

Where Is My Waist?

This—and other mysteries of fit—resolved | BY SUSAN LAZEAR

Experienced sewers know accurate measurements are the basis for good garment fit. It is, therefore, unfortunate that the measurement methods described by the sewing pattern industry, and even some fitting books, can be difficult to perform precisely, and the reference points can bear little relation to the way individuals prefer to wear clothes. Also, the further your figure varies from the pattern or garment industry's standardized figure, the more difficult it is to take accurate measurements. For better garment fit, I think it's time to reconsider where and how you take certain body measurements. Throughout my years teaching fashion

design and working with patternmaking software, I have witnessed the results of guesswork and inaccuracy when it comes to where and how measurements are taken. Based on my experiences, I believe that measuring methods should be flexible, not static.

Understanding how your body relates to the industry's standard figure is vital to assessing pattern fit and making alterations, as well as to create flattering visual illusions through garment fit. Measuring to accommodate your figure's proportions or to suit your fit preferences yields a better result than relying on the industry's standard methods.

There are six measurements you may

want to rethink. I'll review the standard approach for each and explore alternative or refined measuring methods that better accommodate your actual body to help you achieve your best fit.

Taking the most accurate measurements requires patience, some knowledge, and a capable assistant. Compare your previous measurements with the ones taken using these methods, and then refer to your favorite fitting source to make the best alterations.

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Accurate shoulder width

Shoulder width affects how a garment hangs, as well as how its sleeve fits. To take the most precise shoulder-width measurement, you must identify your shoulder point: the spot that marks the transition between your shoulder and your arm. Fitting books direct you to find the bone at the end of each shoulder and to measure between them.

Problem

The shoulder point is not always easy to find, nor is it always in the same position on every person; so the shoulder-width measurement is often taken inaccurately. Each body is a little different, and injury, muscle tone, flesh, and various other factors can interfere with locating the shoulder point.

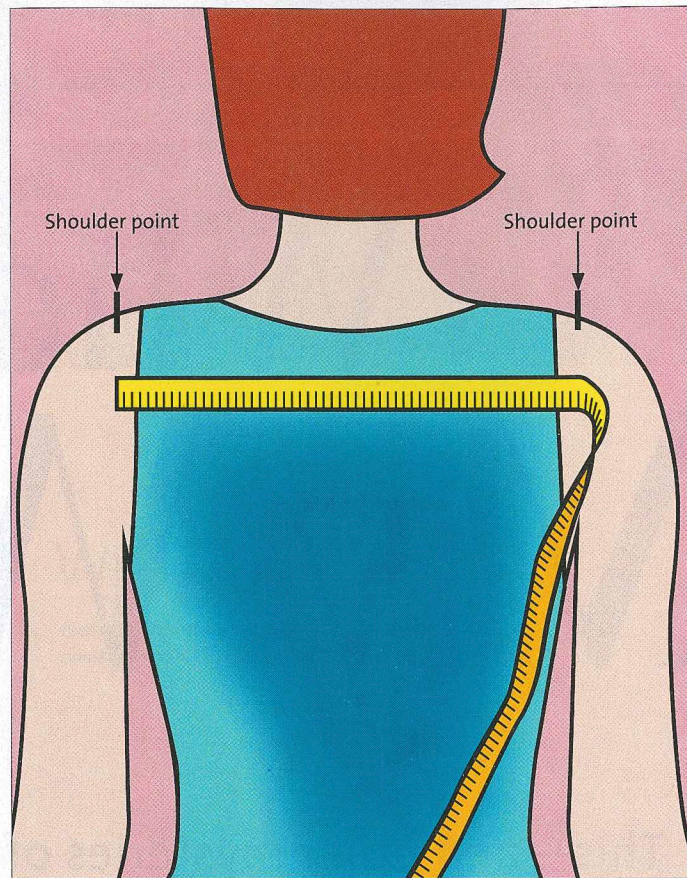
Solution

Here are a few tricks for locating your shoulder point:

- Press firmly along the top of your shoulder and feel for a slight divot, just before the shoulder curves into the upper arm. It may be more toward the front or more toward the back.
- Place the flat side of a ruler on your shoulder and tilt it left and right, back and forth. Search for the divot in the “sweet spot” where the ruler sits flat at the end of your shoulder.
- Or simply visualize where the seam of a set-in sleeve should rest on your shoulder.

