

Fabrics and Natural Fibres

KEY FABRICS USED IN BAGS

| Materials | Description | Uses | Comments |
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| Cotton | A versatile fabric, frequently blended with semi-synthetics. Cotton grade depends on fibre colour and strength. Longer staples equal higher quality. | Outer fabric and lining across a whole range of bags. | Cotton has a high environmental impact at odds with its traditional image. |
| Canvas | Can be a plain weave or basket weave. Duck canvas has a higher thread count. | Totes, casual bags and duster bags. | Bag bases require protection from soiling, water damage and wear and tear. |
| Sail Cloth | Similar to canvas, can be a blend of cottons, hemp or poly-cottons. | Totes, casual bags and duster bags. | As per canvas. |
| Calico | Undyed, unbleached fabric with flecks of cotton seeds. Plain weave. Light to heavy weight. | Shoppers, prototypes and duster bags. | Not durable for everyday use. |
| Oiled Cloth | Natural woven cotton, canvas or linen fabric. Treated with a coating of linseed oil. Medium to heavy weight. Superseded by waxed cotton. | Totes and shoppers. | Oilcloth harbours bacteria, develops an odour and will rot. |
| Waxed Cotton | Impregnated with paraffin or natural beeswax. Strong and waterproof. Can be quilted. Medium to heavy weight. | Mainly used as an outer fabric but can be a lining. | Colour tone changes in proportion to the amount of wax. Can't be glued or ironed and will crease easily, making production time-consuming. |
| PVC/PU Coated | Cotton coated with a waterproof layer of PVC or PU. Wipe clean. Available in a variety of surface finishes. | Used for casual, make-up bags and purses. | Depending on the style, weight and construction, a backer may be required. Prints should be checked for repeat and direction. |
| Cotton Drill/Cavalry | A twill weave with a diagonal structure. Available in light to heavy weight. | Casual bags. | Depending on the construction, seams may need taping to prevent fraying. |
| Printed/Plain Cotton | Shirting, checks, plaids, stripes and patterns. Light to medium weight. | Good for linings but can be used as outer with support. | Prints should be checked for repeat and direction. |
| Cotton Jacquard, Damask and Dobby | Fabrics woven on different looms. Jacquard has complicated patterns and repeats. Dobby is simple motif repeat. | Can be used as an outer with support and also for bespoke linings incorporating brand logos. | Can pose problems for construction. Direction of weave and pattern has to be considered. |
| Brushed cottons | Cotton is brushed on the face-side to remove any lint and fibres, leaving a soft finish. | Mainly used for linings and duster bags | |
| Denim | Dyed fabric mixing two yarns – typically indigo and white. A durable medium to heavy twill weave. | Outer material, works well in combination with leather and leather substitutes. Tends to go in and out of fashion. | Different washes, weights and treatments are available. |
| Corduroy | Low-cut pile in cotton and mixed blends. Woven with ribs called wales. Can be printed and/or treated – washed. | Outer material, works well in combination with leather and leather substitutes. Like denim, is a fashion item. Frequently used in up-cycling. | Pile can have shading issues. Rib direction has to be matched across a bag. Not waterproof, can mark. |
| Jumbo | 6 ribs per inch (2.54cm) medium/heavy. | | |
| Standard | 11 ribs per inch (2.54cm) medium. | | |
| Baby/Feather | 11-21 ribs per inch (2.54cm) medium/light. | | |

