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# Easy Guide to Sewing Skirts

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# **1** Which Skirt to Make?

Anyone can sew a skirt, so if you're just learning, a skirt is the perfect starting point. You can get the color, style, and fit you want, and the length that's exactly right for you.

The number of choices in the pattern books may seem overwhelming at first, but there are really only a few skirt styles and silhouettes to choose from. In this chapter, you'll learn how to determine which styles work best on your figure and which styles and fabrics are best for your skill level.

A simple style and a beautiful fabric are the best combination for fast, easy, and successful sewing (just look at the skirts in any Calvin Klein collection). When you want to make a skirt quickly, stay at or just below your skill level and use the techniques and details that you've mastered. If you want to stretch your limits, choose skirts with some new element—a different zipper application, a more fitted style, or a more challenging fabric.

The more difficult and time-consuming skirts to sew are those that are fitted at the waist, high hip, and full hip, or that have more pattern pieces and construction details, such as pleats or pockets.



## Choosing the Best Style



Begin in your closet. Try on your favorite skirts. Make notes and take measurements.

Decide which styles and silhouettes look best on you. What are the most flattering lengths? Which waistband styles, lengths, and widths are most comfortable? What is the hip measurement of the fitted skirt that looks best on you?

Next, take your tape measure to the stores. Try on a variety of skirts to see what works for you and what doesn't. (I do this at least twice a year—late August and March are when the stores have the best seasonal selections.) Again, make notes of the most flattering lengths, hem widths, waistbands, and so on. Check the fabric types—this will help you learn which fabrics work best for which styles. If you find a skirt in the stores that looks fabulous on you, you'll probably be able to find something similar in the pattern books.

#### What's Best for Me?

Skirt styles fall into a few basic categories: straight, A-line or flared, gored, pleated/tucked, gathered, wrap, and bias. But how well a particular style will look on you depends on your figure type. Some styles look good on almost anyone, while others seem to suit a particular body shape. The so-called "average" or slim, well-proportioned figure can wear almost any style of skirt. Four of the other common figure types and the styles that most flatter them are described on the facing page.

The chart on pp.10-13 describes each of the basic skirt styles, the figure type best suited to each, the range of sewing skills required, and the recommended fabrics. For easy reference, each skirt style is coded with the appropriate figure symbols. The page numbers in parentheses direct you to more detailed discussion of the suggested style variations and design details.

#### FIGURE TYPES



**X or Hourglass** The hourglass figure looks balanced, curvaceous, and well defined. The shoulders and hips appear to be the same width, and the bust and hips are about 10 in. to 12 in. larger than the waist (an hourglass figure might measure 38-27-38, for example). A woman with this shape can wear both straight and flared styles. If you're full figured, however, you'll look better with straight lines that minimize your curves, such as those on a skirt with vertical seams.



A or Pear On a pear-shaped figure, the shoulders appear narrower than the hips or thighs, the bust is small, and the waist is small in proportion to the hips. If you are pear shaped—most women are—avoid bulky skirts and severe slim-line skirts. Flared, A-line, gored, and bias skirts are most flattering. To camouflage full hips, choose soft, flowing fabrics, soft pleats, and long, graceful skirts. **H or Rectangular** The rectangular figure has few curves and not much waistline definition. The shoulders and the hips are similar in width, which makes the figure appear balanced. If you have a rectangular shape, most likely your clothes usually hang well. You can wear skirts that are slim-fitting, as well as ones that are graceful and flowing.

V

**Y** or Wedge The wedge figure has shoulders that are broader than the hips, and the upper arms may be heavy. Some women develop a wedge shape as they age; others are born with these proportions. If you have a wedge shape, slim skirts are made for you. Gored and bias skirts are also good choices.









Hourglass figure

Pear figure

Rectangular figure

Wedge figure

#### STYLES, SKILLS, AND FABRICS

Skirt types	Style and figure notes	Required skills	Suggested fabrics
STRAIGHT	More than any other style, straight skirts reveal the figure. An oversized top wom over a straight skirt, however, works well on figures with proportionally large hips. Short straight skirts ending just above the knee are the most flattering. Super-short straight skirts, such as the micro-mini, are best on slim, long-legged figures. Long straight skirts can have an air of chic, but look dowdy if they're the wrong length. They're best if they end where the leg begins to taper. Some French designers use patterns that are slightly "pegged" at the hem—cut about ½ in. narrower than the full hip at each side seam. A pegged skirt tapers from full hip to hem, creating a curvy, pleasing line for almost any figure that can wear a slim skirt.	<ul> <li>Straight skirts fit closer to the body than any other style, so it's important to have some experience with fitting.</li> <li>A traditional tailored straight skirt might have darts, soft pleats, curved seams, a zipper, fitted waistband, vent or kick pleat, and a lining.</li> <li><b>Easy:</b> A slim skirt with a pull-on elasticized waistband (pp. 89-91) is an ideal beginner's project. A French vent (p. 72) and lining (pp. 82-85) are optional.</li> <li><b>Average:</b> Soft front pleats (pp. 61-63); darts (p. 59), gathers (pp. 64-65), or elastic (pp. 96-98) in the back; machine-stitched zipper (pp. 78-79) at center-back seam; optional French vent (p. 72) and lining (pp. 82-85).</li> <li><b>Advanced:</b> Darts (pp. 59-60) in front and back; shaped darts for better fit or pockets (pp.66-69); hand-picked zipper (p. 79); lining (pp. 82-85).</li> </ul>	For fitted, darted styles, the best fabrics are midweight, sometimes termed "bottom weights" that is, for skirts or pants. The best choices in wools are crepe, lightweight gabardine, fine tweeds, and twills. Avoid wool flannel; most kinds are too stiff and heavy for any skirt. Other fabrics that work well are linens, silk linen or blends, light tweeds, brushed cottons, and denim-weight cottons. For pull-on straight skirts, fabrics should be soft and fluid to avoid excess bulk at the waist and high hip. Silks, wool jersey, challis, and rayon are good choices.

Skirt type	Style and figure notes	Required skills	Suggested fabrics
A-LINE/FLARED         Image: Constraint of the second se	The A-line or flared skirt is probably the best style for most women. It works well on figures with a small waist in proportion to the hips; adds the illusion of a waist on straight up-and- down figures; and may be the only style that works on full-hipped figures. Check the shapes of the pattern pieces on the instruction sheet. The skirt should be flared, not rectangular. If the lengthwise grain is at center back or front, you may want to alter it for a more flattering effect. Also check the finished skirt width at the hem to be sure it's exactly what you want, based on the measurements you've taken of garments in your wardrobe or in stores.	A-line skirts may be fitted at the waist, high hip, and full hip, which requires skill in fitting. They can also be full with an elasticized waistband—super-easy to sew and fit. <b>Easy:</b> Full skirt with pull- on elasticized waistband (pp. 89-91); gathers (pp. 64-65) or soft pleats (p. 61); machine-sewn hem (pp. 106-107). <b>Average:</b> Fitted or partially elasticized waistband (pp. 96-98); zipper (pp. 74-81); pocket detailing (pp. 66-69); curved seams (p. 53). <b>Advanced:</b> Bias cut (pp. 37-39); lining (pp. 82-83); raised waistband (p.101); more fitted, but the more fitted the skirt, the more skills are required to make it.	Because A-line skirts are usually flowing, choose fabrics that drape and move nicely. For more fitted styles, choose wool crepe, double knits, light gabardine, rayon and silk tweed, brushed denim, suede, silk linen. For full, gathered, or softly pleated flared styles, pick silk broadcloth, crepe de chine, rayon, challis, tissue faille, cotton knits, silk noil, wool jersey.

