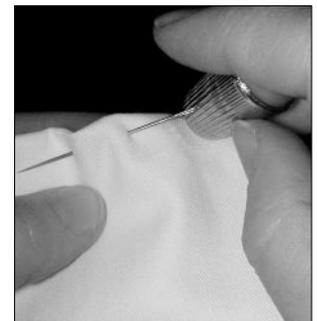


Illustration B

If you do happen to prick your finger and get blood on the garment, there is a very easy solution.

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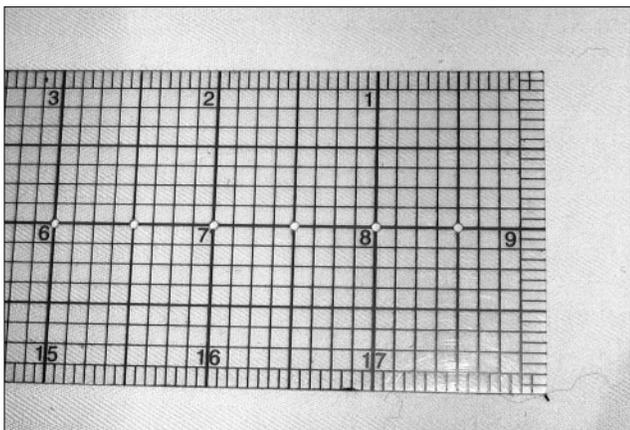
Blood is inclined to leave a permanent stain unless you use your saliva to dissolve it. Yes, it's true – your saliva will remove the bloodstain – but not if you try this after trying any other options. And only your saliva will dissolve your bloodstain so no one can help you with this. Simply spitting on the garment looks a bit vulgar, so take a yard or meter of thread, ball it up and chew it for a moment, let it get saturated, and then dab the stain with the saturated balled-up wad of thread and watch the bloodstain disappear. If you find this hard to believe, try it.

Hand-sewing Needles

They aren't what they used to be, which is one reason goggles are now part of many sewing rooms. Today's sewing needles tend to be brittle and can snap. Needles come in many sizes. Some sewing specialists will have clear ideas as to which sewing needle to use for which process. I am inclined to say, "Use the needle that feels comfortable to hold." Very large ones are not practical but a #6 or #7 seem to be reasonable for many purposes. You need hand-sewing needles so that you can finish the top and bottom edges of your corset by hand.

Measuring Tools

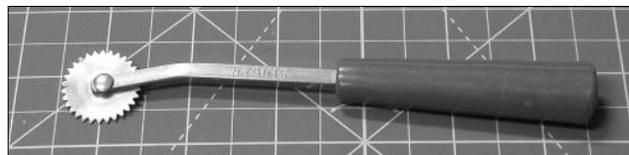
A measuring tape is for measuring the body and for checking measurements of the corset. A see-through ruler is my preferred tool for working on patterns and corsets because it not only offers a measuring device but a straightedge as well. I find I need both when corset making. Measuring can be more exact when using a ruler you can see through, and this makes the tracing of straight bone casing channels a lot faster. Nothing is better to aid you in marking bias strips on fabric than a see-through ruler! And bias strips are needed to finish a corset.



See-through ruler

Tracing Wheel

The tracing wheel makes the job of marking all the bone casings much easier, although tailor's tacks can also be used by those who know how to make them. There are several types of tracing wheels: dressmaking, tailor's, and the **double-wheel tracing wheel**. The double-wheel is the most beneficial in corset making. By using it you cut your time in half for marking the **casings**, and increase your accuracy as the markings can't help but be perfectly parallel. The double-wheel tracing wheel can also be used to mark your seam allowances. Align one wheel on your cutting line and the other wheel on the stitching line and you can mark the stitching line perfectly parallel with the cutting line.



