

How to Make Your First Sewing Pattern

A Start-to-Finish Guide for Beginners

From taking your measurements to cutting your first fabric, this guide walks you through every step with honest time estimates and fix-it notes for common mistakes.

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Free Beginner Resource

How to Use This Guide

This guide teaches you to make a sewing pattern from scratch. Not download one, not trace one, but draft one yourself from your own measurements. By the end, you will have a completed pattern for a simple rectangular skirt that fits your body.

You do not need prior sewing experience. You do need: a flexible measuring tape, a pencil, a long ruler or yardstick, large paper (butcher paper, kraft paper, or newspaper), scissors for paper (not your fabric scissors), and a calculator.

Estimated time: 45 to 60 minutes for your first pattern.

Before You Begin: Machine Readiness Check

A pattern is only useful on a functioning machine. Before you start drafting, complete these three checks:

- Re-thread your machine from scratch (top thread and bobbin). Threading errors cause more stitch problems than tension settings.
- Sew a test line on a scrap of the fabric you plan to use. Check for loops, skipped stitches, or puckering.
- Replace your needle if the stitches skip or the fabric snags. A fresh needle costs under a dollar and solves most problems.

TIP

If you are above a C cup, take a high bust measurement in addition to your full bust. For fitted garments, select your pattern size by high bust and add cup-size volume. This is not an advanced step. It is how you get a garment that fits.

Step-by-Step: Draft Your First Pattern

We are making a simple elastic-waist rectangular skirt. This is the most forgiving first pattern because it uses only straight lines, requires no darts or curves, and teaches the five fundamentals of pattern drafting: measuring, calculating ease, drawing to scale, marking seam allowance, and labeling pattern pieces.

1 Take Your Measurements

You need three measurements: waist circumference (measure at your natural waist, the narrowest point above your hips), hip circumference (measure at the widest point of your hips, about 7 to 9 inches below your waist), and desired skirt length (measure from your natural waist to wherever you want the hem to fall). Write these numbers down. Do not round them.

2 Calculate Your Pattern Dimensions

Divide your hip measurement by 2 (you are making half the skirt, which wraps around the front and back). Add 2 inches for ease (the extra room that lets you move and sit). This gives you the width of your pattern piece. The height equals your desired skirt length. Example: 40-inch hips / 2 = 20 inches + 2 inches ease = 22 inches wide.

3 Add Seam Allowance and Hem Allowance

Add 5/8 inch (1.5 cm) to both side edges for seam allowance. Add 1 inch at the top for the elastic waistband casing. Add 1 inch at the bottom for the hem. Mark these additions clearly on your paper. The total pattern piece is now larger than your body measurements, which is correct.

4 Draw the Pattern on Paper

Lay your large paper on a flat surface. Using your ruler, draw a rectangle with the final dimensions (width with seam allowance, height with casing and hem). Use the ruler for every line; freehand lines cause cutting errors. Label the top edge 'WAIST (fold for casing),' the bottom edge 'HEM,' and each side 'SIDE SEAM.' Draw an arrow pointing up and down along one side and label it 'GRAINLINE.'

5 Mark Your Pattern Piece

Every pattern piece needs five markings: (1) pattern name ('Simple Skirt, Front/Back'), (2) 'Cut 2' (you need two identical pieces), (3) grainline arrow, (4) seam allowance noted (e.g., '5/8 inch SA included'), and (5) your size or measurements. These markings mean you can use this pattern again months from now without re-measuring.

6 Cut Your Pattern, Then Your Fabric

Cut the paper pattern with paper scissors. Lay the pattern on your fabric with the grainline arrow running parallel to the selvage (the finished edge of the fabric). Pin or weight the pattern in place. Cut around the pattern with fabric scissors. Cut two identical pieces.

7 Assemble the Skirt

Pin the two pieces right sides together along both side seams. Sew at 5/8 inch from the edge. Press the seams open. Fold the top edge down 1 inch and press. Sew along the fold, leaving a 2-inch opening to thread elastic through. Cut elastic to your waist measurement minus 1 inch, thread it through the casing with a safety pin, and sew the opening closed. Fold the hem up 1 inch, press, and sew.

TIP

Fix-it note: If the skirt is too tight at the hips, your ease was insufficient. Add another inch to each side seam at the hip and taper back to the original width at the waist. This is a normal adjustment, not a failure.

What You Just Learned

By completing this pattern, you now understand the five skills that underpin every sewing pattern in existence, from a tote bag to a tailored blazer:

- Measuring: taking body measurements accurately and recording them for reuse.
- Ease: adding room beyond body measurements so the garment is wearable, not skin-tight.
- Seam allowance: the extra fabric outside the sewing line that gets hidden inside the garment.
- Grainline: aligning the pattern with the fabric's weave direction so the garment hangs correctly.
- Labeling: marking every pattern piece so you (and anyone else) can use it again without guessing.

Every commercial or free pattern you download uses these same five concepts. The difference is scale and curve complexity, not fundamentally different skills. Now that you understand how a pattern works from the inside, you will read downloaded patterns with more confidence and diagnose fit problems faster.

What to Make Next

Your next project should introduce exactly one new skill. Here is a suggested progression:

- Project 2: A gathered skirt (adds gathering to your straight-seam foundation).
- Project 3: A simple tote bag with lining (adds lining and turning).
- Project 4: A tank top with bias-bound armholes (adds curves and finishing).
- Project 5: An A-line dress (combines fit, curves, and a longer construction sequence).

Do not skip ahead. Each project builds on the one before it. If project 3 frustrates you, return to project 2 with a different fabric. Repetition at the right level builds skill faster than ambition at the wrong level.

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