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p. 78

SEW A SHEATH DRESS

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Streamlined simplicity makes the sheath dress work in many variations. Left, Butterick 4386 in wool crepe; and right, a pattern drafted by the author, in silk and cotton bouclé with a beaded neckline embellishment.

Fabrics: Mendel Goldberg Fabrics

Sew a Classic Sheath Dress

Create a custom version of this stylish silhouette **BY HELEN HAUGHEY**

The sheath dress, so named for the way it fits, gives definition to the waist, has a fitted skirt, and typically is sleeveless and knee-length. Its popularity stems from its versatility. Pair it with a jacket and pumps for work and then transition it into eveningwear with jewelry and a flirty shoe. The sheath has been in style for decades. Jacqueline Kennedy was often seen in a sheath dress with a jacket and a pillbox hat. Summer or winter, it is a wardrobe staple.

I've found, however, that many women imagine only a slender model can wear a sheath dress. The silhouette is actually a wonderful choice for women of any size, because it skims the

body without adding visual bulk. In contrast, the "tent" looks found in many plus-size patterns and ready-to-wear garments aren't flattering, chic, or elegant, but a sheath dress always is.

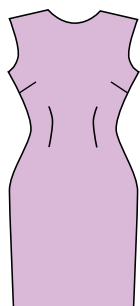
Here, I'll show you how to plan a stunning, custom sheath dress, starting with a commercial pattern, and finish it with couture details, so it will look wonderful and last longer. I want to show you that a carefully created sheath dress does, indeed, flatter every figure—and belong in every closet.

Helen Haughey sews couture garments in her St. Louis, Missouri, studio. To learn more, visit HelenHaugheyDesigns.com.

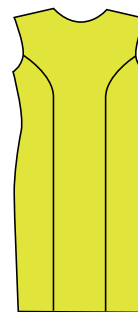
Start with a pattern

Choose a pattern with contour and bust darts or princess seams. You can also use a personalized fitting shell. Make a muslin and refine the fit. Once you've achieved a pleasing fit with the muslin, it becomes the pattern for your custom sheath dress, and the foundation for adding design details.

Contour and bust darts are good for figures with bust and hips of a similar circumference. Fitting the front or back from one piece can be done easily.



Princess seams are useful to fit figures with more difference between the bust and hip measurements. The seams and separate pieces on a princess-seam pattern provide more areas to adjust the fit. (For more on princess seams, see pages 46 to 51).



MY FAVORITES

Butterick 4386
Butterick 5554
McCall's 2401
McCall's 6028
Vogue 1237
Vogue 8146

Read the muslin

Make any pattern alterations you commonly need to fit your body before cutting the muslin. Cut 1-inch-wide seam allowances to allow room for alterations wherever needed. Cut a 3-inch-wide hem allowance. Omit the facings; your sheath dress will be lined edge to edge. Mark all notches, grainlines, and the seamlines.

Armhole placement: The armhole edge should follow the body crease formed when the arm is down. If the armhole extends beyond the crease, the fabric wads in the armhole. If the armhole falls short of the crease, the edge can cut into the body. A 1/4-inch adjustment to the armhole placement can give you a lot more comfort.

Dart placement: On a muslin with contour and bust darts, the dart points should be approximately 1 inch from the bust point.

Side-seam adjustment: The dress may be too loose or too tight at any point along the body. Let out or take in the side seams so that the garment skims the body. The side seams should run straight down the body's side. An ill fit makes them skew to the front or to the back.

Skirt shape and length: You can "peg" the dress slightly, tapering the skirt circumference 1 inch to 2 inches at the hemline. This further skims the body shape and draws the eye to the body's narrowest area. Leave enough circumference for the dress to slide up over your hips when you use the ladies' room. A traditional, generally flattering length is just above or below the knee; you can go shorter or longer, as long as it's comfortable for walking, sitting, and bending over.



Neckline shape and placement: Do you prefer a high or low neckline? Jewel, square, or V-neck, select a neckline that you like and that suits your face shape.

Drag lines: These creases indicate the need for loosening the side seam, or occasionally, a dart that is too large. Let out the seams or darts to achieve a smooth fit.

Fit at the hips: Walk and sit in the muslin. Make sure you have enough ease for comfortable movement but not too much. You want to skim your shape, neither hugging it nor creating a tent that hides it.

MATERIALS TO SELECT

FABRIC: For a fitted style, choose a medium- to firm-weave fabric. A loosely woven fabric requires careful handling and extra support, and even then may not hold its shape.

