

Sharpen Your Pencil Skirt

Pointers for a figure-enhancing garment

BY ERICA BUNKER

A pencil skirt can be your secret weapon for when you want to look confident and powerful on the job, sexy on a night out, or chic and casual on the weekend. In fact, I believe a pencil skirt is a wardrobe staple. You may think you must be 6 feet tall or rail thin to wear a pencil skirt, but this isn't true. With the right fit and proportions, a pencil skirt flatters practically any figure. We'll take a look at how a pencil skirt's fit and design features can be adjusted to suit a variety of body shapes, from petite to generously sized.

A pencil skirt should have a snug, not tight, fit so take the time to fit yours. Luckily, a basic pencil skirt is simple in design, with relatively few details to work around. Eventually you can add seamlines and other design features as desired. Let's see how to approach making the sleekest skirt for your figure.

FOCUS ON FIT

A lot of women wear pencil skirts either too large and boxy or too tight. Pencil skirts are meant to be close-

fitting, with a smooth and narrow silhouette. You want to avoid fit faux pas such as a gaping waist, tightness across the hips and thighs, inaccurately placed darts or seamlines, puckering, and pulling. If you see horizontal lines pulling across the hips or unsightly bumps and rolls, your skirt is too tight. If you see areas that are loose or baggy, your skirt is too large. I'll show you how to choose the right pattern size and what to look for in a flattering fit.

WORK WITH DESIGN FEATURES

To sew a pencil skirt that best suits your figure, consider design elements such as shaping details, waistline treatments, overall length, and fabrics. You may discover one magical combination, or several, that work for you. I encourage you to experiment with styles. You'll find these skirts generally quick to construct and versatile to wear, so you can amass a closetful, ready for every occasion.

Erica Bunker is a Mood Sewing Network blogger and a Bernina brand ambassador. EricaBunker.com.

Pencil Skirt

Get an A+ in style by designing and sewing the perfect pencil skirt for your figure.

Pattern: Vogue 1324 (discontinued).
Fabric: stretch cotton sateen.

Find the right size

Selecting a pattern size is easy. Start with the three measurements below, and pick a size based on your largest circumference measurement.

Waist

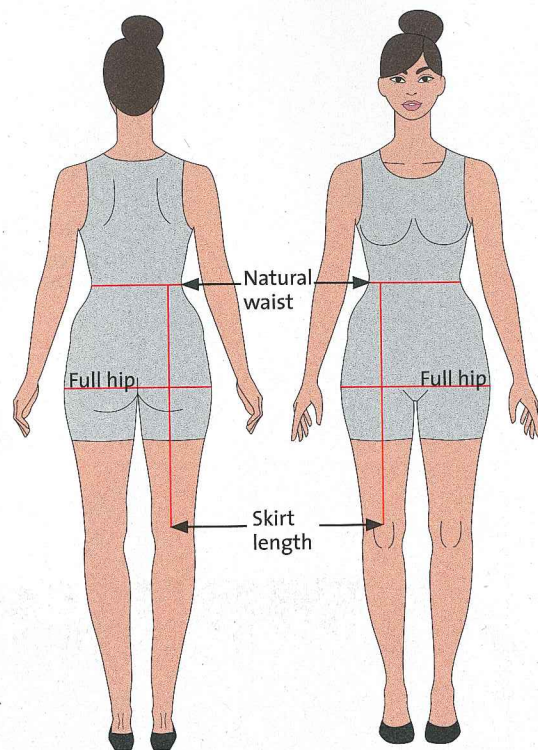
Your natural waist is above your belly button, even though most contemporary clothing waistbands are placed lower. Find your natural waist by bending to the side; the crease that forms indicates your waist. Don't cheat by sucking in your belly.

Hips

Measure around the fullest part of the hips; this may be anywhere from hip-bone level to your upper thighs.

Length

Measure from your natural waist to the desired hemline to determine the length. Unless you have a specific length in mind, I suggest starting with a skirt that finishes at the top of the kneecap. Measure in front and back.



CHOOSE A TEXTILE

For a great-fitting skirt, I like medium-weight wovens with a little stretch for comfort. Look for a small percentage of spandex, and try the options below; you'll find some for every season.

Spandex-blend suitings

In wool, viscose, or blends, stretch suitings confer a professional look. Gabardine is sharp, houndstooth and herringbone are traditional, though you'll find other suiting choices beyond these.