Skirt	Style and figure notes	Required	Suggested
type		skills	fabrics
GORED         Image: Constant of the second	A true classic, the gored skirt is always in fashion. It's also one of the most flattering styles. The vertical lines of a gored skirt create an illusion of height and slimness. A gored skirt can be either straight or A-line, depending on the contours of the gores. If you look best in a slim skirt, choose a gored style that's fitted at the waist and hips and that flares near the hemline. If an A-line is best for you, choose a skirt with gores that flare from waist or high hip. Shaped and curvy gores emphasize the hips. (See pp. 108-109 for tips on constructing a fitted, lightly fitted, and full gored skirt.)	The more fitted the skirt, the more important your fitting ability. You'll also need accurate stitching and pressing skills to achieve flat, nearly invisible seams. Hems can be sewn by hand or machine. <b>Easy:</b> Pull-on elasticized waistband (pp. 89-91); additional ease at waist and hips (p.108). <b>Average:</b> Lightly fitted skirt (p. 108); invisible zipper (pp. 80-81); machine-topstitched hem (p. 106) <b>Advanced:</b> Fitted (p. 109); hand-picked or invisible zipper (p. 79 and pp. 80-81); hand- sewn hem (p. 105).	The best fabrics for this style are fluid and drapey. Wool jersey, velour, and wool double knits are good for lightly fitted skirts; wool crepe, silk tweed, and fine worsted wool for fitted skirts. Silk crepe de chine and rayon are also good choices. Avoid wool flannel and gabardine.

Skirt type	Style and figure notes	Required skills	Suggested fabrics
PLEATED/TUCKED	Pleats create a subtle vertical line while softening the figure. A skirt with all-around pleats, however, flatters only slim, narrow- hipped figures. The position, direction, and depth of the pleats can be varied from those on the pattern to achieve the look that's best for you. Experiment.	Easy: Soft pleats (p. 61). Average: Pressed-down or stitched-down pleats (pp. 62-63). Advanced: All-around pleats, which are extremely difficult to fit.	Soft pleats require soft fabrics, such as silk and silkies, rayon, and jersey. The best choices for pressed- or stitched- down pleats are crisp fabrics, such as light gabardine and menswear worsteds, silk twill, and broadcloth.
GATHERED Cathers emphasize the drape and movement of soft, fluid fabrics.	Gathered skirts visually add weight and bulk to any figure, so choose your pattern and fabric carefully. Beware the rectangular- shaped "dirndl" skirt, which is fine for children but frumpy on most women. Check the pattern instruction sheet to make sure the pattern pieces are narrower at the waist than at the hem. Carefully position the gathers (pp. 64-65) for the most flattering effect.	<ul> <li>Beginners often choose to make a gathered skirt as a first project, but gathers take patience and fussing to get just right.</li> <li>Easy: Gathers created by an elasticized waistband (p. 89); short spans of gathers.</li> <li>Average/Advanced: Long spans of gathers; a multi-tiered, Santa Fe- style skirt.</li> </ul>	To avoid an unflattering puffy look, use soft, fluid fabrics, such as silk, polyester "silkies," rayon, jersey, and challis. If you're unsure whether a fabric is too heavy for a gathered skirt, it probably is.

## Selecting the Pattern



*Keep it simple. The key to success is to begin with a loose-fitting style and a beautiful fabric.* 

As a rule, a garment with fewer pattern pieces requires less time to fit and sew. Scrutinize the illustrations in the pattern books. Keep in mind that each detail—yokes, pockets, pleats, raised waistbands, and intricate seam treatments—adds time and complexity to the project.

Build your skills gradually. With each new garment you make, plan to add another technique or fitting skill to your repertoire. For instance, once you've made a simple, slim skirt with an elastic waistband and a machine-stitched hem, you may want to make the same pattern again, this time adding pockets to the side seams and hand-stitching the hem. Then you'll be ready for a more challenging pattern, say, a darted skirt with a kick pleat and a fitted waistband.

#### Beyond the Pattern Envelope

The pattern envelope contains a lot of useful information, but you have to know how to interpret it. Pattern illustrations can be somewhat misleading, because the artists' drawings are much taller and slimmer than most real women actually are. So keep in mind that you'll probably look very different in the skirt than the figure in the sketch. Also, if there's a photograph of a designer original, remember that the pattern company does not buy the original pattern, but rather the right to copy the design, so the cut of the garment won't be exactly the same.

Don't get distracted by details, such as a skirt pocket or the color of the garment in the illustration. Look at the lines of the drawings on the back of the pattern envelope. These will show you the skirt's basic silhouette—that is, whether it is straight, flared, or gathered. Open the envelope, if the retailer will allow you to, and check the line drawing on the pattern instruction sheet. This is usually larger than the one on the pattern envelope, and the details are easier to see. Also check the shape and grainline position of the pattern pieces.

Check the finished skirt length and width, and compare these to your notes on what looks best on you. Your best lengths may vary, too, depending on the style of the skirt. Length is simple to change, but widths are more difficult to adjust, so you may need to try another size.

Read through the pattern instructions. Be sure you understand or can learn every step. Check the garment details to be sure you are confident you can master them. If not, see if you can simplify the skirt, at least the first time you make it.

#### Which Size to Buy?

Choose a skirt pattern based on your full-hip measurement (p. 28), not your waist measurement—the waistline is easier to adjust than the hip. If your upper thighs are larger than your hips (as on a pear-shaped figure), substitute your upper-thigh measurement for the hip measurement when selecting the size.

If the skirt is part of an ensemble pattern, select the pattern size you would normally take in a blouse or jacket. You don't have to buy another pattern for the skirt—simply adjust the skirt pattern to fit. It's much easier to alter a skirt than it is to alter a blouse or a jacket. While you're searching the pattern books for a skirt, be sure to also check the patterns that show ensembles. You just might find the perfect skirt, as well as a matching jacket or coat.

## **2** Working with Fabrics

It's impossible to select fabric without touching it. When you find a fabric that appeals to you, open it out to the length of the garment to examine its drape and overall effect. Crush it in your hand to see if it wrinkles and if the creases disappear easily. Take the bolt to a full-length mirror and hold the fabric up against you, draping it like a skirt. Stand back and squint to get a different perspective—sometimes a fabric that's appealing at close range isn't when you see it from a distance.

If your skirt will have pleats, fold the fabric to duplicate them. If you want to make a skirt with gathers, scrunch up the fabric to imitate a gathered effect. From these tests, you'll discover whether the fabric drapes smoothly and gracefully (which will flatter the figure without adding bulk) or is stiff and three-dimensional.