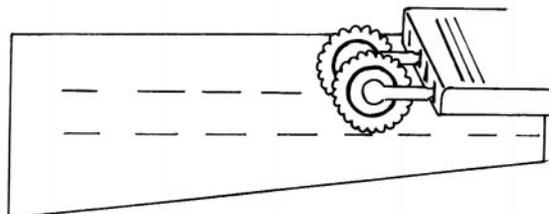
Dressmaking tracing wheel



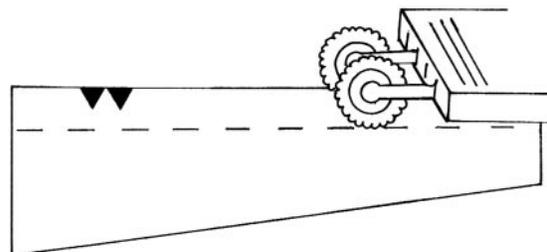
Tailor's tracing wheel



Double-wheel tracing wheel



Marking the casing



Marking the seam allowance

Thread Snips

Thread snips and scissors are used for cutting out the pattern pieces and snipping the multitude of threads left at the top and bottom of the corset where the bone casing stitching ends. There are a lot of threads since every bone casing requires two rows of stitching. Some Janome sewing machines offer a thread clipping option, but if you don't have one of these high-end machines you'll need to do a lot of clipping by hand. If you're using bone casing ribbon you'll also need to be able to cut the ribbon to length.

Rotary Cutter

A rotary cutter isn't absolutely necessary but can make cutting out your pattern pieces easier and saves stress on your hands if you're cutting a lot. To use a rotary cutter you must have a rotary cutting mat to protect your table. Rotary cutters and mats can be purchased at most fabric shops.



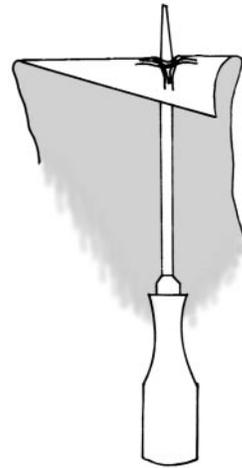
Rotary cutter and mat

Awl

An **awl** is a tool that you won't likely be able to purchase in your local fabric store but you'll find one in almost any hardware store. It's used when you need to apply an opening **busk**. The unique thing about making a hole with an awl is that the threads of the fabric get separated and pushed apart so they don't get cut or broken, and the integrity of the fabric isn't diminished. If you use a hole punch or scissors to create a hole the threads tend to fray and the hole gets bigger; something you want to avoid. This will create a very difficult mending job that will be costly and time consuming.



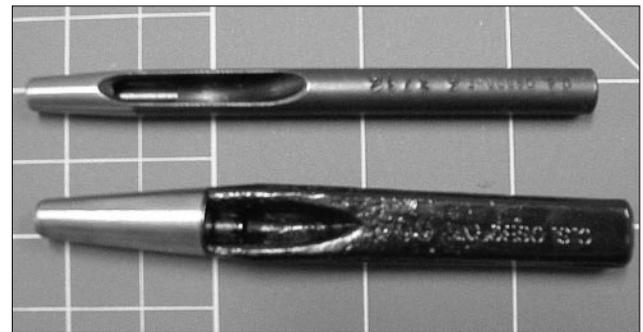
Awl



An awl is very simple to use. Simply work the point of the awl between the threads of the fabric where you've marked the hole placement and continue to push the awl through, spreading the threads further and further apart until you have a hole the size you need. Details of this process can be found in Section 2 Chapter 6.

If you can't find an awl, you can use a well-sharpened pencil – but be sure the pencil color is a close match to your fabric as the pencil needs to be very sharp and the lead will be exposed and will mark your fabric.

A hole punch, **rubber mallet**, **bolt cutters**, tin snips, file, and **needle-nose pliers** are also not likely to be found at your local fabric store, but you may find them in your toolbox. If not, any hardware store should have them.



Hole punches

Earlier we referred to the importance of using an awl rather than cutting a hole to avoid compromising the strength of the fabric. Some people use an awl to form the holes for the **grommets** or **eyelets** as well. However this can be a challenging and time-consuming process as there are far more grommets and eyelets than **busk knobs**, and they tend to be larger than the busk knobs – so grommets are more difficult to force through the awl-made hole. The theory is that by using an awl you won't decrease the strength of the fabric where the grommets/eyelets are set as the threads will remain intact. As a result the grommets will be less inclined to pop out of the fabric. This is true to some extent but using a washer behind the grommet or eyelet increases the security of the grommet or eyelet far more than not cutting a hole would.

