



# Dress Making

## Beginners Guide to Making Your Own Dress!

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## Chapter 1 – Introduction

Fashion is something that will always be changing, innovative, and exciting. Making your statement or impact on the fashion industry can be rewarding and profitable if you have the creativity to keep fashion new and exciting. You can be a part of creating a new fashion trend by designing and creating your own fashionably exciting dress.

In dressmaking, the biggest obstacle to overcome is creating a dress that is perfect for you. No two figures are exactly alike, so by making your own clothing, you have the advantage over shopping from the rack in knowing that the clothing you are wearing was made just for you and your body shape. You achieve the perfect fit that is most flattering for you.

Dressmaking is not as hard as some make it out to be. You can design a dress perfect for you by either studying already designed patterns and altering them to fit your body style, or you can create your own dress from using what you know works for you. Once you have a design in mind, the rest is a breeze.

You can copy an already popular style on the market, study fashion magazines with the latest fads, or create a scrapbook of several different styles of dresses you love and incorporate different aspects of each into a design of your own creation. However, you come up with your dress design; making it yourself will be the most rewarding thing you do when it comes to your fashion wardrobe.

## Chapter 2 – Figure Type

Because everyone's figure varies, you must know your figure type and all of its faults. This will make it easier for you to choose a flattering style of dress for you whether it is by an already made pattern, or one you design on your own.

Choosing a pattern can be fun especially if you have already done your homework and know what is in and what will never go out, such as the little black dress. You can find a wide variety of dress patterns online or at your local fabric store. When you have the dress design in mind, pattern books can offer an interesting amount of variations of the particular basic design.

The skirt part of a dress may appeal to you more on one pattern than the next and the bodice may appeal to you more or sleeve style, neck line, etc. You can take these different aspects of a dress, incorporate them into one, and create your own design/pattern. When looking at a variety of patterns, keep a pencil and some paper handy to jot down pattern numbers and ideas to make it easier for you when you are ready to commit. Often times, out of date pattern books can be picked up at fabric stores for a very little price if not free. This is a great way to start a library of different ideas.

Patterns are full of various figure types. Figure types are grouped according to height and proportion and based off two main measurements –height, and neck to waist length. Choose your pattern(s) to suit your figure type. To find your figure type stand in front of a mirror in just your under garments that would typically be worn under your dress. Take your measurements of bust, waist, and hips. Get someone to help you take your measurements of height and neck to waist length.

Neck to waist length should be taken from your backside for best fitting bodice. Compare these measurements with that of a size chart. For example, if your bust measured 36 inches, waist 27 inches, and hips measured 38 inches you would be looking at a dress size of woman's 14. Choose your pattern sizes accordingly. When your measurements fall between two categorized sizes, always choose the larger size of the two. That leaves you room for making alterations to make your garment fit you perfectly.

On the next page, you will find a Measurement Keeper. Make one for anyone you intend on sewing for.

**Measurement Keeper: Name** \_\_\_\_\_

**Date:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Height:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Bust:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Waist:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Hips:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Back – neck to waist:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Shoulder width:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Back width – armhole to armhole:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Shoulder length – right:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Shoulder length – left:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Front bodice – center front:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Front bodice – right:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Front bodice – left:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Side bodice – right:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Side bodice – left:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chest – above bust:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chest – on bust at front:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Chest – diaphragm:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Upper arm:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Shoulder to elbow:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Sleeve length:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Wrist:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Neck:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Center – neck to hem:** \_\_\_\_\_

**Waist to hem:** \_\_\_\_\_

Here are some basic guidelines to use when getting these measurements. Always have a second pair of hands to achieve the best measurements. If you are still unclear about how to take your own measurements, you can always have it professionally done for you.

**Height:** Stand on the floor in bare feet with your back against the wall. Look straight ahead. Chalk a tiny line on the wall level with the top of the head. Measure from the floor to this mark.

**Bust:** Measure at fullest part of bust.

**Waist:** tie a piece of string around your natural waist. Measure the string without removing it. Leave the string there for other measurements.

**Hips:** Place the tape around the fullest part of the figure. This is usually about 9 inches below the waist for misses and women's, and 7 inches below the waist for miss petite, half size, junior petite, and young junior/teen.

**Back – neck to waist:** Find the bone that sticks out at the nap of the neck and measure from this point down to the middle of the waistline.

**Shoulder width:** Clasp hands together at the front of the waist line. With arms slightly forward and raised, measure across the back from shoulder point to shoulder point.

**Back width – armhole to armhole:** Measure across the back at the shoulder blade level. Start and finish where the normal armhole seams lie.

**Shoulder length – right and left:** Measure from the base of the neck to the point of the shoulder on each side. The two measurements may be slightly different,

**Front bodice – center front, right, and left:** (Center) Measure from the neckline straight down to the waistline. Right and left) Measure from the shoulder seam placement to the waistline on each side, over the bust.

**Side bodice – right and left:** Stand up straight with hands resting on hips and measure each side from one inch below the armpit down to the waistline. There may be a slight difference on each side in measurement.