When you begin shopping, the fabrics recommended on the back of the pattern envelope are a good starting point. These are the fabrics the pattern designer believes will work best for that garment. Often these recommendations are too generic, however, and make no allowances for the sewer's abilities. The recommendations also fail to take into account that the characteristics of a specific fabric type (such as wool gabardine) can vary greatly. Consult the chart on pp. 10-13 for other suggested fabrics for your skirt style.



## A Glossary of Fashion Fabrics

Allow yourself time to select just the right fabric—one that you will enjoy sewing and wearing.

The most common mistake that sewers make is to pair a pattern with an incompatible fabric. If a fabric seems too heavy, too slippery, too wrinkly, too unstable, prone to fraying, or not quite the right color, keep looking. Most sewers have a "little voice" inside that instinctively recognizes when a fabric isn't acceptable. Better to find out before the garment is made than during the project or, worse yet, after the skirt is finished. When you're not sure how a fabric will handle, buy 1/8 yd. to experiment with.



#### **Foolproof Fabrics**

Certain fabrics are like dependable old friends. They are a pleasure to touch, gratifying to sew and press, and they wear, move, and flow beautifully. Natural fibers head the list of foolproof fabrics for skirts.

**Cotton:** *Denim, brushed cotton, chambray, fine poplin, lawn.* Look for long-fiber cottons (the best quality), which can be identified by their beautiful sheen and resistance to wrinkles. A pleasure to sew and press, these cottons last and last.

**Wool:** Wool crepe, double knits, wool jersey (though not for rank beginners), wool challis. The weight and drape of wool makes it a perfect skirt fabric. Wool crepe is excellent, as the texture does not add bulk to the figure. It's also easy to press and sew. Avoid wool flannel entirely—it's thick and bulky and doesn't press well.

**Linen:** *Linen blends.* Linen blends well with other fibers. With linen/rayon, for example, you get the best of both fabrics—the drape of rayon and the stability of linen. Moygashel, a brand-name Irish linen, doesn't wrinkle as much as other pure linens. For slim and fitted flared skirts, choose heavy weights. Consider lining your linen skirt, depending on the style.

**Silk:** *Silk linen, silk noil, silk tweed, silk broadcloth.* Silk can be smooth and slippery or have the look and feel of cotton or linen. Until you have more experience, avoid the slippery silks, such as charmeuse, crepe de chine, georgette, and chiffon.

#### NEEDLES, THREADS, AND STITCHES

For most skirt fabrics (lightweight to midweight wovens and some knits), a #12/80 universal-point needle is best. With these fabrics, use a good-quality long-staple polyester thread and a 2mm to 2.5mm stitch length (about 8 to 10 stitches per inch).

For very lightweight fabric, such as crepe de chine, use a smaller needle (#10/70) and finer thread—machineembroidery thread, for example. With heavy, dense, thick, or textured fabrics, use a longer stitch and larger needle. With denim, for example, use a #14/90 needle. Even if your fabric isn't heavy, because you are stitching through so many thicknesses, you may want to topstitch with a size #14/90 or special topstitching needle.

I baste with silk thread to avoid making indentations in the fabric when I press it before the final stitching. The feel, weight, and drape of the fabric are essential to the success of your finished garment.



#### **Challenging Fabrics**

Some fabrics are more challenging to work with because they require expertise in cutting, handling, sewing, pressing, and hand-stitching. To gain some experience gradually, combine a challenging fabric with a simple-to-construct design. For example, try making a simple four-gore pull-on skirt in rayon or silk crepe de chine.

**Rayon:** *A man-made fiber composed of natural materials.* Rayon's soft and drapey characteristics, which give the fabric its appeal, are also what can make it hard to handle. Sand-washed rayons, especially, shift and move easily while they are being cut and sewn. Imported, cottonlike rayons are often more stable and easier to handle than inexpensive, domestic versions. Try the wrinkle test: If the wrinkles fall out after you crumple the fabric, the rayon is probably of good quality and will be easier to sew.

**Polyester:** A man-made fiber that can look and feel like silk or rayon. Polyester is difficult to cut, sew, press, and shape. The fiber is so strong that topstitching often puckers. Avoid polyester "silkies" until you're a seasoned sewer, and even then, test the fabric first.

**Wool gabardine:** *Can be firm and crisp or soft and drapey.* Although suitable for a variety of skirt styles, gabardine is a difficult fabric for a beginner to work with because it eases poorly, frays readily, and shows stitching errors. Gabardine also requires expert pressing and topstitching to look its best.

#### FABRICS FOR POCKETS, INTERFACINGS, AND LININGS

Once you've found your skirt fabric, select the fabrics for the other items you'll include in the skirt.

**Pockets:** If the skirt fabric is lightweight, doesn't show through from the right side, and won't stick to itself, make the pockets from the same fabric. You can also use the lining fabric to make the pockets.

Pockets may also be made of any strong, slippery fabric or plain-weave cotton in a color close to that of the skirt. Plain broadcloth or cotton twill are also good to use.

If the skirt fabric is a pale color or white, make the pockets of a lightweight lining fabric of nude- or fleshtoned silk or nylon organza.

*Interfacing:* You have a number of choices for waistband interfacing. You don't have to use what the pattern says. Although designed for shirt collars and



Fusible interfacing creates a stable, crisp waistband.

cuffs, woven fusible is perfect for waistbands. It creates a crisp finish that holds the waistband's shape. Sew-in interfacing doesn't work as well. There are also waistband styles for which you don't need interfacing (pp. 89-91).

*Lining:* A lining fabric should be thin, strong, and smooth. It should also be compatible with the weight, drape, and care requirements of the skirt fabric. The color should not be visible through the skirt fabric.

If your skirt pattern doesn't include a lining, you need to calculate how much fabric you should buy. The general rule is: double the skirt length. However, it's safer to lay out your pattern pieces on the lining fabric (except for the waistband, which is unlined). For future reference, note on the pattern envelope how much lining fabric you need for the skirt.

Rayon linings are ideal. Not only are they inexpensive, they "breathe" and have excellent draping qualities. They can be difficult to find, however. (Polyester, though less expensive and more available, doesn't breathe well and has only fair draping qualities.)

Silk is the ultimate in luxury. It's expensive, feels marvelous, and can add warmth to the garment. Crepe de chine is an excellent and sumptuous companion to wool crepe or light gabardine. China silk is an excellent traditional lining fabric, but beware of the thin, cheap varieties—with any stress at all (as in a fitted skirt), the seams may pull out.

Pockets	Waistband Interfacings	Linings
Plain-weave cotton	Fusible nonwoven, precut	Rayon
Plain broadcloth	Fusible woven yardage	Silk
Cotton twill	Sew-in woven, by the roll	Crepe de chine
Lining fabrics of silk or nylon organza	Elastic and flat-ribbed elastic	China silk

## Preparing the Fabric



Prepare the fabric before you sew to ensure that the finished garment will look, hang, and wear well.

Most fabric will shrink the first time it's laundered, so you should wash or dry-clean it before you cut out the pattern pieces. Preshrink using the same method you plan to use to launder your finished skirt. For example, if you'll be washing and drying the skirt by machine, pretreat the fabric by machine. After preshrinking, straighten the grain of the fabric by pulling or pressing to ensure that the finished garment will look its best.

