

Build a Better Waistband

Create stronger, more stable, couture waistbands with internal ribbon stays, bulk-free layers, and securely stitched fasteners.

Couture techniques for improving waistline durability and comfort

BY SUSAN KHALJE

A waistband is a straightforward part of a garment. At its most elemental, it secures an item of clothing to the wearer's waistline. But with a little extra engineering, a waistband can achieve its purpose with more polish, comfort, and stability.

Because bodies typically are bigger above and below the waistline, the waist is the most logical area from which to securely suspend a skirt or a pair of trousers. So a waistband acts as an anchor of sorts. However, the waist is far from stable or stationary: It twists, turns, stretches, expands, and contracts as we walk, bend, sit, or tuck in a shirt. To be an effective anchor, a garment's waistband needs to be firm and well supported, yet comfortable; easy to open and close, but also secure when fastened. And because the waistband endures the stress of movement, it also needs to be sturdy enough to resist stretching and sagging. Why make a beautiful garment that will outlast its waistband?

Details like built-in ribbon stays, bulk-free layers, perfectly placed fasteners, and durable stitches set apart the refined waistbands of couture garments from their average counterparts. A couture waistband is stronger, more stable, and more user friendly when worn.

In this article, I'll share how I sew waistbands using couture construction and finishing techniques for garments that will withstand many years of wear.

Threads contributing editor Susan Khalje is an expert on couture garment construction.

Stabilize with an internal ribbon stay

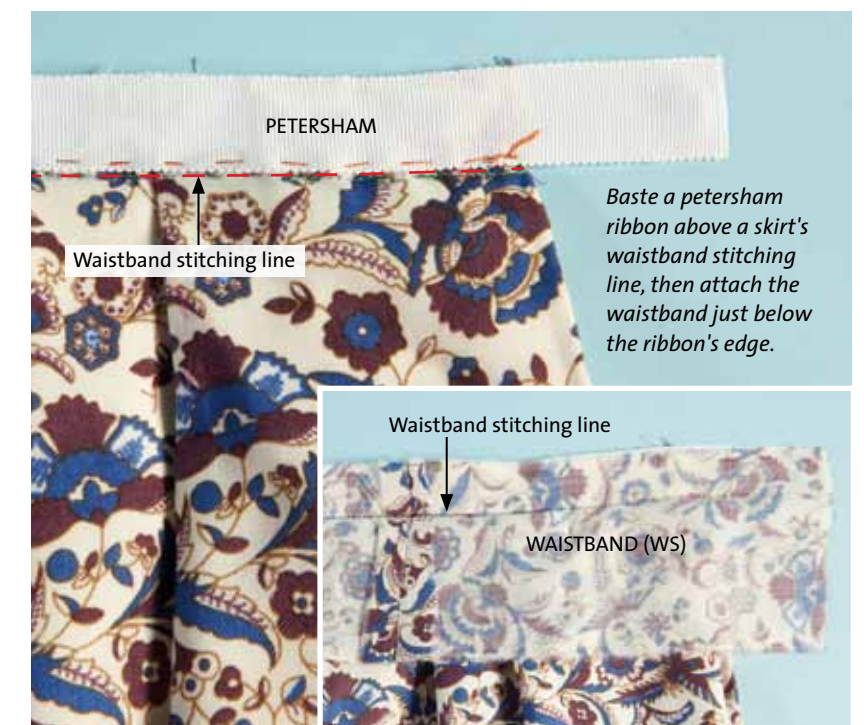
Incorporating an internal ribbon stay into a waistband strengthens it and helps it better withstand long-term use. Commercial stabilizers are available, but the preference for couture garments is petersham grosgrain ribbon. Petersham is firm, but its scalloped edges enable it to be shaped into gentle curves. A 1-inch-wide petersham stabilizes a waistband beautifully.

Certainly, incorporating a petersham stay adds another layer to an already-substantial quantity of layers in a waistband. However, if you control the layers and align them carefully, the results are well worth the effort.

Add a petersham stay after basting the garment's shell and lining together. Cut the petersham ribbon 4 inches longer than the waistline measurement. Place one long edge of the petersham just a hair above the garment's waistband stitching line. The petersham tails extend an equal length past the garment opening on each side. Hand-baste the petersham's bottom edge to the garment seam allowance.

