

A free project, compliments of...

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## Big Tote

### Materials

- Pellon Thermolam Fleece or batting (see Step 4 on fleece/batting information)
- Fabric - the bag in the example uses five different fabrics (a sturdy or heavyweight fabric for the outer bag bottom, and four coordinating quilting cottons for the outer bag top, pockets, handles, and lining.)
- Medium weight fusible stabilizer
- Basic sewing supplies/tools

There have been times when I was in need of an extra large tote bag. I have smaller or average sized bags, but nothing very large. So I ended up packing my carry along items into a large plastic bag I had gotten at a local store. This was not the ideal bag for me. I wanted something handmade and much more sturdy and fashionable. So I set out to make myself a large tote bag.

Because I usually set my tote bags on the floor, I decided to use a sturdy fabric for the bottom part of the bag. For the bag in this tutorial, I used denim. Decorator fabrics, twill, cotton duck, and corduroy would be good choices for a sturdy fabric, but really, you can use whatever you like.

The denim I used was actually from an old pair of jeans. The denim was a light blue color, I believe it was referred to as stone washed or acid washed at the time they were new. I overdyed them with fiber reactive dye and gave them new life and a new purpose.

### Cut

Base or bottom fabric: Two pieces 29" x 11"

Upper/top fabric: Two pieces 29" x 12"

Pocket fabric: Two pieces 11.5" x 15.5"

Straps/handles fabric: Two pieces 3.75" x 60"

(if you don't have fabric long enough for the handles, you will need to piece shorter lengths together to achieve 60")

### Step 1

Create the pockets. Fold the pocket fabrics in half, wrong sides together, and press well. You should have two pieces that measure 11.5" x 7.75". Add a line of top stitching about 1/8" from the top or folded edge of the pocket pieces. This is more decorative than functional. Optional: Add a piece of medium weight stabilizer to the wrong side of the pocket fabric, before folding in half, for a very sturdy pocket.



Bag measures approximately 21" wide and 18" tall.

Straps/handles stabilizer: Two pieces 3.5" x 59"

Thermolam Fleece/batting: Two pieces 31" x 24"

Lining fabric: Two pieces approx. 22" x 28.5"

(you may want to wait and cut the lining in Step 9)

## Step 2

Find the center on both the pockets and the upper fabric pieces, and following Fig. 1, place the pocket pieces on the right side of the upper fabric pieces. The folded edge of the pocket will be toward the top and the bottom edge of the pocket will align with the bottom raw edge of the fabric edge.

Stitch the two side edges of the pocket to baste it to the upper fabric piece. Stitch about 1/8" from the edge. Don't worry about the raw edges at this time, they will be covered with the handle fabric in a later step.

Fabric for upper section of bag

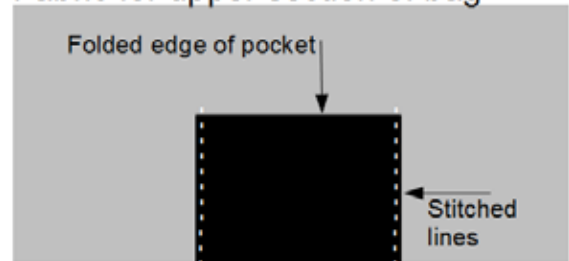


Fig. 1

## Step 3

Connect the upper fabric pieces to the bottom fabric pieces. Stitching with a 1/4" seam allowance, place the upper and bottom fabric pieces right sides together and stitch. The bottom edge of the pocket fabric will get stitched into this seam also.

Unfold, and press along the seam with your iron. You should now have two panels that resemble Fig. 2.