#### Preshrinking and Pressing

Washing by hand is often the best way to launder hand-sewn garments. To preshrink the fabric, either wash and dry it by machine this first time only, or wash it by hand. To preshrink by hand, fold the fabric and submerge it in warm to hot water and a little detergent. (The detergent removes the excess dye or finishing substance.) Then rinse and air-dry the fabric.

Undyed white and off-white wools tend to shrink at alarming rates and should always be preshrunk. Lay the fabric on a large terry towel that has just been washed in the machine (the towel should be damp, not sodden). Roll the fabric and damp towel together like a jelly roll, leave them overnight, and, the next day, press the fabric smooth to remove the moisture.

Some fabrics, such as wool crepe, must be dry cleaned. To preshrink the fabric, have the dry cleaner process the piece of fabric just as if it were a garment.

Not all fabrics need preshrinking. Many wools and silks are "needle-ready," and need nothing more than a touch-up with the iron before you lay out and cut the pattern pieces.

Press the preshrunk fabric before you cut out the pattern pieces and hang it on a hanger so it won't wrinkle. Press and hang your pattern pieces, too. They'll be easier to work with.

#### Straightening the Grain

Even though fabric is woven straight (with the lengthwise and crosswise threads at right angles to each other), it is often pulled off-grain during the finishing process or as it is wound onto the bolt. If you cut and sew a garment off-grain, it may never hang the way you expect it to.

So, before you lay out your pattern pieces, check that the fabric is on the "straight of the grain," that is, with all edges, selvage, and cross grain straight and at right angles. Make a snip through the selvage about 1 in. to 2 in. from one of the raw edges. Tear the fabric if it tears easily and without distortion, or pull one thread out and cut along the area it was pulled from. (Some fabric stores will do this when you buy the fabric.)

Now fold the fabric in half, with selvages together. Press the fabric and place it on a flat surface. The selvage and cross grain should be straight and at right angles to each other; cross-grain threads should lie on top of one another.

If the fabric is off-grain, pull the fabric firmly from the corners along the bias to straighten it. If you have a lot of yardage, work down the length of the fabric, pulling every 12 in. from corner to corner. This task is easily accomplished with two people, but if you're working alone, you can press the fabric, stretching it along the bias as you work, as shown in the photo on the facing page.



To find the "straight of the grain," tear the fabric or pull a thread and cut along the crosswise grain. Check that the selvage and cross grain are straight and at right angles.

## **3** *Getting the Right Fit*

Part of the fun of sewing for yourself is to get the best fit possible. Fitting is the process of adjusting or altering a commercial pattern so that it will exactly fit the person who will wear the garment. It is rare for anyone to have precisely the same measurements as a commercial pattern, and seldom can a pattern be used straight out of the envelope without changes. Altering and customizing the pattern are as much a part of creating clothes as sewing and pressing are.

Fitting has an undeserved reputation for being difficult. It's not, but it can be time-consuming—up to one-third of the time it takes to construct an entire garment is spent preparing and adjusting the pattern. Once you know how your body differs from the pattern, you can adjust all your patterns for your specific hip or waist measurements, preferred length, or other variations. With all the time you'll invest in perfecting a pattern, it certainly pays to have a collection of favorites that you can use again and again.

Because fitting is a trial-and-error process, it helps to take a fitting class or to have a friend who sews or a professional dressmaker assist you in measuring and basic fitting. Reference books help too.

One of the secrets to success in sewing is the process of "proofing" the pattern. When you proof a pattern, you make certain that the skirt will fit around your body and that it will be the right length. Once that's accomplished, pin the tissue pieces together and try on the pattern to check the style, details, and silhouette. When you have a pattern that's exactly customized to the shape of your body, you're ready to cut out the fabric and begin sewing a garment you can be sure you'll enjoy wearing.

Make it your goal to add pattern adjustment and fitting to your repertoire of sewing skills, expanding your knowledge bit by bit with each project.



### The Basics

For many people, fitting is a mystery—but it needn't be. There are four basic steps. Take them one at a time. It also helps to have a few tools handy.



#### Four Basic Steps

If you follow these four simple steps before you cut your fabric, any fitting you do during construction will be fine-tuning, not a major overhaul.

**1**. Compare your body measurements to those of the flat pattern (pp. 28-29).

**2.** Proof the pattern to ensure that the skirt will be the right length and will fit around your body (pp. 30-33).

**3.** Pin the pattern pieces together as they will be sewn and try on the pattern (p. 40). Adjust for swayback (pp. 40-41), round tummy (p. 42) or large hips (p. 43).

**4**. Make any desired changes to the pattern for pockets (p. 34), walking ease (p. 35), linings (p. 36) or changes in grainline (pp. 37-39). Pin-fit again if necessary, and transfer any further adjustments to the pattern.

#### Tools

Adjusting patterns is much simpler and the results are more professional if you use the right tools. Each tool has its own specific uses for the various patternmaking tasks; none substitutes for another. As you grow more familiar with them, they'll become like extensions of your hands.

Acquire the following, arranged here in order of necessity:

Of course, you'll need a measuring tape and 6-in. gauge.

A 2-in. by 18-in. C-Thru ruler is invaluable for creating straight lines, finding right angles, lengthening, shortening, and more.

A metal hip curve is just right for curving and shaping the hips, waist, and legs. (This professional patternmaker's tool is available at stores that sell patternmaking supplies or from mail-order sources.)

Once you use a metal yardstick you'll never again use a wooden one. It's great for making clean, long straight lines and edges.

There are several additional tools you'll find useful when adjusting your pattern—glue, tape, strips of elastic, tracing paper and pattern tissue, pencils and pens, chalk, Clo-chalk, dressmaker's pencils, right-angle ruler, full-length mirror, hand mirror, embroidery floss and chenille needle, scissors, and appliqué scissors. The list will continue to grow as you find your own way of working.

## **Comparing Measurements**

The first step in altering your pattern is to compare your body measurements with the pattern's.



**1** Measure waistline.



2 Measure high hip or tummy.



3 Measure full hip, and from waist to full hip.



4 Measure finished length.

#### Measure Your Body

The four critical measurements are the waist, high hip/tummy, full hip, and finished length. Make a note of these. They're essential for altering and fitting your pattern.

When measuring, wear the underclothing and shoes you might wear with the skirt.

Waist: Pin a length of wide elastic around your body where you'd like the skirt waistline to be. Measure over the elastic, holding a finger underneath the tape measure to allow an adequate amount of ease (1).

**High hip/tummy:** Check your side view in a full-length mirror and measure your high hip/tummy wherever your figure is largest between 1½ in. and 4 in. below the waist (2). Be sure the tape measure doesn't rise up slightly at center front. Also measure from waist to high hip.

**Full hip:** Check your side view again and measure around your hips at their fullest point (this is the full-hip measurement). Also measure from your waist to your full hip (**3**).

**Finished length:** Measure from the waistline at the side seam or front to the desired finished length (4). (Or measure the length of your favorite skirt of similar style.)

#### Measure Your Pattern

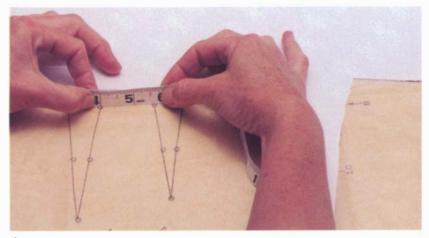
To make it easier to measure the pattern, take it out of the envelope and spread it out on a flat, uncluttered work table.

