

The Core 4

Multiply outfit options with a mini capsule wardrobe

BY NANCY NIX-RICE

A capsule wardrobe promises to solve the problem of having nothing to wear, despite a closet full of clothes. Well-planned garment groupings are also ideal for travel, for downsizing to smaller living quarters with less storage space, or simply for ensuring that every garment you own is versatile and flattering. They also answer a desire to live a more streamlined, sustainable, and intentional life.

The most efficient, direct route to the capsule wardrobe lifestyle is to sew a garment group I call a “core four.” The core four is a combination of two different bottom garments, an underlayer top, and an overlayer top in the style of your choice. All are in the same—or closely blended—neutral color. With the addition of accent tops or jackets, these four pieces can be combined into innumerable three-piece ensembles (underlayer top, overlayer top, bottom).

To coordinate readily with your most flattering accent colors, consider a neutral related to your hair color. Browns, grays, and camel tones are suitable for many women. Navy blue is another classic neutral that works for many and can be worn in all seasons, depending on the accessories chosen.

A key concept when planning your core four is to personalize it to your needs and style. One skirt and one pair of pants are the obvious bottom garments, but for a pants-only lifestyle, dress pants and a pair of jeans is an equally versatile option. For skirt aficionados, a knee-length pencil skirt and an A-line midi skirt create distinctly different combinations. In a tropical climate, the ideal choices might be shorts and capris. The underlayer top might be a tank top, a cap-sleeve shell, a knit turtleneck, or a button-up shirt. Of the four pieces, the overlayer most clearly defines the entire grouping’s formality. A tailored blazer sets a different tone from a cascade cardigan, a bomber jacket, or a zip-front fleece.

I encourage you to begin with four easy pieces, and you will be excited by how far they take you.

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A soft jacket and slim pants can be styled for a wide range of looks, from casual to formal.



Strategize for versatility

Elaborate, trendy designer garments are not ideal as the foundation of a core four. My guidelines help you develop a wardrobe that is much more than the sum of its parts.

KEEP STYLES BASIC

Core pieces are best when they are basic—even boring—on their own. They create excitement when combined with accent pieces to create memorable outfits. Because, in the capsule wardrobe concept, you are likely to pair and layer the pieces, opt for individual garments that are relatively sleek, without ostentatious details or embellishments. As you expand the core four to include additional garments, simpler styles typically present fewer proportional challenges. No matter what silhouettes you choose, be sure all the pieces perform well when paired in all possible combinations.

USE FAMILIAR PATTERNS

A core four is a great place to rely on tried-and-true skirt and pant designs. Those are the workhorse pieces, not the show ponies. A classic wardrobing principle promotes keeping the attention-getting elements of an outfit up near the face—the communications zone. Therefore, look for top and jacket designs that will enable you to add a variety of accessories. Complicated blouse necklines, for example, may conflict with statement jewelry or scarves in your most flattering accent colors. Invest time in fitting these basic patterns, so you can use them again and again.

Here's an extra benefit: Sticking with streamlined styles and familiar patterns makes it realistic to sew an entire core four in a weekend.

My favorite patterns are the four designs by Pamela Leggett (PamelasPatterns.com) shown in this article. They work well together, are easy to fit, and are quick to sew:

#121 Cascade Cardi or Blazer: A softly structured jacket that can be made as a drape-front topper or a lightly tailored jacket.

#108 New Versatile Twin Set (shell): A shapely, sleeveless top with a flattering neckline and plenty of coverage at the armhole; for stretch knits.

#109 Magic Pencil Skirt: A gently tapered skirt with shaping darts and hidden elastic waistband; for knits or stretch wovens.

#113 Pants . . . Perfected!: A classic pants silhouette with waist finish and pocket variations; suitable for wovens, stretch wovens, or knits.

CHOOSE ADAPTABLE FABRICS

For the majority of core four capsule wardrobes, your best bet is to look for textiles that are neither overly casual nor overly dressy. Aim for materials that can step up and down the formality scale depending on how they are combined into outfits and how they are accessorized.

It isn't easy to find bottom-weight and top-weight fabrics in matching colors. For true versatility, try a midweight ponte knit, which works for all four garments: It is firm enough to retain shape in a skirt, pants, or a structured jacket, but soft enough for a shell or cascade cardigan. Its fine, matte surface smoothly skims the body and effectively showcases accessories. If you're sewing for a warmer climate or season, handkerchief linen could be ideal for drawstring pants and a skirt, shell, and shirt/jacket. As when choosing patterns, assess your lifestyle and needs, and select fabric accordingly.

