

# Having a Fit

*Adapted from*

## ***The Dressmaker's Guide to Fit & Fashion.***

One of the most oft-heard bits of historic sewing advice is: "Make a muslin to test out a new pattern." If you are new to sewing, your response may be "Whatever for? So I can find out it won't work, right off the bat?"

Actually, yes. Making a muslin gives you a chance to preview any problems you may have with your pattern, and fix them before you cut your good fabric. You'll need an assistant to help you fit your first darted bodice, but once you have a personally fitted muslin base to work from, you'll be able to sew accurately for yourself with very few difficulties.

Cut your pattern out of plain muslin, or any cheap, firmly woven cloth. Muslin has the advantage of being white, so markings are easily seen, and very inexpensive.

It is very helpful to cut the pattern with a 1" seam allowance, rather than the standard 1/2" to 5/8" allowance on most patterns. You may end up cutting it all off, but having 2" extra in each seam saves time when you need to expand an area. Add this extra in the neck curve as well; you'll have extra fabric to trim away for the best neckline fit.

Baste the bodice wrong-sides together at the side and shoulder seams (along the normal, marked seamlines—you'll have extra large allowances beyond these.). This places the seam allowances to the outside for easy adjustment. This also gives you a distinct right and left in the fitting; use a pencil or pen to mark Right and Left directly on the fabric, and make a note that if the markings on the bodice are visible (right side up), it needs to be cut on top of fabric that is right side up.

Always fit your muslin wearing a full compliment of period undergarments, including a corset or supportive stay laced to a comfortable degree. Your figure measurements may or may not

change with the use of a corset, but the position of various body landmarks (such as where your bust sits) will usually change in a corset. If you have soft, fleshy breasts, see our free pattern and instructions for bust pads; these will improve your fit in most cases, and can be used at the muslin-fitting stage.

Mark the center back and center front lines. Be sure the center front and center back lines are on the straight, lengthwise grain (running parallel to the material selvages), and running directly down the center of your body. It will be very difficult to fit your bodice if these lines are not on grain. Pull and remove a lengthwise thread if you need to find the exact grain.

Don the muslin; your assistant will take over from here. Carefully pin the center fronts together along the center front line. Now you both will assess the fit and begin the alterations.

**1: Neckline:** Is it sitting smoothly at the base of your neck? Right now, it's probably choking you. Make small slits perpendicular to the edge all the way around the neckline, just deep enough to let the fabric spread and sit smoothly and comfortably. Mark along the base of the slits; you will refine this curve when the muslin is laid flat again. Trim off any long tabs of fabric as needed. (Using this same process, you can create any neckline position or shape you need.)

**2: Upper Chest, Bodice Front:** Does it fit smoothly, without pulling at the center front? If it pulls, you'll need to add more wearing ease across the upper chest—you can re-draw the center front line to gain a little more room in the upper chest or bust, noting to lay the adjusted line on the straight grain when cutting the lining and bodice.

If there are vertical folds of extra fabric above the bust, but smooth fabric over the bust, your upper chest area is too wide. Pin out the excess in a temporary "dart" from the shoulder seam toward the bust. You will not be stitching a dart here; the pins hold the excess out of the

way while you fit the rest of the bust and bodice.

**3: Bust line:** You need a bit of wearing ease (beyond your actual measurement) for a smooth bodice; when draping or fitting a bodice, you'll "build" this in automatically. Most patterns have some ease built in. Evaluate the fit directly across the widest point of the bust; mark if additional ease needs to be added in the armhole seam. Because you've cut the allowances wide, you can "sneak" a little extra there, redrawing the armhole curve.

**4: Front Darts:** Pin in your darts, stopping just short of the fullest part of your bust. It may be helpful to stop at this point and baste them in for a firmer hold during the fitting. The darts will not be the same length, or the same angle. Pin them only to your waist point, and mark the base of the dart with pen or pencil.

**5: Side Seam:** You can pull excess front and back width out in the side seam. Fit the side seam just as you would a modern garment, and then draw the correctly angled seam.

A period side seam begins just under the armpit, and angles back slightly. This carries the bulk of the seam behind the "waist horizon", making a visually smaller waist; places the seam on a slight bias, allowing a snug fit with some elasticity; and creates a narrower waist in back with the angle. The fit should be snug and smooth, but not so tight that you create horizontal pulls in the fabric. Draw the desired seam placement directly on the fabric.

**6: Armhole:** Is it dropped over your shoulder sufficiently? You can fill in the shoulder with pieces of muslin pinned smoothly, and draw the correct drop directly on the fabric.

