

How to Correct Sleeve and Armhole Fit

*A tutorial, designed, written and illustrated by Dawn Cloake
using PatternMaker Software*

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Introduction

Many people can buy *RTW garments in 'their size' and have perfectly satisfactory results. The same can be said for commercial paper patterns. When our body size and shape falls into the 'average' category we should experience little, if any, difficulty in sewing a sleeve into an armhole. Yet sleeves and the armholes into which they fit present more difficulties than almost any other aspect of garment design and construction. One cannot be isolated from the other.

Most commercial paper patterns present no problems if used according to the instructions and it is usually what we do with them when altering them in preparation for cutting the fabric or changing the cut garment during and after fittings that causes problems.

These patterns are unable to take into account the many different shapes and idiosyncracies of the human body in the size ranges they cover so even a perfectly balanced sleeve in its armhole can look fine on a garment stand but wrong when worn.

Many problems occur as a result of taking incorrect measurements to check against the pattern before cutting the fabric or of not understanding how much wearing ease is necessary and where it should be located.

Trying to solve such problems at the fitting or sewing stages is like 'shutting the gate after the horse has bolted.' It's too late. We have to go back to checking measurements, altering the pattern and recutting. The time and energy could be better spent.

This short tutorial is part of a group of related tutorials that address sleeve and armhole problems and only deals with bagginess in the front armhole when caused by sloping shoulders. Every figure is unique and there may be other causes for what appear to be similar problems. These will be discussed in other tutorials.

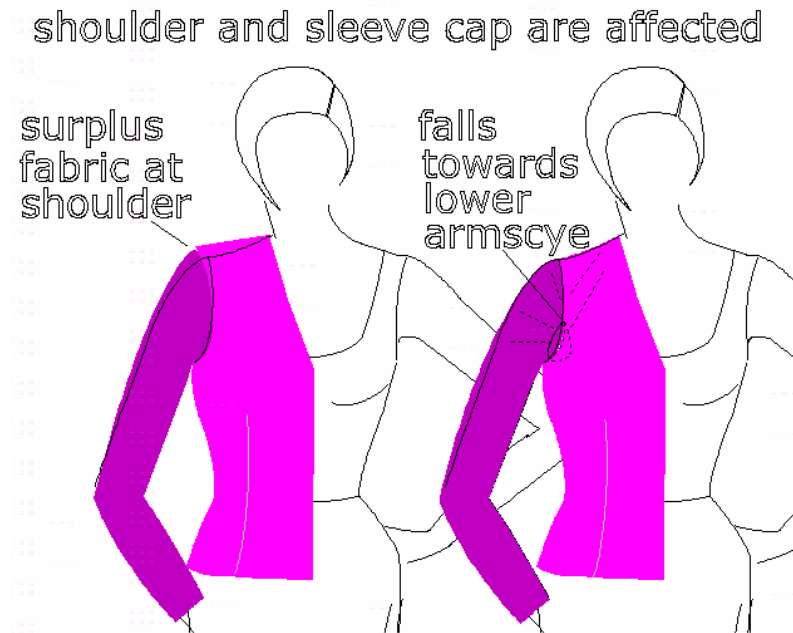
Dawn Cloake, March 2008

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Bagginess in lower front armhole due to sloping shoulders

If the bagginess appears in both the sleeve and the bodice, as shown in the purple jacket below, then both the bodice and the sleeve pattern need to be altered.

This problem can occur when the shoulders of the body slope more than average. Pattern pieces for both the bodice and the sleeve can be adjusted by the same amount to reduce the height or a shoulder pad can be inserted to fill the gap.



Left: amount of surplus fabric at the shoulder and upper arm.

Right: when the garment shoulder seam rests on the body shoulder the surplus fabric falls towards the lower armhole in the bodice and sleeve.