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| Velvet | A luxurious pile fabric. Often combined with other fibres to create different performance and finishes. | Can be quilted, printed and embossed. Used as a sumptuous lining or outer material. A fashion statement for evening wear. | Readily frays. The direction of pile affects shading and look. Pile is easily crushed and can watermark in the rain. |
| Cotton Velvet | A matt upholstery velvet. Heavier and thicker than other types. | Practical bags – totes, hobos and weekenders. | |
| Silk Velvet | Originally made from silk, now a mix of silk, rayon or other synthetics. Has a lustre and soft drape. | Evening bags. | Hard to stitch, easily stained or damaged. Requires backing. |
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| Silks | Natural fibre made from filaments from the cocoons of domesticated silkworms. Many silks now involve mixtures of polyester and viscose. High tensile strength. | Used as an outer for occasion bags and also for lining. | Silks can be difficult to sew and will fray – important to be aware for seam construction. Try to use the best quality. |
| Duchess Satin | Satin weave made from silk, silk blends, polyester, acetate or rayon. Shiny luxurious. Medium to heavy weight. | Used as an outer. | Hard to stitch, easily stained or damaged. Heavy weight satin can be used with light backing. |
| Dupion/Dupioni | Plain weave using irregular threads of silk to give a slub appearance. Medium to heavy weight. | Used as an outer for occasion bags. | Originates from India. Frays and slubs can make production difficult. |
| Shantung | Heavy silk fabric. Has irregular slubs and can be blended with cotton. | Used in evening and bridal accessories. | Originates from China. Stiff feel to the fabric. Can be used as an alternative to dupion. |
| Moire | A medium weight silk with a rippled pattern produced by calendaring when finishing the fabric. | Occasion bags, linings. | Ripple pattern should be checked for repeat and direction. |
| Gros Grain/Faille | Medium to heavy weight ribbed fabric. | Occasion bags. Linings and vintage-style bags. | Used mainly for ribbons and decorative details. |
| Ahimsa Silk | Medium iridescent, stiff, smooth silk. Filaments are harvested once the moth has left the cocoon. | Occasion bags. | Regarded as a cruelty-free alternative to traditional silk. |
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| Hemp | Derived from the cellulose fibres of the hemp plant. Sustainably grown without the use of pesticides. Medium to heavy weight. Usually plain weave, similar to burlap, sail cloth and canvas. | Casual bags. | Stronger than cotton, mildew-resistant, biodegradable. Depending on construction, seams might need taping to prevent fraying. |
| Bamboo | The world's fastest growing, self-regenerating plant. Grown without pesticides. Bamboo is used to make several different types of fabric – blended linen, terry cloth and velvet. Light to medium weight. | A new fabric for handbags, often seen in totes. Bamboo hardware – handles and structural elements. An alternative for wicker bags. Bamboo paper is used for shoppers. | Bamboo can be expensive because of the processing involved in production. |
| Ramie | Made from fibres of the China grass plant. Often blended with cotton. Medium weight 'grass linen', has a silky lustre with the texture of linen. | Hard-wearing totes. | Sustainable. A strong, natural fibre that takes dye well, but will fade in sunlight. |
| Linen | Made from the fibres of the flax plant. Durable and strong. Light to heavy weight. | Used in many styles of bag. Depending on bag, backing may be required. | Easily soiled, fades in sunlight. |

