

Working With Leather

How to Cut Leather

Most leather-working projects require that the leather be cut. Use these suggestions to cut thin or thick leather.

🕒 Steps:

1. Lay the leather out on a flat work surface. Protect the surface with a rubber mat made especially for leather working. This mat will also help protect your tools from being blunted or damaged by contact with the surface.
2. Use a pencil and a ruler or yardstick to make the cutting line along the leather's surface. Make very light pencil marks that don't score the leather.
3. Use a French curve or other rounded edge to trace a curved line.
4. Place a straightedge, such as a metal ruler, along the drawn line. A thick straightedge provides stability for the cutting blade.
5. Draw the tip of a razor knife along the straightedge, cutting into the leather as you go. Keep the blade pushed against the straightedge as you cut into the leather.
6. Cut only as deep as you can while still being able to control the blade. Take as many cutting passes as necessary to cut through the leather.
7. Cut curved lines in the same manner. If you draw your curve freehand, position your razor so it's perpendicular to the leather's surface. Make several light passes with the razor along the drawn line until the leather is cut.
8. Use leather shears to cut suede and garment leather.

✦ Tips:

- Change the knife blade as often as needed. One blade should last for the duration of a project.
- Keep the leather damp while you work it. This makes the leather easier to manipulate. Either spray the entire piece lightly with a spray bottle of water or dampen it with a sponge.
- Dampen the piece evenly with water. If a few drops of water spill onto the piece, then wet the entire piece. This will help prevent water spots.

How to Make a Leather Book Cover

Make a leather cover for your favorite book or to give as a gift to someone special. You can

decorate and personalize the cover with tooling and stamping or leave it unadorned.

Steps:

1. Make a pattern for the book cover by folding a medium- to heavy-weight piece of paper around the existing cover of the closed book.
2. Trim the paper so that 1/2 inch extends beyond both the top and bottom of the book. Also trim the vertical edges of the paper so that 1/2 inch extends beyond both the front and back covers.
3. Measure the length and the width of the front cover of the book. Use a ruler, pencil and scissors to measure and mark out a rectangle that measures 1/2 inch the width of the cover plus 1/2 inch and the length of the cover plus 1/2 inch. This forms the pattern for the pockets of the cover.
4. Lay the two pattern pieces onto a piece of 4 to 6-oz. leather. See 'eHow to Cut Leather' for instructions on marking and cutting out the pattern pieces from the leather. Make sure to cut out two of the rectangular pieces from Step 3 as well as one piece from Step 2.
5. Lay the larger pattern piece onto a piece of skiver leather. Mark and cut out the pattern from this piece. This will serve as the lining of the cover.
6. See 'eHow to Finish the Edges of a Piece of Leather' for instructions on finishing the edges of the cover and pocket pieces.
7. Place the heavier book cover piece on a flat work surface, right side down. Evenly apply leather cement to the leather with a wooden paint stirring stick. Allow the cement to dry until the shine has disappeared and then affix the lining.
8. Affix the lining beginning at either the left or right edge of the cover and then smooth the lining toward the opposite end. Make sure that the top and bottom edges are lined up evenly. Allow the cement to dry thoroughly.
9. Keep the book cover right side down and cement each pocket piece in place along the left and right edges of the cover. Apply cement to the side and top edges of each piece. Allow these pieces to dry thoroughly, as well.

Tips:

- Use vegetable-tanned leather if you plan on tooling, dying or stamping the leather.
- Do any tooling, dying or decorative stamping before beginning Step 7.
- Use a clean wooden paint stirring stick to smooth the lining of the cover.

How to Make a Leather Dog Collar

Use vegetable-tanned leather to make a collar for your dog. You can make it in any width, length or color you choose.

Steps:

1. Determine the desired length and width of the collar and cut the collar from the leather. See "Cut Leather," under Related eHow's, for instructions. Make the length of the collar equal to the dog's neck measurement plus 3 to 4 inches. The width of the collar should be equal to the interior width of the buckle.
2. Decide what shape you want the free collar end to take. You can make it pointed, rounded, square ' whatever shape you like. Mark the collar end and use a razor knife and straight edge to cut it to the desired shape.
3. Fold the uncut edge of the collar back so that a crease is made 1 1/2 inches from the collar end. Place a slot punch on the collar so that the punch's end evenly intersects the crease at the crease's center point.
4. Hold the handle portion of the punch and strike the top with a wood or rawhide mallet. Repeat until the punch has completely punctured the leather.
5. Use a rotary punch or drive punch and mallet to make four rivet holes in the leather for the buckle. The diameter of the rivets and the punched holes should be equal, and the holes should be placed evenly around the slot. The first two holes should be placed 1/4 inch from the collar end, each hole 1/4 inch from the collar's edges.
6. Place the second set of holes on the other side of the slot so that when the collar end is folded back along the crease line, both sets of holes match up evenly.
7. Use an edge beveler to trim all of the collar's edges. Do any tooling or decorative stamping at this time as well.
8. Use leather dye to color the collar if desired. See "Dye Leather," under Related eHow's, for instructions. Allow the leather to dry completely and then use a clean, white cloth to rub neat's-foot oil or saddle soap along the length of the collar. Polish and remove the excess oil or soap with newspaper or rag paper.
9. Insert the buckle prong through the punched slot so that the buckle is correctly positioned. Fold the uncut collar end back so that the rivet holes are lined up, and insert the rivets from the underside of the collar. Place the collar end on a flat work surface and affix the rivet caps to the rivets with a mallet.
10. Determine the placement of the holes through which the buckle's prong will be inserted. Put the collar around the dog's neck. On the back of the collar, mark a hole position that will result in the collar being positioned comfortably but securely around the dog's neck.
11. Mark just one hole or a series of holes that are spaced about 1 inch apart and continue to the collar's free end. Many holes might be a good idea if your dog still has some growing to do.
12. Punch the holes with a rotary punch or a drive punch and mallet. Make sure that the holes are centered.

Tips:

- Determine the desired length and width of the dog collar before you go to purchase the leather and buckle.
- Adjust the rivet placement if necessary. You may need to adjust their placement depending on how narrow the collar is. Just make sure that the rivets are evenly placed.
- Keep the leather evenly dampened while you work it. This makes the leather easier to manipulate. Either spray the entire piece lightly with a spray bottle of water or dampen with a sponge.
- Look for rivets and punches with a diameter of approximately 1/8 inch.
- Insert a metal or leather loop over the collar end before beginning step 9. The loop should sit between the rivets and the buckle.
- Look for appropriate-size buckle sets that come with a buckle, metal belt loop and metal belt end.

How to Make a Leather Pouch

This leather drawstring pouch is another good beginning leather-work project. Make this pouch any size you like.

Steps:

1. Choose a soft, supple type of leather for the pouch. Use leathers such as doeskin, chamois, garment-weight suede or buckskin. Also choose leather lacing or thong for the drawstring closure.
2. Make sure to choose a piece of leather that's large enough to make the pouch in the desired size.
3. Dye the leather if you wish. See "How to Dye Leather," under Related eHows, for instructions.
4. Use a pencil and a ruler to measure out the dimensions of your pouch. Make the pouch as one long rectangle to be folded in half and stitched up the sides, or cut out two equal rectangles to be stitched on all sides.
5. Round out the portion of the pattern pieces that will make up the bottom of the pouch - it will give a rounded rather than square shape to the pouch. This is an option if you cut two pieces for the pouch.
6. Cut out the pouch pieces with leather shears or a sturdy pair of scissors.
7. Use a stitching awl to punch a series of holes in the leather about 1/8 inch from the edge. Leave the top portions of the pouch pieces alone for now.
8. See "How to Use a Stitching Awl in Leather Work" and "How to Sew a Double Needle Stitch on Leather," under Related eHows, for instructions on making the stitching holes and sewing the sides of the pouch together with waxed linen thread.

9. Use a rotary punch to make a series of large holes at the top of the sewn pouch. Make sure the diameter of each hole matches the diameter of the leather lacing or thong.
10. Thread the lacing or thong through the large holes, going in at one hole and out through the next. Repeat until all holes have been laced.
11. Make sure the free ends of the lacing or thong are even, then knot the ends together.

Tips:

- Choose dyed garment-weight leather for the pouch. Many of these types of leather come in a wide variety of colors. This will save you from having to dye the leather yourself.
- Make your pouch from one large circle of leather. Punch holes along the perimeter of the circle, approximately 1/4 inch from the edge, for lacing, and gather the leather into a pouch.
- Use a sewing machine and a wedge-point needle to sew lightweight leathers.
- Use a special lacing needle to pull the lacing or thong through the holes at the top of the pouch, or just cut the tip of the thong to a point and use your fingers to insert the lacing.