You will get the most mileage from simple pieces.

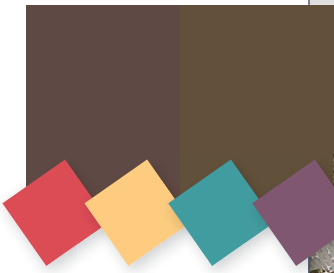
Fabric: ponte knit, NancyNixRice.com.

Select colors thoughtfully

The fashion industry consistently promotes core wardrobe groupings based on black, white, and a bright accent color. This is eye-catching in a retail setting, but it is not universally flattering. Depending on your personal coloring, your best neutral may not be black. Consider the following palettes for alternative color stories.

BROWN

If your hair is a dark, rich auburn or brown, try deep brown as your neutral. Add accent colors that have depth and warm tones.



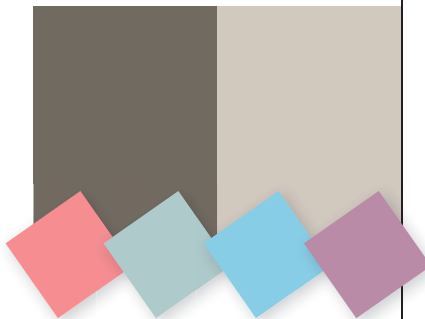
GRAY

People with silvery hair and cool skin tones stand out in gray; choose clear, soft accent colors.



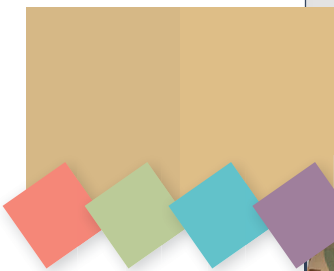
TAUPE

This soft, light- to mid-toned neutral is a classic that works well with slightly muted hues. It can suit individuals of warmer or cooler skin and hair tones, and it is an excellent choice for those whose darker hair has some unpigmented strands mixed in.



CAMEL

A blonde with golden skin undertones glows in camel paired with warmer, light- to mid-toned colors.



BLACK

Black looks great with bright, cool colors—including reds with blue undertones. These high-contrast, high-drama combinations are striking but can easily be overwhelming if your own coloring doesn't include a similar level of contrast.



Create key pairings

When planning ensembles based on the core four, I think in terms of “color columns.” These foundation outfits simplify dressing and multiply your options. The accessories you choose help define the overall look. Remember that the job of every outfit you wear is to call attention to your face, which is your center of communication.

MONOCHROMATIC COMBINATIONS

The core four pieces can be worn as two complete single-color outfits:

- Skirt, top, overlayer
- Pants, top, overlayer

These monochromatic combinations need eye-catching accessories to avoid being boring and to establish the level of formality. A silky scarf and pumps can take the ensemble up a notch, while a cotton bandana and chunky booties relax the look of the same garment combination.



The monochromatic look is an easy solution for a travel outfit.

Create a chic office ensemble with the jacket, top, and skirt.



Photos: (p. 73, right and accessories) Jack Deutsch; (all others, pp. 72–73) Mike Yamin. Stylist: Jessica Saal. Hair and makeup: Agata Heiena.com. Styling credits: (p. 73, right) earrings—Melrose and Market (NordstromRack.com), scarf—Jill.com, belt—Halogen (NordstromRack.com), clutch—DSW.com, shoes—Sam Edelman (NordstromRack.com); (p. 73, left) handbag—DSW.com, shoes—Steve Madden (NordstromRack.com).

INSIDE COLUMNS

Pairing the top with either bottom garment creates two inside columns. With the addition of an accent-color overlayer, such as a jacket, cardigan, or even a floaty, unstructured duster, you've got a new and different outfit. The monochromatic top and bottom combination creates a continuous vertical line that elongates the figure and, more important, leads the eye upward.

An essential element of these outfits is a linking accessory—a piece that connects the core neutral color and the accent color into an understandable pairing. A multicolor scarf or necklace often serves this purpose, as the accessory works best when it frames and highlights the face. This accessory may include other colors as well as the neutral and accent color. In fact, if it contains one or more other neutrals that suit you, it will work with other core four groupings as well.