**Chest – above bust and on bust at front:** (Above) Measure around at underarm level above the bust. (Bust at Front) Measure from underarm seam to underarm seam over the bust. If this measurement is 2 inches or more than the back width, your pattern may have to be altered to allow more room.

**Chest – diaphragm:** Take this measurement around the rib cage, halfway between the waist and the fullest part of the bust.

**Shoulder to elbow:** Bend your arm and measure from the point of the shoulder to the point of the elbow.

**Sleeve length:** Bend the arm slightly and measure from the point of the shoulder to the wrist including the bend. It is also helpful to measure 1 inch from below the underarm seam to the wrist with the arm straight.

**Wrist:** Measure the wrist over the wrist bone.

**Neck to hem:** Measure from the nape of the neck to the required hem level of dress. Hold the tape in at the waist while measuring.

**Waist to hem:** Holding tape measure in at waist, measure to the required hem level.

## Chapter 3 – Choosing a Pattern According to Figure

As stated earlier, no two figures are exactly the same. One may fit the standard measurement chart perfectly whereas another may only compare in one or two areas. A person can be flat chested and in the bust department be a size 8 but in the waist and hips fall in a size 16. The following will help you to determine what looks best on varying figure types.

### Flat Chest

Flat chested women fair better with gathered and draped styles so the bodice has added fullness that is more flattering. Flat chested women should avoid fitted bodice or wide necklines.

### Large Bust

Large busted women should avoid high necklines, heavy frills, drapes, and gathered bodices. Full sleeves also should be avoided, as they will make a woman appear top heavy throwing off a flattering look. Large busted women will fair better with a tailored top bodice with fitted sleeves. Leave any trims for the skirt region, unless heavy hipped.

### Short Neck

Avoid tie neck bands, high polo necks or turtlenecks, mandarin necklines and wide shoulder lines. Plunging long necklines are far more flattering when you have a short neck as well as V-shaped neckline with narrow shoulders lines such as in tank style.

### Thin Neck and Shoulders

If you have a thin neck and narrow shoulders, it is best to avoid dress patterns that sport a wide or boat style neckline. You will be more flattered by V-shaped necklines, tie collars, or a mandarin standing collar.

### Short Full Figures

Short full figured women are flattered more by dress styles that have fitted sleeves, gored skirts, and or princess lines. Avoid wide necks, full sleeves, gathered skirts, frills, wide belts, and horizontal stripes.

### Thin Tall Figures

Women of height and thin figures are flattered by gathered or draped skirts accented with wide belts and neck trim. Avoid straight skirts, fitted bodices and princess lines.

### Large Hips

Avoid fitted skirts, pockets at hips, and narrow bodices. Look for patterns that have shaped skirts from the waist that are gathered only if the waist is small.

### Thick Waist

Avoid cummerbunds, wide belts, and slim skirts. Narrow belts, tapered lines and gored skirts, will flatter you more.

### Thin or Thick Upper Arms

Both thin and thick upper arms should avoid sleeveless style dress bodice. Instead, go with cap sleeves or  $\frac{3}{4}$  length sleeves.

## Chapter 4 – Fabric: Pick Your Color

Did you know that by wearing a color that is not flattering to you could change the way your body figure presents as well as can make your skin tone look drab or become totally lost? Choosing the right color for your dress is just as important as the style for your figure. If the color is wrong for you, no matter how well the dress is made, the effect will be totally lost.

There are a few things one must know when choosing the right color for your garment. The old time myths of wearing blues and greens, and reds and pinks together are no longer true. Pretty much nowadays, anything goes, as long as it compliments you! Mixing and matching colors that compliment you can be fun and give your creation your very own personal touch. Year to year, what is considered “in fashion” as far as color, changes. Do not give the color of the season as much play as what looks great on you! Choosing the right colors can draw attention away from any figure faults you may have. Accenting your dress with accessories in matching or contrasting colors can even bring out your design that much more.

Colors can create an optical illusion from cool dark colors making you look smaller and warm light colors making you look larger. Subtle muted colors can be slimming and bright contrasting colors can draw attention to ones figure making it look larger. Here are some general rules to help guide you in what will look most flattering to you. However, they are just general rules and some exceptions can apply.

### **Redheads:**

General rule for redheads is to avoid colors that match their hair color tone, color, and avoid reds, pinks, and oranges. Choose natural colors such as grays, cream, camel, browns, black, and white for main color. Accents or contrast trims, etc in yellows, greens and blues compliment redheads nicely.

### **Blondes:**

Avoid some yellows and oranges. Blondes look smashing in pastel blues, greens, and browns. For dark blonde-haired people and mousy blonde haired individuals, go with rich deep colors.

### **Brunettes:**

Brown-haired women are probably the luckiest of all hair colors when it comes to shades of colors that look great on them. They can easily pull off almost any bright colored fabric, browns, blacks, and whites.