How to Preserve Leather

In order to give your purchased or made leather pieces a long life, it is very important to care for and treat them properly.

Steps:

1. Use a finishing product or sealant at the end of your leatherworking project. Make sure that the finishing product you choose is safe for the type of leather and materials you've used. If necessary, use finishes that are meant to be used with leather dyes and paints.
2. Finish projects made with vegetable-tanned leather by working saddle soap or neat's-foot oil into the surface of the piece. Polish and then buff off the excess with newspaper or rag paper.
3. Keep your leather products as clean as possible. Dust, dirt and oils will cause damage (i.e. scratches) to the surface of the leather. Use cleaners made especially for leather, if necessary.
4. Maintain your leather pieces so that professional cleaning is not necessary. Even professional cleaning will alter the color somewhat.
5. Keep all leather products from getting wet. If something is spilled on the leather, blot the area dry with a clean cloth as soon as possible, and allow the area to dry thoroughly.
6. Remove dirt from soiled suede before the dirt has time to set in. Allow the piece to dry completely, if necessary, and then brush thoroughly with a suede brush.
7. Keep leather pieces soft and supple with a conditioner designed specifically for leather. Apply the conditioner with a clean cloth, work it into the leather and then buff the piece until the excess conditioner has been removed.

Tips:

- Make sure to apply any finishing products as recommended by the manufacturer. Some types of leather need special products.
- Purchase leather finishing and care supplies at a leather supply store.

How to Shape Leather

Some leatherworking projects, such as containers or portfolios, require that the leather be shaped or molded to hold a particular form. Use the following suggestions to help create a formed or molded piece.

Shaped

Steps:

1. Determine the finished dimensions of a leather container and obtain a wooden form that matches these dimensions. For example, for a leather cup with a diameter of 3 inches, you will need a circular wooden form of the same diameter.
2. Make your own wooden forms if there are none available that fit your size requirements. Make sure that the wood has not been stained.
3. Soak the leather completely.
4. Remove the leather from the water and wrap the piece around the wooden form. You may have to pull hard on the leather to get it around the form.
5. Secure the leather to the form with smooth leather straps that have not been dyed or painted. Make sure that the straps are smooth and thick enough as to leave no impression upon the leather.
6. Allow the leather to dry thoroughly. Undo the straps and then remove the leather piece from the form.

Tips:

- Use any form, in lieu of a wooden form, that will not break from the stress of having the leather wrapped around it and will not adversely affect the leather. For example, do not use metal forms that will rust when wet.
- Use a straightedge to keep your fold line straight.
- Rest weights along the folded edge after you have hammered it. A large, heavy book works well for this purpose.

Folded

Steps:

1. Keep leather in a folded shape, such as needed for some book covers or portfolios, by first scoring the intended fold line with an awl or other like tool. This should be done on the wrong side of the piece.
2. Dampen the leather piece with water and a sponge and fold the leather piece, wrong sides together, along the scored fold line.
3. Use a wood or rawhide mallet to hammer along the fold. Allow the piece to dry in this position.

How to Use a Stitching Awl in Leather Work

Use a stitching awl to punch holes in leather along the stitching line. This tool resembles a small ice pick and comes in two parts: the awl (needle) and the haft (handle). Look for sets that include interchangeable awls of various sizes.

Steps:

1. Place the leather on a flat work surface. Use a ruler, a straight or curved edge and a pencil to measure and mark a stitching line.
2. Use an over-stitch spacer to make evenly spaced indentations along the marked stitching line. The over-stitch spacer consists of a small metal wheel attached to a wooden handle. Small, evenly spaced points protrude from the wheel.
3. Press the wheel portion of the over-stitch spacer firmly into the leather and roll it along the stitching line. Keep the pressure on the leather constant. The resulting indentations in the leather are the points to be punctured with the stitching awl.
4. Punch through the leather with the stitching awl. Use a controlled pressing action instead of a stabbing motion to penetrate the leather. You will need to lift the leather from your work surface so that the awl can penetrate the underside of the piece.
5. Withdraw the stitching awl once the point has completely penetrated the leather. Avoid pushing the stitching awl so far through that the handle touches the leather's surface. This will result in a much larger hole.
6. Punch one or two holes at a time and stitch as you go. The awl has a flattened blade that spreads the leather as it punctures it. Left for an indefinite period of time, the leather will begin to contract, and the punched hole will become narrower and more difficult to stitch.