Waist: Hold the tape measure on its edge (to make it easier to follow the pattern's curves) and measure the waist along the stitching line, excluding seam allowances, tucks, pleats, or darts (1). Pin these in position or simply skip over them when measuring—this will give you the actual measurements of the finished skirt. (Because of the ease built into the pattern, this measurement should be larger than the waist size listed on the pattern envelope.)

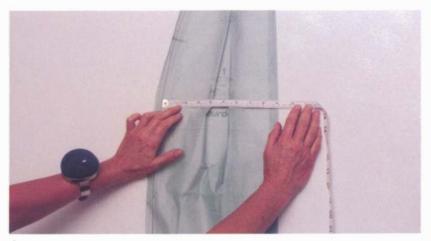
**High hip/tummy:** If you have a rounded tummy or high round hips, take an additional measurement 1<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> to 4 in. below the waistline of your pattern.

**Full hip:** The full-hip measurement on the pattern will be the same distance from the waist as the measurement on your body. If your skirt has tucks or pleats, pin them into position first to get a true measurement of the finished garment (**2**).

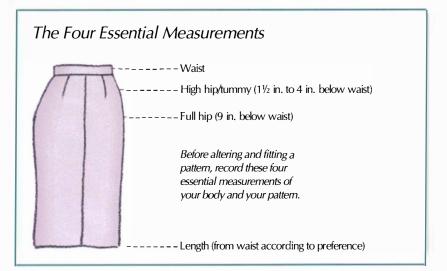
**Finished length:** Along the skirt's center front or side seamline, measure from the waistline to the bottom edge of the desired hem.



**1** Measure the waistline, excluding the darts, tucks, pleats, and seam allowances.



2 Measure the pattern at full hip with the pleats pinned in position.



### Proofing the Pattern

Adjust the length and width of the flat pattern before you try it on to reduce the amount of fitting you'll need to do later.

It's more efficient to lengthen or shorten your pattern before you add width so that you'll be working only with the necessary length. You'll also be able to blend the side seamlines easily and accurately as you smooth the jog that often occurs when you change the length of the garment.

If you need to lengthen or shorten your skirt 2 in. or less, simply add or subtract length at the hem. If you need to adjust it more than 2 in., alter the body of the skirt at the lengthen/shorten line.

If your pattern doesn't have a lengthen/shorten line, add one so you will be able to realign the top and bottom halves of the skirt. To do this, extend the grainline; then draw a line at a right angle to it at the point where you want to lengthen or shorten your skirt.

If your skirt is shaped at the hem, as in a gored, flared, or pegged skirt, or if it has a kick pleat, French vent, or hem detail, lengthen or shorten below the full hip so as not to interfere with the design detail.

You may need more fabric if you lengthen or widen the skirt significantly. To find out for sure, do a trial layout of your pattern pieces on paper or on a gridded cutting board.

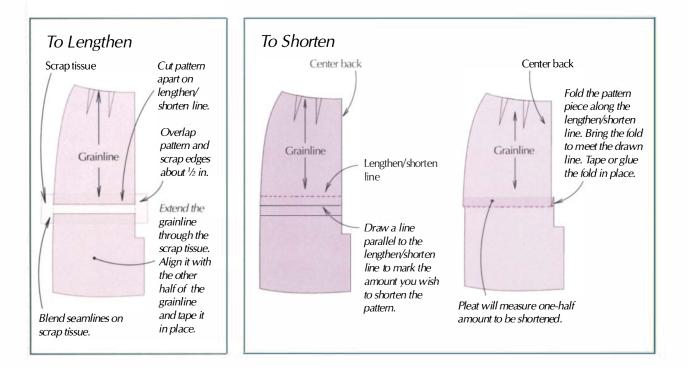
#### Lengthening a Pattern

Cut along the lengthen/shorten line and tape or glue a piece of tissue paper along one cut edge, overlapping the pattern and tissue edges about <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. (You can use scrap pattern tissue, as long as it's as wide as the pattern piece and at least 1 in. longer than the amount you're adding to the skirt.)

On the scrap tissue, parallel to the lengthen/shorten line, mark the amount you want to add to the skirt. Extend the grainline through the scrap tissue. Line it up with the grainline on the other half of the skirt pattern and glue or tape the scrap tissue in place.

If you're not also changing the width of the skirt, simply draw the side seamlines on the scrap tissue and blend the seamlines of the skirt halves.

If you are changing the skirt width, make these adjustments (p. 31) and blend all the seamlines in one operation.



#### Shortening a Pattern

Mark the amount you want to shorten your pattern by drawing a line parallel to the lengthen/shorten line.

Fold the pattern piece along the lenthen/shorten line and then lift the fold to meet the drawn line. Glue or tape the pattern piece in position. The pleat that forms should be half the total amount to be shortened (for example, if you're shortening the skirt 1½ in., the pleat will be <sup>3</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. wide).

Make width adjustments, if needed, at the hip or waist. Connect and blend the seamlines.

#### Adjusting Width

Adjusting width is the most common pattern alteration, and it pays to master it from the start. Increase or decrease skirt width at the side seams only. If you add width at center front or back, the darts/tucks will be positioned too far apart.

Although you'll decrease width less frequently, the same principles apply for both increasing and decreasing. Adjust the side seams on the pattern tissue, drawing in new cutting lines. This will allow you to pin the tissue together along the stitching lines and try on the paper pattern to test the fit.

The total amount of adjusted width should be divided evenly among the quarters of the skirt—if an extra 2 in. is needed, for example, add  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. at each side seam.

#### CALCULATING PATTERN EASE

Two types of ease are built into the pattern: wearing ease and design ease. Wearing ease is the amount of extra fabric you need to move comfortably in a garment. Design ease is the amount of extra fabric the designer or patternmaker adds to give the garment a certain style and look. The total amount of ease is the difference between the size measurements on the pattern envelope and the actual measurements of the pattern.

For example, the size chart on the pattern envelope or in the pattern book may indicate that a size 10 pattern has a waist of 26 in. and hips of 34 in. The skirt's flat pattern, however, measures  $27\frac{1}{2}$  in. at the waist and 38 in. at the hip. This means there is  $1\frac{1}{2}$  in. of ease in the waist and 4 in. in the hip, which is standard for a straight skirt.

Flat-pattern measurement – Envelope measurement = Amount of ease

To determine the amount of ease in your pattern, measure the flat pattern (p. 29) and compare these figures to the body measurements on the pattern envelope. Write down the amount of ease your pattern allows in the waist, high hip, and full hip. When you adjust your pattern for your body measurements, you want to maintain this amount of pattern ease (as shown in the chart below). You can add a total of up to 8 in. (2 in. at each side seam) to the waist and/or hip before the shape becomes distorted. If you need to add more width than this, you should use a larger-size pattern.

It's also possible to make varying adjustments to the hip, high hip, and waist. Figures with a rounded tummy or high round hip, for example, may need extra width at the waist as well as at the high hip to achieve a smooth line (pp. 42-43). This is especially true for small-waisted figures (an elasticized fitted waistband, p. 96, works very well on these shapes).

