NO PREP

How to Read a Pattern

Includes: Student reading, case study, differentiated questions, teacher key

Name: Period: Date:

How to Read a Pattern

The Envelope Is the Instruction Manual

A commercial sewing pattern is a complete manufacturing plan for a garment, compressed onto printed tissue and an envelope, and almost everything a person needs to know is printed before they ever open it. The front of the envelope shows the garment as photographs or line drawings, usually in several versions labeled View A, View B, and so on, which are variations built from the same core pieces, such as long sleeve versus short sleeve, or with and without a collar. The back of the envelope carries the information that actually determines whether the project succeeds. It lists suggested fabrics, and this is a genuine restriction rather than a hint, because a pattern drafted for a woven fabric assumes zero stretch and will not fit if it is cut from a knit, while a pattern drafted for knits builds negative ease into the measurements and will be far too small in a woven. It lists notions, meaning everything needed besides fabric: thread, zippers, buttons, interfacing, elastic, hooks, or trim. It carries a yardage chart, a grid crossing pattern size against fabric

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Sizing: Why Your Pattern Size Is Not Your Store Size

The most reliable way to demoralize a first-time sewist is to let them choose a pattern by the number on their jeans. Pattern sizing and retail clothing sizing are unrelated systems. Retail sizing has drifted for decades through a marketing practice known as vanity sizing, in which manufacturers relabel progressively larger garments with smaller numbers, and there is no legal standard forcing consistency between brands. Pattern sizing, by contrast, has been tied to a fixed set of body measurements for many decades and has not drifted. The practical result is that a person who buys a size eight in a store commonly measures as a size fourteen or

sixteen on a pattern envelope, and nothing is wrong with either the person or the pattern. The correct procedure is to ignore every number you have ever worn, take actual measurements, and compare them to the chart on the envelope. The essential measurements are the full bust or chest, the natural waist, which is the narrowest point of the torso and not where a waistband happens to sit, and the fullest part of the hips. Measure over the undergarments that will be worn with the finished garment, keep the tape snug but not tight, and keep it level all the way around. When measurements land in different sizes, which is extremely common, choose the size based on the area hardest to alter: for tops that is usually the bust or chest, and for pants and skirts that is usually the hip.

Ease: The Number Nobody Explains

Ease is the difference between the body measurement and the finished garment measurement, and understanding it resolves the frequent complaint that a completed garment came out enormous. Ease comes in two kinds. Wearing ease is the extra room required for the body to function, since a shirt cut to exactly the chest measurement would not allow the wearer to breathe deeply, raise an arm, or sit down. Typical wearing ease at the bust for a fitted woven garment runs a few inches, with additional allowances at the waist and hip. Design ease is extra fullness added purely for style, and it is entirely a designer's decision. An oversized jacket may carry eight or ten inches of design ease, which is exactly what makes it read as oversized rather than as a mistake. Both types are already built into the pattern pieces, which is why cutting a pattern down to match the body measurement exactly produces a garment that cannot be worn. Some patterns for knit fabrics use negative ease, meaning the finished garment is deliberately smaller than the body, relying on the knit to stretch, which is how leggings and fitted athletic wear are drafted. The finished garment measurements printed on the envelope or directly on the pattern tissue let a sewist see exactly how much ease a particular design includes before cutting anything.

The Symbols Printed on the Tissue

Once the envelope is open, the pattern pieces themselves carry a standardized set of markings, and each one is an instruction. The grainline is a long straight arrow, and it must be laid parallel to the selvage, which is checked by measuring from the selvage to each end of the arrow and confirming the two distances match. Getting

this wrong is the leading cause of a finished garment that twists on the body. A bracket with arrows pointing to a solid line means place on fold, and that edge is laid exactly on the folded edge of the fabric and never cut, because cutting it produces two halves of a piece that was supposed to be one. Notches are diamonds or triangles along the cutting line that mark where pieces align during construction, and the convention is that a single notch marks the front and a double notch marks the back, which prevents sewing a sleeve in backward. Dots mark specific matching points, dart legs, and stopping points for stitching. Dashed or dotted interior lines mark the stitching line, which sits inside the cutting line by the seam allowance, most commonly five eighths of an inch on commercial patterns. Double parallel lines across a piece are lengthen or shorten lines, placed where the piece can be adjusted without distorting its shape. The guide sheet folded inside translates all of this, provides cutting layout diagrams organized by size and fabric width, and gives the construction steps in required order.