Casual fabrics

Cotton/spandex twill, stretch denim, and stretch linen in a medium to heavy weight are ideal for off-duty and weekend skirts.

Stretch-woven linings

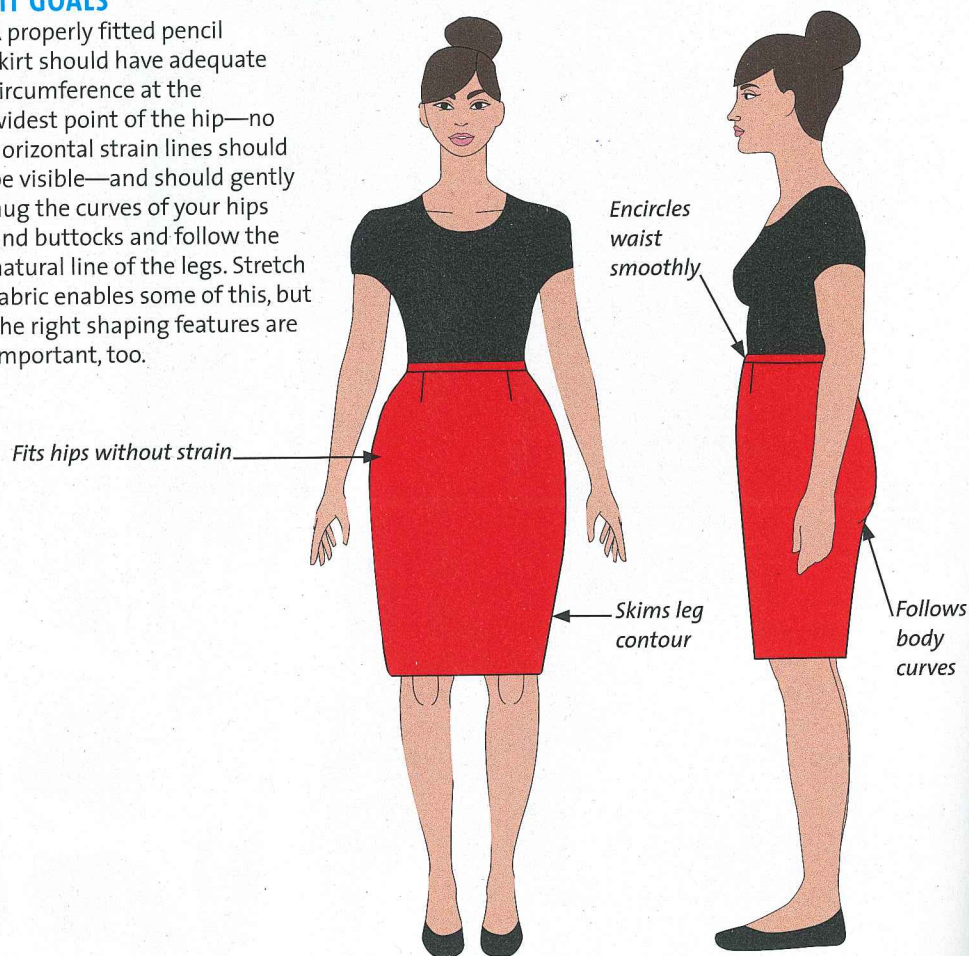
If you plan to line your skirt (and I recommend you do), use a stretch fabric. Silk with a small percentage of spandex is luxurious, and polyester-spandex charmeuse works well and is more affordable.

Finesse the fit

A pencil skirt should not look like a straight tube or a box. Waist and hip shaping are the keys to a slimmer look, no matter what your shape.