After you've made all necessary adjustments, use 1-in. side seams to build in extra fitting insurance. This will allow you enough extra fabric to alter the skirt while you're

#### CALCULATING THE WIDTH ADJUSTMENT

Make a copy of this chart and record your body measurements, the flat-pattern's measurements, and the pattern ease. The chart will help you determine how much to adjust your pattern at each seam for the best fit, while retaining the right amount of wearing and design ease.

	Waist	High hip/ tummy	Full hip
Body Measurement	29		
Plus Ease (as calculated above)	11/2		
Total	301/2		
Minus Flat-Pattern Measurement	271⁄2		
Adjustment to Pattern (distributed evenly at side-seam allowances)	3		

sewing; the extra seam width can always be trimmed or evened afterward.

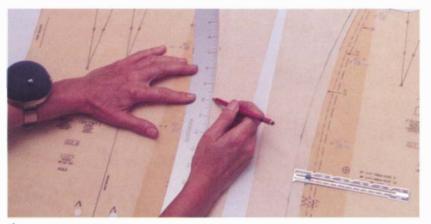
Make dots on the tissue with a pencil to mark the amount you need to adjust the side seams at waist, high hip, and full hip. If needed, attach scrap tissue paper to the side seams to add enough width (1). Make sure you maintain the hip ease at your full-hip measurement.

Use a hip curve to connect the dots, adding the same amount you added to the full hip all the way down the seam to the hem, in order to retain the original silhouette of the skirt.

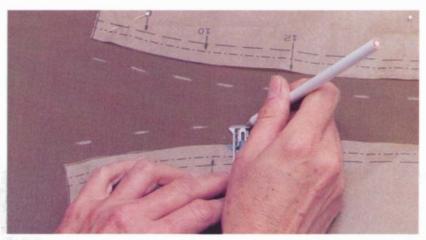
Remember to adjust the waistband pattern piece if you make any changes in the skirt width at the waistline. If you add <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. to each of the skirt's side seams, for example, you'll also need to add 2 in. to the waistband by adding 1 in. to each waistband side seam.

As you become more adept at making and fitting skirts, you may prefer simply to chalk-mark the amount that you need to add or subtract directly onto the fabric (2), and cut.

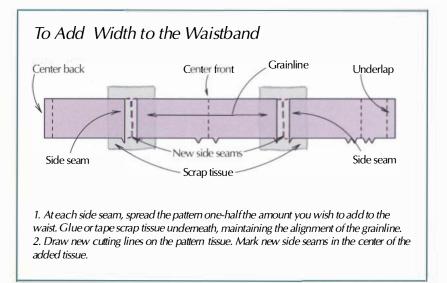
A hip curve will help you redraw the new silhouette of the skirt perfectly.



1 Add extra width to the side seams of the pattern pieces with tissue paper.



2 Mark additions directly onto fabric.



### Customizing the Pattern

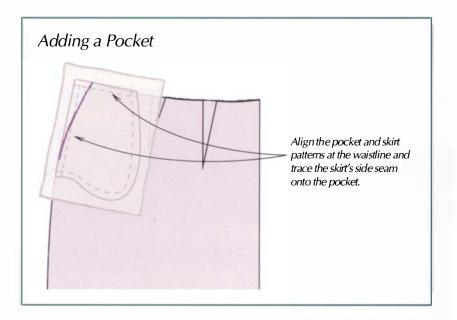
A few simple, optional alterations to the flat pattern might make your garment more attractive and comfortable. Consider pockets, linings, and additional walking ease.

#### Adding a Pocket

If your pattern does not have a pocket, borrow one from another pattern. When you find a pocket that works well, copy it and save it for future use.

Position the pocket pattern so it extends into the waistband and mark the opening. If necessary, shape the side seam so it is the same as the side seam on your skirt. (Some skirts are curved to the shape of the hip, others are straight.) Position the pocket pattern on the skirt pattern, aligning them at the waistline, and trace the skirt's side seam onto the pocket.

Transfer the markings for the pocket opening with tiny snips or chalk marks on the wrong side of the fabric.



#### Adding Walking Ease

Walking ease, a secret of fine dressmakers and never calculated in commercial patterns, is a simple alteration that makes kick pleats, French vents, slits, front openings, button-front and wrap skirts hang perfectly straight. In fact, the straightness is an optical illusion.

When a garment is cut straight, there's a natural tendency for it to hang open at the hem. If you add walking ease, however, skirts appear to hang arrow-straight.

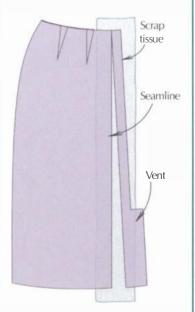
When you add walking ease, you do not change the original grainline of the garment. Make this pattern change after all other adjustments are completed.

The amount of ease is based on the length of the garment and weight of the fabric.

#### Kick Pleats, French Vents,

**Slits** Add walking ease at the front or back seamline, depending on the placement of the kick pleat, French vent, or slit. Add  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. for a knee-length (19-in. to 24-in.) skirt, 1 in. for a mid-calf (32-in. to 36-in.) skirt. Add slightly more ( $\frac{1}{8}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{4}$  in.) for heavy or thick fabrics. Adjust the lining pattern too (p. 36).

On the skirt-pattern piece, cut along the seamline/vent fold line from the hem to the waist. Tape or glue a scrap of tissue along one edge. Position the other edge so that the walking ease is added at the bottom of the hem and tapers to nothing at the waist end of the seam. Adding Walking Ease to a Pleat, Vent, or Slit

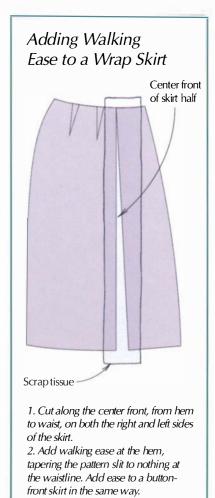


 Cut along the seamline/vent fold line from the hem to the waist.
 Add walking ease at the bottom of the hem by spreading the pattern and adding scrap tissue. Taper the slit in the pattern to nothing at the waistline.

**Other Skirt Styles** For wrap or button-front styles, add <sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in. of ease for knee-length skirts, 1 in. for mid-calf-length skirts. Add the walking ease at the center front, from hem to waist, on both the left and the right sides of the skirt.

If your fabric is a plaid or stripe, or if it has a strong vertical design, add walking ease at the side seams.

For skirts with side buttons, add walking ease at the front and back side seams.



#### CUTTING CHECKLIST

1. Choose the lining fabric for your skirt (p. 21).

2. Decide on the finished length of the lining. Pick the hem treatment you want to use (pp. 84-85) and shorten the lining accordingly, or simply cut it 1 in. shorter than the skirt.

3. Mark all the darts and tucks with snips.

4. Mark the center front and back with snips.

5. Mark the zipper end with a snip.

#### Adding a Lining

Lining a skirt has multiple benefits: It gives a finished look to the inside of your garment, makes the skirt easy to slide on and off, and helps it stay wrinkle-free. In addition, a lining keeps the skirt fabric from clinging and makes a lightweight fabric opaque.