For the waistband, cut one 4-inch-wide fashion fabric strip (on the straight grain) the waistline length, plus 4 inches. The finished waistband is 1 inch wide. The seam allowances are also 1 inch wide to place a buffer between the fabric and the petersham's top edge, which could show through on lightweight fabrics, such as the challis used below. A thick or dense fashion fabric may conceal the ribbon's edge, and the seam allowance could be reduced.

Align the waistband, right side down, to the garment's waistline edge. The waistband stitching line should rest just a hair below the petersham's lower edge. Sew the waistband to the garment by machine. It's helpful to first hand-baste it in place to prevent the fabric from stretching during machine stitching and to prevent stitching through the petersham. Press the waistband upward, toward the garment edge, wrong sides together. Then, fold it to the garment's wrong side along the petersham's top edge, enclosing the ribbon. To complete the waistband, read "Finish a waistband perfectly," page 47.



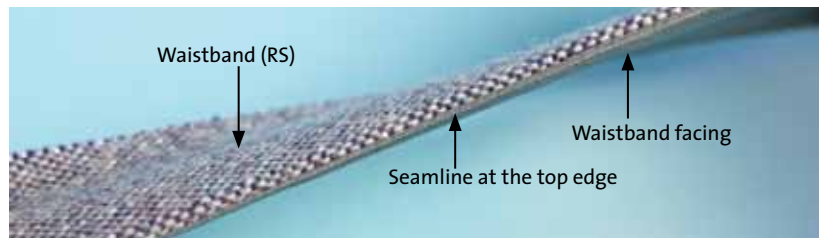


Reduce waistband bulk with a facing

The typical waistband is a single fabric strip folded a number of times lengthwise. If your fashion fabric is thick or heavyweight, a standard waistband can result in unnecessary bulk. Instead, construct a faced waistband using a lighter-weight fabric, such as lining, for the facing. A faced waistband is assembled from two fabric strips: the fashion fabric on the exterior and the lining fabric on the interior. This reduces the waistband's thickness and makes it easier to handle during sewing, as well as more comfortable to wear.

Cut two 2-inch-wide strips of fabric—one from fashion fabric and one from lining—each the length of the waistline measurement, plus 4 inches. If the fashion fabric is very bulky, adjust the waistband width to accommodate the fabric's turn of cloth. Place the strips right sides together, and sew them along one lengthwise edge. Use a 1/2-inch seam allowance. Press the seam allowance open. Then, fold the waistband wrong sides together and press again. The seamline runs along the waistband's top edge.

If you're adding an internal petersham stay to the waistband, baste the ribbon in place (see paragraph three in "Stabilize with an internal ribbon stay," page 45). Then, sew the waistband to the garment using a 1/2-inch seam allowance. With the fashion fabric's right sides together, align the waistband's stitching line with the garment's waistband stitching line, below the petersham's lower edge. Sew the waistband in place on the right side. Press it toward the waistline edge, wrong sides together. Fold it to the garment's wrong side, enclosing the petersham.



A wool tweed skirt is a perfect candidate for a facing that helps create a smooth, flat, and bulk-free waistband.

Pattern: Butterick 5391

Sew the waistband to the garment on the right side. Press it up to enclose the ribbon stay, then fold it to the garment's wrong side, pressing along the top seamline.