### **Gray and White Haired People:**

Pastel shades are good for both these hair shades however shallow skin needs warm colors without too much yellow to give it an appealing tone. Pale skin needs colors strong enough to contrast with it and dark skin is much like brunettes. Dark skinned people can pull off just about any color, although exotic colors during the day can look out of place on them.

There are three types of color schemes for clothing, monochrome, contrasting, and toning. Always try color schemes by holding the fabric combination near your face while looking in a mirror to see if the colors suit you. Monochrome color schemes use shades of a single color or one color with black and white. Contrasting color schemes uses two

or more different colors in varying strengths that compliment each other. Toning color schemes uses two or more similar colors.

## Chapter 5 – Style Lines, Silhouettes, Balance, and Proportion

Style lines of a dress can emphasize or conceal parts of your figure. It is important that if there is something that is not pleasing to you regarding your figure that you choose the right style line in your dress pattern that will help down play that perceived fault. There are three different types of style lines – Vertical, Horizontal, and Curved. Each particular style line accents a body differently. Vertical style lines add height and make a figure look slimmer. The princess style is one example of a vertical style line. Horizontal lines tend to add an appearance of width.

These should only be used to flatter different points of ones figure. Curved seams create soft and flattering lines. Curved style lines are also often referred to as draping. Diagonal lines go from left to right when looking at a garment and long diagonal lines take the eye down in a slimming line. Use caution when using lines that appear in the weave or pattern. Straight lines are usually severe and deliver a tailored or classic look where curves and drapes appear graceful and feminine.

The basic dress garment silhouettes can be broke down into four categories – fitted, semi-fitted, slightly fitted, and loosely fitted. Fitted dress garments fit the natural curves of your body and may show off your figure. Fitted dress garments must be well cut and carefully fitted. Caution: This style may crease easy. Semi-fitted dress garments are usually fitted in the bust area with a slightly looser cut at the waist and hips. This style is more flattering for the less than perfect figure.

Slightly fitted dress garments are easy to wear and allow room for movement. They just barely follow the body outline and may be bias cut. The loosely fitted dress garment is often fitted only on the shoulders with the rest presenting full. The fullness disguises the body from the bust down.

Any garment looks best when details are not concentrated in just one area. Maintain balance by keeping an equal amount of eye appeal in two or more garment areas. Two halves may be identical so the dress has a symmetrical look. If one area has special emphasis, it may be balanced by having another point of interest elsewhere. Proportion is important when relating areas of the dress to one another and your figure. Take into consideration style lines, design details, fabric, pattern, and figure type. The scale and size of the fabric and dress must also suit the figure type.

A full mid-skirt style dress may swamp a tiny slim figure while a mini-skirt style dress is unflattering on a tall plump figure. Pleasing proportions can be achieved by planning the dress out in halves, thirds and quarters. Fro some figures, slightly uneven proportions may be more suitable. It is the over all look that is most important. To get an idea of how your dress will look on you once finished, go to dress stores and try on dress that are similar to the style you have in mind to make. Hold different fabrics up to you and see what looks best.

Check the effect of shiny versus dull fabrics, large and small prints, sheer in contrast to bulky fabrics and various color combinations before deciding on what type of fabric you want to use in your design.

## Chapter 6 – Fabric Choice – Texture, Design, and Material

The texture of your fabric will affect the final appearance of a garment. Fabric can be stiff or flowing, rough or smooth, shiny or dull, and sheer or bulky. Soft clingy fabrics reveal the figure while stiff fabric may conceal a figure's fault by creating a sleek outline. Shiny or bulky materials make the figure appear larger. Those types of fabrics are better used for those who may be too thin. Someone who is heavy should avoid bulky or shiny fabrics unless they are used as trim or accessories. Soft clinging fabrics such as jersey, bias cut silk, wool, and crepes make for nice soft feminine dresses.

Soft loosely woven fabrics such as heavy wool, crepes, and jerseys make attractive flared clothes or dresses with un-pressed pleats. Lightly woven fabrics can be draped closer to the body. Firmly woven wool, linen, cotton, silk, and fine tweed make tailored clothes with a seamed or sculptured look.

Prints and patterns can add beauty and interest to a dress. Consider the style and function of the dress when using a print. Too many seams and other style details may break up the fabric print making it hard not to notice seams. It can also be hard to match the print pattern giving your dress an unfinished or off appearance. The more complex the print design is, the harder it is to keep the pattern in unison.

When using a pattern or print, choose suited to your figure in size and color. Small patterns are prettier on tiny figures, while larger patterns may be overwhelming. Vertical stripes make a figure look slimmer and taller while horizontal stripes add width and reduce height appearance. Bright colors and sharp contrast make a figure also appear larger.

The main color should be flattering. Use combinations of other colors in small areas such as in printed pockets on a plain dress. Limit eye-catching designs to areas where they are complementary and do not draw attention to figure faults. The curves and angles of fabric and dress designs should be in harmony. Straight boxy bodices look better in checks than paisleys. Curved bodice seams and collars may spoil a plaid or striped effect. Also, take into consideration the direction of the pattern and what you intend on being the natural flow of your dress so they do not conflict.