If you still can't precisely locate your shoulder point, establish it just inward from the sloping join of the shoulder to the upper arm.

Measure between the shoulder points, front and back. On most people, the front measurement is 1 inch narrower than the back, due to posture.



Tip

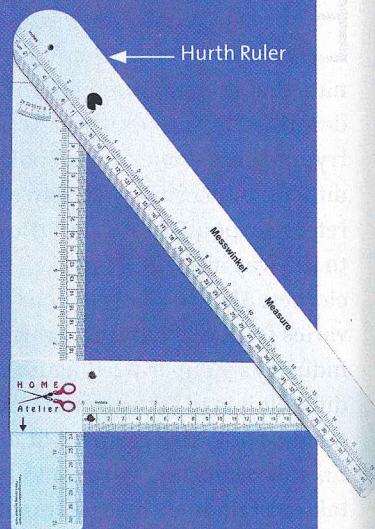
CREATE AN ILLUSION.

For techniques on how to camouflage or enhance your figure assets through garment fit, read “Get the Ideal Silhouette,” *Threads* no. 162.

MEASURING AIDS

For the greatest accuracy, use one of these specially designed measuring tools:

- The Hurth Ruler (Cochenille.com) is a two-armed ruler with an articulated joint. A smaller sliding ruler attaches to one arm. It makes it easier to take certain depth and width measurements, such as armhole depth.
- Lorraine Henry's Two Easy Tapes, part of the Measuring Made Easy kit (Conselle.com), is a double-ended tape measure with zero in the middle. A companion tape slides onto it, so you can measure three different lengths at once.
- A carpenter's level with an integrated ruler ensures measurements are parallel to or perpendicular to the floor. They are available at hardware stores.



Correct shoulder slope

Fitting books tell you to determine shoulder slope by measuring diagonally from your center-front waistline over your bust to the shoulder point.

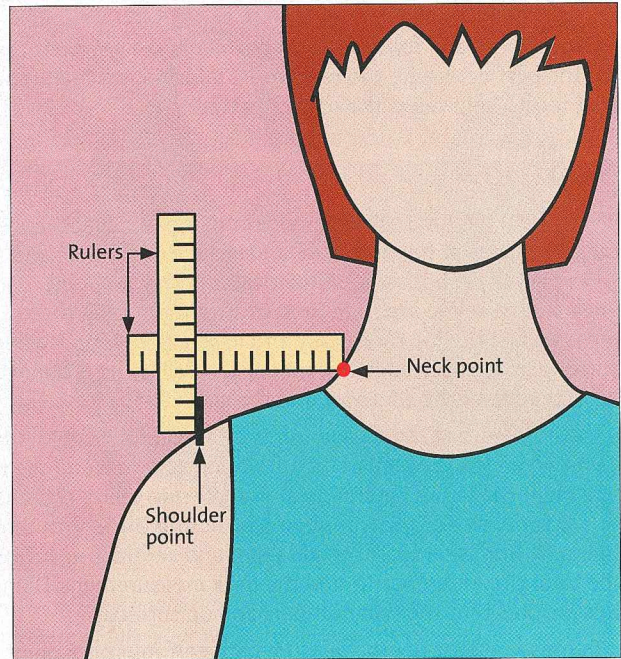
Problem

This measurement's accuracy depends greatly on how you hold the tape, the shape and fullness of your bust, your bra's fit, and where you place your waistline—but it's very important. The shoulder seam's slope dictates how a garment hangs on your body and affects how the fabric's cross-grain drapes. If the garment's shoulder slope doesn't match your shoulder slope, the garment will exhibit either folds of excess fabric or straining at the shoulder seams.