UNDERLINING: Underline the dress with silk organza or lightweight, finely woven cotton. This practice extends a garment's life, reduces wrinkling, and adds body. It is well worth the effort and expense.

LINING: Silk charmeuse and crepe de Chine are luxurious, comfortable linings. Lightweight cotton is suitable for cotton sheath dresses, as well.

Cut and construct

Careful construction is key for a long-wearing dress. The disassembled muslin is the pattern for the fabrics. Mark new seamlines and fitting adjustments before removing pins or basting.

1 Cut the underlining first. Use dressmaker's carbon to mark it with all stitching lines, notches, and grainlines. Next, cut the lining. Mark it with all stitching lines and notches as well. Finally, cut the fashion fabric, using the underlining as a pattern. If you choose silk organza as underlining, you can see the fabric through it and easily plan print placement.

2 With wrong sides together, pin the underlining pieces to the fashion fabric pieces. Hand-baste the underlining and fabric together along all seamlines.

3 Hand-baste the darts or princess seams. Then baste the dress front and back sections together. Try on the dress. The fashion fabric may need a subtle fit adjustment, as it behaves differently from the muslin. Apply the fitting adjustments to the lining as well.

4 Machine-stitch the darts or princess seams, the side seams, and the shoulder seams. Sew the construction seams in the dress and lining, leaving the seam for the zipper unstitched. Remove any basting stitches from the seams.

Tip

BASTE WITH SILK THREAD.

It is easily removed and does not mark the fabric if you iron over it.

You may think of the sheath dress as sleeveless, but the design works just as well in versions with sleeves. The purple wool crepe dress with embellished pockets is Butterick 4386.

Fabric: purple wool, Mendel Goldberg Fabrics



Invest time in the details

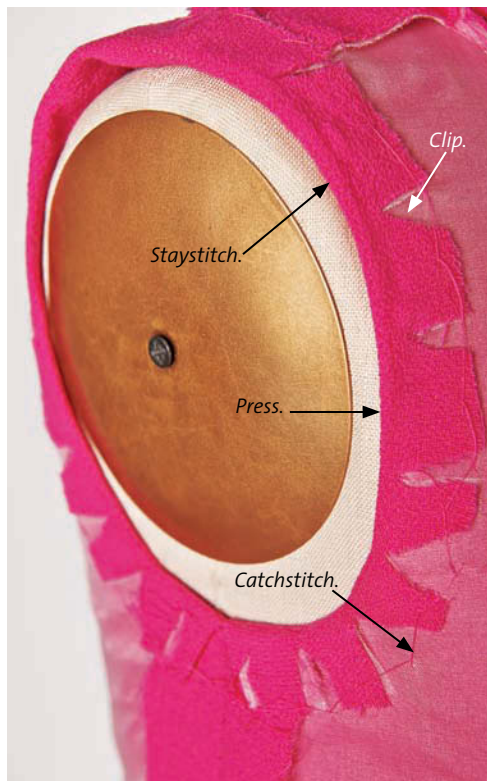
Extra effort is worth it to maintain the fit and achieve a couture-quality finish. For example, though it's easier to install an invisible zipper when the fabrics are flat, leaving the seam open allows last-minute fit adjustments. I also adjust and hand-sew the lining at the armhole.

1 Sew in an invisible zipper, after the dress construction. Place the zipper teeth $\frac{3}{8}$ inch below the neckline seam (or the armhole seam if the zipper is in the side seam). This placement allows room for a hook and eye at the top.

2 Sew the lining to the dress, right sides together, at the neckline only. Trim and grade the neckline seam allowance. Clip the seam allowance layers separately, so that the clips on the lining are between those on the fashion fabric and interlining. Understitch close to the seam. Press the neckline well over a ham or sleeve board. Turn back the lining along the zipper opening. Slipstitch it to the zipper tape.



