

How To Make a Multi-Section Coptic Stitch Journal

Intermediate Bookbinding

Bookbinding as a process has existed for centuries. There are many different types of binding with varying techniques depending on their origins. The coptic stitch method of bookbinding was created around the 4th century by the Copts, a group of early Christians originating from Egypt. Some of the world's oldest manuscripts are coptic stitch-bound.

This ancient bookbinding method leaves the binding exposed, but requires no adhesive and has an attractive look to it. Coptic stitch binding also allows the pages to lay flat when opened, making it a perfect option for artist sketchbooks. The following instructions will guide you through making and coptic stitch-binding your own journal.

The coptic stitch is one of the more intricate methods of threaded bookbinding. While you don't necessarily need special skills to follow these instructions, it helps if you have tried at least one other form of bookbinding, or if you have some experience sewing by hand. Children should not attempt to follow these instructions, as they require using extremely sharp tools.

Tool List:

- 20 sheets of letter-sized (8.5" x 11") paper
- 1 sheet of letter-sized chipboard
- 6 yards of waxed thread
- Large sewing needle
- 12" Ruler
- Cutting mat
- Exacto knife
- Scissors
- Awl

Work Area: You will want a flat working surface where you can place your cutting mat. Sitting at the kitchen table or at a desk are great options. Since you'll be using sewing needles, which are easy to drop and lose track of, work in an area without carpeting where needles are easily lost.

1. Make the Bifolio Signatures

- Fold one sheet of paper in half lengthwise using your fingers to make the crease.
- Run the long edge of a ruler over the crease again (“Creasing” photo) to make the fold more precise. You have now made a bifolio (one sheet of paper folded in half to make two leaves).
- Repeat these steps for the 19 additional sheets of paper.
- Nest four bifolios inside one another; a group of bifolios is called a signature.
- Continue nesting four bifolios together until you have five signatures.



Creasing

2. Cut the Cover

- Draw a line lengthwise halfway (5 ½”) along the chipboard.

WARNING: To avoid injury when using an Exacto blade, be sure to keep the sharp edge pointed away from and others. Always cover or retract the blade when finished.

- Holding the chipboard firmly on the cutting mat, cut the chipboard in half with an Exacto knife.

3. Draw the Signature Holes

- Stack the signatures with the folded edges on the left, ensuring the stack is even on all sides.
- On the top signature, lightly draw a mark along the folded edge 1” from the right side.
- Draw two more marks, each spaced 1” from the previous mark.
- Repeat the two previous steps, making three marks space 1” apart from the left side.
- Using one of the cover boards as a guide, align it with one mark and lightly draw a straight line down, marking the folded edges of the signatures (“Marking the signatures” photo).



Marking the signatures

- Continue drawing straight lines for the other five marks.

4. Make Cover Holes

- Align one of the signatures with the cover board, leaving 1/2" from the edge.

WARNING: To avoid injury when using an awl, never hold your hand directly behind the area you are piercing through, and be sure to keep the sharp point away from yourself and others.

- Using the awl, pierce markings into the board next to each of the signature marks ("First cover holes" photo).
- Punch holes through each of the piercings using the awl, making each hole about as wide as your needle ("Awl close up" photo).
 - Note: To make sure the holes go all the way through the cover, you may need to flip it over and punch through the holes from the other side.
- Stack the first and second cover so the insides face one another.
- Push the awl through the holes on the first cover to pierce the second cover.
- Punch holes through the second cover just as you did with the first.



First cover holes



Awl close up

5. Make Signature Holes

- Open one signature, laying it flat on the cutting mat so the folded edge faces up.
- Check to make sure the folds are centered so the holes will align.
- Pierce holes at each mark using the awl ("Signature holes" photo).



Signature holes

- Continue piercing holes in the other four signatures.
 - NOTE: As you work through piercing each signature, re-stack them in the order in which you marked them. This will ensure your book's pages align well when stitching.