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To make a hole you need a hole punch. Hole punches will come with any grommet or eyelet kit you purchase. It's imperative that the hole you make is the correct size. This will be assured if you use the hole punch that comes with the kit, and then order more grommets or eyelets in the same size as those included in the kit.

Rubber Mallet

Rubber mallets are useful in setting grommets. *Don't use a regular metal hammer*, as the metal hammer striking the metal grommet setter is unsafe. If you can't get a rubber mallet try a rawhide or wooden one. Details on setting grommets or eyelets can be found in Section 2 Chapter 7. There are other means of closing the back of your corset so if you decide not to use grommets or eyelets then you won't need a rubber mallet. Decide how you'll finish the corset before you buy the tool. See Section 2 Chapter 8 for other options.

Bolt Cutters

Bolt cutters can sometimes be found at dollar stores, but don't waste your money on them. They tend not to do the job, and if they work at first they don't last until the end of the project. The movement of the jaws of a bolt cutter can make it a better cutting tool than tin snips for some steel. The jaws of a bolt cutter are parallel to one another and clamp down in a way that applies pressure to the whole piece of steel at one time – unlike tin snips which function more like scissors. This means that the steel can't slide out from between the jaws. Bolt cutters are a better choice for spiral steel bones and narrower spring steels. Details on how to cut steel can be found in Section 2 Chapters 4 and 5.



Bolt cutters

Tin Snips

Tin snips are another tool for cutting steel bones. Some bones cut more easily with bolt cutters and some with tin snips. Like bolt cutters, tin snips shouldn't be purchased at the dollar or discount store. *Wiss* brand works well. Regardless of brand name the tin snips should have serrated jaws as they'll grip the steel better and don't allow the steel to slide out from between the jaws. Tin snips function in the same way as scissors do, so lack of a serrated jaw means the bone will slide out of the jaws as they close. Tin snips are best for spring steel, particularly wider spring steels, and for plastic as well.

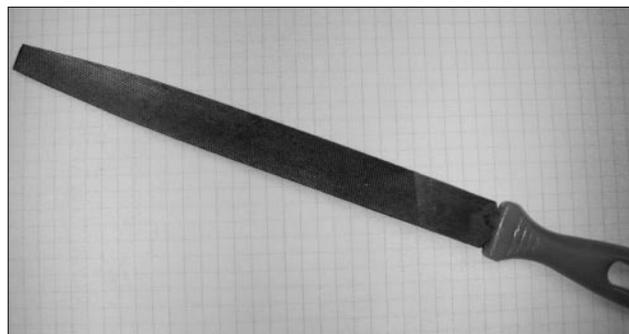


Tin snips

Details on cutting bones and which tools to use for what type of bone can be found in Section 2 Chapters 4 and 5.

File

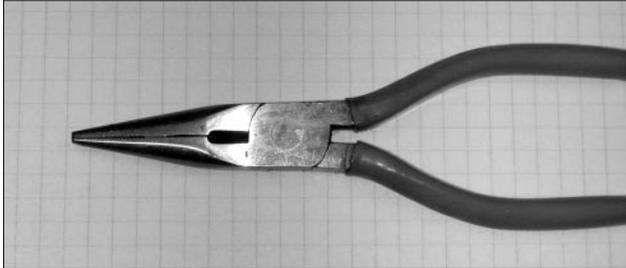
A file may be needed if you're cutting steel bones. You may need to file off the rough or sharp corners of the steel bones prior to applying "U" tips. For cutting and finishing most plastic bone scissors and an emery board from the drug store will likely be adequate.



File

Needle-nose Pliers

You'll need to have two pairs of needle-nose pliers if you're cutting steel bones. The cut steel has to be capped with small "U"-shaped ends and the only way to apply these tips is by using two pairs of pliers simultaneously. Full details of this process can be found in Section 2 Chapter 4.



