

Get the Ideal Silhouette

Strategies for achieving the illusion of a perfect figure with the garments you sew

BY SUSAN LAZEAR

When I think back to my college years, I remember a woman I used to see on campus. The clothes she wore seemed to suit her perfectly, and she always looked great. I assumed that she had a perfect figure. But with the perspective of experience, I wonder now if she really did. Perhaps she had simply mastered the art of camouflage and was adept at creating the appearance of a perfect figure.

Few bodies naturally match the fashionable ideal.

People come in a broad spectrum of shapes, each with its own assets and fitting challenges. But don't despair.

The clothing you sew and wear can help you create the illusion that you have the ideal figure, regardless of your body type. Playing with garment proportion and silhouette lets you reframe the figure nature gave you and control how it is perceived.

Silhouette is often the first thing people notice about our bodies.

There are three silhouettes to consider in fashion: your body silhouette, the ideal silhouette, and your illusion silhouette.

Your body silhouette is created by the shape and contours of your figure: your frame, its proportions, and how your body volume (or flesh) is distributed. Variations in the amount and distribution of volume on the same size frame create drastically different silhouettes.

The ideal silhouette is set by culture, society, and fashion. Today's ideal is a balanced hourglass. The shoulders and hips are about the same width, and the waist is 8 inches to 10 inches smaller. (A modified hourglass, with a slightly larger waist, is actually more typical than a true hourglass, but it is still considered ideal.)

The illusion silhouette is the effect you can create with clothing, fabrics, colors, and accessories.

But what illusion will you create? Most women want to transform their body silhouette into the ideal silhouette. Before you decide how you want to present your figure, you first need to analyze it and gain an understanding of its assets and challenges. I'll show you how to evaluate your figure and choose garment silhouettes and designs that will help you create your illusion silhouette.

Start a worksheet to record your figure analysis. First, write down the three things you like best (your assets) and the three things you like least (your challenges) about your figure. Then, examine the figure types on page 42 to determine yours, and follow the steps to analyze your proportions and the strategies for creating your ideal silhouette.

Susan Lazear is a professor of fashion at San Diego Mesa College. She also owns Cochenille Design Studio, developer of Garment Designer pattern software.



Color blocking and design lines angling toward the body's center emphasize our model's hourglass figure. Deep navy sections frame and focus attention on the bright red sections, which mimic an hourglass shape.

*Pattern: McCall's 6394
Fabric: cotton sateen*

Find your figure type

Although we are three-dimensional beings, we tend to view ourselves as one flat plane, usually from the front. Your figure type determines your silhouette. Examine the figure types below, and find the one that most closely resembles your own unclothed figure. Many people are a combination of figure types, so go by your most prominent figure characteristics to find your primary silhouette.



TEARDROP (OR TRIANGLE)

- Hips are wider than waist and shoulders
- Individuals with heavy thighs, but narrow hips, may also be Teardrops



KEYSTONE (OR INVERTED TRIANGLE)

- Shoulders are wider than waist and hips



COLUMN (OR RECTANGLE)

- Shoulders and hips are about the same width
- Waist is the same or slightly narrower than shoulders and hips
- Figure may be broad or narrow



OVAL (OR SPHERE)

- Shoulders and hips are balanced, but narrower than waist
- Waist is wider from both front and side views, and rounded
- Figure may be broad or narrow



FIGURE-EIGHT

- Shoulders and hips are about the same width
- Waist is noticeably narrower
- Shoulders are sloped
- Hip fullness is set low, closer to the thigh



HOURGLASS

- Shoulders and hips are about the same width
- Shoulders are relatively square
- Waistline is well defined, 8 inches to 10 inches smaller than the bust and hips
- Hip fullness is set high



A figure-skimming fit, angled side-waist pleats, and shimmering silk shantung accentuate our model's natural curves. The crossover-V neckline draws the eye upward to her face. Slightly extended shoulders maintain visual balance with the hipline.