FIT GOALS

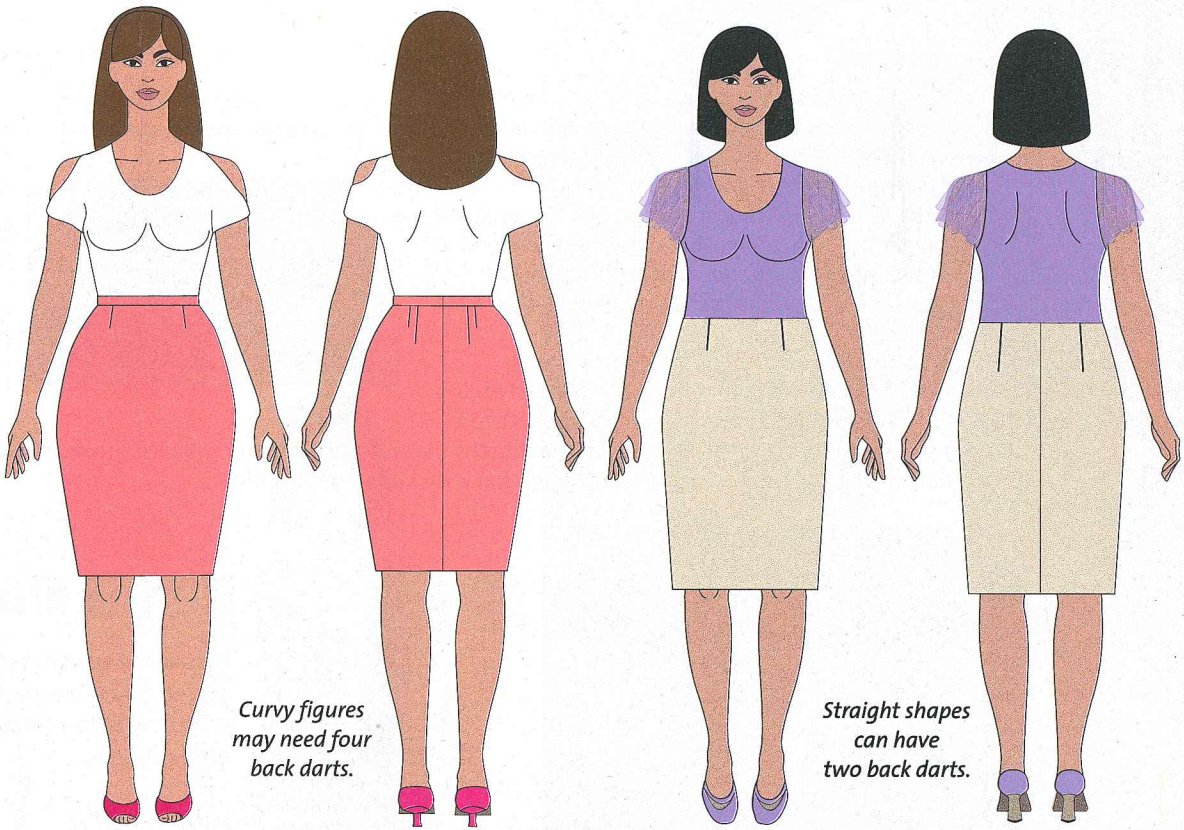
A properly fitted pencil skirt should have adequate circumference at the widest point of the hip—no horizontal strain lines should be visible—and should gently hug the curves of your hips and buttocks and follow the natural line of the legs. Stretch fabric enables some of this, but the right shaping features are important, too.



DARTS

Waist darts are the most common shaping detail on a pencil skirt. They accommodate fullness in the belly and hips. A typical pattern includes two front darts and two to four back darts. However, you can change these: Increase or decrease the dart number, length, and depth to suit your shape.

A round derriere may need up to three darts per side. A full abdomen may need no darts at all in front, or only short, narrow darts. Keep in mind that multiple smaller darts distribute shaping over a wider area than one deep dart; consider dividing a single deep dart into two narrower ones.



