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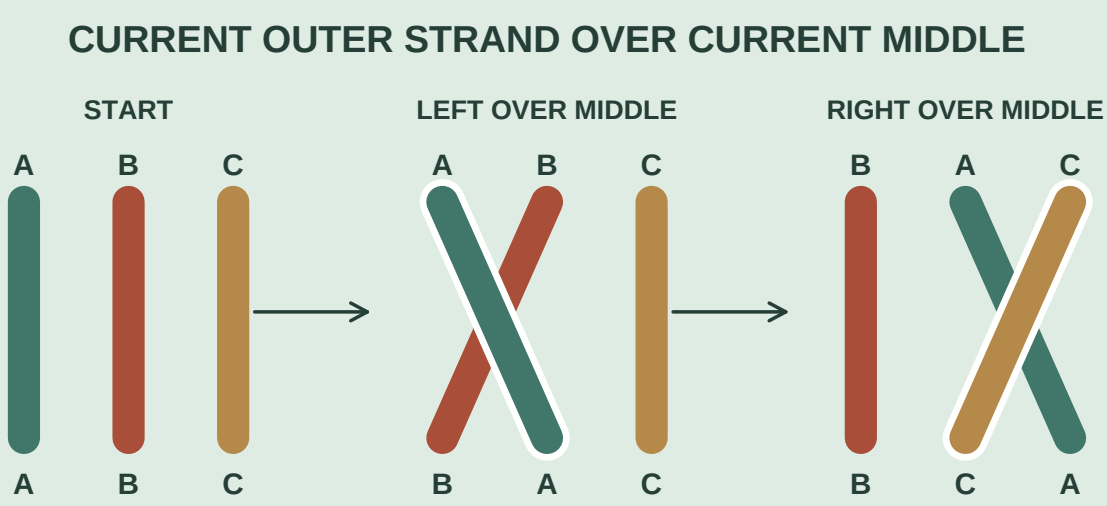
MAKE / OFFCUTS & CREATIVE REUSE

Turn a Worn Cotton Shirt into Braided Cord





Sew across the overlapping stack. Leave fabric beyond the stitches.

THREE STRIPS / ONE DECORATIVE BRAID

14 practical steps · Cut · braid · finish

Original diagrams and two printable maker records

Illustrative plans — not physical test results

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Before you start

A worn shirt may have damaged cuffs or a tired collar while its body still contains strong usable fabric. This project turns three sound sections into a flat three-strand braid. Choose a known cotton knit T-shirt or similar soft cotton shirt; the example uses jersey, whose cut edges may curl. Woven shirt cloth behaves differently and may fray. A decorative cord is not a rope, necklace, fastening for a child or pet, or a load-bearing tie.

Materials: a clean dry shirt with known fibre and care information, a paper rectangle guide, fabric scissors, ruler, washable marking tool if compatible, matching thread and suitable hand needle, clips, and a flat protected table. Choose sound regions with enough uninterrupted length. Keep scissors, needles and loose cords out of reach of children and pets. Do not work with contaminated, mouldy, brittle or heavily deteriorated fabric.

Plan the project

Cut three parallel strips A, B and C, each nominally 20 x 400 mm, after any permitted washing and drying. Mark a 25 mm end zone at each end on a separate sketch; this leaves 350 mm of unbraided working length per strip before accounting for braid take-up. Keep the long direction consistent so the strips stretch and curl comparably. If the shirt cannot supply three sound 400 mm paths, choose three equal shorter strips and record the revised sizes. Do not stretch the fabric while measuring.

Lay A, B and C side by side and overlap their first 25 mm zones into a small flat stack; stitch the stack securely across a sound area with suitable backstitch and secure the thread ends. Clip the stitched end to a stable non-damaging tabletop support. Braid by passing the current left outer strand over the middle, then the current right outer strand over the middle, repeating. Stop before any strand runs into its final 25 mm end zone. Stitch the overlapping ends, then trim only surplus beyond the stitched area. Measure the finished braid at rest; there is no universal conversion from strip length to cord length. Pattern 1 and Pattern 2 are measured schematics, not full-size cutting templates.