*Pattern: Vogue 1192
Fabric: silk shantung*

Gauge your proportions

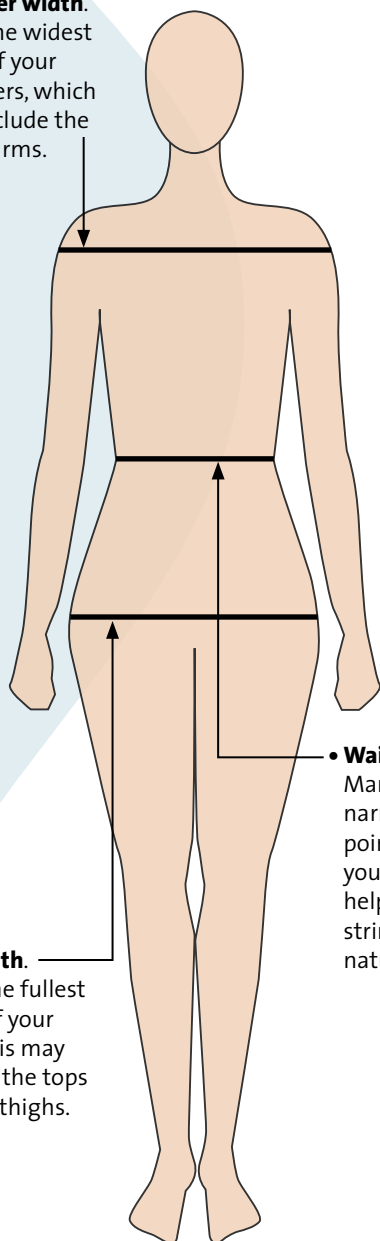
Just as there is an ideal body silhouette, there are also ideal proportions. Knowing how your proportions differ from the ideal can help you get a better garment fit and craft your illusion silhouette. The following two exercises will help you determine your proportions. You'll need a roll of kraft paper, wider than your greatest body width and longer than your height, a rigid yardstick, a pencil, and an understanding friend. Wear form-fitting, but not tight, clothing and remove your shoes. Tape or pin the paper to a wall, letting several inches drape onto the floor. Draw a vertical line down the paper's center. Stand against the vertical line in your normal posture for both exercises.

IDENTIFY YOUR HORIZONTAL PROPORTIONS

If you have difficulty evaluating your figure type objectively, this task will help you identify your primary body silhouette. Make a pencil marking along each side of the body at the points noted below. Measure the distance between each set of points and record them on your worksheet.

- **Shoulder width.**

Mark the widest point of your shoulders, which may include the upper arms.



- **Waist width.**

Mark the narrowest point of your waist. It helps to tie a string at your natural waist.

- **Hip width.**

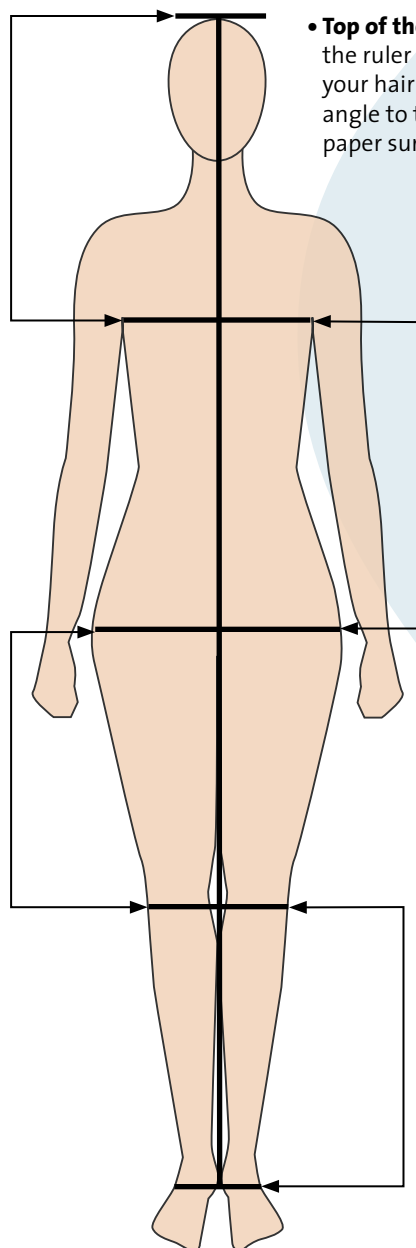
Mark the fullest point of your hips. This may include the tops of your thighs.