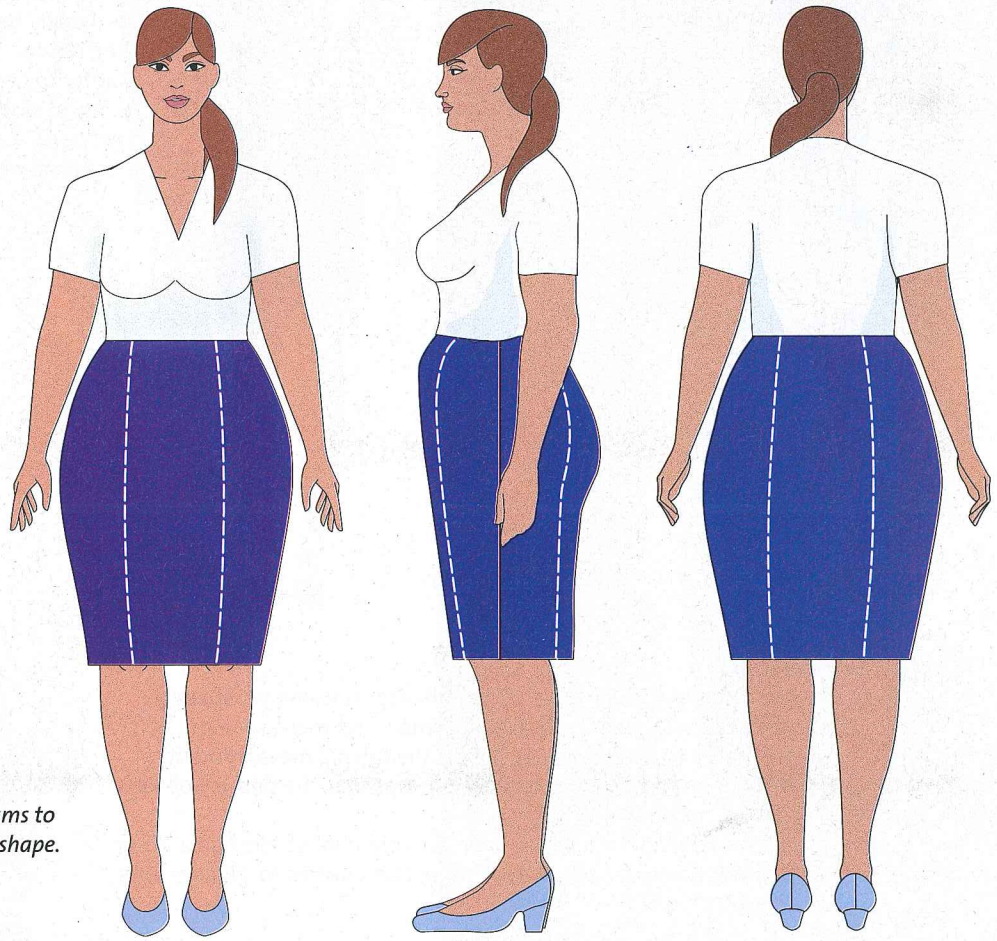
Curvy figures may need four back darts.

Straight shapes can have two back darts.

PRINCESS SEAMS

Princess seams also are used in pencil skirts to create shape. They begin at the waist and travel over the fullest parts of the belly and buttocks. Princess seams give you more opportunities to refine the skirt's fit. You have many places to take in or let out if needed.

The curvier your figure, and greater the difference between the waist and hip measurements, the more helpful princess seams are in fitting. Adjust their placement to create the best look for you.



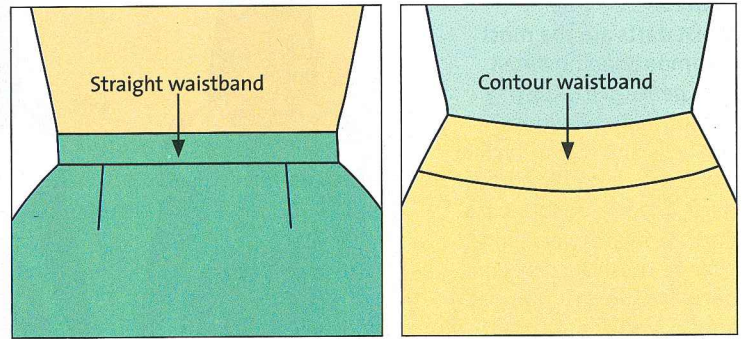
Use princess seams to contour a curvy shape.

WAISTBAND OPTIONS

Your pencil skirt's waistband should have a snug fit yet feel comfortable. You can achieve this by basing the waistband on the waist measurement and the amount of wearing ease you prefer. The band can be straight or curved.

A straight waistband fits best when it's at the natural waist. It often is 2 inches wide, but you can make it narrower if you prefer. To reduce bulk in a straight waistband, cut a separate facing rather than cutting the band with a fold at the upper edge. Use a lightweight fabric for the facing.

A curved, or contoured, waistband is a great option for a curvier shape. It can be worn lower than the natural waist and is shaped to conform closely to the body. If you're shortwaisted, this is a flattering and comfortable option: It visually lengthens the torso, and doesn't squeeze the relatively small area between bust and hips. A simple waistline facing, with no band at all, is another easy, streamlined option.