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Bagginess in lower front armhole due to sloping shoulders

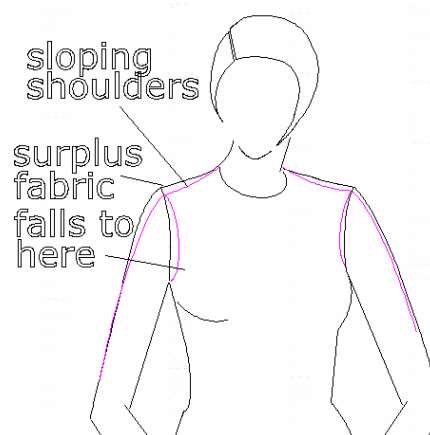
The purple line indicates the sloping shoulder of the body. Using an 'average size' commercial paper pattern, a gap would occur. The shoulder seam of the bodice would fall until it finds somewhere to remain, i.e., in the lower armhole.

Sloping shoulders:

The top of the sleevehead and the bodice shoulders are too high at front and back on an erect figure.

A rounded back uses some of the surplus both on the sleevehead and the back bodice, in which case only the front shoulder of the pattern needs adjustment.

Sloping shoulders on an erect figure



The solution depends on whether you want to have the garment fitted to the sloping shoulders, thus emphasising the slope, or to disguise them with the use of shoulder pads or to build them up in some other way.

Some suggestions:

- Creating a design feature such as epaulettes (straps of double fabric plus interfacing = three extra thicknesses of fabric) as used on safari jackets.
- A yoke of double fabric thickens up the shoulder area but the front yoke seam should be horizontal, not slanted, and taken a little below the front neckline rather than into the side neckline. This emphasises the horizontal across the whole bodice. A quilted or tucked yoke or epaulette is even more effective.
- Wide collars can also do a certain amount to disguise sloping shoulders.

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Establishing how much to reduce shoulder and sleevehead

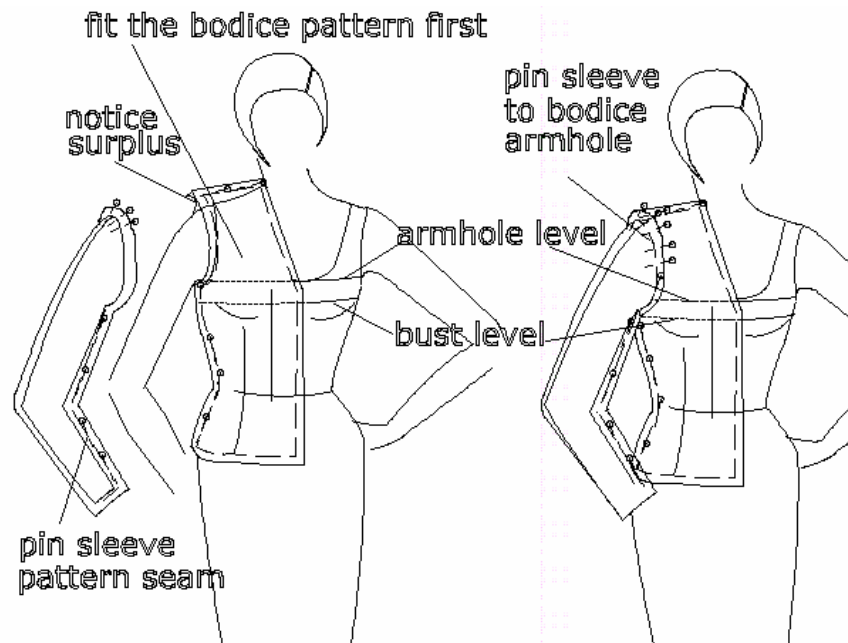
Pin the bodice pattern together on the fitting (sewing) lines.

Pin the sleeve seam together.

Try the bodice pattern on. This will show how much needs to be reduced at the shoulder.

Study this first, take it off and pin the sleeve into the bodice armhole.

Try on again. It is awkward trying on a paper pattern but it helps to establish how much surplus height there is in the bodice shoulder and cap of the sleeve. Measure and mark the amount to be removed on both bodice and sleeve. However small, it will make a big difference to the fit and the appearance of the garment. Do not over-fit or the armscye will be too tight.