IDENTIFY YOUR VERTICAL PROPORTIONS

The ideally proportioned figure is divided into equal fourths from the top of the head to underarms, underarms to hips, hips to knees, and knees to floor. Divide your height in inches by 4 to calculate your ideal proportions. Mark the points noted below on each side of your body; connect the points with lines. Then, measure each body section vertically and record the lengths on your worksheet. Note which body sections are longer or shorter than your ideal proportions; you may want to visually lengthen or shorten them using illusion strategies.

- **Underarm.**

Position the ruler under your arm gently so it just touches the armpit.



- **Top of the head.** Position the ruler so it flattens your hair and is at a right angle to the wall and paper surface.

- **Hips.** Mark the level of your hips' fullest point.

- **Knees.** Use the center back of your knee to mark this point.

- **Bottom of the feet.** Mark under the soles of your feet.

Craft an illusion

Now you have the information you need about your body silhouette to craft your illusion silhouette. Consider the three figure assets you noted on your worksheet; these are the areas of your body you may want to emphasize. Also examine your figure's three challenges, and decide whether you want to simply de-emphasize them or camouflage them. As you review the following illusion strategies for your figure type, keep your assets and challenges in mind. Don't be afraid to discard any strategies that conflict with your personal goals.

Use the figure-type strategies here for widening, narrowing, lengthening, and shortening as a guide for choosing garment shapes, details, colors, textures, and accessories that will help you visually change your body's proportions and create the illusion of the ideal silhouette. If your figure is a combination of two types, merge the strategies that apply to your body shapes. Once you've mastered the art of illusion to visually create the ideal hourglass, you can expand your horizons and reshape your silhouette any way you prefer.

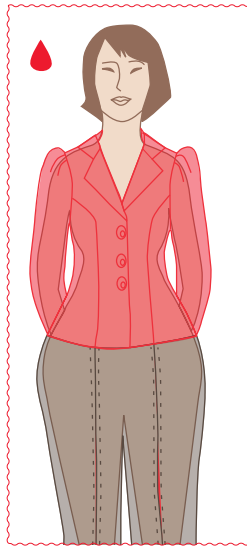
IF YOU'RE A TEARDROP . . .

Widen your shoulders:

- **Horizontal necklines** (boat, wide round), wide lapels and oversized collars, neckline ruffles
- **Horizontal stripes or patterns** in upper bodice
- **Shoulder interest or emphasis**, such as upper sleeve-cap details (pleating, gathering), dropped shoulders, or padded shoulders
- **Tailored tops and bodices** with lots of detail
- **Draw attention with light or bright colors**, shine, or texture on top

Narrow your hips:

- **Vertical lines**, such as seams and gores
- **Minimize fullness**
- **Avoid** bands, yokes, and hemlines at the full hip
- **Use inset pockets** to avoid adding width
- **Draw attention to center front** with contrasting colors, details, and embellishments



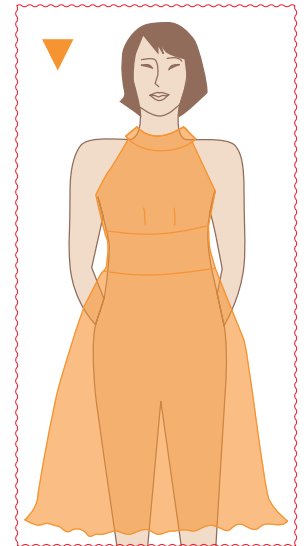
IF YOU'RE A KEYSTONE . . .