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| Jute | Made from the stem of the Jute plant. A coarse durable fabric in medium to heavy weights. | Sacking, internal structure. Rope used for handles. | Biodegradable. Dyes well. Low cost in burlap. |
| Straw | Dry stalks of cereal plants such as rye, rice, corn and barley. | Summer bags. | Becomes stiff over time. |
| Rattan | A strong fibrous climbing palm, mainly from tropical forests in Indonesia and Southeast Asia. The fibres vary in length and width, depending on the species and the time of harvest. | Structured, basket-style bags. | Cut stalks do not regrow, making it expensive to produce and potentially damaging to the environment. Often replaced by synthetic substitutes. |
| Raffia | There are around twenty species of <i>Raphia Farinifera</i> , known as the Raffia Palm. The leaves are stripped and the stalks are dried, going from green to a sandy colour. | Simple, summer, woven basket bags. | Sustainable – plants are unharmed when harvested. The resin in the leaves makes them flexible and long lasting, so ideal for weaving baskets. Easy to dye and biodegradable. |
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| Wool | Loose to compact woven fabrics in medium to heavy weights. Plain or twill weave. Can be blended with cotton. | Wide range of uses. | Durable and biodegradable. Available in different patterns and colour ranges. Requires careful consideration of construction and backing. Threads will catch easily in loosely woven wool. |
| Tweeds – Harris, Shetland, Donegal, Herringbone | A coarse cloth woven with pure virgin wool. Closely associated with traditional sheep farming in Scotland, Ireland and the North of England. Medium to heavy weight. | Used for any style of outer. | Weather-resistant. Can laminate. Works well with leather and leather substitutes |
| Houndstooth/dogs tooth | Two-tone broken check pattern. | As per tweed. | Works well with piped seam construction. |
| Tartans and Plaids | Geometric grid pattern. Tartans are associated with clans, whereas plaids have no historic attachment. Originally wool but may now contain mixed fibres. Light to medium weight. | As per tweed. | Large pattern requires careful matching. |
| Boiled Wool | Boiling wool causes the fibres to shrink, creating a more dense fabric. | Outer. Used as a style statement more than a signature fabric. | Not waterproof. Works well with leather and leather substitutes. |
| Felted Wool | A non-woven fabric made by compressing fibres into a fabric. Light to medium weight. | Practical bags – totes and hobos | Won't fray, can be used leaving raw edge construction. Durable and easy to dye. |
| Velour | Soft thick nap similar to velvet but with the benefits of wool. | Mainly used as a fashion statement. Can work with frame bags and classic styling. | Velour can have shading issues. |
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| Rayon (Artificial Silk) | A semi-synthetic made from cellulose. Breathable, moisture-absorbent. Can be blended with cotton. | Outer and lining fabrics. | All semi-synthetic production emits high levels of greenhouse gases. All require backing. |
| Viscose | A semi-synthetic type of rayon fabric made from wood pulp that is used as a silk substitute. Can be blended with cotton. | Outer and lining fabrics | Prone to stretching in production. |
| Tencel/Lyocell | An eco-friendly semi-synthetic made using recyclable solvents. Can be called eco-silk. Light to medium weight. | Outer and lining fabrics. | Reduced carbon footprint, lower water consumption in production. Can be blended with cotton. |

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| Cupro | Made from tiny cotton fibres, known as linters. Smooth, soft alternative to silk. | Linings. | Regarded as a recycled textile because it uses the waste from the cotton industry. Takes dye well. |
| Acetate | A light, delicate fabric with a luxurious feel. No shrinkage and moth-resistant. | Lining and occasion bags. | Requires special dyes to be colour fast. |
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| Nylon | A polyimide made from petroleum. A fine, smooth fabric, made in varying weights. Shower to waterproof, depending upon the finish. | Functional bags, although sophisticated nylons can be used for a more formal look. | By-product of the petrochemical industry. Non-biodegradable. |
| Ripstop | Ripstop nylon has a grid pattern which prevents tearing – used for parachutes. A light, strong fabric. | Sports bags. Linings. | Requires backing. |
| Ballistic | Thick and durable fabric with a basket weave pattern. Able to withstand extreme conditions. Also produced as a mesh. | Luggage, backpacks, totes. Mesh useful for exposed pockets. | |
| Cordura | Tough nylon fabric, hessian-like weave. Water- and abrasion-resistant. | Backpacks, functional bags, reinforcement. Can be printed and quilted. | |
| Microfibre | Made from a combination of synthetics, woven from strands of a similar thickness to silk. Lightweight, ultra-strong, with a soft luxurious texture. | Used as a leather substitute, in handbags, backpacks, wallets and small accessories. | Can be printed, heat embossed and coated with various finishes, including antibacterials. |
| Polyester | A blanket term describing materials made from polyester yarns or fibres. Strong and highly stain-resistant. Widely used in the fashion industry. | Linings, padding for quilting. | Non-recyclable, and a major source of pollution. |
| PET (Polyethylene Terephthalate) | Made from recycled plastic bottles. Fabrics vary from coarse weave to polar fleece. | Outer, structural support, linings. | Recycling process is highly energy intensive, which diminishes its green credentials. |
| PP (Polypropylene) | Made from nylon, acrylic and polyester. Main fashion application is webbing. | Straps and handles. | |
| Neoprene | A synthetic rubber, most commonly associated with wet suits. Shock-absorbing, flexible and often bonded with an outer fabric. | Fashion bags, computer bags and sleeves, insulating containers and structural support. | May be glued, sewn or heat taped in construction. Water- and sunlight-resistant. |