Solution

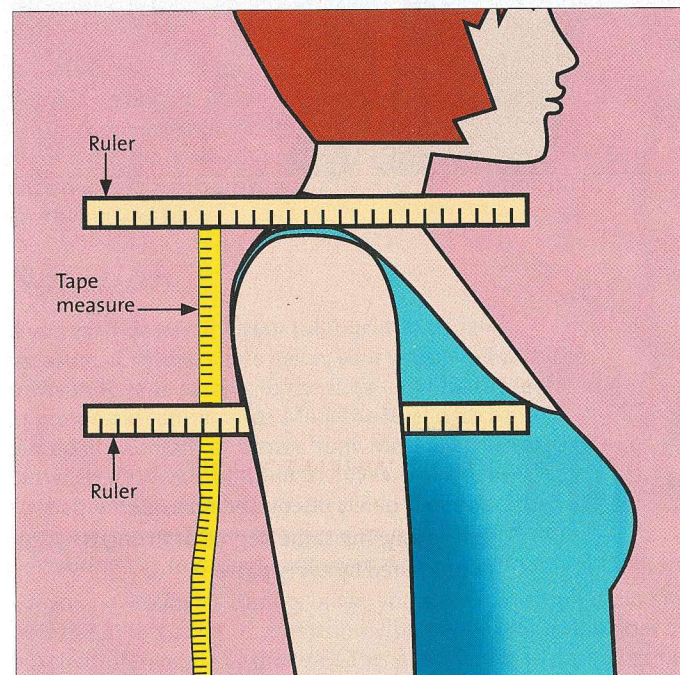
Have a friend hold a rigid ruler parallel to the floor with one end at your neck point and the other over your shoulder point. Make sure the ruler is parallel to the floor, not resting on your shoulder. Use another ruler to measure between the first ruler's end and your shoulder point; note the measurement.

Although an accurate shoulder slope is important for proper fit, you can visually square a very sloped shoulder by filling the gap between body and garment with a shoulder pad. To do this, measure with a shoulder pad in place. If one shoulder is higher than the other, use the higher shoulder for your pattern changes, and elevate the lower shoulder with a pad to keep the visual effect symmetrical.



Improved armhole depth

Typically, the armhole is measured by wrapping a tape around your shoulder socket. From this, you're supposed to determine the best shape and depth for a bodice's armhole.



Problem

Accuracy is difficult to achieve. How the tape measure rounds the curve, how far below your underarm it rests, the armhole shape you prefer, and how much ease you prefer all play a role in the results. I have spent weeks helping students perfect basic sloper patterns, and the biggest sticking point is always the armhole depth. Armhole depth affects ease of movement and silhouette.

Solution

I suggest taking a much simpler, vertical armhole depth measurement, which is easier to translate to a pattern.

Tuck a rigid ruler under your arm and parallel to the floor; it should gently touch the crease of your armpit. Place another ruler at your shoulder point, also parallel to the floor. Have a friend measure the distance between the two rulers.

A fitted garment's armhole depth is generally 1 inch greater than the body's armhole depth, while less-fitted garments tend to have deeper armholes.

Better bust measuring

Sewing and fitting books generally tell you to take a single circumference measurement by running the tape around your bust at its fullest point.

Problem

Most patterns and ready-to-wear garments are symmetrical front to back, but women's bodies usually are not. For the best bodice fit, you need more information than total bust circumference. Although you need to know that too, to help select the correct pattern size.