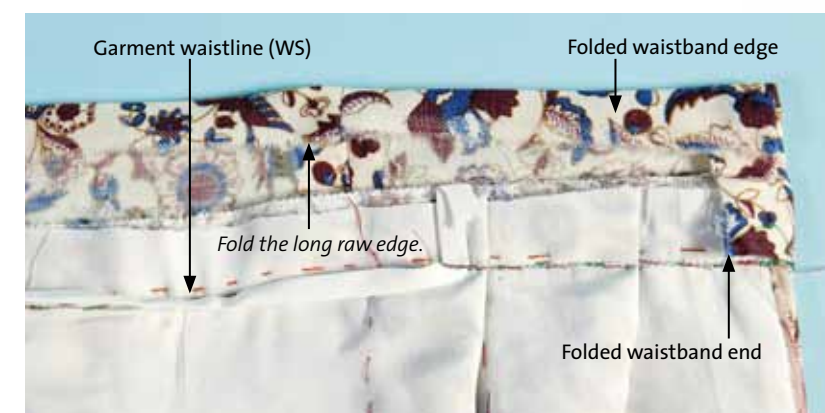
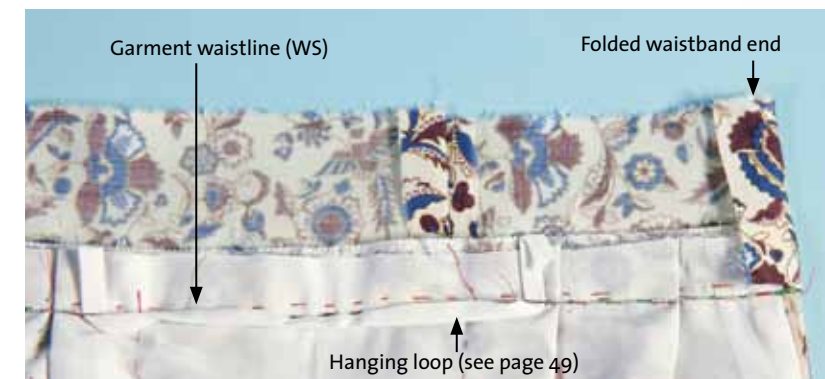
Finish a waistband perfectly

Regardless of which waistband type you use and where the garment opens, the waistband ends need special treatment. As you fold, press, and stitch to finish the waistband, measure carefully and often. The waistband ends should be the same width when finished, but it can be difficult to maintain a consistent width through the waistband's entire length.

The waistband closure's orientation depends somewhat on whether the wearer is left- or right-handed. For a center-back opening, right-handed individuals require the waistband underlap on the left side (as worn); reverse the orientation for left-handed individuals. For a side-opening garment, the waistband's back extension underlaps the opening's edge. Whether the opening is at the garment's back or its side, the underlap extends 1/2 inches beyond the garment opening. But the method for creating square, even ends is the same for both waistband types and both closure orientations.

Start by trimming each petersham end to match the waistband's finished length. Then, fold the waistband end seam allowances over the petersham ends and press. Next, fold under the waistband's long raw edge and press. Trim away some of the interior bulk, if necessary. Turn the waistband over the garment's raw edge. Double-check the width of the waistband ends and adjust as necessary. Then, sew small fell stitches at the waistband ends to secure the folded layers.

Pin the waistband's folded long edge in place on the garment's wrong side, at the waistband seamline. Secure it with fell stitches, catching just the garment lining in the stitches.



Fold the waistband ends over the cut petersham ends, then fold under the waistband's long raw edge. Make sure the waistband end is the same width on both sides of the garment opening.



Lightweight wool challis requires internal support for a firm, stable waistband.

Pattern: Butterick 5285



Orient and secure secondary closures

Hooks and eyes, as well as snaps—often referred to as “findings”—are typically employed as secondary closures on a waistband to augment the primary closure (usually a zipper) and give extra security. Findings should be oriented for the wearer’s ease of use and for a quality, no-show finish.

Hook-and-eye placement

Your dominant hand makes the motion required to close a garment opening. So place hooks on your dominant hand’s side, and place underlaps, metal eyes, or thread bars on your nondominant hand’s side.

Snap placement

Snaps help secure a waistband’s underlap, keeping it from slipping above the waistband or folding back against the wearer’s body. To secure the snap, pushing the ball into the socket is easier to do with the dominant hand. So place the snap’s ball section on the waistband’s underside, with the socket section on the waistband underlap.

Sewing hooks, eyes, and snaps

Findings often work their way loose because the stitches used to attach them allow them to move; in effect, they saw themselves off. Use a locking stitch to sew findings securely.

