

Farm Boy... Fetch Me That Pitcher

Or

How I Learned to Stop Worrying and Reach My Own Damned Pottery

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There are many ways to make sleeves, some more technical, and some less technical. I tend to lean a little towards the less technical side. They are part science, part art. You can use measurements up to a point, and then you just have to fiddle with it until it works.

These instructions cover the construction of a basic, set-in sleeve, with a small arm hole, or armhole. There are other ways of fitting medieval sleeves, including the *grande assiette*, but that would be an entirely separate class.

Sleeves are one of the places where you can introduce a lot of individuality in a dress. They can end at the wrist, the knuckles, or even five inches past your fingertips in a long drape. There are even examples of sleeve ends that fall further than this, with perhaps a foot long drape at the end. You can leave them straight without buttons, button them to the elbow, or even put tiny buttons up the upper arm. Pick the look you want, and what you think works best for you and the time that you want to spend (a plain sleeve without buttons is the fastest).

Fundamentals of Sleeve Fitting

Farm boy, fetch me that pitcher. – Buttercup

I'm sure we've all heard the rumor; well-to-do medieval women couldn't lift their arms above their heads because they have servants to do all of the work. Baloney. That would mean that only servants wore clothes that fit.

The fit of the upper sleeve boils down to two measurements, and the ratio between them. The first is the size of the arm hole, or armhole. The second is the size of the bicep. These two measurements determine the steepness of the curve on the sleeve head, and therefore the mobility of the arm.

If your bicep measurement and armhole measurement were exactly the same, the line at the top of your sleeve pattern would be flat. When the measurements aren't all that far off, the curve will be shallow. When there is a large difference between the bicep and the armhole the curve will be steep.

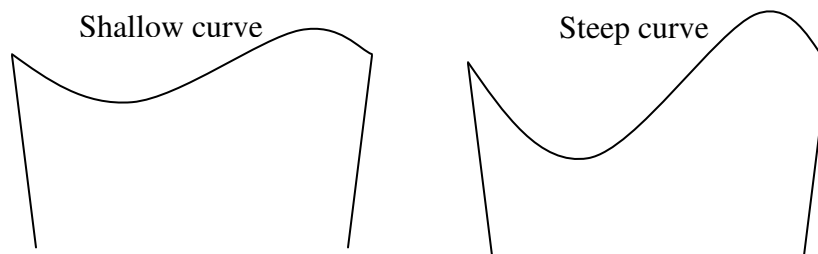


Figure 1

The steeper the curve, the less you'll be able to move your arm. The shallower your curve, the more little wrinkles you'll get under your arm when you put it down. The key is to find the right balance, but in the meantime, I recommend living with the wrinkles, as opposed to not being able to raise your arms.

A sleeve with a shallow curve starts with the fitting of the dress. As a general rule, the smaller your armscye, the shallower your curve, and the better you'll be able to move your arms. There are ways to remedy a larger armscye.

Many of the extant 14th garments found in Greenland include a small gusset in the sleeve. The gusset can help extend the armscye measurement, without adding width to the bicep measurement. It's also possible to add some flare into the top of the sleeve, to achieve this without the gusset, like the diagram on the right.

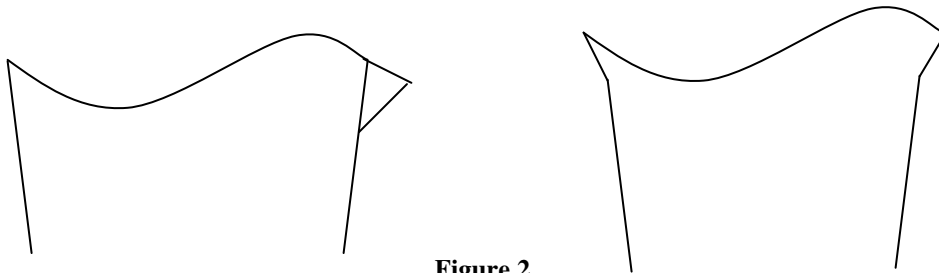


Figure 2

Alternatively, you can make your bicep measurement a little larger, which will make the upper part of the sleeve a bit baggier, but gives more room for movement.