Needle-nose pliers

Goggles

Goggles are not a tool, but do need to be mentioned. Goggles or protective eye wear should be worn whenever you cut steel or machine stitch the top edge of your corset after sliding the bones into their casings. Cutting spiral steel often results in a little piece flying off and the risk of the machine needle hitting a bone and breaking is high – wear goggles. Wardrobes that abide by health and safety rules will expect you to wear goggles whenever you're at a sewing machine, so you might as well get your own and get accustomed to wearing them.

2. Textiles

There are two types of materials used in corset building: those made of textile fibers and those that aren't. Busks, grommets, and bones are examples of those that *aren't* made of textile and will be covered later in this section. The next few pages will be dedicated to those materials that are made of textile fibers.

These materials are:

- fabric
- bone casing
- **bias tape** or binding and **petersham**
- **twill tape**
- **cable cord**
- **lacing cord**
- **lacing tape**
- **fusible interfacing**

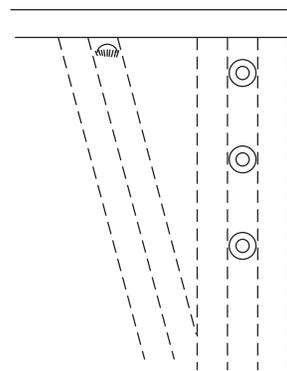
Fabric

We are all familiar with fabrics and you can likely identify the difference between satin and denim, but chances are you've never seen **coutil**. Few fabrics have the characteristics of coutil, and few are suitable for the foundation of a corset.

Coutil can be a **brocade**, satin or **herringbone** weave, and cotton or cotton/viscose are the most common fiber contents. Polyester is difficult to work with and doesn't breathe well – it's best avoided.

Coutil's important characteristics are:

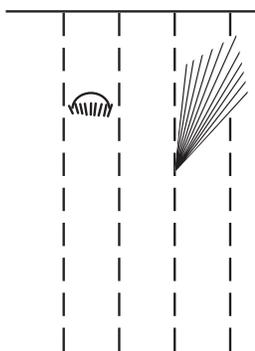
- tightly woven
- limited inclination to stretch
- smooth finish
- strength.



Tightly woven fabric is by nature dense and this is important as bones are less likely to work holes in the fabric. The bones in a corset tend to shift up and down in their casings when the corset is worn, and this shifting can cause holes at the top and bottom of the bone casing – a common problem. This is best dealt

with during planning and construction rather than as a repair process because repair is time consuming and rarely attractive. Bone damage to a corset can occur during only one wearing if you don't construct your corset properly. Start with using a tightly woven fabric.

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Decorative stitching was traditionally used to help strengthen these areas of wear. This adds a very attractive touch but takes time and more importantly skill.

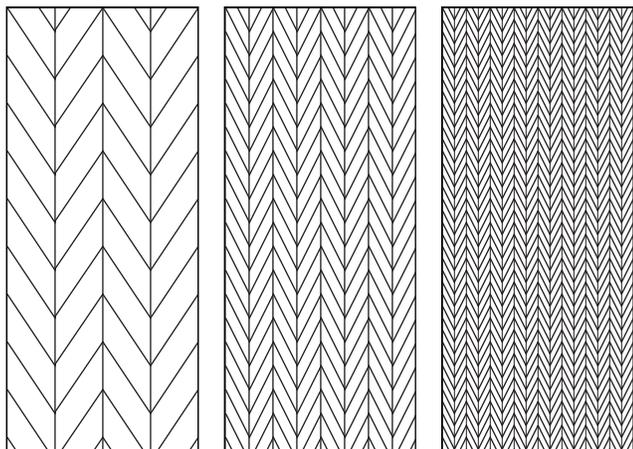
Stretching of the fabric in a corset defeats the purpose of a corset, however it will still

happen to some degree. I've had people suggest denim as an alternative to coutil. But – think about squeezing into a new or freshly washed pair of jeans and then think how they feel at the end of a day. They have stretched. For this reason denim isn't a good choice despite it seeming to be more cost effective. Tightly woven fabric is less inclined to stretch.