When making your own dress you will want to make sure you purchase ample material plus some extra just in case a mistake is made. Measure the length from the nape of the neck to the desired hemline. Double this measurement and add 5 ¼ inches for seam allowance and hem. Short sleeves will need an additional 18 inches and long sleeves 27 inches. A full skirt needs one extra waist to hem length.

## Chapter 7 – Fabrics and Fibers

There is nothing worse than buying yards of fabric for a dress you have envisioned in your mind to get it home, spread it out, and realize that it is just not suitable for the garment. The information to follow will help you in selecting a fabric suitable for that one of a kind dress unique to just you.

Most pattern envelopes give suggestion as to which fabrics work best with that particular pattern. That does not mean that those are the only fabrics that can be used, but it does give you a general idea as to what type of texture and weave of fabric is more suitable. The fabric chosen should suit the person for who the dress is intended for; if you are making it for yourself then it should flatter your hair color, skin tone, and be of such material to conceal figure flaws as well as work with intended pattern and style of dress. A heavy bulky fabric would not work well with a dress pattern intended to have more movement unless you are purposely trying to remove the movement factor.

Tall thin figures should not wear vertical stripes. If natural complexion is highly colored, do not wear multicolor prints. Large designs, horizontal stripes, or shiny fabrics do not compliment short plump figures.

Do not choose a fabric with a busy design when making a dress with unusual lines, pin tucking, or other stitching detail. The design will distract from the finished effect and the many hours of handwork you put into your design may go unnoticed.

Fabric should be an appropriate weave or knit for the style of dress you are making. For tight fitting garments, choose closely woven fabrics and for loose fitting dresses, choose loosely woven fabrics. Make sure the fabrics you choose are washable or easily cleaned, depending on the amount of wear your dress will receive. If you are making a sundress that will be worn more often, use a fabric that is machine washable. If you are making a special occasion dress then by all means consider some of the wonderful dry clean only fabrics or those that take extra care.

When selecting fabrics to be worn together, avoid the muddled effect. If you want to mix fabrics, have at least one common factor such as color or design. A variety of plain fabrics may be used together. Any patterned fabric that highlights one of the plain colors can be included.

Do not forget texture. Compare fabrics and try to have a contrast in texture. If it is difficult to choose color schemes with balanced design and color, copy ideas from magazines or books and look back at your notes taken when you tried on different dresses when looking for styles that complimented your figure.

### **Fabric Checklist**

Ask yourself the following questions when deciding on a fabric best suited for your dress pattern.

1. Is it soft or stiff?
2. Will it drape?
3. Will it stretch and recover its shape?
4. Will it shrink?

5. Is it washable or must it be dry cleaned?
6. Is it clingy?
7. Is it rough or scratchy?
8. Is it soil and stain resistant?
9. Will it be cool or warm?
10. Is it absorbent?
11. Is it colorfast?
12. How does it handle?
13. Will it need ironing?

Use common sense. E.g. - If you do not need a fabric that drapes, then when asking yourself question 2, if the answer is yes, then you would not purchase that fabric. Your fabric is going to make or break your dress. You want to make sure not only that the fabric you choose is easy to work with if you are a novice to sewing, but also that it suits your design. Here are some other general guidelines for evaluating the fabric chose you are making for your dress.

Check the fabric over well for any imperfections. Imperfections are common in many fabrics, however if there are a lot it will make it hard if not impossible for you to be able to work around them. Check the grain of the fabric to make sure it is straight. If it isn't, can you make it straight with little effort? If not, choose a different fabric. Always make sure there is enough of the desired fabric you want on one bolt. Purchasing the fabric from separate bolts can be disastrous.

Although they may appear the same, the dye lot may be off in one of the bolts, which will throw off your finished garment. Check the direction of your fabric as well. Make sure it has a right and wrong side if it should be the case. Some fabrics are reversible; however, they still have a prominent side. Look for and understand the direction of a pattern if there is one.

## **Fabrics by Skill Level and Ease of Use**

Choose patterns according to your own personal sewing skill level. If you are a beginner, avoid dressmaking patterns in the couturier area. Begin with easy to sew patterns and work your way up as your skill levels develop.

### **Beginners**

**Cotton** Strong and easily washed fabric made from natural fiber from cotton linters. This fabric is comfortable to wear and ranges from fine, smooth voile to thick toweling.

- Advantages: Easy to press and handle. Gathers well and can be tucked. Can be embroidered and is often reversible.
- Disadvantages: None

**Gingham:** Plain-woven fabric. Usually yarn dyed threads make a prominent check pattern on a white background.

- Advantages: Easy to press and handle, gathers well, patterned on both sides.
- Disadvantages: Does not pleat well.