Solution

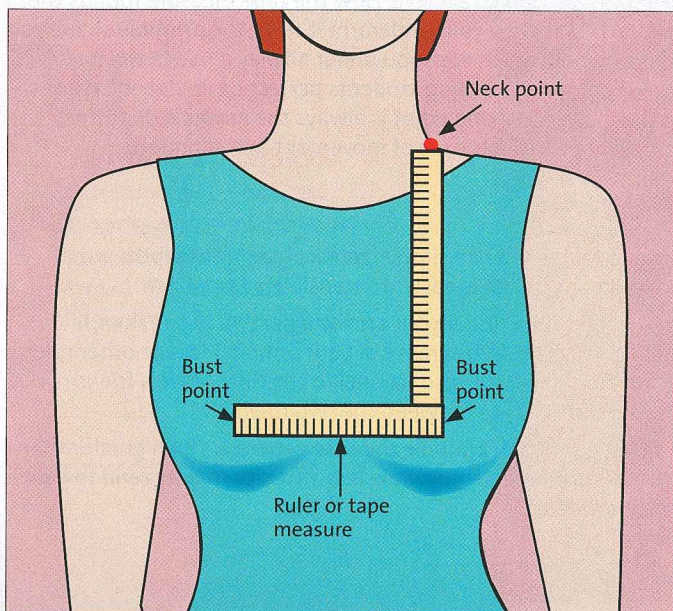
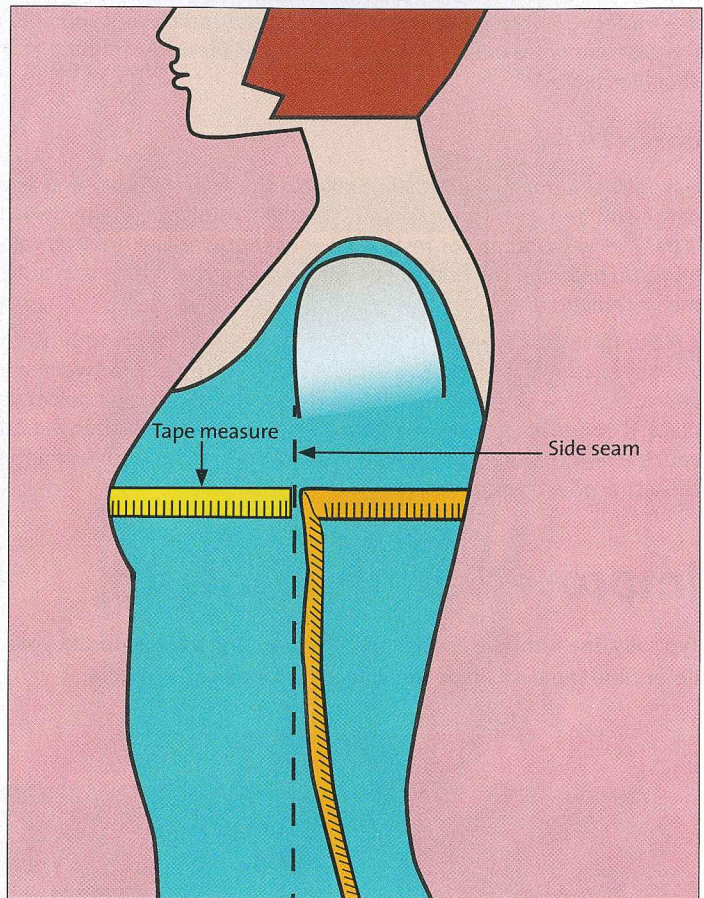
Break down the total circumference into front and back measurements at full-bust level, and include bust depth and span.

First, establish both side-seam locations on your body. They are the key to accurate pattern alteration using these measurements. Stand naturally and have a friend mark a line starting at the back edge of your ear and following it down the neck, the top of the shoulder, and the side of your torso.

Place one end of the measuring tape at your left side seam, continue across the bust at its fullest point and around the back, and meet the tape's beginning at the left side seam. This enables you to separate the measurements by noting the length across the front from side seam to side seam and subtracting it from the total circumference to find the back measurement. Doing this ensures that the two numbers add up correctly.

To measure bust depth, measure between your neck point and your bust point. Compare your bust-depth measurement to the pattern's bust depth (measured from the neck point to the bust point dot, if provided). If the pattern's neckline is not a high round neckline, you'll need to measure your bust depth starting where the pattern's neck point rests on your body (instead of from your natural neck point) to accurately compare the measurements.

Measure between your bust points to find your bust span.



Tip

KNOW WHEN TO HOLD 'EM.

Use your newly discovered measurements judiciously. The same degree of fitting is not required by every pattern.