If the armhole is too tight under the arm, snip the fabric to relieve the pressure just as you did with the neckline. You will refine this curve when it is laid flat. Kay Gnagey, an experienced dress and corset maker, recommends you fit the shoulder

area with your fists on your hips, to ensure sufficient wearing ease during movement. Having used this technique in my own and client projects, it works nicely.

Changing the drop of the armhole changes the overall measurement of the opening; you will need to adjust your sleeve piece as well. Period manuals recommend that the sleeve be approximately 1" longer than the armhole measurement for a smooth fit.

You may notice some "pooching" or small folds of fabric just above the bust when your arms are at your sides. This can be corrected by making sure the upper chest is no wider or longer than it needs to be, and then filling in the hollow with bust pads.

**7: Shoulder Seam:** This seam should start just under the earlobe at the neck, and angle down and back to the back of the shoulder. If the seam isn't where it needs to be, draw a slanting line in the right place to mark the seam line. Treat the corrected seam position just as you did in step 5. If there is a lot of excess fabric in the back armhole (with the fists on the hips as in step 6), you can pinch and pin it out. When the muslin is laid flat, you will see the corrected curve. Your shoulder slant may not match the patterns; you can unpin and adjust the shoulder seam as needed to get the correct slope for your body (this may be different on the left and right sides—few of us are truly symmetrical!)

**8: Back "Seams":** If you will have a decorative back seam, mark the finished placement line by drawing a smooth curve from just below where the shoulder seam intersects the armhole, to about 1" on either side of the center back line at the waist.

If you present an active impression and rarely wear darted-to-fit dresses, you may never use these placement lines; having them included now will speed dressmaking later, however.

**9:** Look at the *over all length*, and make sure the waist lies smoothly all the way around.

If you have horizontal wrinkles at the waist, it indicates the bodice is too long

and is binding at the hip. Snip into the fabric just as you did with the neckline, until the stress is relieved and the bodice lays smooth. Cut off the fabric tabs and mark the desired waistline.

Period waists lie just above the natural waist in most cases. This allows the dress to sit very smoothly, even over multiple waistbands. To find your waist, feel down the side of your body to the place just below your last rib. This will be quite a bit higher than a modern "fashion" waist, which actually sits on the hip!

You can also find your waist by tying an elastic cord around your body, and moving about until it settles into your waist indent. Smooth the bodice beneath the elastic, and draw along the cord for an accurate waistline placement. With most historic patterns, adjusting the length will make a tremendous difference in the fit of the pattern.

### Testing Your Muslin

Once you have completed these revisions, remove the bodice and baste in the changes you have made. Give it another quick try-on.

Remove the bodice, and mark along the darts, making lines across the dart for ease in matching them up again.

Remove the stitching from the darts, sides, and shoulder seams. If you have altered the seam placements, do not unpick the original seams; simply cut the muslin directly on the new seam line, and make notations to add a seam allowance to the cut edges. (You can relocate almost any seam in this way!)

*\*Note: if you "darted" out excess fabric in the upper chest width, leave this pinned in place.*

*Cut the waist darts directly on the stitching lines, all the way to the point. When you lay the fabric flat, the darts at the waist will spread wider. This is called "swinging the dart"; fullness is transferred from an undesirable area to a desirable one, allowing the bodice to lay flat again. If you are making this sort of alteration, I suggest tracing your shape onto paper to capture the correct dart spread before proceeding, or taping additional muslin or paper under your*

*spread darts. You'll continue to stitch the darts along the lines you've marked; they'll just encompass more fabric at the waistline than before. Swinging the dart does not change the finished waistline fit—it's a bit of dressmaking magic!*

Lay your altered muslin pieces flat and use them as a pattern to cut another muslin. Smooth out the curves at neckline and armhole as needed. Be sure to add your seam allowances to the cut edges. Cut the new muslin with ½" allowances in all seams. For fitting purposes, don't add a seam allowance at the neckline just now, but cut directly on the finished neckline.

Baste the shoulder and side seams, and baste in the darts. Try it on and make any small adjustments needed.

When you take the muslin apart again, you have a fully functional, personalized muslin base.

Trace it onto paper or heavy sew-in interfacing (such as Pellon) for durability.

Make sure you have a ½" seam allowances for the shoulder, and armholes; 1" seam allowances for the side seams (this allows extra fabric in the seam when shaping your back tuck and future alterations for changing waistlines); and mark ¼" seam allowances along the neckline. Add 2" to the center front lines to allow for forming a placket to close the bodice.

Once you have a basic darted bodice, you can create accurate Civil War era fashions for yourself with minimal fitting fuss. You can make additional versions with low or half-high necklines, versions with pleated, tucked, or gathered fullness instead of darts, even versions that fan or have shirring at the center waist. The options are nearly endless, and because you've started with your customized bodice base, you'll start with a good fit, and end with a good fit.