



Industry Seam Allowances

How and why patternmakers apply varied widths to designs

BY LAUREL HOFFMANN

Most commercial patterns are drafted with a consistent seam allowance width along every seamline. It might be $\frac{1}{4}$ inch in patterns designed for knits, or it could be $\frac{5}{8}$ inch, the standard used in the majority of garment patterns drafted for woven fabrics. It appears convenient to work with the same seam allowance width throughout a garment: You can set the needle position relative to the desired seam guide and simply follow along for each seam.

However, all seams are not equal, and they don't all need the same allowance. Consider that you typically trim most of the allowance at enclosed areas, such as along facing seams, or you occasionally need to let a garment out along a side

seam. In these cases, narrower or wider allowances facilitate your work.

In the sewing industry, allowances vary according to the seam location and type. The purpose of these different widths is to make construction efficient and yield a sturdy garment with the proper structure and drape. Home sewers can easily adapt commercial patterns to these same standards. Most commonly, seam allowances need to be reduced in width. Narrower seam allowances save time and fabric, because you don't waste yardage on larger pattern pieces or spend time trimming the unneeded allowances. It is also easier to sew "on gauge," that is, accurately along the seamline. Finally, narrower seam allowances are neater and

less bulky within the garment.

I'll share the guidelines I use as a production patternmaker and show you how to revise your patterns with precision. My example is a basic blouse with a cut-on front facing, but the same process works for any pattern you adjust. Bear in mind that you should fit the pattern first, as these allowances may not be wide enough for significant fit-while-you-sew adjustments. Once you've achieved a great fit, revise the seam allowances, and you'll have a pattern you can use again and again, with truly professional results.

Laurel Hoffmann has developed a fashion technology program. Learn more at CFashionEdu.com.

Best practices in patternwork

Reducing seam allowances is a straightforward process, but to minimize confusion and ensure accurate results, follow these guidelines. These instructions assume the pattern has standard $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch-wide seam allowances.

MATERIALS

Tracing paper: Purchase 36-inch-wide yellow tracing paper, as it is more transparent than white tracing paper. You'll find it at art supply stores (ArtSupply.com).

Drafting tape: This secures the pattern and the tracing paper. Test to find one that can be easily peeled off when you've finished tracing (DickBlick.com).

Pencils: Red and blue pencils for tracing help you distinguish visually between the traced lines and the pattern's printed lines, visible through the tracing paper.

Rulers: Equip yourself with transparent rulers, including a straight ruler with a $\frac{1}{8}$ -inch grid, at least 12 inches long, and a curved, or fashion, ruler.

TRACING SETUP

1 Tape the pattern in place.

Press the pattern to remove creases, then tape it to a gridded worksurface, aligning the grainline or foldline along a gridline. The grid shown is marked at 1-inch intervals.

2 Tape the tracing paper in place.

Lay it over the pattern and tape its edges.

