

How to Make a Muslin

Testing your
pattern in
throw-away
yardage is
well worth
the effort

BY JENNIFER SAUER


The more markings, the better. A muslin test garment is your chance to do things in sewing that you wouldn't normally do. Go ahead and use up old or garish thread. Leave plenty of dangling thread tails, and write all over the thing with permanent (yes, permanent) marker. Heck, even sew half of the muslin inside out, if the urge hits. No one will see all that wild, crazy rule-breaking but you.

Butterick 4515

Model photos: Jack Deutsch; hair and makeup: Sylvia Pichler; all other photos: Sloan Howard

I love the smell of muslin. The subtle, almost earthy aroma emitted from the unbleached cotton fabric reminds me to relax, slow down, and enjoy the craft of garment creation. But my attitude wasn't always so Zen-like. When I first started sewing, like many others, I was impatient to finish a garment so I could wear it. I didn't listen when more experienced sewing friends suggested that I test a pattern's fit by creating a muslin version. What? That was double the work! So, I jumped in, cut my fashion fabric directly from an absolute stranger of a pattern, and started madly sewing.

Unfortunately, my haste led to many frustrating hours ripping out seams and resewing to get a better fit, which wasn't always possible at that late stage. And usually my fabric never fully recovered from all that tugging and tearing.

It took me many a fitting disaster to come around to the idea of testing a pattern, but the first time I did, I became a complete and utter convert. I will share four excellent reasons for a muslin test garment and explain the straightforward process for making one. You'll see—with a good-smelling muslin test garment by your side, you'll be able to kick back and focus entirely on sewing your fashion fabric, confident that all the fitting "t"s are crossed and "i"s dotted. 

Jennifer Sauer is an associate editor at Threads who learned the value of testing a pattern when she attended the Fashion Institute of Design and Merchandising (Fidm.com).

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THERE ARE FOUR GOOD REASONS WHY

REASON 1

PRACTICE MAKES PERFECT—AND STRESS-FREE SEWING

■ Before you take your bike on a busy highway, you should pedal around the neighborhood's side streets, no? Think of a muslin test garment as the quiet side street of the sewing world—it allows you to practice techniques and fine-tune/streamline the garment-making process. With Butterick 4515, I found the recommended $\frac{3}{8}$ -inch seam allowances too bulky, especially in the princess seams, so switched to $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch amounts. I also set sleeves differently than the pattern instructions, so I didn't need to transfer all of those markings. ■ You know how sometimes the fear of making mistakes can actually lead to procrastination? Well, in muslin, I can experiment and happily make mistakes, without fear of ruining expensive fabric.

REASON 2

SPOT-ON FIT AND STYLE, DOWN TO THE HEMS

■ With a muslin test garment, you can let in, take out, and otherwise tweak the fit in areas impossible to adjust in fashion fabric, such as slashing and spreading at the waist or shoulder area.

REASON 3

FASHION FABRIC IS SPARED WEAR AND TEAR

■ Because you adjust fit and figure out hem placement in a muslin, you don't need to leave extra fabric in the seam and hem allowances. ■ You'll only need to sew once and won't have to rip out stitches, which can leave behind tiny pinpricks or tears. The simple act of pushing, pulling, and easing fabric over the feed dogs can also stretch fabric out of shape.

REASON 4

IN THE LONG RUN, A TEST GARMENT ACTUALLY SAVES TIME

■ A muslin test-run may take a little extra time at the beginning of the pattern/fabric relationship, but I like to think of it as the ultimate icebreaker—a way to slowly get to know a pattern, learn its idiosyncrasies, and coax it into shape before committing to it in fashion fabric. And, believe it or not, I've found that making a muslin version actually saves time—and frustration.

Making a muslin, step by step

Choose a pattern size using the measurement chart (usually found on the back of the pattern envelope or on the instruction sheets) as your guide. Press all pattern pieces with a warm, dry iron; the tiniest fold or wrinkle can affect fit.

1. CUT OUT THE MAIN GARMENT PIECES. NO NEED TO SPEND TIME ON CUFFS, FACINGS, POCKETS, ETC.

Cut out the main pattern pieces as marked, including two sleeves. (As you'll see later, you'll sew and attach one sleeve first, then check the fit. Only if things look too tight or too loose across the shoulders will you need to attach the other sleeve as well.)

2. MARK DARTS, GRAINLINES, WAIST, AND BUST POINTS WITH BLUE PERMANENT MARKER.

Mark the center front lines, and zipper or buttonhole placement; you can mark the seamlines too, if you like. When you make any fit or style changes, you'll know exactly where your starting points are. Mark pockets directly on the muslin to judge placement. Baste hemlines because the line of thread is easier to feel and press; if desired, staystitch the neck edges.

