

Beginner's Leathercraft

Complete Starter Checklist & Guide

This checklist covers everything a new leathercrafter needs to get started — from basic workspace safety through to tools, consumables, and edge finishing. Work through each section in order. Buy tools as you need them for a project, not before.

SAFETY & WORKSPACE BASICS

- Self-healing cutting mat**
A3 or larger — cutting surfaces must be softer than your blade
 - Thick cardstock or paper**
For making reusable patterns before cutting into leather
 - Pencil**
For tracing patterns and marking leather before cutting
 - Metal ruler with cork or rubber backing**
300mm minimum — cork prevents slipping on the leather surface
 - Disposable gloves**
Particularly when working with adhesives or dyes
 - Face mask**
Wear when sanding — leather dust should not be inhaled
 - Box of plasters**
Sharp knives cut fingers. Keep them close.
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MARKING

- Scratch awl**
General marking, tracing, and poking — one of the most-used tools on the bench
 - Wing dividers**
Scribes a consistent stitch line along edges. More accurate than a ruler for curves.
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CUTTING

- Sharp craft knife or box cutter**
Keep spare blades to hand. A dull blade drags and causes more accidents than a sharp one.
 - Skiving knife — buy later**
Needed when you start thinning folds, overlaps, or straps. Not required for first projects.
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GLUING

- Water-based contact adhesive**
e.g. Renia Aquilim 330 — strong, clean, and safer than solvent-based alternatives. Use in a ventilated space.
- Glue spreader or scrap leather strip**
Never apply adhesive by hand. A strip of scrap leather works well as a free alternative to a dedicated spreader.
Tip: Rough the gluing surfaces lightly with a scratch awl or sandpaper before applying. This improves bond strength significantly.

PUNCHING

Punch pad or pound board

Thick rubber slab, or multiple layers of stacked scrap leather — at least 10–12mm thick. Protects your bench and prevents tool blunting.

French-style pricking irons — 2-tooth and 5-tooth or larger

3.85mm spacing is a solid starting point for most small goods. The 2-tooth handles curves and corners; the 5-tooth or larger covers straight runs efficiently.

Maul or hard rubber mallet

Never use a metal hammer — it will damage your tools. A leathercraft maul (e.g. 340–450g tapered) gives the best control.

Round hole punch or rotary punch

For punching holes to set hardware such as rivets, snaps, or buckle bars.

STITCHING

Harness needles

Two per project — one for each end of the thread. Blunt-tipped. e.g. John James harness needles, size 002.

Waxed polyester thread

Pre-waxed. 0.55mm is a versatile starting weight. Linen is traditional but requires more care.

Scissors or thread snips

For trimming thread cleanly after finishing a seam.

Tip: Cut thread to approximately 3.5–4 times the seam length. Attach one needle to each end and lock by piercing the tail before starting.

EDGE FINISHING

Edge beveller

Removes the sharp corner along the edge. Size #1 suits most beginner leathers — match the size to the leather thickness.

Sandpaper — 180 / 320 / 600 / 800 / 1000 grit

Work through in order. Do not skip stages. Lightly dampen the edge between 600 and 800 grit, and again between 800 and 1000 — this compresses fibres rather than simply abrading them.

Wooden edge slicker or burnishing stick

For working the compound into the edge with firm, consistent pressure.

Burnishing agent

Clear is the most versatile starting choice. e.g. Tokonole (modern, consistent finish) or Gum Tragacanth (traditional character). Neither compensates for rushed sanding.

Tip: Sand before bevelling, not after. This levels the edge first so the bevel sits cleanly on a flat, consistent surface.

OPTIONAL — USEFUL EARLY ON

Stitching pony or saddler's clam

Holds the work steady while you stitch. Makes saddle stitching significantly easier and more consistent.

Bone folder

For pressing creases flat and working inside pockets and folds after gluing.

Bulldog clips

For clamping pieces together while adhesive sets.

Strop and polishing compound

Worth buying early. Keeping tools sharp is one of the most important habits in leathercraft.

A NOTE ON LEATHER

Start with vegetable-tanned leather. It is firm, workable, and responds well to edge burnishing and dyeing — the most suitable leather for learning the fundamentals. Buy coloured leather if you want colour. Do not attempt hand-dyeing until you are comfortable with the basics.

Small goods — wallets, cardholders, key fobs

1–1.5mm works well for most layers

Straps — bag handles, watch straps, accessories

2–3mm vegetable-tanned is a practical starting range

Belts

A personal choice. 3.5mm or considerably thicker is typical. Leather character matters as much as thickness.

LEATHERCRAFT WITH PHYSICAL LIMITATIONS

Leathercraft is accessible across a wide range of physical conditions. The notes below suggest alternative approaches for common challenges.

Grip and hand strength

Seek tools with ergonomic or contoured handles. An arbor press or hand press with a chuck attachment reduces the repetitive force from mallet work. Thinner or softer leather also requires less force to punch and stitch through.

Stitching and dexterity

A stitching pony removes the need to grip the piece while stitching. Wide-eyed needles and pre-waxed thread make threading easier. A stitching punch (round hole style) creates wider holes requiring less pulling force than a standard pricking iron.

Cutting and precision

A rotary cutter offers more stability than a craft knife on straight cuts. A metal safety ruler reduces the risk of blade slip. Magnifying lamps help with fine detail work.

Hammering and punching

An arbor press removes almost all repetitive mallet work — suitable for pricking irons, hardware setting, and stamping.

Vision

Use high-contrast work surfaces — a light mat for dark leather, a dark surface for pale leather. An adjustable desk lamp or head torch provides consistent, focused light on the work.