3 Add guidelines.

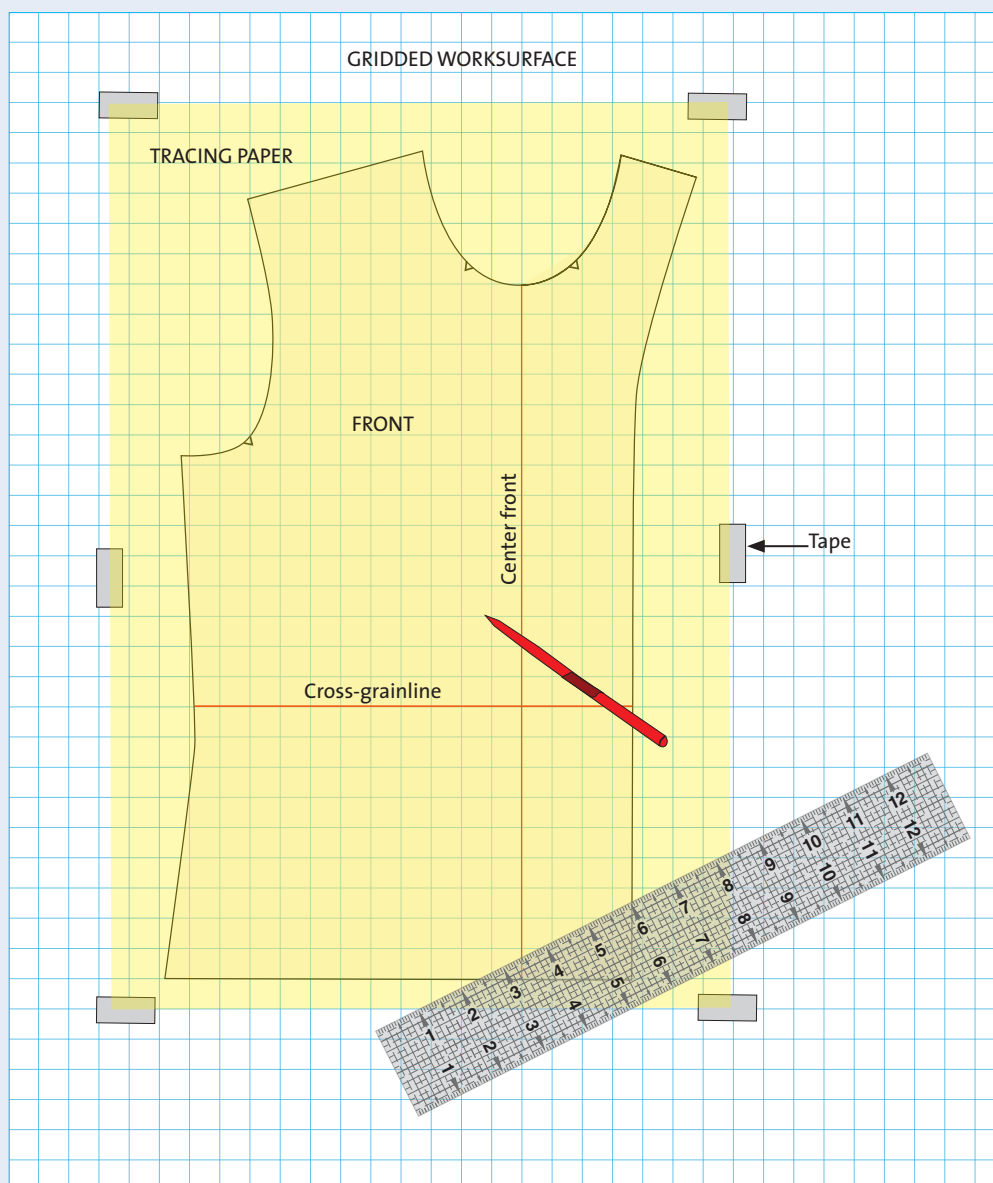
In red pencil, trace the grainline or center-front or center-back foldline and a cross-grain line. If the pattern has no cross-grain line marked, create one perpendicular to the grainline.

4 Proceed with the seam allowance reduction.

Use a dashed red line to indicate the narrowed allowances; a solid red line for unchanged cutting lines. Next to each edge, write the amount the allowance was reduced and/or the new seam allowance width, so you know how to sew the seam.

5 Add notches and marks.

Consult the "Diagram key," p. 42, for helpful marks.



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Adjust the front and back patterns

The example pattern has a cut-on front facing. If the original pattern has a separate facing pattern piece, reduce its seam allowances to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch wide at the neckline and front opening edges.

FRONT AND BACK

Reduce the seam allowances as noted.

Neckline: Reduce by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch.

Armhole: Reduce by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch. If you plan to apply a flat-felled or other seam treatment, adjust this allowance as needed to accommodate the desired technique.

Shoulder seam: Reduce by $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch. Reduce the shoulder seam portion of the cut-on facing similarly.

Diagram key

Use these marks consistently on the traced patterns to indicate cutting lines, notches, and centers front and back.