3. SEW TOGETHER USING LONG BASTING STITCHES; PRESS.

Follow your pattern instructions, skipping steps for details you decided not to include. Sew on one sleeve to start. Don't sew closures; simply pin those closed. Also, just press up and loosely pin the hems. To make stitch removal easy, only back-tack at stress points.

4. PRESS ALL SEAMS AS YOU WOULD IN A FINAL GARMENT.

You can cut many corners in a muslin, but never skip pressing steps because even a $\frac{1}{16}$ inch difference can throw off your fit. Press the seam as sewn to set the stitches, press it open, then press again from the right side of the garment. Whenever possible, don't trim or clip seam allowances in the muslin, as you might need to let out seams in the fitting process.

5. TRY ON OR HANG ON A DRESS FORM TO EVALUATE FIT AND STYLE.

Check fit, style, and length. If you prefer to fit the test garment on yourself, enlist the help of a fitting buddy. If the fit looks strange across the shoulders, sew on the other sleeve.

6. PIN OUT ANY CHANGES OR RELEASE BASTING STITCHES.

Write adjustment amounts and any other notes directly on the muslin. Also pin-mark any style changes you wish to make. When satisfied with the fit and style, remove the garment, and lay it flat on a hard surface.

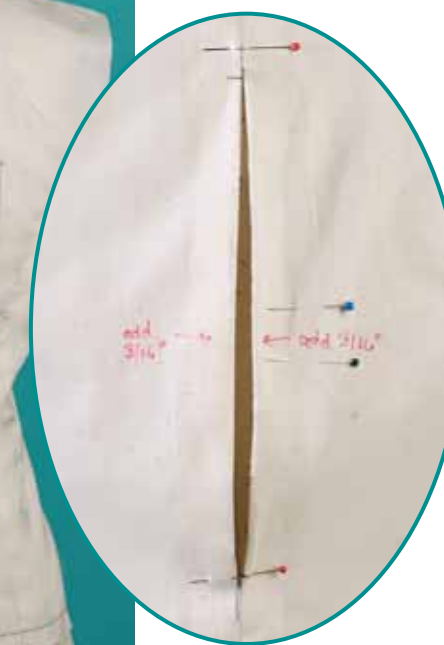
NOTE: Unless the left and right sides of your body are radically different, you can make changes on one side of the muslin garment.

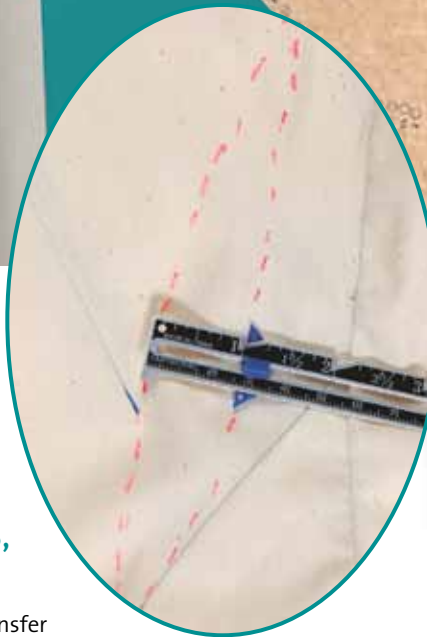
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tip

A muslin doesn't necessarily need to be sewn in cotton muslin fabric

Muslin comes in various weights and blends—choose one that drapes and behaves like your fashion fabric. For thick, stiff fabric like denim or wool, use inexpensive canvas. For a knit garment, use inexpensive knit as your “muslin.” But, really, making a muslin doesn't need to cost you more than the price of thread. Be resourceful—use scraps of fabric you have lying around, or cut up old sheets and garments otherwise marked for Goodwill. A colorful patchwork of throw-away fabrics simply increases the fun factor.





7. TRACE ALONG PINNED LINES WITH A RED PERMANENT MARKER.

Using a dotted line, mark both sides of a pinned section.

8. RELEASE PINS, PRESS FLAT, MEASURE CHANGES, AND TRANSFER TO PATTERN.

Measure the differences between the red and blue lines. Transfer these changes to your pattern. If you make major adjustments, you might want to make another test garment to double-check the fit.

tip Label and save your muslins

There's no need to start from scratch every time: A muslin doesn't take up much room, and it will come in handy months or years down the road when you want to sew a favorite pattern in a different fabric. If you've lost or gained weight, or wish to make subtle style changes, you can just shake out the muslin, try it on, then make minor adjustments. Just be sure to write the date, pattern name, and size directly on the muslin in permanent marker before you store it away.

Thanks to the muslin, the final outfit fits perfectly. Eight different adjustments were made to the jacket muslin, a few of which could never have been made in final fabric: pinching out in the shoulder areas, adding height to the neck, and slashing and spreading at the waist. The skirt didn't require any changes, which is rare, indeed.