**Lawn:** Light woven cloth used in bodices of dresses as well as blouses and handkerchiefs.

- Advantages: Will not fray. Crisp but easy to work with. Easy to press and gathers well.
- Disadvantages: None

**Pique:** Firmly woven fabric with horizontal ribs.

- Advantages: Will not fray. Maintains shape and wears well.
- Disadvantages: Too springy for gathering. Requires matching ribs.

**Poplin:** Plain-woven fabric with fine horizontal ribs.

- Advantages: Will not fray. Firm to handle, gathers well, and easily pressed.
- Disadvantages: None

**Seersucker:** Woven fabric with a prominent, overall surface design.

- Advantages: Will not fray. Easy to handle, light pressing needed, gathers and hangs well.
- Disadvantages: Cannot be tucked or pleated. If patterned, matching seams can be difficult.

## **Semi-skilled**

**Wool Boucle:** Medium weight wool with looped piling.

- Advantages: Will not crease, is light weight and hangs and drapes well.
- Disadvantages: Stitching can be difficult to keep straight if the weave is heavy. Does not pleat easy.

**Chintz:** Plain-woven, printed or solid-colored, glazed cotton fabric..

- Advantages: Will not fray. Easy to press. Hangs well.
- Disadvantages: Cannot be gathered if glaze is too high. Hard to handle.

### **Cotton Satin**

- Advantages: Will not fray. Strong, hangs and presses well, often crease resistant, and tucks and gathers nicely.
- Disadvantages: None

**Crepe:** Light to medium fabric with a textured look.

- Advantages: Tucks, drapes, gathers, and hangs well. Can be embroidered.
- Disadvantages: Springy

**Crepe De Chine:** Opulent glossy light weight fabric with a subtle texture.

- Advantages: Does not fray badly. Easy to handle and usually reversible.
- Disadvantages: Ironed in creases can be hard to remove.

**Denim:** Strong twill weaved fabric usually made of cotton. It is washable and available in all colors but traditionally is blue.

- Advantages: Does not fray badly. Long wearing, pleats well, and is strong.
- Disadvantages: Does not gather easily. Shrinks when washed.

### **Wool Flannel**

- Advantages: Will not fray. Hangs and pleats well. Good for tailored styled dresses.
- Disadvantages: None

### **Wool Gabardine**

- Advantages: Good for tailored styles, pleats well and is strong.
- Disadvantages: None

**Linen:** Natural made material from the stalks of ripe flax plants. Linen is a strong and long wearing fabric.

- Advantages: Pleats, hangs, drapes and presses well. Suitable for tailored clothes and keeps its shape nicely.
- Disadvantages: Creases and frays badly.

**Muslin:** Plain-woven cotton fabric made in various weights.

- Advantages: Great for fine sewing. Can be tucked and frilled.
- Disadvantages: Frays, shrinks when washed.

**Organdy:** Plain-woven light fabric with a crisp finish.

- Advantages: Ideal for sewing. Can be tucked, rolled, and good for hand or sewing machine embroidery.
- Disadvantages: Springy, does not gather well, frays somewhat, and is transparent. Shrinks when washed.

**Sateen:** Strong cotton fabric constructed in a satin weave with a glossy face

- Advantages: Other materials can be used over it without it clinging.
- Disadvantages: Frays. Can slip while being cut or sewn.

### **Lingerie Satin**

- Advantages: Can be gathered, embroidered, and tucked. Hangs and drapes well,
- Disadvantages: Frays easily.

**Wool Serge:** durable twill weave fabric, heavier in weight than gabardine, made from a blend of 45% wool and 55% polyester

- Advantages: Holds pleats and does not crease easily.
- Disadvantages: None

**Silk:** Natural made fabric from the silkworm. Silk is a strong, warm, absorbent and springy fabric.

- Advantages: Pleats and gathers easily. Strong but soft. Ideal for fine sewing. Keeps shape, hangs, and drapes well.
- Disadvantages: Frays badly.

### **Polyester Wool**

- Advantages: Holds pleats and does not crease easily.
- Disadvantages: Frays easily. Can be bulky to wear.

**Voile:** Light plain-woven fabric with an open weave often used for bodices of dresses, blouses, and shirts.

- Advantages: Good for fine sewing. Can be tucked or frilled.
- Disadvantages: Frays easily. Seams must be strong and reinforced.

### **Worsted Wool**

- Advantages: Pleats well, strong material, and suitable for all tailored style dresses.
- Disadvantages: Difficult to work on. Tends to be bulky, and highly flammable unless treated.

### **Skilled**

**Chiffon:** Soft light weight plain-woven fabric.

- Advantages: Drapes, gathers, and hangs well.
- Disadvantages: Frays easily. Requires skilled handling.

**Georgette:** Strong, sheer lightweight silk with a matte crinkly surface.

- Advantages: Drapes, gathers, and hangs well. Does not fray easily.
- Disadvantages: Seams and edges may stretch.

### **Jersey**

- Advantages: Drapes and hangs well.
- Disadvantages: Edges tend to stretch. Handle gently so material is not distorted. Sew with a stretch stitch.

