



# Ironing versus Pressing<sup>1</sup>

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The words *pressing* and *ironing* are often interchanged. However, these two terms are not equivalent. *Ironing* is what you do to remove wrinkles by sliding a hot iron back and forth. *Pressing* is the process of lifting and putting the iron down on a specific part of a project.

For example, we *iron* a garment so that it does not lose its shape. A well-ironed garment allows you to look well dressed and composed. On the other hand, a quick *press* takes a specific wrinkle out of something. It is important to know the difference.

## Tools of the Trade

For both tasks, you will need an iron and an ironing board. If you don't have an ironing board, you can create a makeshift ironing board. Find a flat, even, heat-resistant surface, like the floor or a table, then fold up a towel and put a pillowcase over it.

A pressing cloth protects your fabric by preventing sheen and protecting against scorching and melting. It also protects your iron from fabric melting and sticking to the sole plate (the hot surface of your iron) or from poor-quality printing ink transferring to your iron.

A practical ironing board adjusts the height of the board or table. Personal upright posture needs to be maintained even while reaching across the full width of the board. The goal of good posture ironing is to reduce strain on the neck, arms, and back while ironing. The correct height also helps ensure safety. Keep in mind that adjusting the height of the

board may not always be possible. Make sure the covering on your board is clean and flat to decrease the chances of interference in your pressing or ironing.



Figure 1. Ironing board.

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The heat of an iron is controlled by its settings. Always use the setting for the fiber content of your fabric. If the fabric is labeled cotton, use the cotton setting on your iron. If the fabric is a blend of two or more fibers, use the setting for the most heat-sensitive fiber. For a polyester/cotton blend, you would use the permanent press setting for polyester because it is a lower temperature than the cotton setting. You should use extreme caution because the heat of an iron can melt or even burn fabric.

Moisture is often used with an iron. Moisture can be used on most fabrics, but you must control it carefully. Moisture can come from several sources, including a steam iron, a dampened press cloth or even a spritz of water. When

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using an iron on any cloth, test on a scrap of fabric before using moisture on the garment or article. The labels for the settings on most steam irons will tell you which settings are hot enough to produce steam. If the fabric requires a heat setting lower than the steam setting on the iron, use a dampened press cloth to give moisture. You can also refer to the owner's manual of the iron.



Figure 2. Iron.

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## Ironing

When ironing, smooth out wrinkles with a sliding motion of the iron. This gives the item a more professional look. Ironing an item is about the finished appearance of the item and how it will look when you put the garment on. Ironing can involve dampening the material and/or using spray starch to help it hold the shape in which you press it. Spray starch, made from cornstarch and water, can be purchased at most stores and is a traditional aid for ironing. It moistens the fabric and helps garments to maintain the creases that you iron into them.



Figure 3. Ironing a shirt.

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When ironing, try to handle garments as little as possible to avoid adding new or extra creases. It helps to dampen an item prior to ironing. With the advanced irons available now, you simply need to press a button on the iron and spray a mist over the fabric to do this.

## Pressing

Pressing means smoothing and shaping garments or other items with heat, moisture, and pressure using an iron. Pressing gives these items a smooth, flawless look. When you are performing the task of pressing, you lower and lift the iron. While you are sewing, periodic pressing gives the item you are working on a smooth appearance. Typically, you would press each seam and dart before it is crossed with another seam. Seams and darts are the places that garments are stitched together. Pressing seams when sewing an item (quilts, clothing, etc.) is an important step to bring crispness and shape to sewing projects.

Light pressure is needed to press most of today's fabrics. Lower and lift the iron carefully, keeping most of the weight of the iron in your hand. Many pressing steps while sewing items use only the tip or the edge of the soleplate. Too much pressure often causes seams or darts to leave a mark or ridge on the front of the fabric.



Figure 4. Pressing a seam.

Credits: Heather Janney, UF/IFAS

Press pattern pieces with a warm, dry iron before placing the pieces on the fabric to be sure you will cut the correct size and shape. Prior to cutting and placing pattern pieces, press the fabric to remove wrinkles. Try not to press over pins, because they can leave a mark in the fabric or melt the plastic pin head. Press around pins or remove them. Be careful as hooks and eyes, zippers, and other fasteners may melt or scratch the soleplate of the iron and could cause damage to fabrics. Use a press cloth to cover the fastener and protect the iron. Always remove bastings or temporary

stitches that might leave marks before you begin to press. With practice, you will learn to press with the grain of the fabric (i.e., the direction with hardly any stretch) and in the same direction that the seam was stitched. This will prevent stretching. Press each seam, dart, and construction detail before joining it to another part of the garment. Use a light touch, usually on the wrong side of the fabric. Do not overpress. Clean the iron if it becomes necessary. There are several cleaning products available that remove built-up starch or other residue.

## Sources

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