Body type matters a lot. On a woman with slender arms or an athletic figure, it's more difficult to get the armhole small enough to make the sleeve without a gusset or flare. On a heavier woman who has fleshy upper arms, it's even possible to make the armscye *smaller* than the bicep measurements. When fitting this body type, the armhole should be made large enough to give at least some curve on the top of the sleeve.

The Steps

Take a Bunch of Measurements

If your pattern pieces are different on each side, you need to take measurements on both sides of the dress. You may need to take additional measurements based on your sleeve design. For now, ignore seam allowances.

Measurements Needed:

A: Armscye of dress. Remember to measure at the seam line, taking seam allowance into account.

B: Bicep

C: Top of shoulder (where it attaches to the dress) to wrist opening

D: Top of shoulder to elbow

E: Around the elbow when your arm is flexed.

F: Around wrist or the smallest measurement that you can fit your hand through. It all depends if you button the wrist or not.

G: Around a relaxed hand

Draw a Grid

Use cheap fabric! Once you've made many sleeves, you'll likely develop the ability to draft a sleeve correctly on your first try. Until you become comfortable with the process, I recommend that you draft the sleeve on muslin or other cheap fabric first.

- Start out by drawing a vertical line, as long as your arm from the shoulder to the wrist (C).
- Draw a line at the top, as wide as the bicep (B).
- Draw a curve for the top of the sleeve, as long as A, with the top of the curve touching the top line. See below for more information on the shape of the curve.
- Draw the wrist measurement (F), centered on the vertical line.
- Figure out how far the elbow measurement (E) has to be from the top (D).
- Draw the elbow measurement (E), centered on the vertical line.

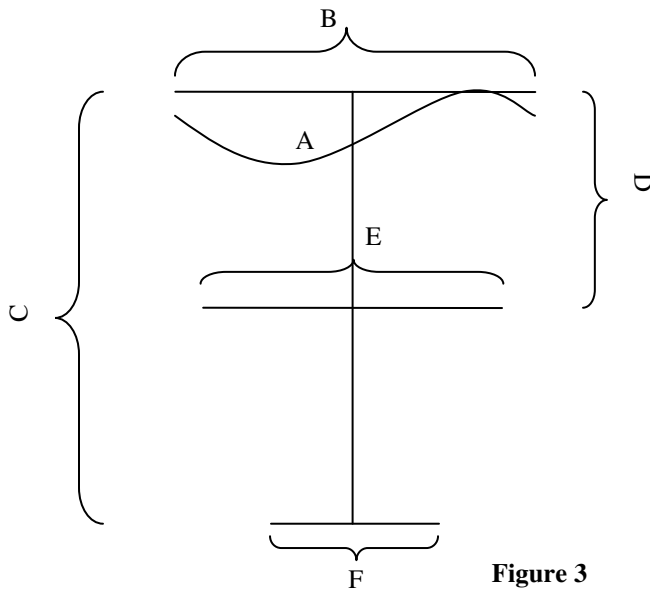


Figure 3

The Shape of the Curve

Don't worry overmuch about the exact shape of your curve. I used to lay out a tape measure in about the right shape, and the right length, and trace. Now, I use a flexible ruler that I bend to the right shape, and lay on the fabric. They can often be found in the quilting section of a regular fabric store.

The curve is made in the shape of an "S" so that the seam will be oriented at the back of the arm. I arrange the curve so it looks more like the one on the left in figure 4. This allows the seam to be a little further up the back of the arm, rather than starting to rotate under the arm. I'll explain why this can help with movement, below.

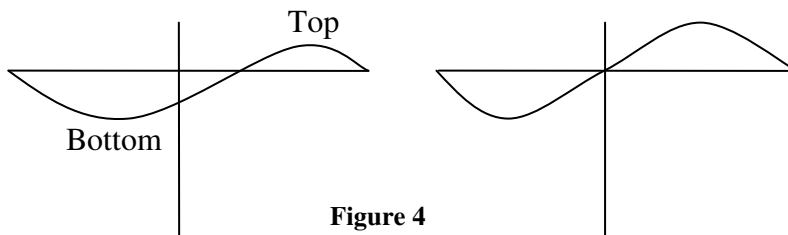


Figure 4

Connect the Lines

You took measurements for the bicep, elbow, and wrist. You could take as many measurements along the arm as you like, and add them to the grid. Since this is a draft that you will eventually try on, there's likely not much point. Connect the lines, and add any additional sleeve treatment. In this example, I've lengthened the sleeve so it comes to the wearer's first knuckle.