### **Moiré**

- Advantages: Gathers, flares, and hangs well while maintaining crispness.
- Disadvantages: Frays badly. Shows water marks and can be difficult to match patterns at seams.

**Nylon:** Nylon is made from products of the oil industry. It is often blended with wool or cotton. Used alone, nylon attracts dirt dues to static electricity.

- Advantages: Does not require much pressing. Is fine but strong.
- Disadvantages: Frays easily and is transparent.

**Taffeta:** Plain-woven fabric with a crisp feel, often used to line garments.

- Advantages: Can be dressy.
- Disadvantages: Frays badly.

**Velvet:** Fabric with a cut pile surface. Traditionally made of silk or cotton but is now available in man made fibers. It is washable and crease resistant; however, the pile on velvet may be crushed if not handled carefully.

- Advantages: Hangs and drapes well.
- Disadvantages: Can only be cut in one direction. Hard to press. Pins will mark the pile so use only very fine needles.

## Chapter 8 – Fabric Construction and Finishes

From natural to man-made yarn fibers, beautiful fabrics are being constructed. The most common ways that yarn is made into fabric is weaving and knitting, and a couple less common ways bonding and felting. Once the fabric has been constructed there are many finishes that has been developed to improve the appearance or performance of fabrics. The finishes are always applied to the finished fabric, not the individual threads of yarn used in the construction.

Let's look at the way fabric is constructed first. The process of which fabric is constructed determines on how the fabric reacts. If it has any stretch, if it is bulky, and how strong it is, all things important to know when choosing the right fabric for your garment.

Weaving is the process where two groups of yarn are put together at right angles in woven fabric. Warp (threads running the length of the fabric) is the thread that runs parallel to the selvage. Warp threads are the strongest of the weave. In the weave, the crosswise thread (weft) runs under and over the warp threads, creating the weave, which creates the fabric. The higher the count of weave threads, the stronger the fabric. There are many weave variations – rib, basket, twill, satin, pile, dobby, and jacquard. You can see these variations if you look at your fabric under a magnifying glass.

Knitting is a continuous yarn that is knitted into interlocking loops to form a stretchy flexible fabric. This can be done by hand or by knitting machines. Manufactures can knit on knitting machines a huge variety of weights and textures of knit fabrics. A few terms used in knitting fabric are:

- Wale: the row of loops running lengthwise in the fabric like warp threads.
- Course: the crosswise rows.
- Denier: Term used for the weight and thickness of the knit fabric.
- Gage: The number of stitches used to form a singular row of the fabric. The higher the gage the tighter the knit.

Yarn can be weft knitted into a flat or tubular fabric by using a single continuous thread that links with the previous and following rows. When more than one yarn is used to produce lengthwise rows of loops, it is called a warp knit. Each row of loops link with the other ones on either side. Fabrics that are made this way are almost always run proof.

Bonding is a less common way to make fabric. Fibers are bonded together without knitting or weaving. There is no grain and bonded fabric has no stretch. These fabrics are not self lined or laminated which means two materials are fused together. It would be like taking single strands of yarn, laying them side by side, and gluing them together to form a single piece of material.

Felting is an inexpensive warm, non woven fabric. Fabrics manufactures make felted material from wool or fur fibers joined together by heat, moisture, friction, and pressure. Felt is made in many thickness and colors. It does not fray, but generally is not durable enough for most clothes. There is another form of felting that is done with knitted fabric. It is done similar to that of the manufactures method, only on a much smaller scale.

When wool yarns are knitted to form a fabric, by placing them in a hot bath in a washing machine, the once knitted yarn fabric will come out appearing as felt but is extremely strong.

Many finishes have been developed to improve the performance and appearance of fabric. Without some finishes, certain materials would not be suitable for clothing wear such as the flameproof finish you will read on the label of children's sleepwear. Some common finishes you will read on bulk fabric labels are:

- **Colorfast:** What this means to you is that when you wash your finished garment it will not bleed or lose its color.
- **Flameproof:** This is applied to fabric to insure that it is flame resistant. The law requires that all children's sleepwear be treated with a flameproof finish. Here is where the problem lays though, although they may be treated with a flameproof finish, often times these finishes wear off through washing, so do not use the label to much as a comfort factor.
- **London-Shrunk:** London-Shrunk is when wool suiting is dampened and let to dry naturally (shrinking some) before tailoring.
- **Luster:** Resins and starches are applied to cotton fabric to make a crisp and shiny surface much like chintz. (Note: This too wears off through washings.)
- **Machine Washable:** A finish is applied to the fabric to make it washable. In addition to the usual fabrics, it is possible to wash some suede's, leathers, and wools in a washing machine if they have been treated. Look for the label for laundering instructions when purchasing fabric.
- **Mercerizing:** The process of treating cotton under tension to give it strength and make it lustrous.
- **Permanent Press:** A process done by the manufacture to prevent fabrics from creasing and to hold their shape without requiring ironing.
- **Preshrink:** When a manufacture shrinks the material down to reduce the amount of shrinkage while home laundering.
- **Waterproofing:** When a manufacture uses silicone on the surface of a fabric to make it water repellant.
- **Sizing or Dressing:** Glue, clay, or wax is added to a fabric to give it body, however it does eventually wash out.