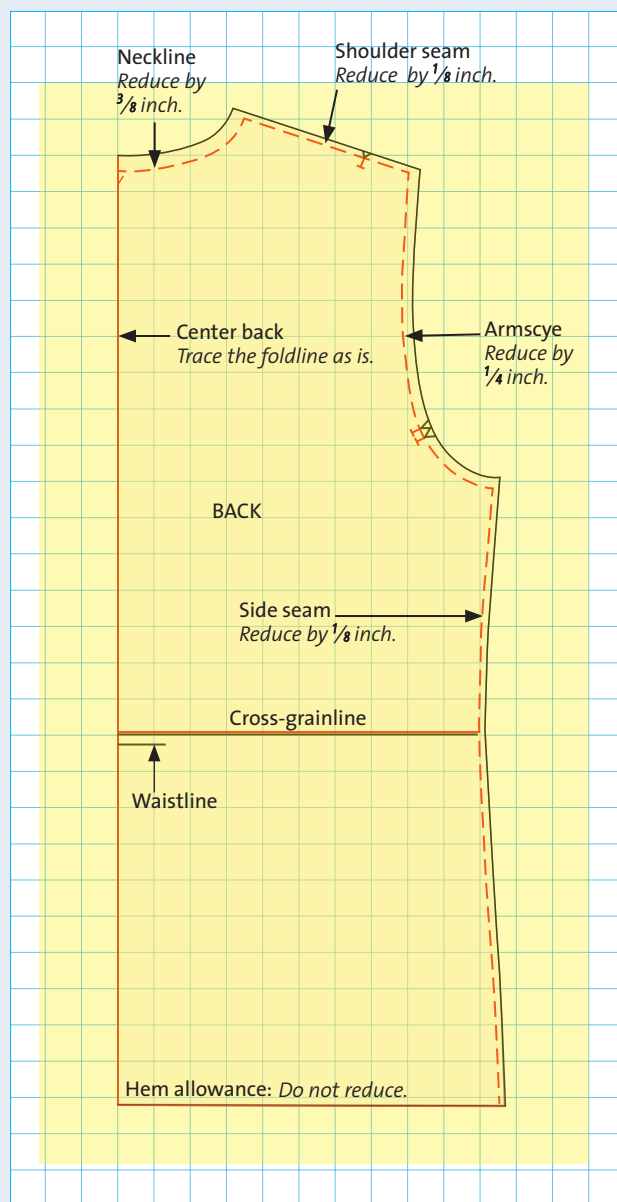
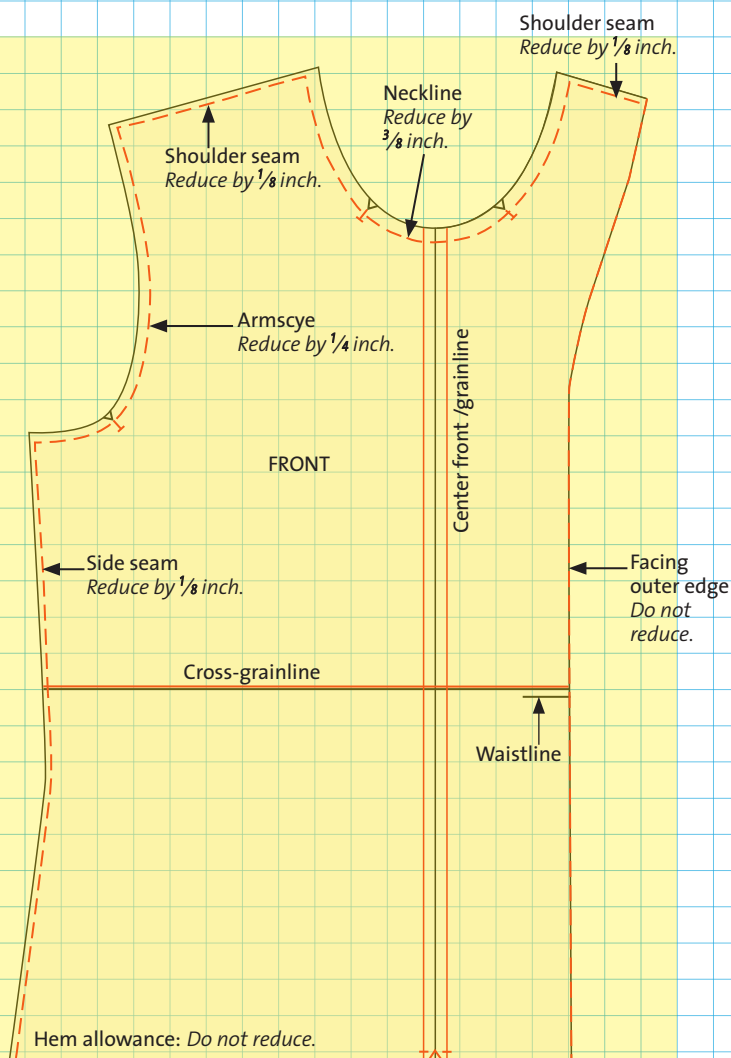
- — — Reduced seam allowances (new cutting lines)
- — — Unchanged cutting lines
- ⊥ Notch with stop mark; shift to new cutting line
- ∨ V-notch; use at centers and at sleeve-cap peak