Steps 01–02

1. Inspect the shirt for reusable cloth

Read the care label if available and identify sound areas of the shirt body. Hold the fabric flat over a light surface and look for thinning, holes, weak seams, loose coatings and stains of uncertain origin. Exclude damaged or contaminated regions, and do not use fabric whose condition cannot be established. Keep labels for fibre and care information rather than relying on appearance alone.

2. Prepare the shirt without stretching it

Wash only if the shirt care instructions permit, then dry it completely. Smooth the fabric by hand without pulling it in either direction. Set the shirt flat on a cutting surface and locate seams, printed areas and the hem. Choose a single layer of cloth for each strip; avoid accidentally cutting both front and back together. A heavy printed region may behave differently from plain cloth.

Steps 03–04

3. Identify a consistent long direction

Look at the visible knit columns and compare two small sacrificial offcuts along the proposed directions. Choose the same orientation for all three strips, preferably a relatively stable direction that will make the braid manageable. This is a qualitative comparison, not a stretch or strength test. If the cloth curls excessively or crumbles at the edge, choose another shirt or use a different craft.

4. Make a rectangular cutting guide

Draw a 20 mm wide by 400 mm long rectangle on paper, or use a short measured guide along a straight ruler. Find three uninterrupted paths of that length on the actual shirt. Mark A, B and C. Keep an extra small piece for a stitch trial. If a full length cannot fit, reduce all three lengths equally rather than joining weak or very short strips.

Steps 05–06

5. Cut three equal strips

Support the fabric on the table and cut along the marked outlines with suitable scissors, moving the cloth rather than cutting toward your hand. Keep the strips separate and do not pull them to make their edges curl. Measure their resting lengths and widths. Record natural curl and deviations; a knit edge can roll, while a woven edge may need appropriate edge finishing or a different choice of fabric.

6. Practise the end stitching

Stack three small matching scraps and sew a short row of backstitches across the stack using a suitable needle and thread. Secure the thread ends and check whether the cloth puckers or tears with ordinary handling. Choose a different needle, thread or fabric if needed. Keep the needle in a container whenever it is not in use; this stitch observation is not a load test.

Steps 07–08

7. Align and sew the first end

Align the three strips with their ends level, overlap the first 25 mm zones into a flat stack, and sew across that stack within the zone, for example about 12 mm from the starting ends. Secure the thread ends and leave fabric beyond the stitch line. Spread the three free strips into left, middle and right positions. Clip the sewn end to a stable flat work support without piercing or damaging it.

8. Make the first left crossing

Start with A left, B middle and C right. Pass A over B, placing A in the middle, so the order becomes B, A, C. Keep the strips flat enough to distinguish the crossings. Bring the crossed strip into place gently instead of stretching the knit. Look at the first drawing before continuing; the strand names change positions but the instructions refer to current positions.

Steps 09–10

9. Make the first right crossing

Pass the current right strand C over the current middle A so the order is B, C, A. Then pass the current left over the new middle. Continue alternating current left and current right over the middle. Do not pass the same physical strand simply because it was originally A or C. If a crossing is missed, undo to the last clear sequence.

10. Continue with even relaxed spacing

Work a few crossings at a time, keeping the braid supported on the table. Use the same modest tension on each strip and avoid tight knots, twists or pulling against the clip. Let any knit roll remain consistent if it does not obscure the braid. If the braid narrows sharply, undo a short section and change your hand position rather than tugging harder.

Steps 11–12

11. Stop at the shortest usable strand

As the loose ends approach the final 25 mm zones, stop before the shortest strand is consumed. Hold the last crossing with a clip and bring all three ends together in a flat stack. The three usable ends must overlap enough to stitch through sound material. If not, undo one or more crossings. Never stretch a short strand just to make the ends line up.

12. Stitch and tidy the second end

Sew across the overlapping end stack with the method chosen on scrap. Keep at least several millimetres of intact cloth beyond the stitch line when trimming uneven tails; leave more if the fabric needs it. Remove clips and confirm the needle is accounted for. Inspect for loose thread or unravelled crossings. If an end opens during ordinary supported handling, undo and remake it on sound material.