Most fabrics stretch a little. Some yarn made fabrics are made with built in stretch made by tight twisting or crimping yarn. Special expendable fibers may be used, or the fibers may incorporate a fine rubber core that gives them its spring back quality. Knit fabrics made from these types of yarn have the most give or stretch. Fabrics used for sports wear stretch in both directions. Warp- stretch or weft- stretch only stretch in one direction.

When choosing and using a stretch fabric make sure the pattern you are using is for that particular type of fabric. Follow the patterns directions carefully. Stretch material can be tricky to work with for your first couple of times. While on the machine, you may have a tendency to pull the fabric to taut which will leave buckles in your seams. By stretch fabric remnants and practice with stretch fabric before cutting a whole dress pattern out and attempting to sew your dress. Although you can rip seams out and start over, most stretch fabrics are not very forgiven.

Self-lined fabrics were once called bonded fabrics. Some of the original bonded fabrics were stiff and gave garments a “stuck-out” appearance. Today’s self-lined fabrics are designed to be wearer friendly, drape nicely, and are done for added appearance. Self-lined fabric is easy to handle on the machine and is a great starter fabric beside cottons. Self-lined fabrics can save you time and money. Instead of cutting a lining fabric and the fabric for the dress, you only have to cut one fabric and sew one fabric! Plus, you are getting two fabrics for the price of one!

The fabric resists fraying which reduces the need for finishing edges, which is very, time consuming. The added lining makes it much easier to make buttonholes also. The lining helps it glide easier on your sewing machine, keeping the risks of twisting patterns or checks out of shape. Garments made with self-lined fabrics hold their shape and retain a tailored look much longer than other types of fabrics. They do not crease nor bag.

## Chapter 9 – Making Patterns

After you have been sewing for a while, you may have collected quite a few patterns along the way. Make sure that when you purchase a pattern to take good care of it because once you have been sewing for a while you may want to try your hand at making your own patterns.

There may be certain aspects you like from different patterns, such as the sleeves on one, a collar on another, the bodice, or the skirt on another. By saving all your patterns, you can begin to mix and match these desired aspects to create your own original design. You can make copies of your original patterns on pelon, fabric such as muslin, or on unprinted newspaper that you can get from any newspaper publisher in bulk. Often times they have end rolls that they are unable to use. These are great for copying your patterns and extending their life, cheaply.

Any sewer can benefit from using a mock up pattern known as a fitting shell, standard pattern, or toile. A basic paper pattern is carefully adjusted to your personal measurements. It is cut out and tacked together in a fabric such as muslin. The mock garment is fitted carefully and accurately to your figure. After having this mock pattern constructed all your new patterns can be compared with it before cutting and sewing to avoid mistakes. It may take longer to check the fit of each pattern this way but it can be worthwhile especially when details really matter. This way, you can always do a trail run on muslin before committing to the actual fabric you want your dress to be made from.

You can definitely combine two or more patterns to construct your own unique gown or dress, however it is best if they are all in the same size range unless you are very skilled in pattern adjustments. If in doubt, do it in muslin first.

The problem with commercially made patterns is they are made for a nonspecific person, not for your unique figure. You may have to make several pattern adjustments to make a commercial pattern fit properly. Another way you can form your own patterns is by garments you already own that you know fit you well. You can carefully disassemble the garment and trace it onto newsprint adding  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch for seam allowance.

If you do not want to disassemble a currently owned garment, another option is to hit your local thrift stores and find garments that fit you nicely, regardless of the print or color. These will not matter. This is a cheap way to pick up garments that can be made into patterns for a customized dress pattern.

## Chapter 10 – Dress Making Terminology

There is much terminology you will come across when sewing, be it a dress, shirt, skirt, or a pair of slacks. If you do not know the terminology, it would be like following directions in a language you knew nothing about.

Some common terminologies used regarding fabrics are selvage, grain-line, bias, and nap. **Selvage** is the finished edge of a woven material. Sometimes the manufacturer's name and fabric style may be printed along this edge. The purpose of a selvage edge is to keep the material from fraying or unraveling. The **grain-line** (sometimes referred to as the straight line) of fabric is the threads running parallel to the selvage. The crosswise grain is the threads that run selvage to selvage.

You should always try to cut with the grain-line when possible. **Bias** refers to the thread line that is diagonal to the grain-line and crosswise grain of the fabric. If fabric is pulled along the bias, it will stretch. A garment will hang differently depending on the direction it has been cut. The **nap** of the fabric refers to the way the pile lays. It is a soft raised surface commonly found on wool fabrics.

Much like fur, if you run your hand on it one way it feels smooth, wrong way of nap, it will feel rough. When designing a dress you want to make sure the nap runs all in the same direction. The nap is one way to distinguish which side of the fabric is the face or front.