Side seam: Reduce by $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

Hem allowance: Do not reduce.

Facing outer edge: Do not reduce. Sew it with a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide allowance rather than a $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch-wide allowance.

Center back: Trace the foldline as is.



tip

Draft with care. Use a curved, or fashion, ruler as a guide when tracing curved seamlines to achieve the smoothest results.

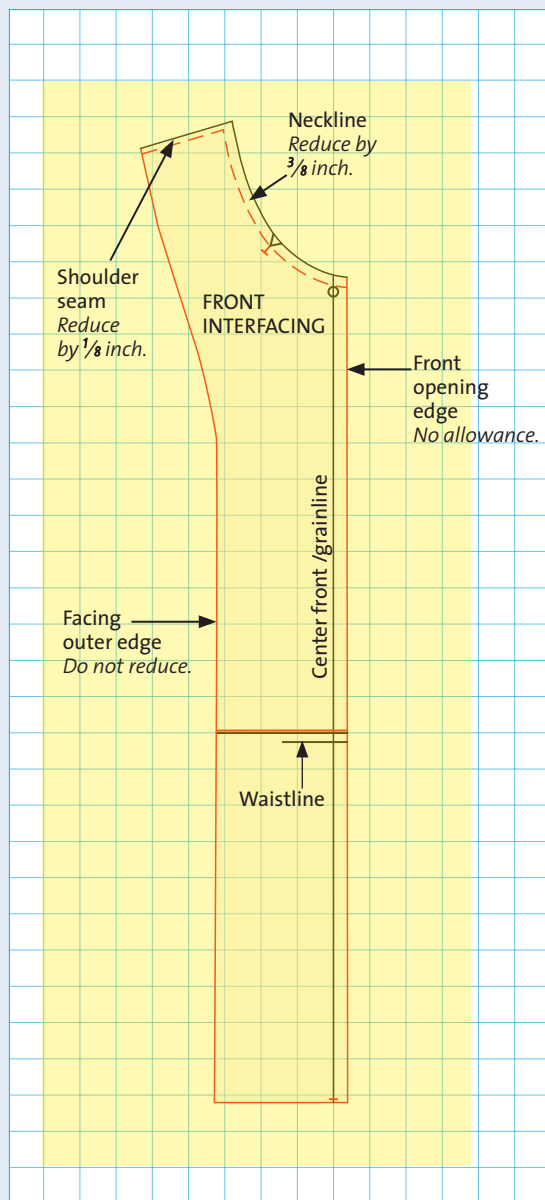
FRONT INTERFACING

Neckline: Reduce by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch.

Shoulder seam: Reduce by $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

Outer edge: Do not reduce. Sew with a $\frac{1}{4}$ -inch-wide seam allowance rather than a $\frac{5}{8}$ -inch-wide allowance.

