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Correcting Embroidery Mistakes

Mistakes are inevitable. That is an indisputable fact. How you deal with mistakes, however, especially as you are starting out in business, will set the tone for how often they happen. If mistakes are treated like first class felonies, then no one will ever admit to making an error. Here are some nifty tricks to help you correct embroidery errors.

Permanent Markers

Applying ink to cover up embroidery mistakes is one trick embroiderers rarely mention, but it is widely practiced. Permanent markers can be used to touch up stitches where bobbin thread has been pulled through to the top of the fabric.

For this quick fix use a marker that closely matches the color of the thread you are using, and make sure you have good lighting and a gentle steady hand. If you press too heavily, for example, the ink will run along the fibers and become a fuzzy blob. Remember, when using permanent markers, you're creating a mark that can't be erased or washed out, one slip, and you compound the problem.

When purchasing markers for this purpose, keep in mind that "permanent" does not mean the same thing to all pen manufacturers, for embroidery touch ups, the ink must be permanent under all conditions of washing and dry cleaning.

You can, however, avoid the need for ink touch ups altogether. If your machine tension is adjusted properly, the bobbin thread shouldn't show. (Embroidery should have a ratio of 1/3 bobbin thread to 2/3 top thread when viewed from the underside.) But with some fabrics, especially nylon, you may repeatedly get some bobbin thread showing, despite how well your tension is adjusted. In this case, try using an extra piece of backing under the fabric. It doesn't have to be framed or hooped with the garment, because you already have one piece framed to stabilize the fabric. Just slide this second piece under the garment, but on top of the machine table; it will give the material a little extra thickness to keep the thread where it belongs.

Camouflage

If you are working on goods that are easily replaced, it is possible to hide errors. For example, merely toss the offending garment into a salvage box and replace it. Use that "problem" garment later where the embroidery will completely cover the mistake and the color of the original stitches won't show through the new embroidery. Of course, you could also apply an emblem on top of the mistake, but the bad embroidery will still show from the inside.

If the matching fabric is available to you and the design is large and has well defined edges, place the matching fabric over the mistake re-embroidery the design and trim the fabric very close to the finished stitching. This is actually the technique used for appliqué, but it will work if there is a solid design edge. Lettering cannot be fixed by this method because there is no sewn border that will hide the edge of the fabric.



Unpicking

One of the first things a new embroiderer learns is to unpick or remove stitching. Unpicking seems the most logical normal method of fixing errors and it is but it is definitely easier said than done. Generally, the larger the lettering, the easier the unpicking. Following this premise, small script can be a nightmare.

So how do you unpick? It's almost always done from the back of the garment and, unless the lettering is wide and clear, NEVER with a seam ripper or scissors. Many embroiderers use old machine needles, they are strong, easy to hold and best of all plentiful.

Other unpicking instructions: Don't un-hoop the garment unless absolutely necessary, because this will allow you to realign the machine with the point where the embroidery stopped and hopefully complete the design without further error. Also, working from the end of the embroidery toward the beginning will give you access to the bobbin thread on top. Use the needle to lift out the bobbin thread stitch by stitch. Once the bobbin thread is removed, the top thread practically falls out. Try to follow the stitching line and not do easy bits first or you can lose sight of the bobbin thread and make a real mess.

Don't be tempted to pull the bobbin thread. This will tighten the stitches and make the next bit even more difficult to unpick. It can also pull the thread so tight that tiny holes appear in the fabric.

If you are cautious, you can unpick even the finest details or tiniest lettering. It's not always easy of course, but it can be done, especially if you use an electric or battery operated stitch remover. Some embroiderers use an artist's blade like an X-acto™ knife, for example, to precisely cut bobbin thread. The top thread is then gently pulled out using tweezers. And here's one more unpicking twist: A disposable razor can be used to gently cut bobbin thread when a delicate base fabric, such as satin would otherwise suffer from the friction of pulling thread. You have to find the method that works for you.

With unpicking, especially on placket shirts, tiny holes are almost inevitable. These can be darned with matching thread before re-embroidering. Remember, however, that stretchy, knitted fabrics will run; when darning any holes, make sure you catch all the loops exposed in the hole. If you can see the pattern of the knit, weave the sides of the hole together invisibly. Just be careful not to pucker the fabric, because you want the new stitching to smoothly cover the repair.

Fixing mistakes isn't easy. It is tedious, annoying and costly and there really are no easy answers or solutions. With regard to mistakes, remember there's never time to do it right, but there's always time to do it twice. Care, attention to detail and good machine adjustment will ensure that your mistakes are kept to a minimum.