OUTSIDE COLUMNS

As the name suggests, an outside column is made from the core four overlayer, paired with either of the two bottoms. The variety comes in with the addition of contrasting or patterned underlayer tops, plus linking accessories. Again, the added garments and accessories help establish the ensemble's general style, from formal boardroom suit to comfy loungewear.



The inner column reads as a sleek dress that sets off a statement jacket-necklace combination.



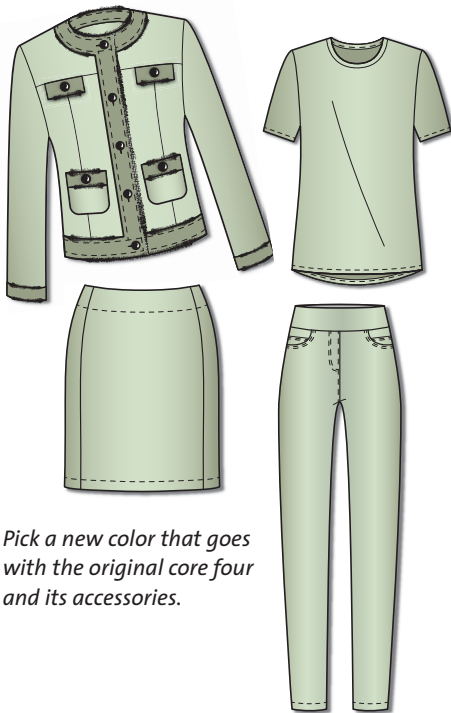
You'll look instantly pulled together when you pop the jacket on over a bottom piece plus contrasting top.

Expansion ideas

Although a core four capsule works wonders with just a few accessories, there are ways to increase your wardrobe options. Another few garments, in matching or accent colors, multiply the number of coordinated, stylish ensembles you can create.

SEW ADDITIONAL GARMENTS IN THE CORE NEUTRAL

Consider creating two underlayer tops: for instance, a tank for layering and a button-up shirt to wear as a single layer or to wear open as a faux jacket over the tank. Or maybe you'd like to include a tailored jacket and a casual outer layer piece, too. Having three bottom options—a skirt, dress pant, and jeans—extends the capsule's versatility.



Pick a new color that goes with the original core four and its accessories.

MAKE A COMPLEMENTARY CORE FOUR

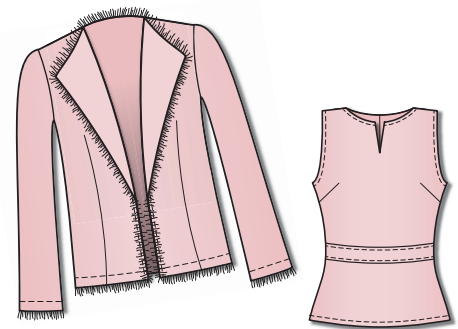
Choose a second color that coordinates well with the first, to increase the mix-and-match potential. This core four can be another neutral, or a more distinct hue that is represented in your accessories or accent pieces. For example, if your neutral capsule is taupe, consider a soft blue or sage green, or even a muted plum.



Add versatility with a handful of different garments in your neutral.

COORDINATE YOUR ACCENT PIECES

For example, create a twin-set effect with matching overlayers and underlayers, and pair them with a core skirt or pants. In this case, choose a linking neckline accessory that repeats both colors, to make the combination look intentional and to create a focal point near the face.



Make extra garments in an accent color to mix with the core neutrals.



INTRODUCE A TWO-PIECE DRESS

Sew a matching top and skirt that, when worn together, read as a dress. They can be in an accent solid color or a print that incorporates the core neutral. This pair can be worn together, with or without the core overlayer; or paired with any of the core garments as desired.

A print combo in your neutral and accent colors provides a link among all the core pieces.

web extra

Find a list of core-four-suitable patterns at [ThreadsMagazine.com](https://www.threads magazine.com).

Photos: (p. 74, left and accessories) Jack Deutsch; all others, Mike Yamin. Illustrations: Steven Fleck. Stylist: Jessica Saal. Hair and makeup: Agata+elena.com. Styling credits: (p. 74) earrings—BananaRepublic.com, necklace—AnnTaylor.com, bracelets—stylist's own, jacket—Helen Bergman (Nordstrom.com), scarf—Nordstrom.com, blouse—AnnTaylor.com, shoes—left, Vince Camuto (Nordstrom.com), right, Sam Edelman.