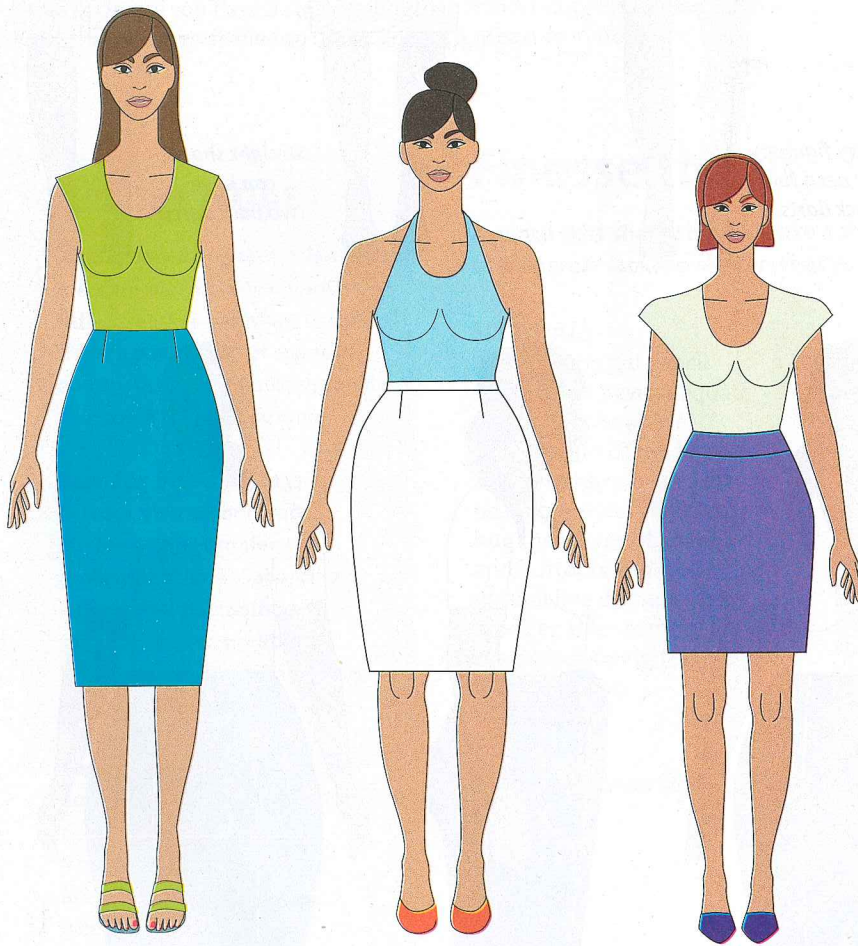


Refine the proportions

Hemlines and styles change with every new fashion season. You can experiment with the latest trends, or stick with the details and proportions that look best on you.

HEM LENGTH

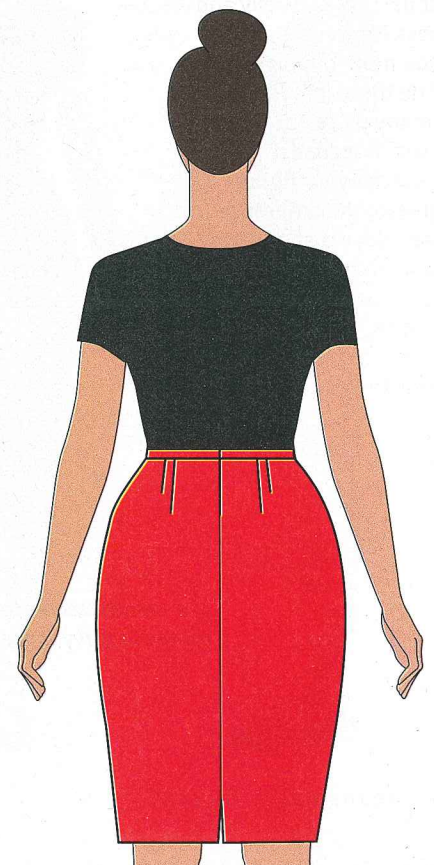
The classic and universally flattering length for a pencil skirt is brushing the top of the kneecap. This is usually the narrowest point of the leg and creates the illusion of longer, leaner legs. Petite women may prefer to hem their skirts a couple of inches above the knee to elongate the lower leg. Tall, leggy women can get away with a below-the-knee skirt, but this is a less flattering length for shorter figures.



HEM CIRCUMFERENCE

Tapering the skirt from hip level to the hem further enhances the slim yet shapely look a great pencil skirt delivers. My general rule of thumb is to taper to a hem circumference that is 2 inches to 4 inches smaller than the full hip measurement; taper less for narrower hips and more for larger. This ensures that the skirt is not too restrictive, so you can enter and exit a car comfortably.