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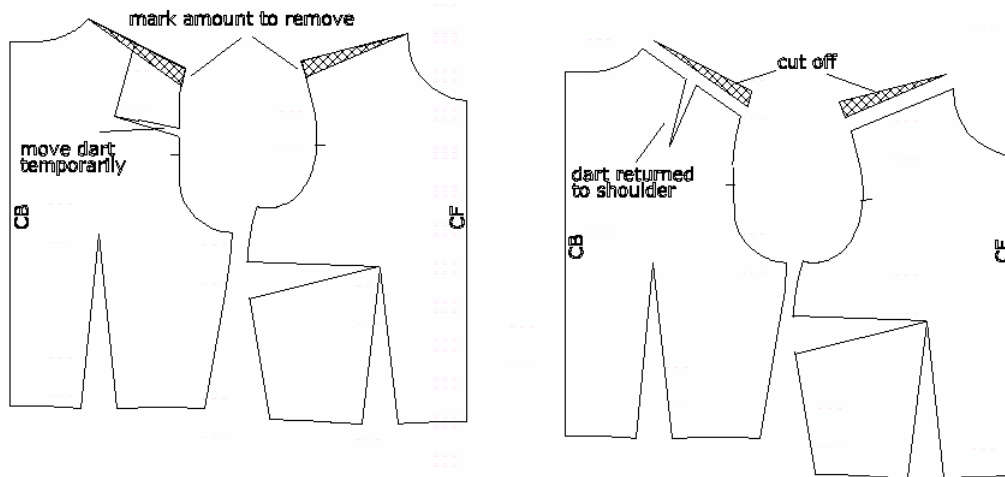
Correcting a commercial pattern to fit the shoulders:

If possible, work without seam allowances. They get in the way and can confuse measurements. Cut them off or fold them back. If they are not marked on your pattern pieces, use the sewing notches as a guide and draw the sewing (fitting) lines on, then fold them out of the way. Remember to mark both the armhole and the sleevehead notches. If you work with blocks there will be no seam allowances as these are added at the last stage of pattern cutting. They must be replaced after altering the pattern before using the pattern to cut out in fabric.

How to alter the pattern pieces

The bodice: the back shoulder seamline is always a little longer than the front to allow for the extra width at the shoulder blades. Fold out the dart or move it temporarily to the armhole to equalise back and front shoulder seamlines. In the same way, a front shoulder dart can be transferred to the side seam and returned after correcting the shoulder.

From the shoulder end on the bodice armscye, mark the amount to be removed along the armscye and draw a line back to the side neck point. Cut off this triangle. The back shoulder dart can now be returned.



Notice that the shoulder slope is now at quite a drastic slant compared to the original pattern

The next step is to alter the sleevehead.

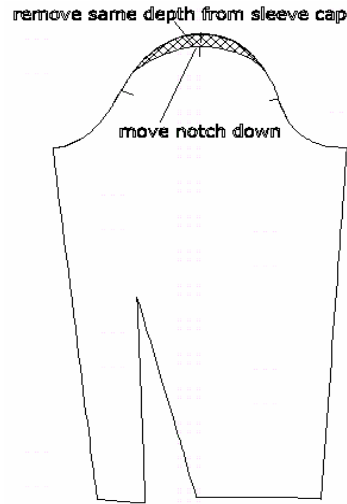
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Removing surplus from sleeve cap

From the Crown Point - usually indicated by a notch at the highest point of the sleeve cap, mark the same amount to be reduced as on the bodice.

Draw a smooth curve onto the back and front armscye, using the original outer line on the sleeve pattern as a guide.

Mark a new Crown Point notch.



Check the length of the front and back bodice armscye and the sleeve armscye. The sleeve armscye measurement along the outer, curved edge should always be a little longer than the bodice armscye to allow it to ease into the bodice armhole.

The amount of wearing ease varies according to the type of fabric being used and is allocated to the cap area, mainly to accommodate the upper front arm muscle.

Conclusion

This short tutorial has focussed on one fitting problem only, i.e., bagginess in the front armhole due to sloping shoulders. There are other causes for surplus fabric accumulating in various places in garments and other solutions for dealing with sloping shoulders. These, and other fitting problems, will be addressed in a series of tutorials requested by members of several pattern and sewing Internet groups. I thank those who posed the questions.

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