A smooth finish is important because the corset is worn tightly and often directly against the skin, and a rough finish can cause unsightly and uncomfortable indentations on your body over the whole area of the corset. So, while some people say they use cotton duck because it doesn't stretch as much as denim does – think twice about doing this to someone you like.

The strength of the fabric you use is extremely important as is the technique for sewing the seams. Remember the corset is snug fitting and you don't want seams bursting or pulling apart. For this reason don't use velvet or satin unless the satin is a coutil. The corset seams will be under a great deal of strain, even if the corset isn't being used to greatly reduce your size.

Note: There are many herringbone twills and those with the smallest herringbone weave are the best, densely woven and with the least inclination to stretch.



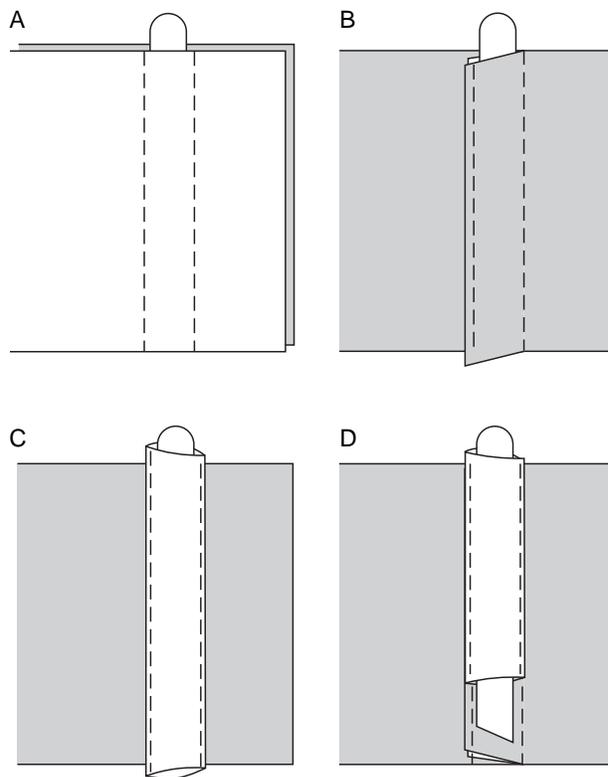
Three herringbone weaves

Coutil has been designed specifically for corset manufacturing, and while it's rather costly it really is the best choice. I know of no comparable fabric.

Bone Casing

Bone casings are used in all corset construction. There are four methods of making bone casings:

- Using two layers of coutil. (A)
- Using the **seam allowances**. (B)
- Using bone casing ribbon (manufactured for the purpose) and sewn onto the inside of the coutil corset. These ribbon-look bone casings can also be sewn onto the outside of the corset and this can create a design feature, particularly when contrasting color is used. (C)
- Using bone casing ribbon over the seam allowance – this encases any raw edges, creating a beautiful finish as well as holding the bones (D).



Four types of bone casing

The bone casings must be of a durable woven fabric. If you wish to use satin ribbon as a design feature consider it as an appliqué, applying it over the bone casing. Manufactured bone casing appears to be a basic cotton or rayon ribbon but it's in fact a flattened tube into which you can slide the bone. Bones are not slid into the casing until after the casing is sewn onto the

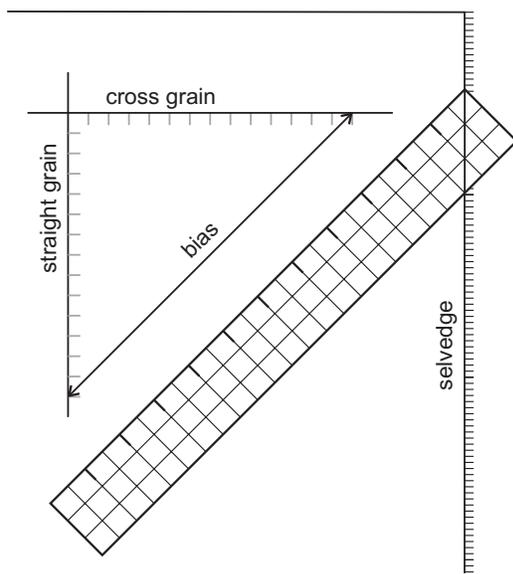
garment. If you look closely at the manufactured bone casing you'll see the area where you can stitch. Avoid stitching outside this area and into the bone area as you'll have difficulty sliding your bones in later.