Preferred waist placement

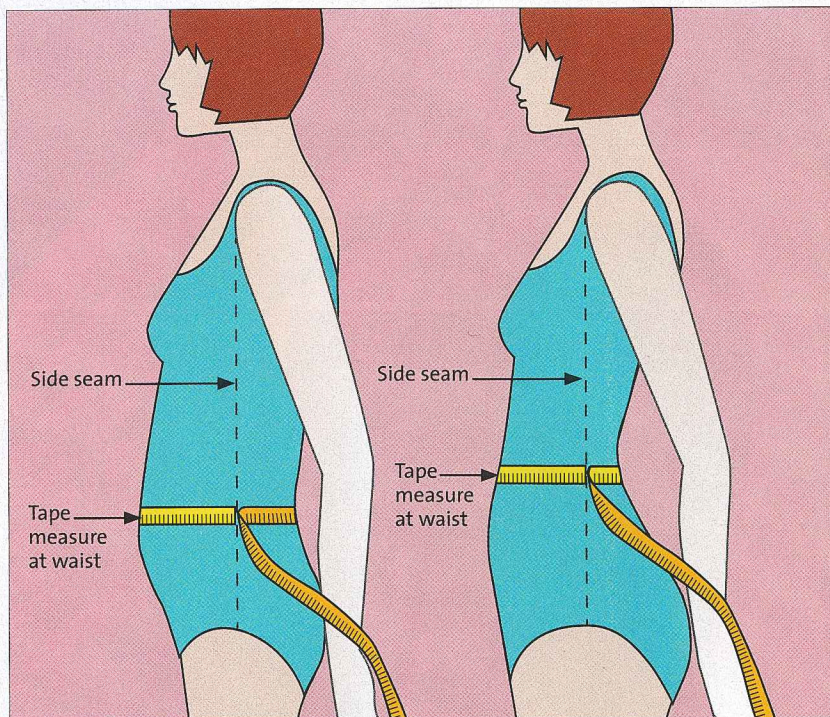
The waistline is said to be the smallest part of the torso between the bust and the hips. It is where an elastic or string tied snugly around the waist naturally wants to settle or where an indentation is created by bending your torso to the side.

Problem

This description may help some sewers locate their waists, but many others have figures that differ so drastically from the standard that the only things they find are confusion and frustration. For others, the waist is a moving target that shifts with the demands of fashion (e.g., low-rise styles), weight gain or loss, weight redistribution, or simply varying fit preferences.

Solution

Measure your waist wherever you want to locate your waist. It is OK if that differs from where the pattern industry thinks it should be. Regardless of where you prefer to locate your waistline, always note its level in relation to other measurement points, such as bust level, to assist in pattern alteration. Decide where to take your waist measurement based on your figure and any fitting or design strategies you might want to use for comfort, camouflage, or to visually lengthen or shorten your torso. For even greater fit accuracy, take the waist measurement in two parts (front and back) using the method previously described for measuring the bust circumference.



Regardless of your figure type, such as oval (left) or pear (right), you decide where to take your waistline measurement.

Exact hip circumference

According to conventional wisdom, the hip circumference measurement should be taken 7 inches below your center-front waist if you are petite and 9 inches below the waist if you are of average height.

Problem

Hip levels vary from person to person. Some women's hip fullness is set high, others low. Heavy thighs and prominent derrieres also sometimes must be included. Determining full-hip level is just as important as hip circumference because a pattern's hipline is often a transition point for styling and fit.

Solution

If you can't determine your full-hip level visually, measure at several spots below your waist—all with the measuring tape parallel to the floor—to find the level of greatest circumference. Mark the level with a pin placed horizontally at center front. Measure the distance between your waistline and the pin and note the length so that you can adjust the pattern hip circumference to the correct level. This is another area that benefits from measuring the front and back separately in addition to finding the total circumference.

If you have a lower-tummy bulge, you can avoid emphasizing it by placing a ruler over the fullest point of your tummy, perpendicular to the floor and measuring the hip circumference over the ruler. This prevents fitted garments from cupping under a prominent tummy.