6. Prep to Stitch

WARNING: Don't put your fingers or hands directly behind the area you're sewing through. Always wear shoes when sewing. If you drop a needle, stop working, and look for it immediately.

- Once you pierced holes in the signatures and covers, stack them with the holes all on one side facing you.
- Double thread your needle with waxed thread and tie a knot at the end.
 - NOTE: You will need approximately 6 yards of waxed thread, but only start with much thread as is manageable. You will run out of thread, but that's okay! You can tie more thread on later (see step #10 "When You Run Out of Thread").
- Pick up the top cover and four signatures and turn them over, flipping the folded side away from you and stacking them in a neat pile.
- Check to make sure that you have the bottom cover and bottom signature in front of you with the folded side facing you. You are now ready to begin threading!

7. First Coptic Stitch

- With one signature and the bottom cover in front of you, start at the far right hole and sew from the center inside the signature through to the outside, pulling the thread until you reach the knot ("First hole thread" photo).



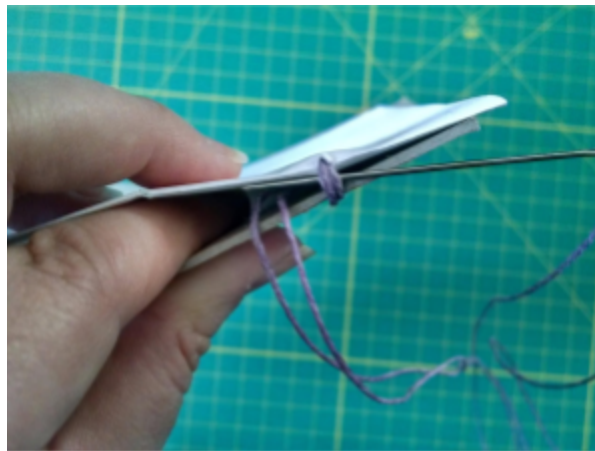
First hole thread

- Next, sew through the outside of the cover, aligning the signature with the cover. The thread should come between the signature and the cover ("First cover thread" photo).



First cover thread

- Loop the needle through the stitch you just made, and pull firmly (“First loop stitch” photo).



First loop stitch

- Sew the needle back into the signature hole, this time from the outside in so you’re back where you began (“Finish first bind” photo).



Finish first bind

- Move to the next signature hole, and continue threading the signature and back cover together through all the holes except the last.
 - NOTE: Even waxed thread can sometimes tangle. Try sewing slowly, so your thread doesn’t tangle.

8. Adding Another Signature

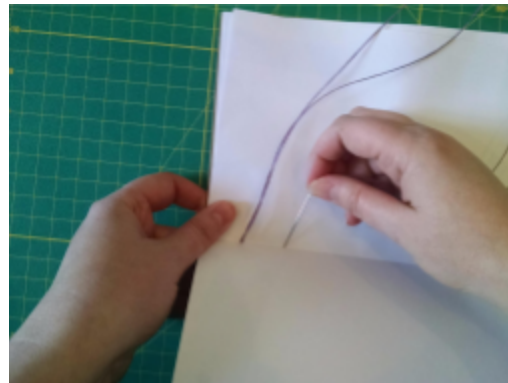
- When you reach the last hole, sew through the inside and pull firmly.

- Next, sew through the outside of the cover, then loop around the stitch just as you did with the other holes.
- This time, return the needle through the far left hole on the second signature (“Add second signature” photo).



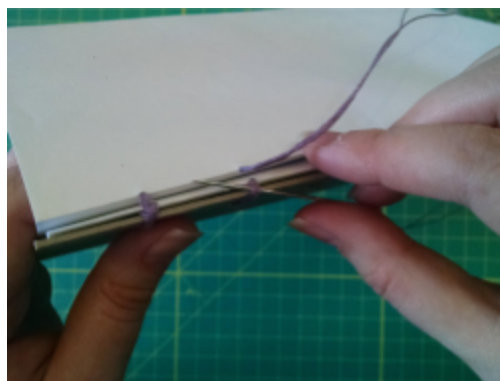
Add second signature

- With the thread now inside the second signature, sew through the next hole (“Sew next hole” photo).