Bone casing tape is available in four widths and in two colors only – black and white (and occasionally flesh). Natural fiber content makes bone casing tape easy to dye and curve into shape. Twill tape isn't adequate for bone casing as it's too weak. Prussian tape however is suitable but hard to find. Prussian tape looks much like twill tape but you'll notice a distinct difference in how it feels. It's much more densely woven and stronger, and tends to be made of polyester.

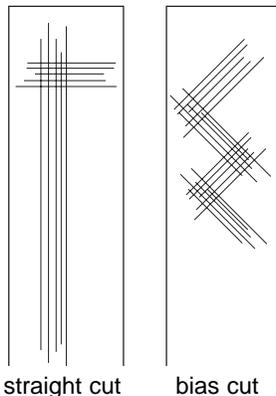
Bone casing will be discussed in detail in Section 2.

Bias Tape

Bias tape or biais tape – I have seen it spelled both ways but the pronunciation seems to be the same everywhere.



Finding the bias of your fabric

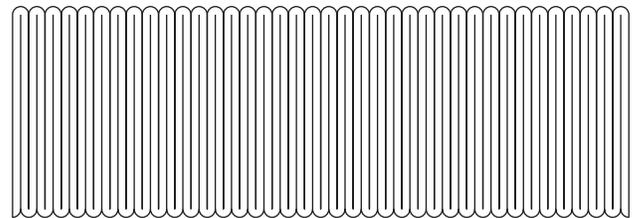


Bias strips have the ability to bind curved edges without bunching, tucking, or pulling because the bias cut allows for subtle stretching and shaping. This can't be accomplished with straight-grain cut goods or most ribbons. Bias tape can be purchased at

most fabric stores but making your own in coordinating or contrasting fabric creates a more professional look. Details on this process can be found in Section 2 Chapter 11.

Petersham Ribbon

Some call it grosgrain ribbon and I've heard various theories on the difference between the two. The important details to look for are fibre content and **selvedge**. In binding the edges, petersham ribbon must be able to respond to curves in the same manner as bias tape does – stretching and curving without pucker or pulling. The ribbon's fiber content must be natural; polyester won't allow for the stretching and curving needed. Cotton and cotton/viscose blends work well and can be dyed. The selvedge must *not* be smooth, but bumpy as the smooth selvedge defines the edge length and won't allow for the stretch required when binding a curved edge. Petersham ribbon can also be used as the **waist stay** of the corset.



Petersham ribbon

Twill Tape

While twill tape isn't adequate for bone casing it's suitable for a waist stay. The twill tape for this should be polyester as it's less inclined to stretch. Twill tape can't be used to bind the top or bottom edge of the corset.