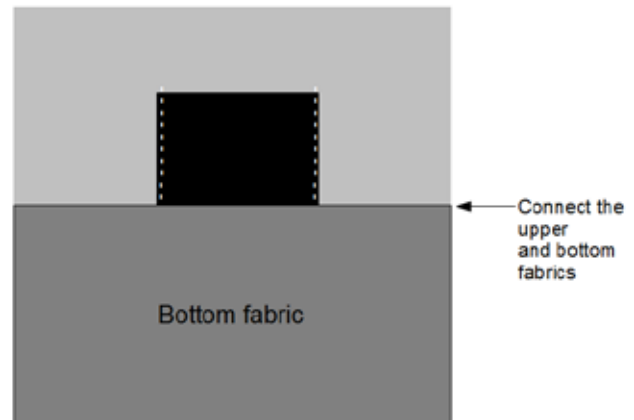


Fig. 2

## Step 4

Baste or fuse the two panels from Fig. 2 to the Thermolam Fleece. I prefer the Thermolam Fleece for this type of project because I find it has more body than regular cotton quilt batting. But you can use batting if you like. I would recommend adding a layer of medium weight stabilizer along with the batting to give it some additional support. The Thermolam Fleece comes in a fusible and non fusible version and either one will be fine for this project. Note that the fleece or batting layer is larger than the fabric panels. This is because we are now going to add some quilting or decorative top stitching to our panels and the excess fleece allows for shrinkage from the stitching.

Once your pieces are basted, go ahead and add your quilting or top stitching. You can do anything you want here but remember....don't stitch over the top of the pocket fabric.

When you are finished with your quilting, trim away any excess batting. Your panels might measure 22.5" x 29" at this point but if they don't that is fine, just be sure they both measure the same. Usually the more quilting you add the more shrinkage you will get. Jot down your panel's dimensions at this time. You will need this information later.

## Step 5

Mark a 4" square section in each of the bottom corners of both panels. Cut this area away. This will help form the shape of the bag. See Fig. 3.



Fig. 3

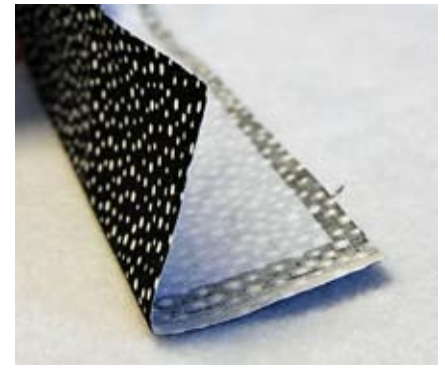
## Step 6

Create the handles. Adhere the fusible stabilizer to the wrong side of your handle fabric. If you don't have single pieces of fabric that measure the length of 60" for the handles, you will first need to piece those together. Notice that the stabilizer is cut a bit smaller than the handle fabric. I like to center the stabilizer on the wrong side of the fabric. You don't need the stabilizer to reach to the edges.

Once your stabilizer is on the fabric, fold the fabric in half along the length and press with your iron (top right photo).

Then open the fold and take one raw edge and fold it in toward the middle fold or crease you just formed. Press this well with your iron down the full length. Then do the same for the other side, fold the raw edge toward the middle crease and press well. It's okay to have a gap where the two edges meet in the middle, but try to keep it consistent. See middle right photo. Once you have pressed both edges so they meet in the middle, then fold the fabric in half along the original, beginning fold and press again. This encloses the raw edges inside and creates a sturdy handle. See bottom right photo.

Top stitch about 1/8" from each edge down the length of the handle piece. Create two handles.



## Step 7

Attach the handles to the bag panels. One handle goes on each panel. Align the raw edges of the handle ends to the raw edges of the bag's bottom seam. The handle fabric will be positioned so it covers the raw edges of the pocket. Make sure that there are no twists in the handle. Refer to Fig. 4.

Pin in place and top stitch each edge of the strap starting at the bag's bottom edge. Top stitch right over the stitching you added to the handle edges in Step 6. Stop top stitching the handles about 2" from the top edge. (See Fig. 5) You will complete the top stitching on the handles after the lining fabric is attached.