Layout, Cutting, and the Muslin Nobody Wants to Make

Before laying anything out, prepare the fabric by preshrinking it the same way the finished garment will be cleaned, because a garment sewn from unwashed fabric can shrink after construction and no longer fit. Press out wrinkles, then fold the fabric as the layout diagram specifies, usually right sides together with selvages aligned, which keeps marking on the wrong side and cuts mirrored pieces in one pass. Follow the layout diagram for the specific size and fabric width being used rather than improvising, since those diagrams are calculated to fit within the yardage listed. Watch for fabrics with a nap, meaning a surface direction such as velvet or corduroy, or a one-way print, because all pieces must be laid in the same direction or panels will appear to be different colors in the finished garment. Pin pattern pieces inside the cutting lines, keep the fabric flat on the table rather than lifting it, and cut with long smooth strokes, clipping notches outward into the seam allowance rather than inward. Transfer all markings before removing the tissue, because once the pattern is unpinned, dart legs and dots are gone. Finally, for any fitted garment or expensive fabric, sew a muslin first, which is a test version made from cheap plain fabric used solely to check fit. Almost no beginner wants to make one and almost every experienced sewist does, because a fitting problem found in three dollars of

muslin is an adjustment, and the same problem found in forty dollars of wool is a loss.

Key Information: Pattern Markings and Terms

Detail	Information
Grainline Arrow	Laid parallel to the selvage; measure both ends to confirm
Place on Fold	Bracket edge laid on the folded fabric and never cut
Notches	Single marks the front, double marks the back, for alignment
Seam Allowance	Space between cutting and stitching lines; often 5/8 inch
Wearing Ease	Extra room so the body can breathe, reach, and sit
Design Ease	Extra fullness added purely for the intended style
Negative Ease	Finished garment smaller than the body, relying on knit stretch
Muslin	A cheap test garment sewn only to check fit before cutting

Case Study: Aisha and the Size on the Envelope

Aisha wears a size eight in almost every store she shops at, so she buys a size eight pattern for a fitted button-down shirt and cuts into fabric she saved three paychecks to afford. The finished shirt will not close across the chest. She is convinced she measured wrong or sewed the seam allowance too wide. Her teacher has her measure her full bust with a tape and then hands her the envelope. The chart puts her at a fourteen. Aisha says that cannot be right, she has never worn a fourteen in her life. Her teacher explains that store sizing has drifted for decades while pattern sizing has not, and that the two numbers were never measuring the same thing. Aisha buys the pattern again in a fourteen, and this time she sews a muslin out of eight dollars of plain cotton first. She writes in her project log: the pattern was not lying to me, the store was, and the muslin is the cheapest insurance I will ever buy.

1. Explain why Aisha's store size and pattern size were so different, using the reading's account of how each system works.

2. Aisha calls the muslin cheap insurance. Explain what a muslin is and what it would have protected in her first attempt.

Multiple Choice

1. What must be true about the grainline arrow when a pattern piece is laid out?

a) It is parallel to the selvage at both ends

b) It sits at 45 degrees to the selvage of the fabric

c) It points toward the fabric fold

d) It runs along the crosswise grain

2. What is the difference between wearing ease and design ease?

a) Wearing ease is added by the sewist, not the pattern

b) Wearing ease applies only to knits, design ease to wovens

c) Wearing ease lets the body move; design ease is style

d) Wearing ease is measured after the garment is sewn

3. According to the reading, what does a double notch on a pattern piece mark?

a) A point where stitching must stop

b) A line where the piece may be lengthened as needed

c) An edge that is placed on the fold

d) The back of the garment, for correct alignment

Matching

Write the letter of the correct definition on the line next to each term.

Term	Definition
1. ___ notions	A) Extra room built in so the wearer can breathe, reach, and sit
2. ___ vanity sizing	B) The folded instruction sheet with layouts and construction steps
3. ___ wearing ease	C) Relabeling larger garments with smaller numbers over time
4. ___ nap	D) Everything besides fabric: thread, zippers, buttons, interfacing
5. ___ guide sheet	E) A surface direction requiring all pieces laid the same way

Fill-in-the-Blank

1. The standard seam allowance on commercial patterns is _____ inch.

2. A test garment sewn from cheap fabric is called a _____.

3. Pattern size should be chosen from your _____, not your store size.

Short Answer

Answer each question in 2-4 complete sentences.

1. Why does the reading call the suggested fabric list a restriction rather than a hint?

_____

_____

_____

2. Explain why cutting a pattern down to your exact body measurement backfires.

3. Why must fabric be preshrunk before the pattern pieces are laid out and cut?