Sew next hole

- Next, loop the thread around the stitch below from the first signature



Loop the stitch beneath

- Sew the needle back into the same signature hole from the outside.

9. Keep Going

- Continue sewing the remaining holes, looping through the stitch beneath until you reach the last hole.
- After you loop through the stitch beneath the last hole, return the needle into the far right hole on the third signature.
- Sew through the next hole in the third signature and continue to the end of this signature

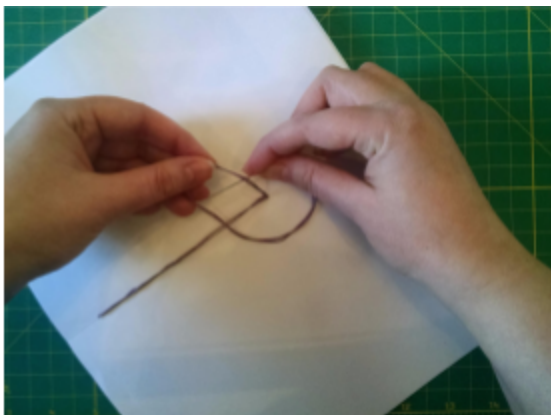
10. When You Run Out of Thread

- When you have about 6 inches of thread left, it is time to tie off and rethread the needle. Begin with the thread inside the signature you are working on.
- Make a knot by looping the thread beneath the inside stitch (“Start tying off” photo).



Start tying off

- Thread the needle through the loop you just made (“Thread the knot” photo) and tie the knot firmly (“Tie off” photo).



Thread the knot



Tie off

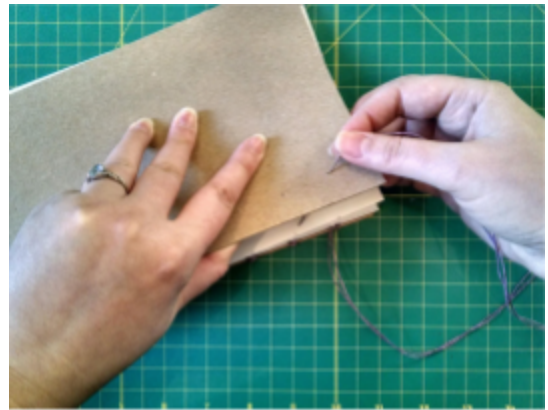
- Cut the thread, leaving the end tucked beneath the inside stitch (“Cut thread” photo).
- With a new double-threaded and knotted needle and thread, sew through the inside of the next hole on the signature just as you have with each hole until you reach the knot.
 - NOTE: When you finish, you can go back and tuck the end of this new thread beneath the stitches so the binding has a clean finish.
- Continue sewing each hole the same way as you have before.



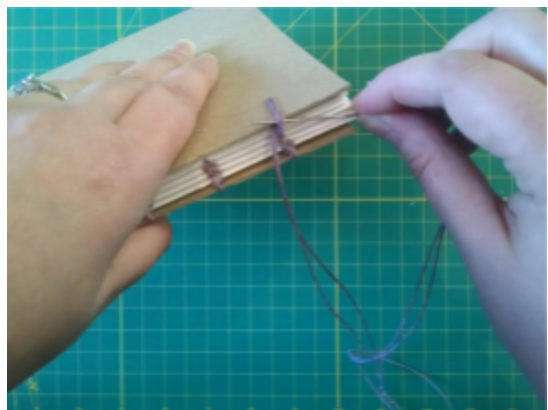
Cut thread

11. The Last Signature & Front Cover

- When you are ready to sew on the last signature, you must also sew on the front cover.
- Stack the last signature and the cover on top of the bound pages, then pick up just the cover.
- Sew through the outside far right hole of the cover and pull gently (“Attach front cover” photo).
 - NOTE: The last signature should be between the cover and the rest of the signatures, even though it’s not attached yet.
- Loop the needle around this stitch once (“Securing the cover” photo).