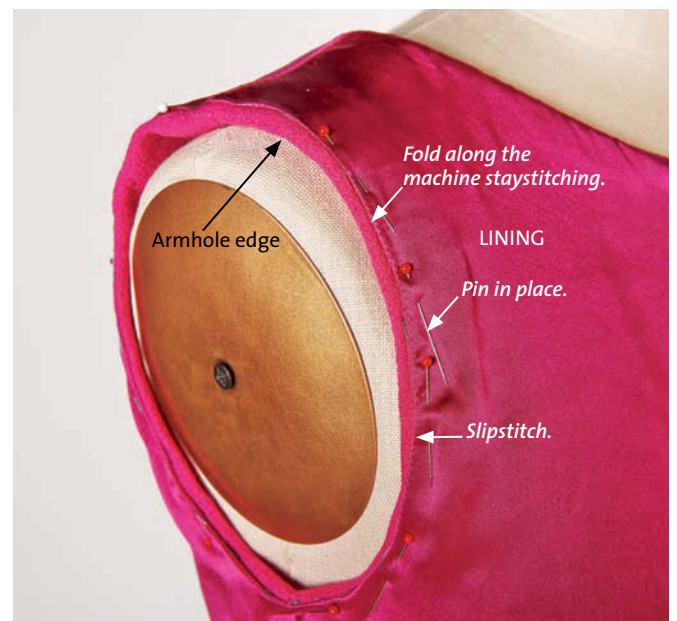
3 Staystitch around the armhole. Clip the seam allowance to within $\frac{3}{16}$ inch of the staystitching. Fold the staystitching to just within the armhole. Hand-baste the seam allowance to the dress interior. Press the fold, then catchstitch the seam allowance to the underlining.



4 Pin the lining smooth against the finished armhole edge. Mark the seamline with pins or hand basting along the actual armhole. It is rarely the same as the original seamline. Machine-staystitch the lining armhole $\frac{1}{8}$ inch outside the marked seamline, creating a slightly wider seam allowance.



5 Trim the lining seam allowance to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch and clip it. Fold and press the lining seam allowance toward the dress along the staystitching. Pin the lining to the dress with the fold $\frac{1}{8}$ inch from the armhole edge. Hand-slipstitch the lining to the dress around the armhole.



Hand-sew the hem

Enlist a friend's help to mark the hemline as you wear the dress. The lining is attached to the dress at the hem to prevent the lining from peeking out during wear.

1 Try on the dress and mark the hemline. Hand-baste along the hem fold. Fold the hem allowance to the wrong side. Press the hemline fold, and then trim the hem allowance to 2 inches. Leave the underlining the same length as the dress fabric.

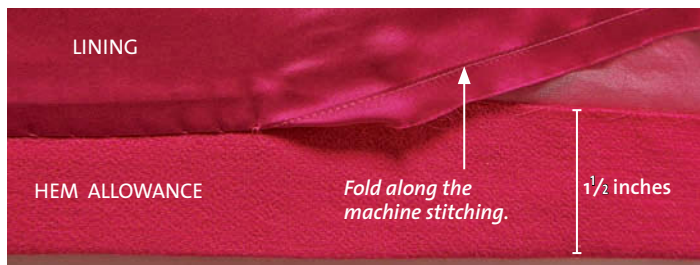
2 Hand-stitch the dress hem.

If the dress fabric does not ravel, the raw edge can be catchstitched in place to the underlining. If the fabric ravels, finish the raw edge by serging, zigzagging, or with a hand whipstitch.

Then catchstitch the finished edge to the underlining.

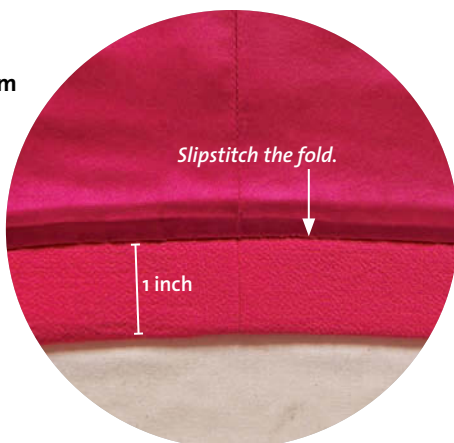


3 Hang up the dress, or place it on a dress form. Trim the lining at the dress hemline. Sew a straight machine stitch $\frac{1}{2}$ inch from the cut edge. Use the stitching as a guide to fold the lining's hem allowance toward the underlining.



4 Slipstitch the lining fold to the dress hem allowance.

Place the fold on the dress hem allowance $\frac{1}{2}$ inches from the dress hemline and pin, matching seams. Slipstitch in place. Smooth the lining over the stitching to form a $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch fold. Press lightly.



A "pegged" hem narrows the sheath dress below the hips, following the body's contours for a flattering look. Make one in a fabric and length you love, and the dress will be a versatile favorite.

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