Some other terms you may come across are:

- **A-line:** A dress or skirt that resembles the outline of a "A".
- **Avant Garde:** Ahead of the trend.
- **Bateau:** Neckline following the curve of the collar bone.
- **Caftan:** Long flowing coatlike dress often-sporting bell sleeves.
- **Coat-Dress:** Front opening dress having the appearance of a coat.
- **Couture:** Garment made all by hand.
- **Décolleté:** Bare neck and shoulders with a plunging neckline.
- **Haute Couture:** High fashion.
- **Mandarin:** Narrow standing collar, close fitting at neck.
- **Maxi:** Hem length falling between mid-calf and ankle.
- **Micro:** Hem length falling to upper thigh.
- **Midi:** Hem length falling to mid-calf.

- **Mini:** Hem length falling at mid thigh.
- **Peplum:** Small flounce around the hips of a garment, usually as an extension of the bodice.
- **Princess line:** Garment fitted with seams instead of darts.
- **Sheath:** Close fitting dress with a straight skirt.
- **Shift:** Loose fitting casual dress.
- **Skirt-waist:** Dress with a bodice buttoned like a shirt.
- **Toile:** Copy of an original garment design made in cotton fabric, such as muslin.
- **Tunic:** Simple dress worn over another garment.
- **Voile:** Light plain-woven fabric with an open weave, often used in blouses, skirts, and dresses.

## Chapter 11 – Dress Label, Stitches, and Thread

When ever you make a garment, no matter if it is a dress or not, you should always put an information label on it. Unless you have them written down, you may forget vital care information for the fabric used. Even if it is just a hand written tag attached to the hanger you place your finished product on, make sure it is there. If you have a sewing machine that allows for monogramming, you can create your own designer labels. There are also iron on monogramming and fabric care labels that you can purchase from a fabric supplier. The label should include fiber content, fabric construction, special finishes, trim information, ironing instructions, and any other pertinent data.

The basic sewing machine has three types of stitch settings, normal, basting, and zigzag. There may be several different setting for these stitches. Those variations determine how many stitches will be inserted with in an inch. The normal stitch is used for most straight seams with most using 10 to 12 stitches per inch. The basting stitch is a longer stitch with fewer stitches per inch and is used to hold a seam together temporarily while you are attending other things. A basting stitch is very easy to remove and since there are very few stitches per inch, most fabrics will tolerate it well. However, you can hand stitch basting or tacking stitches in manually as well. The zigzag stitch is used to finish raw edges or for decoration.

If you intend on hand sewing your garment, there are several hand stitches that can add so much more character to your garment then you could ever achieve by machine. However, now days there are sewing machines that can do almost anything shy of cutting out the pattern. Some are now computer accented performing many hand stitches that were once never possible to perform automotive. For those who still enjoy the traditional means of sewing, there are many wonderful books that are packed with the most beautiful hand stitches known such as the arrowhead tack, chain stitch, French knots, featherstitch, lazy daisy stitch and many more.

There is a large variety of thread for sewing, each has its unique purpose, and it is important to use the right thread for the stitch, fabric, and garment being created. Natural fibers need to be sewn with natural threads for instance and man made fabrics with man made threads. The thread you choose should have the same characteristics of your fabric, from compound made from and the color of fabric. If not, the garment you sewn will not be compatible in laundering method leaving your garment coming out disheveled and un-repairable.

If you use a man made thread with a natural fabric that shrinks when washed, the man made thread will not shrink, leaving your thread loose. If you use natural thread with a man made fabric that does not shrink by nature, the natural thread will shrink during laundering leaving your garment buckled. Know the fabric compound you have purchased and purchase your thread accordingly. If you are in doubt, ask for assistance.

## Chapter 12 – Conclusion

The biggest joy in sewing your own dress is you can create who you see yourself as, your own design, through your own eyes. You can create a tradition within your own family, or you never know, you may just design the next big fashion break. There are no real rules as to what one perceives as fashion, so the world of design is a blank canvas just waiting for you to put your mark on it.

You can do this by creating the next best sundress or be Avant Garde and knock the socks off your own red carpet event. You can bring back something old and make it new again or take aspects from many eras and create something entirely new. You can follow a manufactures pattern, create your own, or use old dresses as your inspiration. You can mix and match fabrics to create texture or flow.

With very little sewing background and with just a little practice you can be creating your own dresses. This is your opportunity to put your own touches on your wardrobe, add your own personality, and use your creativity. Use this book as your guide, allow your creative juices to flow; the possibilities are endless. Sewing dresses is fun, playful, and stress free! You can create a romantic evening dress or a fun and flirty sports dress. You can sew a variety of dresses to fit any mood or occasion. Make your own style statement. Before you know it, your wardrobe will be overflowing with dresses.

Do not be afraid to think outside of the box. As long as you follow the basic guide lines of not mix matching fabrics/threads, anything goes.