Knot the end of a doubled, waxed, and pressed thread. Anchor the thread in the waistband and take one stitch through the finding’s eyelet from underneath. Take another stitch, but before tightening the loop, slip the needle through it. Tighten the thread to create a tiny bead that rests at the finding’s base. Follow

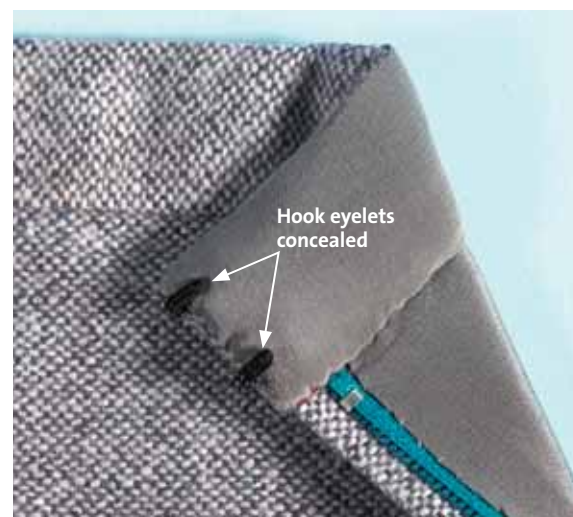
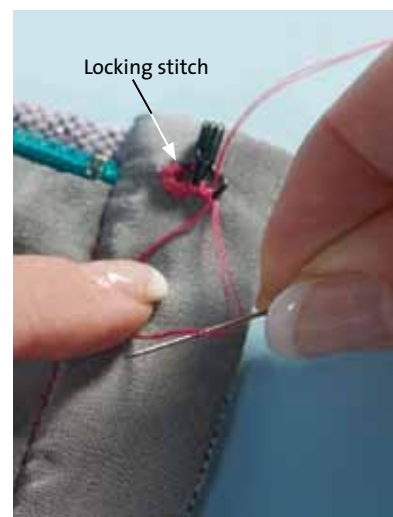
the finding’s contours as you stitch. If you’re sewing a snap, use two or three stitches on each quadrant.

Hooks also can be sewn to the waistband’s end before it’s finished, to conceal the hook’s eyelets. Place each hook so its eyelets rest just inside the waistband end’s foldline. Anchor your stitches to the petersham to secure the hooks.

Log On

For a video of Susan Khalje’s hook insertion technique, go to ThreadsMagazine.com.

Photos: (p. 44, p. 46, left, and p. 47, right) Jack Deutsch, stylist; Jessica Saal, hair and makeup; Patrycja for Hailey Resources; all others, Sloan Howard. Styling credits: (p. 44, right, and p. 46) top—BCBGeneration (Macys.com), camisole—(AnnTaylor.com), necklace—A.B.S. by Allen Schwartz (Bloomingdales.com), earrings—Kenneth Cole (Macys.com); (p. 44, left, and p. 47) top—(Express.com)



Sew findings using a locking stitch (left). Hooks may be installed before finishing the waistband so their eyelets are concealed (right).

Complementary details

There are a variety of small finishing details that further enhance a waistband. Below are three that complement the couture construction techniques explained on the previous pages.

Thread bars

Thread bars are often used in place of metal eyes in couture garments. To sew them, begin with a length of doubled thread that is waxed and pressed. Anchor the thread on one side of the bar’s placement, hiding the knot. Draw the thread over the waistband’s surface, and anchor it on the opposite side, then return to the first side, anchoring it again. These four thread strands form the bar’s base. Use your thumb to hold the thread out of the way, slide the needle under the base threads, and pull it most of the way through. Pass the needle back through the small loop created from underneath, then pull the loop closed. Repeat until the entire bar is covered, sliding the knots down along the base threads so they’re closely packed. Secure the thread at the end with a few small, tight stitches.

Covered snaps

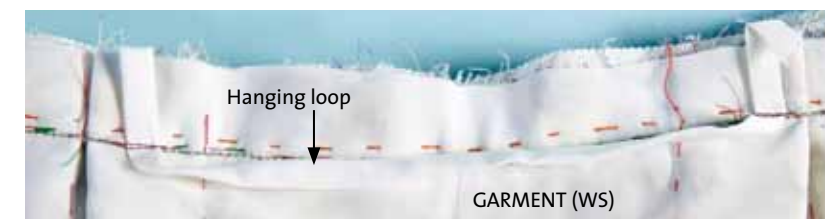
In the couture tradition of covering up as much metal as possible, snaps are usually covered with a small piece of lining fabric.