Tips:

- Use a sewing machine and a wedge-point needle to stitch most garment-weight leathers.
- Keep the stitching line approximately 1/8 inch from the leather's edge.
- Use a compass or wing divider to mark a curved stitching line.

- Make sure that the appropriate wheel is attached to the over-stitch spacer. Most spacers come with interchangeable wheels that will produce five, six and seven holes per inch.
- Guide the over-stitch spacer along a metal edge as you mark the stitching line.
- Avoid pressing the stitching awl into the work surface. This will damage the awl's point.
- Rub beeswax every one or two holes when punching through very thick leather. This will ease penetration.

How to Choose Leather

Before you begin any leatherworking project, you'll need to know a little about the types of leather available.

🕒 Steps:

1. Purchase leather by the square foot. The measurements of a piece of leather are commonly written on its underside.
2. Choose vegetable-tanned leather for projects requiring the surface to be stamped or tooled. This leather is a natural tan color, and its rigid structure makes it perfect for projects such as belts and book covers.
3. Choose oil-tanned leather for projects that require durability and flexibility. Saddles and tack are often made from an oil-tanned leather called latigo. Oil-tanned leather can be distinguished from other leathers by its waxy surface.
4. Choose chrome-tanned leather for relatively inexpensive leather that comes in a variety of colors. This type of leather is tanned with chemicals and does not breathe very well. It is frequently white on one side and can be any color on the other.
5. Use suede for projects that require soft, pliable leather. Suede is wonderful for garments of any kind and comes in a wide range of colors.
6. Choose garment leather for projects requiring a soft, supple leather. Garment leather has a smooth rather than sueded finish and comes in rich colors.

✳ Tips:

- Avoid using oil-tanned leather when stretch or flexibility in the leather might be undesirable. For example, you will not want a dog collar that an animal would be able to stretch enough to allow its escape from the collar.
- Whereas vegetable-tanned leather can be tooled or stamped, leather that has been treated with oil or chemicals will not take impressions..

How to Make a Leather Bracelet

This bracelet is made as a miniature version of a leather belt. Use leather stamps or tooling to personalize it or add studs for decoration.

🕒 Steps:

1. Determine the desired length and width of the bracelet. Measure the wrist and add approximately 2 to 3 inches to this measurement for a close-fitting bracelet.
2. Choose leather and a buckle. Use 6 to 8 oz. vegetable-tanned leather for the bracelet and a buckle that is the same width as the desired bracelet width.
3. Cut the bracelet from the leather. Decide at this point what shape the free end of the bracelet will be, and mark and cut it into the desired shape.
4. Fold the unshaped end of the bracelet back so that a crease is made 3/4 inches from the end.
5. Place a slot punch on the bracelet so that the punch's end evenly intersects the crease at the crease's center point. Hold the handle portion of the punch and strike the top with a wood or rawhide mallet. Repeat until the punch has completely punctured the leather.
6. Use a rotary punch or drive punch and mallet to make four rivet holes in the leather. The first two holes should be placed 1/2 inch from the slotted bracelet end and 1/2 inch from the bracelet's edges.
7. Place the second set of holes on the other side of the slot so that, when the bracelet end is folded back along the crease line, both sets of holes match up evenly.
8. Use an edge beveler to trim all the bracelet's edges. Do any tooling or decorative stamping at this time as well.
9. Insert the buckle prong through the punched slot so that the buckle is correctly positioned. Fold the slotted bracelet end back so that the rivet holes are lined up, and insert the rivets from the underside of the bracelet. Place the collar end on a flat work surface and affix the rivet caps to the rivets with a mallet.
10. Put the bracelet around the wrist. On the back of the bracelet, mark a hole position that will allow the bracelet to fit comfortably around the wrist when buckled. Mark a second hole, if desired to allow for a tighter or looser fit.
11. Punch the holes with a rotary punch or a drive punch and mallet. Make sure that the holes are centered.

✳ Tips:

- Cut the leather 2 or 3 inches longer than the length calculated in Step 1. Fit the strip around the wrist to determine the most comfortable fit and then trim the piece as needed.
- The diameter of the rivets and the punched holes should be equal. Look for rivets and punches that are approximately 1/8 inch in diameter.