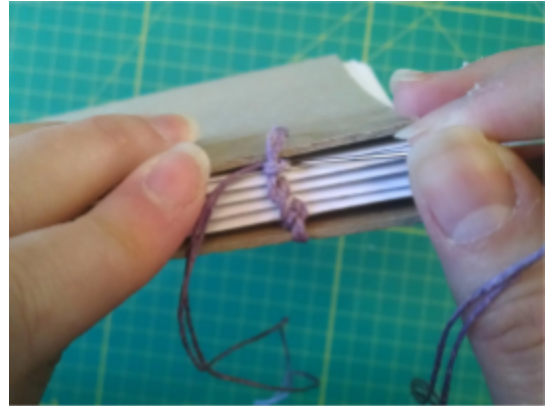


Attach front cover



Securing the cover

- Then sew into the last signature from the outside of the far right hole (“Attach last signature” photo).



Attach last signature

12. Continue Last Signature & Front Cover

- For the next hole on the last signature, first sew inside of the signature just as you have in previous steps (“Last signature’s 2nd hole” photo).



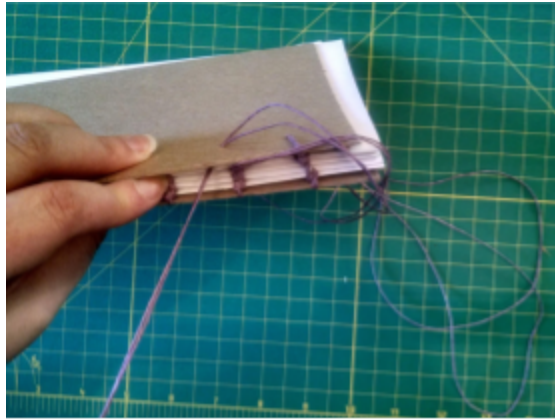
Last signature's 2nd hole

- Next, loop around the stitch below once, as you have in previous steps.



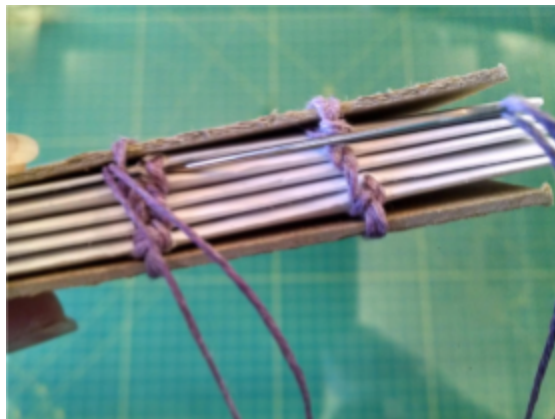
Last signature loop

- Next, sew through the outside of the cover, pulling the thread between the cover and the top of the last signature (“Front cover’s 2nd hole” photo).



Front cover's 2nd hole

- Loop once around the stitch between the penultimate and last signature (“Loop again” photo).



Loop again

- Then sew back through the signature hole into the center (“Finish second hole” photo).



Finish second hole

- Repeat these steps with the remaining of the holes.

13. Tying Off

- Once you sew the thread back through the far right hole on the last signature, you are ready to tie off the end.
- Make a knot by looping the thread beneath the inside stitch pull the not firmly.
 - NOTE: This and the following steps are exactly the same as the steps in the “When You Run Out of Thread” section.
- Loop the thread under the stitch behind it again, and cut it off, leaving the end tucked beneath.
- You now have a finished sketchbook (“Finished journal” photo)!



Finished journal

If you find that your finished product has loose stitching, this normal for a coptic stitched book. This is what allows the pages to lay flat when you open the book.

Bookbinding is a slow process, but it is also very rewarding. Once you get a feel for the process, it can be very meditative. Your finished product is something you can use yourself or give away as a gift.