Cut a circle of lining fabric larger than the snap. With an awl, make a small hole in the fabric, and force the snap’s ball through it. For easier handling while covering the snap, stitch around the fabric circle’s outer edges with a long running stitch and gather it lightly, making a pouch. Then, stitch around the snap’s back side—through the fabric only—using small backstitches to tighten the fabric. Next, sew several stitches across the back, sewing only through the fabric. Trim off the tuft of fabric, and flatten the remaining edges with your fingernail. Cover the socket section the same way, but it’s not necessary to pierce the fabric first. Snapping the two halves together will create an indentation in the socket’s fabric covering. The socket section is a little more slippery than the ball section, and it’s easy for it to flip over as you work, so take care as you’re sewing. One way to prevent this is to snap the covered-ball section into the socket section while you sew the socket’s covering in place. Sew the snap sections to the garment with a doubled thread that is waxed and pressed.

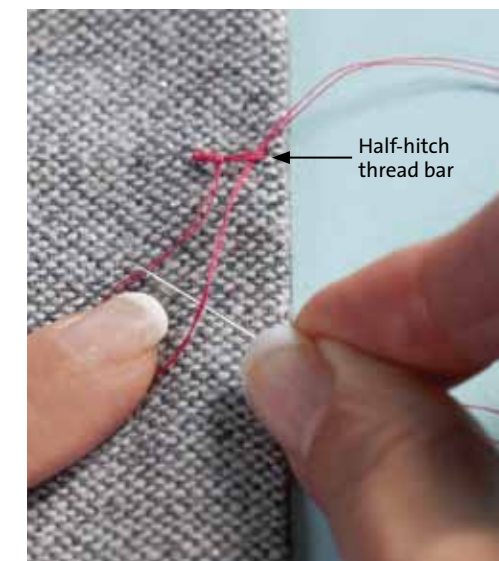
Hanging loops

Another clever feature for a waistband is a pair of hanging loops. They distribute the garment’s weight on a hanger from four points.

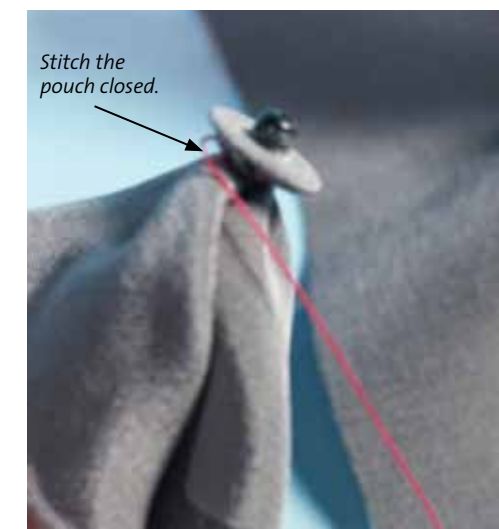
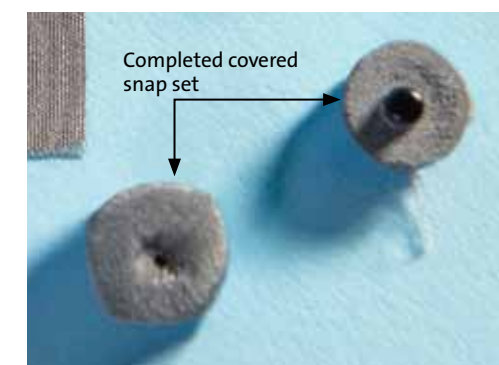
Sew two tubes from lining fabric, cut on the straight grain. Press flat. Each should be about 3/8 inch wide and 8 inches long when finished. Place the ends of each loop perpendicular to the waistline, about 3 inches to either side of the side seams. Stitch in place by hand or machine. Install hanging loops before finishing the waistband, so their ends are concealed.



Install hanging loops before finishing a garment’s waistband.



Sew thread bars using a half-hitch stitch. Slide each knot formed down the base threads’ length, stacking one on top of the other.



Cover metal snaps with a piece of lining fabric. Sew a pouch of lining fabric around a snap section, tightening it with stitches.