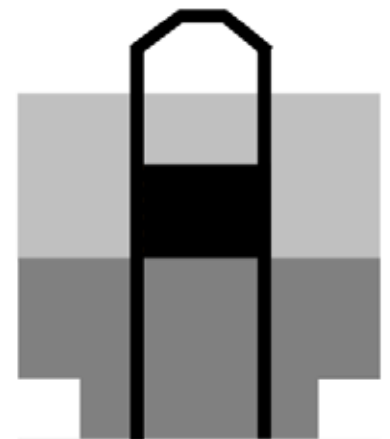
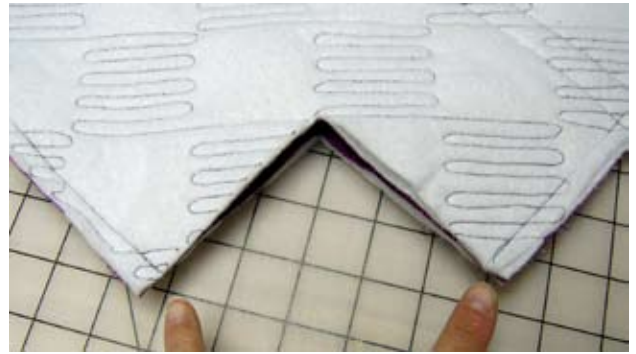


Fig. 4

## Step 8

Sew the two bag panels together. Pin them with right sides together and sew down both sides with a 1/4" seam allowance. Sew the bottom seam with a 1/4" seam allowance.

Now you should have two bottom corners that aren't stitched. In Fig. 6 you see one of these bottom corners. The two seams that are pointed to, need to be manipulated so they meet and nest together.



In Fig. 7 you can see how the side and bottom seam are nested together and the entire seam line is pinned and ready to be stitched with a 1/4" seam allowance. Stitch the seam to create the gusset. Repeat on the other side.

After the gussets are stitched, turn the bag right side out.

## Step 9

Prepare the lining fabric. Take your panel dimensions from Step 4 and subtract 1/2" from both the width and length. So if your panel dimension was 22" x 29", you would cut your lining pieces 21.5" x 28.5". The lining fabric should measure approximately 1/2" smaller in dimension than your panels measured. Cut two 4" squares in the bottom corners of each lining piece, just as you did with the outside panels in Step 5. Now sew the two lining pieces together. Place them right sides together, pin, and sew the two sides and the bottom seam with a 1/4" seam allowance. Then sew the two corner gussets like you did with the outside panels in Step 8.

Don't turn the lining fabric, leave it with the right side on the inside.

## Step 10

Attach the lining to the bag. Slip the bag inside the lining so that the right sides of the outer bag and the right sides of the lining are together. Be sure the handles are pushed down inside, between the bag and lining, and out of the way. Align the side seams of the lining and bag, match the raw edges along the top and pin around the entire top edge of the bag. In the photo at right you can see the outer bag is positioned inside the lining. The lining is almost completely pinned around the top edge.



Sew around the entire top edge of the bag with a 1/4" seam. Leave a section approximately 8" to 10" unstitched. This is where you will turn the bag right sides out. When you sew your top seam, begin and end with a back tack stitch so that the stitching doesn't come undone when turning out the bag. Turn the bag right sides out and push the lining down inside the bag.

## Step 11

Press the fabrics along the top seam so they lay flat and smooth. Press well in the area that you left unstitched. Press it so the seam allowance appears the same as that of the area that is stitched. Top stitch around the entire top edge of the bag. This will close the seam that was left open from turning the bag out. Be sure the handles are kept out of the way.

You can now finish top stitching along the edges of the handles to secure them up to the top edge. I like to baste the lining fabric to the outer fabric with some pins so that it stays flat during this process. Otherwise you may stitch some puckers into the lining. See my pin placement in the photo to the right. I place them so that they aren't in my way while stitching.

Repeat these steps to stitch the remaining handles.



Your Big Tote is now complete. You can easily customize this bag by changing the dimensions of either the overall size or by changing the measurements of your outer fabrics. Make the handles longer or shorter, add inside pockets, or whatever you desire. Have fun!