Even if the skirt pattern includes a lining, I prefer to cut one from the skirt pattern pieces. (For a list of suggested lining fabrics, see p. 21.) Lining fabrics are firmly woven and usually have much less give than the skirt fabric, so don't make the lining smaller than the skirt.

Cutting and constructing a lining is simple and fast. Linings for skirts

with special details such as a French vent, however, may require additional adjustments, as shown in the drawing below. When you sew, stitch the lining's side seams slightly narrower (1/8 in.) to allow for sitting room and to keep the seams from pulling out.

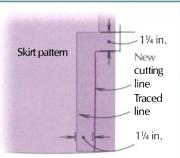
Cut the lining so the hem will be at least 1 in. shorter than the skirt, while covering the raw edge of the skirt hem. Different lining-hem finishes may require that you cut the lining to slightly different lengths (pp. 84-85). If you're not sure how you're going to finish the lining hem, simply cut the lining 1 in. shorter than your skirt. Trim as needed.

#### LINING A SKIRT WITH A FRENCH VENT

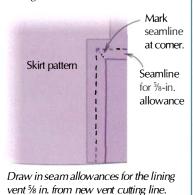
1. To adjust the skirt pattern to be used for the lining, fold the pattern piece back along the seamline and vent fold line. Trace the cut edge of the vent onto the pattern.

2. Add seam allowances by drawing a new cutting line 1 <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. from the traced line, as shown in the drawing. This allows for the skirt's <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-in. seam allowance plus the lining's <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-in. seam allowance. The skirt and the finished lining will be flush at the vent opening.

3. Now draw the <sup>5</sup>/<sub>8</sub>-in. seam allowance of the lining vent, including the corner, as shown. Don't skip this step. You'll be reinforcing the seamlines at the corner, so you'll want them to be clearly marked.



For lining pattern, mark new vent cutting line 1¼ in. from skirt's vent line.



#### Changing the Grainline of a Flared Skirt

The drape and flattering effect of an A-line or gored flared skirt can be changed significantly by repositioning the grainline on the pattern pieces.

Lengthwise grain is often placed at center front and center back of the pattern, on the lengthwise fold, which makes the front and back one pattern piece. This layout is common on commercial patterns because less fabric is required than with other layouts. It's the least flattering, however, as it results in a wide silhouette that broadens any figure and exaggerates a tummy. In addition, the bias at the side seam may stretch, creating an uneven hem.

Two alternate lengthwise-grain positions and one bias-grain position for the same skirt panels are shown on p. 38. Treat both front and back pattern pieces in the same way. Remember that you may need additional fabric if you change the grainline. To figure out the yardage you'll need, do a trial layout on paper that is the width of your fabric or on a gridded cutting board. You can reposition the grainline for any type of fabric.

#### Lengthwise Grain in Center of Front and Back Panels

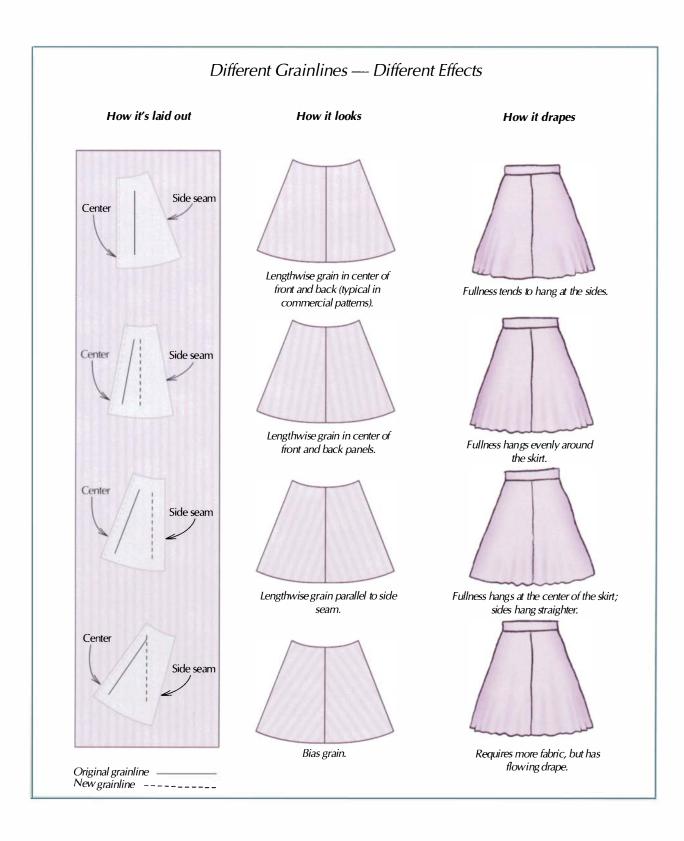
Often used by Ralph Lauren, this cut is very flattering and slimming, especially for the pear-shaped figure. Because the fullness hangs evenly around the skirt, an uneven hem is less likely. This layout is a perfect choice for rayons, knits, or other fabrics that may stretch at the hem. To alter the pattern, simply fold the skirt panel in half, center seam to side seam. The waist shape will not match, but that's okay. Draw in a new grainline down the center of each panel. (Add seam allowances at center front and back if the original pattern was one piece cut on the fold.)

**Lengthwise Grain Parallel to Side Seam** If the straight of the grain is parallel to the side seam, the skirt's fullness hangs at the center. The center seam is on the bias and may tend to stretch. This styling creates a strong vertical line, which is especially effective with striped fabrics.

This layout broadens the figure and emphasizes a protruding tummy or derriere, but is a good choice for a figure with roundness at the side of the hips—the straight of the grain flattens out the curve.

**Bias Grain** The 45° diagonal line through the lengthwise and crosswise grain of the fabric is the bias. A bias-cut skirt requires more fabric than any of the other layouts, but nothing else has such a beautiful, flowing drape.

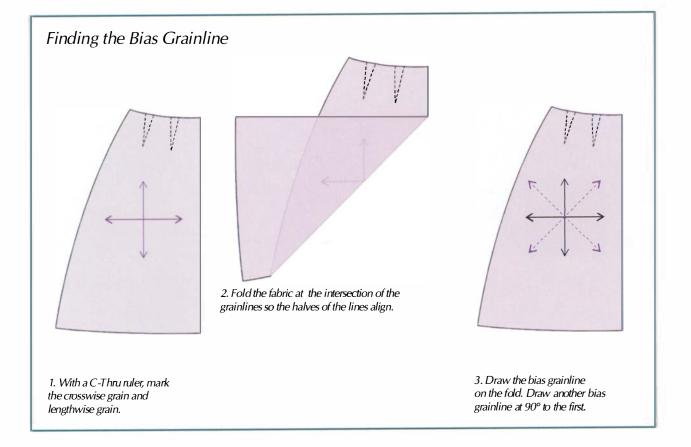
The bias cut will reveal curves and bulges, however, and garment construction and hemming take a bit of special care. If you are adapting a pattern with a onepiece front or back to a bias layout, add seam allowances to the center front and back. This way, the garment will hang without twisting to one side.