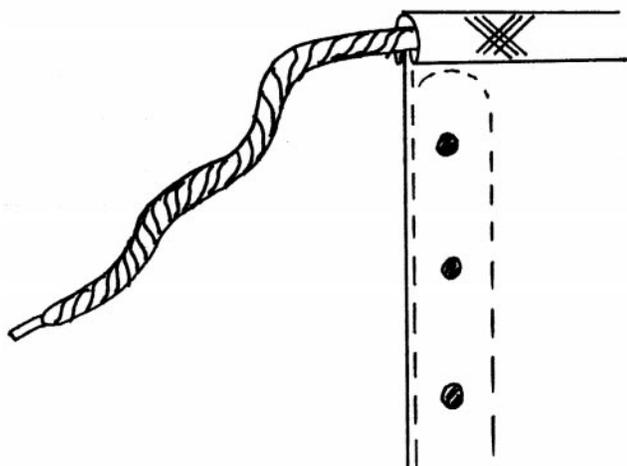
Twill tape

Cable Cord

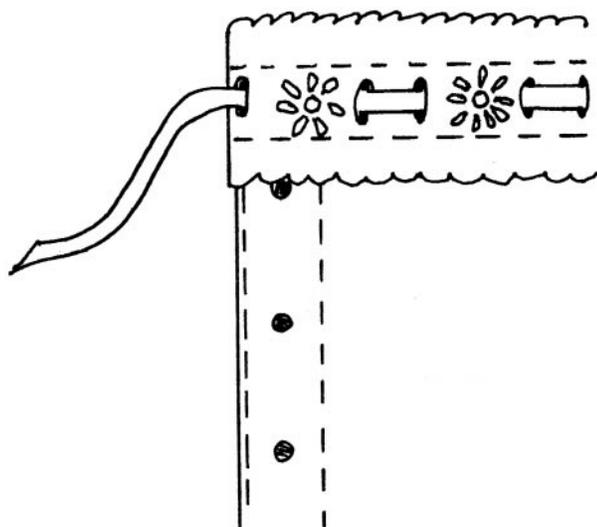
The reason for a cord at the top of the corset is to gather the top edge very slightly which limits the risk of breasts spilling out. A cord drawing the top edge in makes for a very secure garment for any size woman. Cable cord, fine ribbon, or other narrow cord can also be used. This cord should be fairly fine to limit bulk in the bound top edge and to allow it to be tucked discreetly away to the inside of the corset when the corset is being worn. Lace beading can also be used

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with a ribbon threaded through it. This process makes the draw ribbon both functional and attractive.



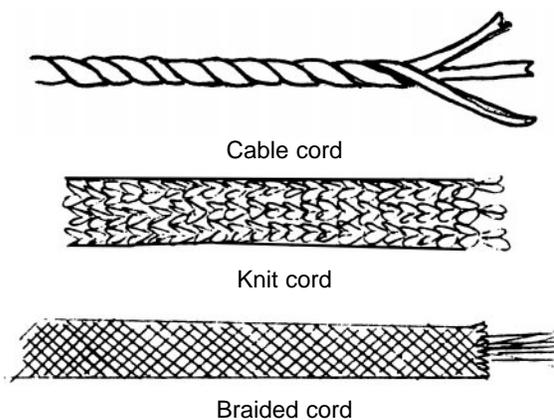
Cord encased in bias



Lace beading with ribbon

Lacing Cord

Usually the lacing cord is found at the center back. Cord fiber content can be of anything, but polyester will be the strongest. Cord should be either knit or braided but not twisted – so *don't* use cable cord for lacing. The knit cords tend to be flat, and braided cord tends to be round. I prefer the round braided cord as it never appears twisted when laced. Flat cords can twist during the lacing process and while this doesn't affect the strength of the lacing, it can affect the look. Ribbon can also be used but it's harder to work with as it's slippery and the twisting during lacing is very evident and hard to control. It can create a very pretty effect if you have a dresser to help with the lacing, when the look will be worth the time and effort.



Lace Tips

Cable cord and lacing cord need to be tipped to keep the ends from fraying and this can be done either with small steel tips called **aglets** and aglet pliers (which are hard to find and expensive), or with **shrink tips**. You can also use shoelaces if you can find some that are long enough. More information about tipping laces can be found in Section 2 Chapter 9.

Lacing Tape

Lacing tape can be sewn to the center back of a corset rather than setting grommets or eyelets. More information on lacing tape can be found in Section 2 Chapter 8.

Fusible Interfacing

Fusible interfacing isn't an absolute must-have item. A strip of it can be used down the back panel where the grommets are going to be set. Fuse it to the wrong side of the fabric before you punch the holes; it helps keep the fabric around the holes from fraying. This isn't necessary with most coutil but it's a good idea with the fashion fabric layer. Keep the fusible interfacing light to limit the amount of bulk it will add. You may also want to use fusible interfacing on single layer corsets to help increase the bulk if you find the eyelets are not setting firmly.