

Fitted Dress Construction

A Primer

Pre-Project Prepping 2: Washing your Fabric

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Introduction:

This is one of a series of instructions for turning your four-panel fitted dress mockup into something that you can wear.

This tutorial was written with beginner to intermediate-level sewers in mind. If something in these documents is unclear, please contact me and I will try to clarify or correct the instructions. There are often many ways to skin a cat. I am presenting techniques which work for me and for those who I've helped construct a gown.

I have provided a bibliography of main sources at the end, but quite a bit of this tutorial is the result of knowledge accumulated throughout years. These instructions are not heavily footnoted, as they're more of user's guide than formal documentation. Many of the references can be found in other papers located at my website. If you need your own documentation I'd suggest checking out the books in my bibliography. They're excellent sources, and are good foundation books for anybody interested in knowing more about the period.

Washing Your Fabric

The general rule is to treat your fabric before sewing the way you want to treat the garment after it's made. If you do not wash your fabric before it's sewn, you cannot wash it afterwards without unexpected results.

Linen

Linen doesn't usually shrink much, when washing. Washing and drying will soften it, and get the sizing out. I usually wash and dry on hot at least once before sewing. Once a garment or item is sewn, I usually wash on cold and delicate, and hang to dry. Repeated trips through the dryer, though it makes linen buttery soft, will reduce the life of your garment. Sometimes I will dry the linen for 10 minutes in the dryer, and hang to complete drying. You can also iron the linen while it is still damp, saving time with the steam iron.

Wool

Wool can shrink considerably during a hot wash and dry cycle. Wool is tricky, because it can sometimes shrink multiple times. A lot depends on the type of wool that you have. Worsted wools have a smooth finish and longer staple length. The individual fibers lay parallel and close to one another. When washed, worsted fabrics do not tend to shrink and full up very much, although there are always exceptions. Woolens, on the other hand, are fuzzy, and have a short staple length. Some woolens will shrink quite a bit in a hot wash and dry. When working with wool, especially woolens, it's a good idea to buy an extra yard or two of fabric to account for shrinkage.

How you pre-treat your wool is somewhat a matter of personal preference. Washing and drying a lightweight gabardine can often remove an undesirable "suit-y" and shiny finish. An unwashed flannel can sometimes look shiny, and usually benefits from at least a hot wash. Both flannels and meltons, or coatweight wools, can be made somewhat water resistant when fullled with a hot wash, agitation, and a hot dry cycle.

I prefer to buy with shrinkage and fulling in mind, wash on hot, and dry on hot. For subsequent washings, I use cold water, the gentlest cycle possible, and hang to dry. I usually do not have problems with additional shrinkage on my worsted gowns, but machine washing is always a risk. I had one gown that I machine washed multiple times, and after two years, it finally decided to get four inches shorter. Hand wash gently in a bathtub, with minimum agitation, to be on the safe side. Some people use a little baby shampoo, or high quality lingerie cleaner.

Silk

Some silks can be washed, some cannot. Your best bet is to cut a 6"x6" square, wash it, perhaps dry it, and see how it comes out. Keep an eye on the finish, the shrinkage, and the color fastness.

Continue to [Pre-Project Prepping 3: Evening the Sides](#), or skip to [Pre-Project Prepping 2: Transferring to Paper](#)

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