Narrow your shoulders:

- **Avoid shoulder and sleeve-cap detail**, and padding
- **Use sleeveless styles**, such as halter and cut-in tank styles
- **Use diagonal shoulder seamlines**, such as raglan, to direct the eye toward the neckline
- **Use dark, flat colors**
- **Use texture sparingly** and strategically

Widen your hips:

- **Choose flared and full skirts**
- **Use stiffer fabrics**
- **Use horizontal lines**, such as skirt yokes, long peplums, wide waistbands, patch and welt pockets
- **Use flounces or ruffles** from hip to hem
- **Light, bright colors and textural fabrics** or details



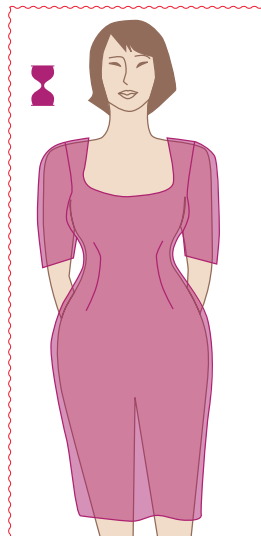
IF YOU'RE AN HOURGLASS . . .

Maintain balance:

- **Avoid adding volume** to shoulders and hips

Emphasize your waist:

- **Choose styles** that draw attention to the waist, but avoid over-emphasizing an extremely narrow waist
- **Avoid styles** that conceal or widen the waist



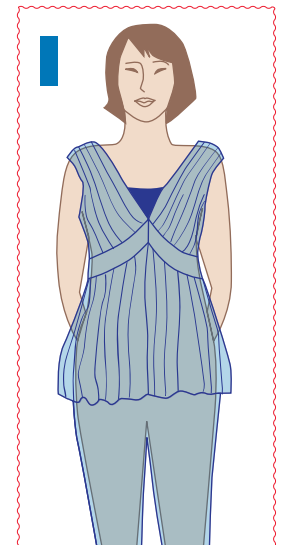
IF YOU'RE A COLUMN . . .

Widen your shoulders and hips:

- **Add equal width** to shoulders and hips; if your figure is broad, focus on narrowing the waist
- **Use light, bright colors** at shoulders and hems
- **Use diagonal lines** at shoulders and hem to direct the eye toward center front

Narrow your waist

- **Draw attention to the center** of the body and/or waist with vertical details (vertical darts, princess seams, waistbands, etc.)
- **Avoid contrasting colors** at the waist



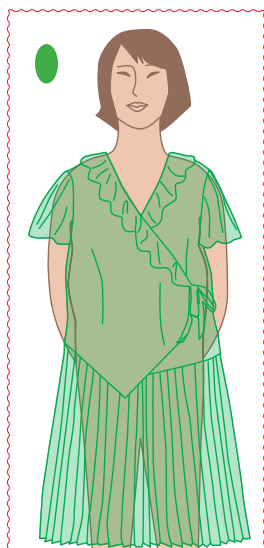
IF YOU'RE AN OVAL . . .

Narrow your waist:

- Use **vertical or diagonal details** at the body's vertical center
- **Break up waist and hip yokes or bands** with vertical or diagonal lines
- **Avoid bright, light colors** or shine at the waist
- **Avoid textural detail** at the waist

Draw attention toward your shoulders and hips:

- **Add dimension and interest** with volume (gathers, pleats, ruffles, shoulder pads) but avoid widening beyond the width of your waist
- **Draw the eye** with diagonal lines running toward center front
- **Choose flared skirts** and wrist-length or short sleeves



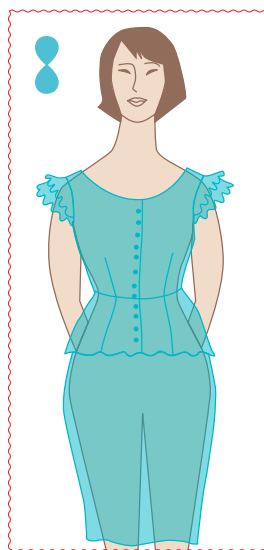
IF YOU'RE A FIGURE-EIGHT . . .