Steps 13–14

13. Measure at rest and choose a use

Place the braid straight on the table without stretching it and record its finished overall length and approximate width. Compare those measurements with the original strip sizes; any take-up depends on the actual cloth and braid. Use only as a short non-load-bearing decorative trim or a loose accent on a flat display. Do not wear it around the neck, use it to restrain anything or leave it dangling within reach of children or pets.

14. Record and store the cord

Write the shirt ID, actual dimensions, grain direction, end stitching, braid sequence, resting length and visible condition in the records. Mark DECORATIVE READY, CHANGE/REMAKE or HOLD. Store the dry cord loosely coiled in a labelled container away from heat and children or pets. Retain the cut plan for another shirt rather than assuming the same final length will result.

Fix, care and preserve

Strip twists repeatedly.
Lay it flat and undo to the last clear crossing; choose a more suitable strip if needed.

Braid becomes uneven.
Relax tension and keep the current left and right sequence consistent.

End stack is too short.
Undo crossings to recover an overlapping end zone before stitching.

Fabric tears beside a stitch.
Stop and select sound cloth with an appropriate needle and thread.

Cord is shorter than expected.
Record the actual length; plan a new set of longer equal strips rather than stretching it.

Source & evidence boundary

Original Steadleaf English prose, calculations, vector artwork, diagrams and maker records. The following sources give general craft-safety or paper-care context, not certification of this design. Follow actual product instructions and local disposal guidance.

Health Canada, Arts and crafts safety

https://www.canada.ca/en/health-canada/services/home-garden-safety/use-arts-crafts-materials-safely.html

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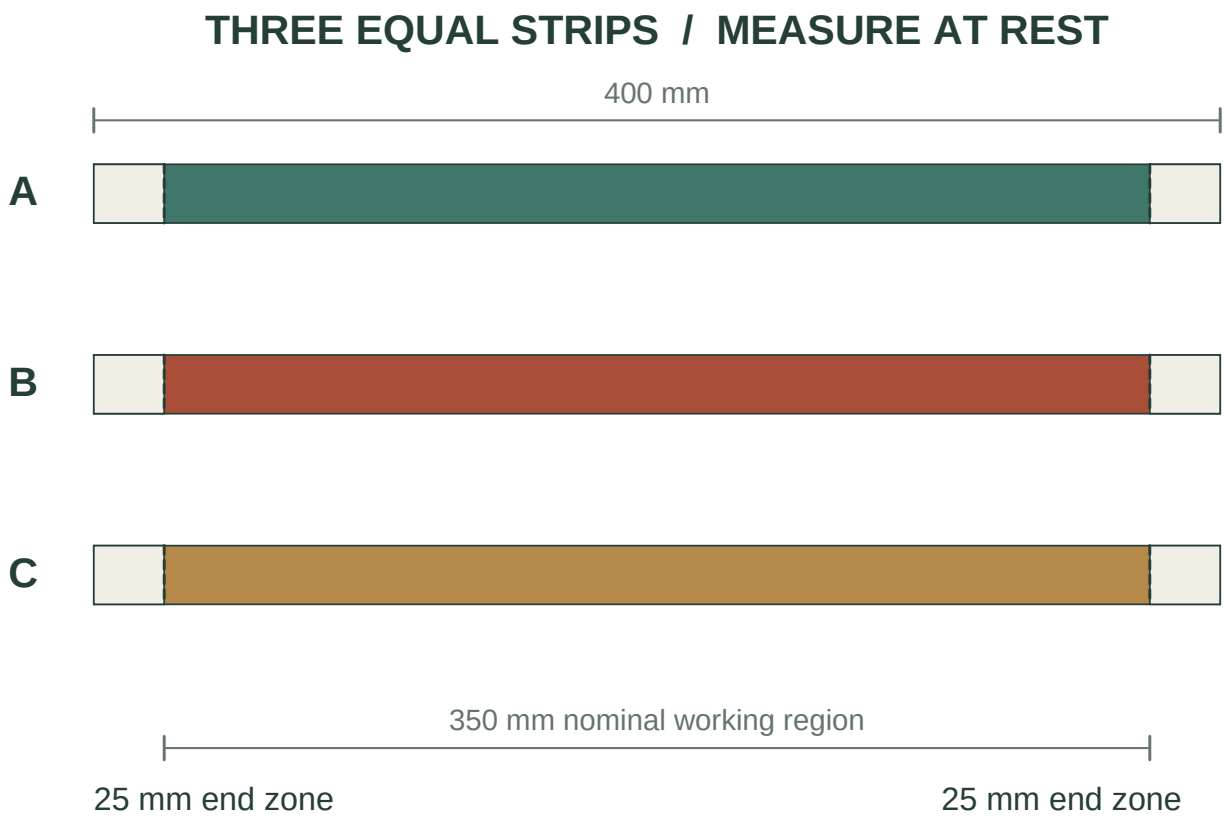
Three-strip cutting plan