(F) is the wrist measurement. If you are making the sleeve without buttons, this needs to be large enough to fit your hand through. If you are making the sleeve with buttons, you need to add a small amount, about a 1/4 inch, for the overlap of the buttons and the buttonhole.

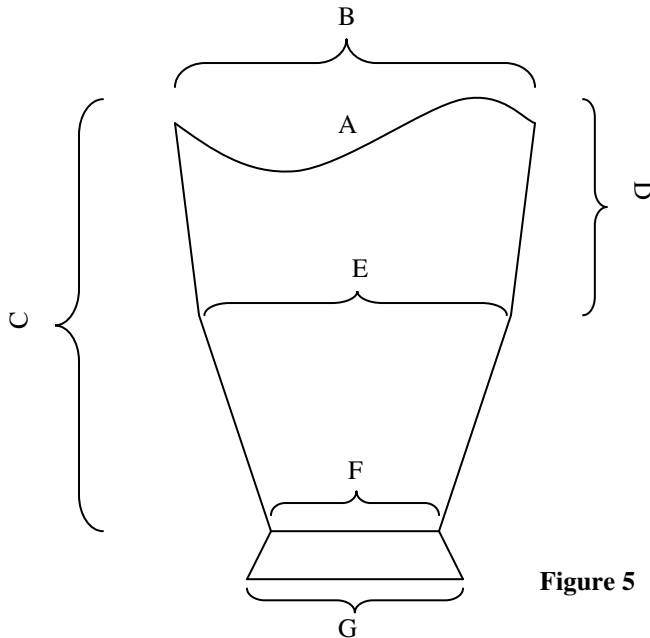


Figure 5

A Note on Buttons

If you button your sleeves partway up the arm, say, up to the elbow, you'll need to add just a little bit of fabric to accommodate the overlap. Generally, my sleeves aren't SO tight that I even bother. The buttons themselves should be sewn directly to the edge of the fabric, and the buttonholes can also be quite close to the edge. If you do your buttons and buttonholes that way, you might need only a 1/4 inch or less of overlap.

Add Seam Allowance

I always add the seam allowance (S/A) *after* I've drafted the rest of the sleeve. I don't like to worry about adding it to the measurements, and if the S/A will affect the length of the curve, etc. I just add it right before cutting.

When drafting a sleeve for the first time, add a very generous seam allowance, especially to the sides. Add at least two inches to the left side of the above diagrams.

Cut out the draft.

Try On the Sleeve

Pin the sleeve together along the side seams, so you can try it on. I usually slip my arm in at this point, to make sure that I can actually get into it. If you're planning on using buttons, don't panic if you cannot fit your hand through the pinned wrist.

Assuming that you can actually get your arm into the sleeve, pin the sleeve into the armhole on the dress. Pin along the actual seam line of the sleeve.

When setting in the sleeve, it is tempting to put the top of the sleeve curve (as marked in figure 4) at the very top of the sleeve opening. Instead, put the top of the sleeve curve an inch or two back from the top of the opening. This is why the curve should look like the left side of figure 4. If the curve was symmetrical, like the right side of figure 4, the back seam of the sleeve would start creeping into the armpit. Moving the top of the curve back a little can help with movement issues. We tend to move our arms forward more than back, and this rotation allows more comfortable forward movement.

Since the measurement of the sleeve curve is the same as the armhole of the dress, presumably the sleeve should fit well. If it is not at least close, check your measurements and get it to be at least close. If it is not perfect, don't fret. You can fix that later.

Tweaking the Fit

Try on the dress with the sleeve pinned in. If possible, lace or button the dress closed so you can have the best approximation of fit. If your sleeve is too loose, pin it a little tighter. If your sleeve is too tight, or you can't bend your elbow, pin it a little looser. This might be easier if you have a friend to help, or you can play the put it on, take it off, put it on, and take it off game.