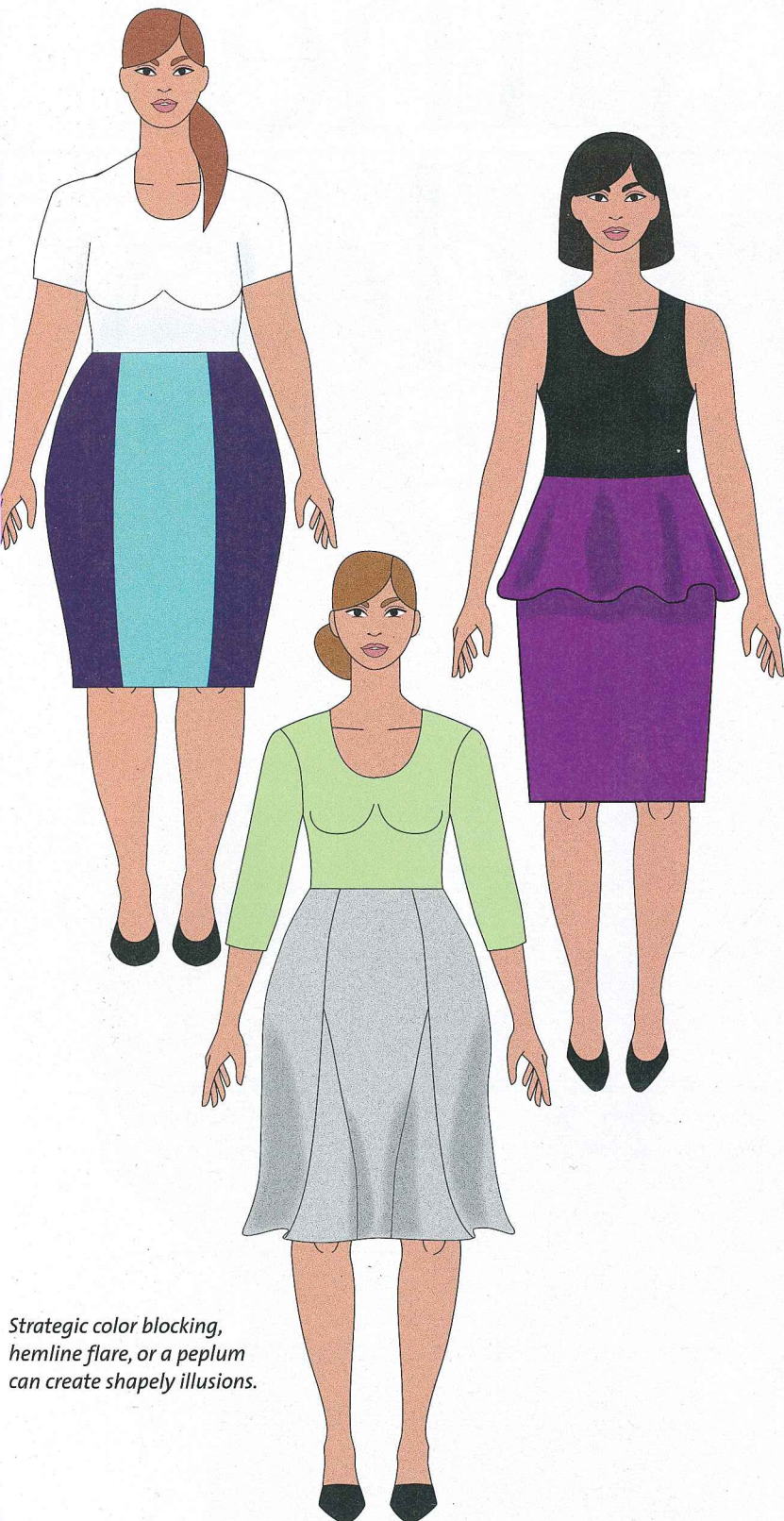
Avoid making a hobble skirt that restricts your natural, confident stride. Add a slit or vent for greater range of motion and style. The slit should be 3 inches to 4 inches long.



BALANCING DETAILS

To create the effect of a slimmer silhouette, try color-blocking a princess-line skirt, using a dark color for the side panels and a lighter or brighter hue for the center.

Add or conceal curves with design features. A peplum hides a round belly; a bit of flare or strategic godets at the hem balance width at the hip or waist.



Strategic color blocking, hemline flare, or a peplum can create shapely illusions.



A figure-hugging skirt that traces the body's curves without clinging can flatter any shape.