Three 20 x 400 mm strips, each with 25 mm end zones and 350 mm nominal working region. Cut along consistent direction; measure at rest.

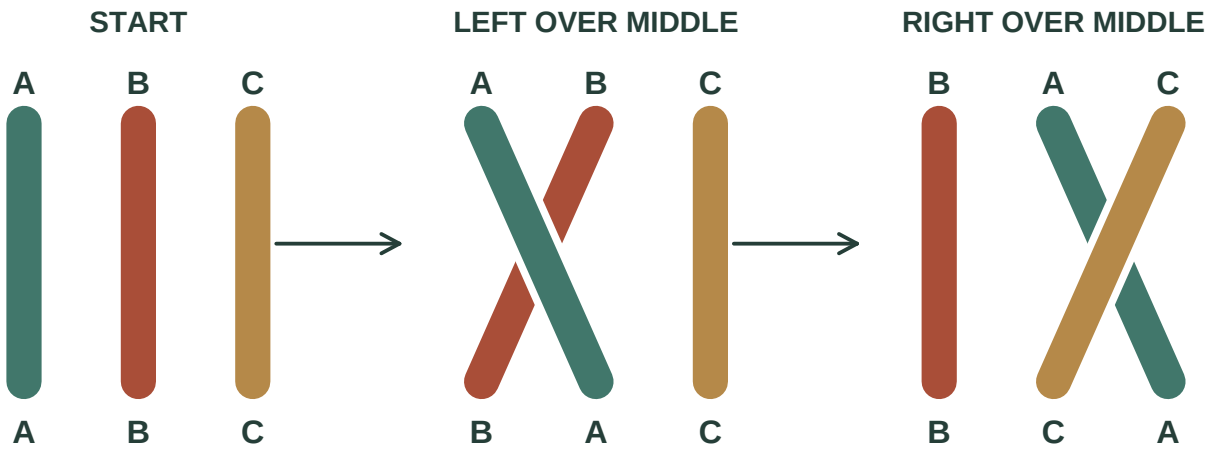


Actual braid length must be measured after stitching.

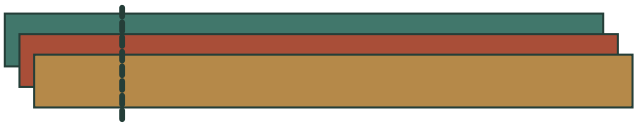
Alternating braid and end finish

Start A B C. Left over middle gives B A C; right over middle gives B C A. Repeat using current positions, and stitch both overlapping end stacks.

CURRENT OUTER STRAND OVER CURRENT MIDDLE



END FINISH / STACK THREE SOUND ENDS



Sew across the overlapping stack. Leave fabric beyond the stitches.

Fabric and strip plan

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or performance certificate.

Shirt / fibre and care

Sound regions / direction

A actual width and length

B actual width and length

C actual width and length

End zone and needle / thread

Scrap stitch observation

Decision: PROCEED / CHANGE / HOLD

Braid finish and resting length

Enter actual observations only. Mark missing information UNKNOWN or NOT CHECKED. This is a craft record, not a safety or performance certificate.

Crossing sequence / any corrections

Shortest remaining end zone

Starting and final stitch condition

Finished resting length / width

Loose threads / needle accounted for

Disposition: DECORATIVE READY / CHANGE-REMAKE / HOLD

Intended decorative use / storage

Date / unresolved issue