The simplest way to alter a pattern for the bias cut is to use a rightangle ruler that has a 45° angle marked on it. An alternative is to mark lengthwise and crosswise grains with a C-Thru ruler. Then fold the fabric at a right angle through the intersection of the grainlines so the lines are superimposed on each other. Draw a line along the fold to mark the bias grainline. Mark a second bias grainline at 90° to the first. This way, when you turn over the pattern piece to cut out the second half, you can easily position it.

Place bias-cut pattern pieces on a single layer of fabric, keeping the pattern in a one-way layout, that is, with the nap of the fabric always in one direction. All the hems will be facing the same way.

When cutting two front or back pieces in one layer of cloth, be sure to flip the pattern piece over to cut the second half so that they will be mirror images.



## **Pin-Fitting Adjustments**



There's no substitute for pin-fitting your pattern and altering it as carefully as you can before you cut the fabric.

Once the two-dimensional flat pattern has been adjusted, it's time to have a look at your pattern in three dimensions.

Pin-fitting the pattern on your body, just as if it were the finished skirt, allows you to adjust for aspects of your body profile that are not accounted for by measurements alone. A swayback, a protruding tummy, and a fuller than average derrière, for example, may prevent your skirt pattern from fitting well. These very common adjustments are best made on the pattern tissue, now, before you cut out the garment.

#### Try on the Pattern

Pin the pattern together and try it on as if it were the finished skirt. Place pins parallel to the stitching lines along the seams. Pin any darts, tucks, or pleats in position.

Hold the pattern in place at the waistline with a 1-in.-wide length of elastic. Position the center fronts and backs and check the fit, length, and overall styling in a fulllength mirror. It takes only a bit of practice to develop an eye for the way the finished garment will look. Use a large hand mirror to see the back view. A knowledgeable friend is also a great help!

After you check the fit and length, and have made the necessary adjustments, see if the skirt needs an adjustment for swayback or a protruding tummy.

#### Adjusting for Swayback

If the skirt needs some adjustment for swayback, you'll find horizontal wrinkles at the center back of the pin-fitted skirt pattern, just below the waistband. Here's how to estimate the amount you'll need to remove at center back for the skirt to lie smoothly.

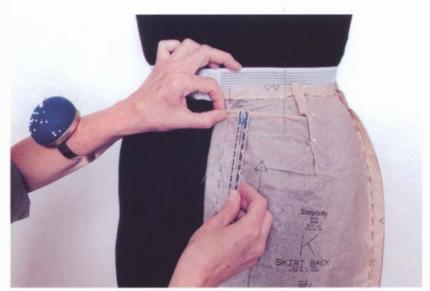
While pin-fitting, lower the waistline at center back by slipping the pattern slightly under the elastic until the wrinkles are eliminated. Mark the pattern tissue with a pen or pencil right under the elastic at center back. The amount you'll need to remove usually ranges from  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{2}$  in.

Pin all darts, pleats, or tucks in place. Then draw a new line to eliminate the desired amount of pattern tissue, starting at center back and gradually meeting the waistline at the side seams. The hip curve is the perfect tool for drawing this new waistline. If your skirt has gathers, the line is less critical, so simply draw, freehand, an even, slightly curved line from center back to side seam.

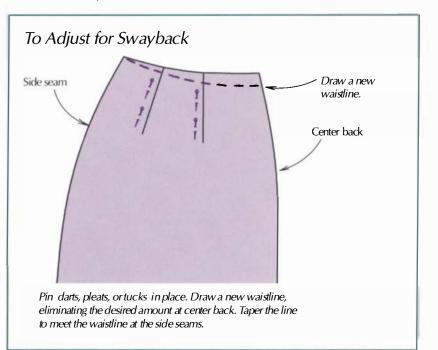
Overlap the pattern pieces for the amount of the adjustment at the center-back seamline, tapering to nothing at the side seams. Redraw the lines for darts, tucks, and the center-back seam. Make corresponding adjustments to the back facing. Avoid the pins and cut along the redrawn waistline.

If you're working without a partner, it may be difficult to determine the exact amount you'll need to remove. That's okay. Estimate now and fine-tune the fit later while you're constructing the garment. You can make this swayback alteration just before you apply the waistband to the skirt, but you may need to shorten the zipper, too. It's easiest to make pattern adjustments before cutting, then double-check them during the garment's construction.

If your skirt has a raised waistband (p. 101), make the swayback adjustment by cutting the pattern back along the waistline, from the center back to  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. from the side seam.

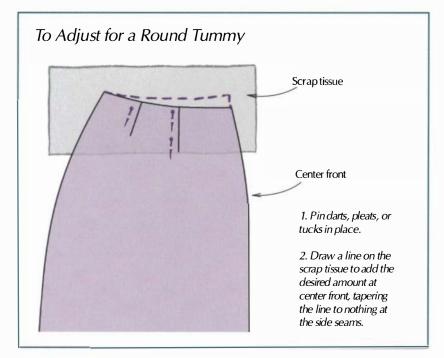


To adjust for swayback, lower the waistline at center back until the horizontal wrinkles are eliminated. You may need to remove from  $\frac{1}{4}$  in. to  $\frac{1}{2}$  in. of excess pattern tissue.





If the pattern piece you're pin-fitting sits below the waistline because of a protruding tummy, you need to add extra length at center front.



## Adjusting for a Round Tummy

To adjust for a round tummy, you usually need to add not only extra width to your pattern (pp. 31-33), but also extra length at center front. When pin-fitting, check that the skirt pattern sits correctly at the waistline. If it doesn't, you'll need to correct it by adding length to the pattern with scrap tissue. This little adjustment can actually minimize the curve visually.

Add enough length so that the pattern meets the waistline correctly and hangs over the tummy smoothly. Exactly how much to add is hard to estimate, but it's best to allow a little extra. Average amounts range from <sup>3</sup>/<sub>8</sub> in. (which doesn't sound like much, but can make a small tummy nearly vanish) to about 2<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> in.

Before you begin, pin any pleats, tucks, and darts in place. Draw a line on the scrap tissue to indicate the additional pattern length at center front and taper to nothing at the side seams. Curve the cutting line slightly outward over the tummy using the hip curve. Trim the tissue with the pleats, tucks, and darts in position.

A figure with a round tummy rarely is flattered by a dartedfront skirt. Eliminate the darts and ease the entire amount across the front using the technique known as staystitch plus (p. 60).

#### Adjusting for Full-Hip Measurements

The straight darts on a pattern are designed for an "average" full-hip measurement, but you can curve the back darts to the exact shape of your figure. The darts should point toward and end 1 in. to 1½ in. away from the fullest part of the figure. Shorten or lengthen them as needed.

Working from the midpoint of the dart, add or subtract  $\frac{1}{8}$  in. from each of the original dart lines. Use the hip curve to re-mark the stitching line, beginning and ending at the top and bottom of the dart.

For rounded full hips, scoop in the legs of the darts, allowing <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. of extra fabric in the garment per dart.

For flat or low derrières and narrow full hips, curve the darts out, eliminating <sup>1</sup>/<sub>4</sub> in. of fabric from the garment per dart.

Mark the position of the new end of the dart, and redraw the legs to reconnect them to their original positions at the waist. To Adjust for Rounded Full Hips