Square your shoulders and balance your hips:

- **Add shoulder structure** with padding
- **Create shoulder width** and interest with volume and detail (ruffles, gathers, pleats)
- **Choose wide necklines** (boat, high, square) and shoulder yokes to draw the eye outward
- **Avoid diagonal seamlines** at the shoulder (raglan sleeves), which emphasize the slope
- **Use short peplums** or yokes to add volume higher on the hip
- **Draw the eye to your assets** with bright, light colors

Accent your waist:

- **Choose styles** that sit at your natural waistline
- **Avoid boxy, loose styles** that conceal the waist
- **Use contrasting colors** at the waistline
- **Avoid overemphasizing** an extremely narrow waist



LENGTHEN AND SHORTEN

Techniques for creating a vertical illusion are less figure-specific than those for creating silhouette illusions. If any section of your figure is proportionally shorter or longer than others (see "Identify your vertical proportions," page 43), you may want to lengthen or shorten it to assist in creating an ideal balance. Use these vertical illusion techniques for any figure type.

To lengthen . . .

- Choose vertically seamed garments (gores and princess lines) and vertical design details (pleats, darts, hem slits)
- Avoid horizontal seamlines
- Choose V and scoop necklines to direct attention upward
- Use vertical stripes or patterns
- Create a continuous vertical line of color
- Accessorize with long scarves and necklaces

To shorten . . .

- Choose horizontal construction details, seamlines, and design elements, especially at the waist (set-in waists, peplums, wide waistbands, hip yokes), to break up the figure
- Use pockets of any type, especially flap and welt pockets
- Place contrasting, bright, and/or shiny fabric at the body's center to break up the figure
- Choose horizontal patterns, especially stripes
- Accessorize with belts, or create contrast-color waistbands

ELEMENTS OF GARMENT DESIGN

Your illusion tools are the elements of design. As you select garment styles, fabrics, and colors, remember:

- A garment's shape is its outer silhouette.
- Details, such as design lines, seamlines, fabric weaves, or prints, can be used to direct and fool the eye.
- Color can be used to draw or deflect the eye. Dark colors deflect attention and reduce (or retreat), while bright or light colors draw attention and increase (or advance).
- Texture can be created by your fabric choice or by details like gathers and ruffles. Flat, smooth fabrics minimize, and shiny and/or crisp fabrics maximize.

Log On

Download a personal analysis worksheet that will help you document your figure evaluation at ThreadsMagazine.com.

Self-Evaluation

FIGURE ASSETS (WHAT I WANT TO SHOW OFF)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

FIGURE CHALLENGES (WHAT I WANT TO MINIMIZE OR CONCEAL)

1. _____
2. _____
3. _____

SILHOUETTE

My figure type (refer to “Find your figure type” on page 42 and “Identify your horizontal proportions” on page 43):



Teardrop (or Triangle)



Keystone (or Inverted Triangle)



Hourglass



Column (or Rectangle)



Oval (or Sphere)



Figure Eight

My desired illusion silhouette:

- Hourglass
- Other _____ (You may decide that creating the hourglass ideal is not your goal and choose to create a different illusion silhouette using the figure-type strategies detailed on pages 44 and 45.)

Illusion goals:

- _____ my shoulders
- _____ my waist
- _____ my hips

(Refer to the figure-type strategies detailed on pages 44 and 45 for ways to achieve your illusion silhouette.)

VERTICAL PROPORTIONS

My height:

_____ inches

One fourth (25 percent) of my height:

_____ inches

(This is what each section of your figure would measure if it were ideally proportioned.)

My actual vertical proportion measurements (refer to “Identify your vertical proportions” on page 43):

- _____ top of the head to underarms
- _____ underarms to hips
- _____ hips to knees
- _____ knees to soles/floor

To create visually balanced vertical proportions, I should (circle either lengthen or shorten for each body section below; refer to “Lengthen and Shorten” on page 45):

- lengthen/shorten top of the head to underarms
- lengthen/shorten underarms to hips
- lengthen/shorten hips to knees
- lengthen/shorten knees to soles/floor