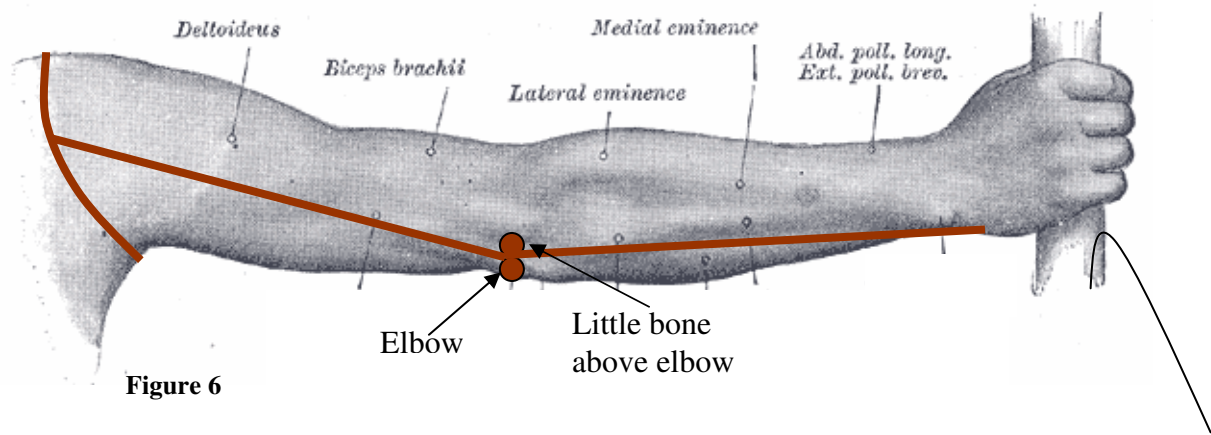
Try raising your arm. Since the angle of the curve is critical to the ability to raise your arm, problems might not be easy to fix. If you cannot raise your arm comfortably, you should reassess the curve, starting essentially at the beginning. This is why I recommend using cheap fabric. If you absolutely cannot start over, you might need to make the entire sleeve looser in order to achieve comfortable movement.

Rearrange the Back Seam

This next step is important if you are buttoning the lower sleeve. Even if you are not using buttons, this can prevent the feeling that the sleeve is twisting, and make bending the elbow easier in a tight sleeve. The seam of the sleeve should run along the back of the arm, right above the knobby part of the elbow, and along the side of the wrist.

If the seam runs under the elbow and lower arm, your buttons will be attached under the elbow. Putting your arm down on a bunch of buttons can be very uncomfortable!

Bend your elbow. Feel for the pointy part of the elbow. Moving your fingers to the outside of the arm, you should feel a dip, and then another bony protrusion. To perfectly place this seam, arrange it so that it runs through this dip.



To arrange the seam correctly, you can re-pin, using the additional seam allowance that you left. Alternatively, you can draw on the mockup where the new seam should be. When you take the sleeve off, instead of unpinning it, cut it open along the new seam line. Lay the sleeve mock up on a new piece of fabric or paper, and trace around the old sleeve, treating the cut part as if it was always part of that side of the sleeve.

The new sleeve will probably look something like figure 7. The length of the two sides might have changed, which you'll notice when you sew up the new seam. Adjust the top curve, or the wrist to make up for this. Make sure the length of your curve stays the same.

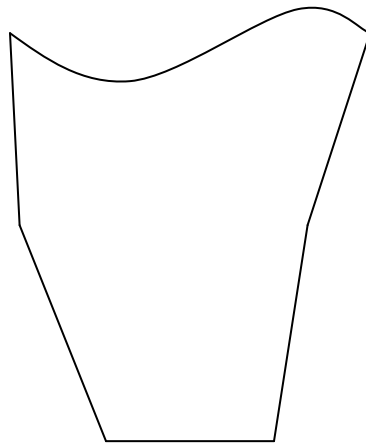


Figure 7

Once you get used to making sleeves, you might be able to make this adjustment automatically. At this point, you may be able to draft your sleeve right on the final fabric.

Sewing the Sleeve In

Even though the measurement at the top of the sleeve should match the armhole, sometimes the sleeve just doesn't fit. If the sleeve is bigger than the armhole, pretend that the arm hole is a bit bigger under the armpit. Essentially, the seam allowance under the arm will be much wider. If the sleeve is smaller than the armhole, you'll do the opposite. The seam allowance on the armpit of the sleeve will be much larger.

Because the attachment point in the armpit affects the arm mobility, try the dress on before cutting off any excess seam allowance.

A Final Note

Let go of total perfection. Wrinkles are period!