Front opening edge: No allowance. If using nonfusible woven interfacing, overcast this edge or cut it on the selvage.



Revise the sleeves and cuffs

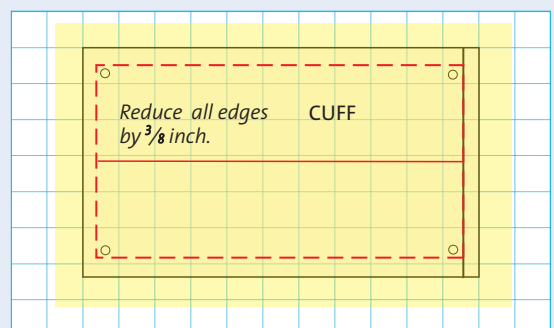
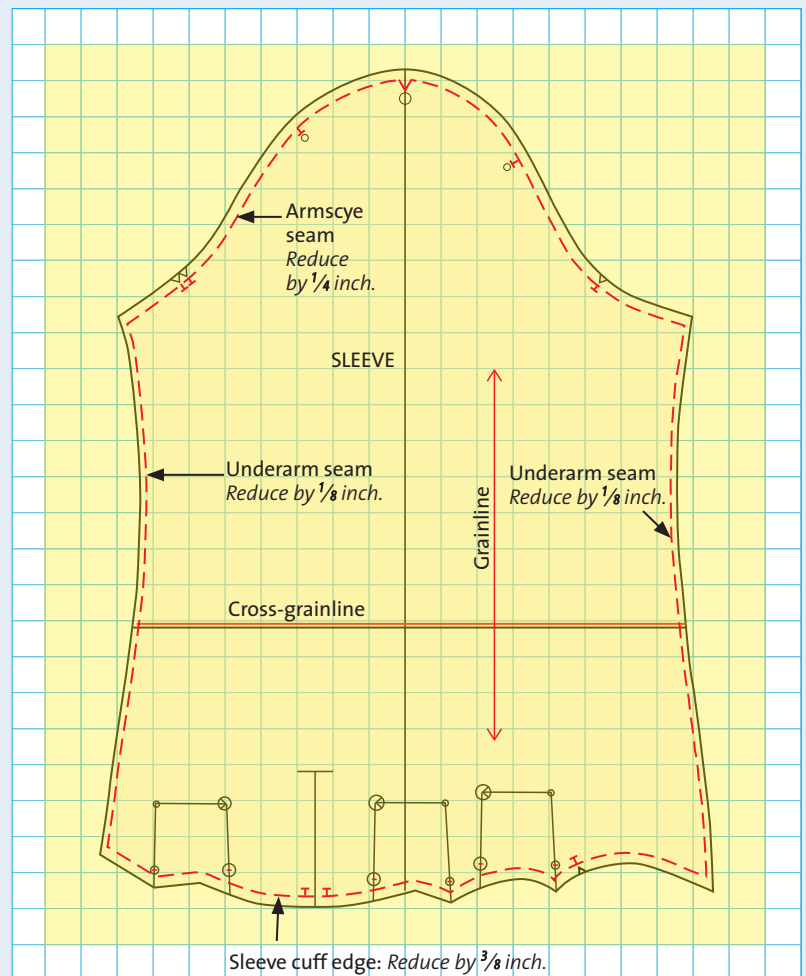
This sleeve is pleated into a cuff. If your pattern has a different treatment, adjust as desired.

Armscye seam: Reduce by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch. If you plan to apply a flat-felled or other seam treatment here, adjust this allowance as needed to accommodate the desired technique.

Underarm seam: Reduce by $\frac{1}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch.

Sleeve cuff edge: Reduce by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch.

Cuff pattern: Reduce all allowances by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. If the fabric is delicate or prone to fraying, reduce the allowances by $\frac{1}{4}$ inch, to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch. Reduce the cuff interfacing seam allowances by the same amount.



Modify the collar patterns

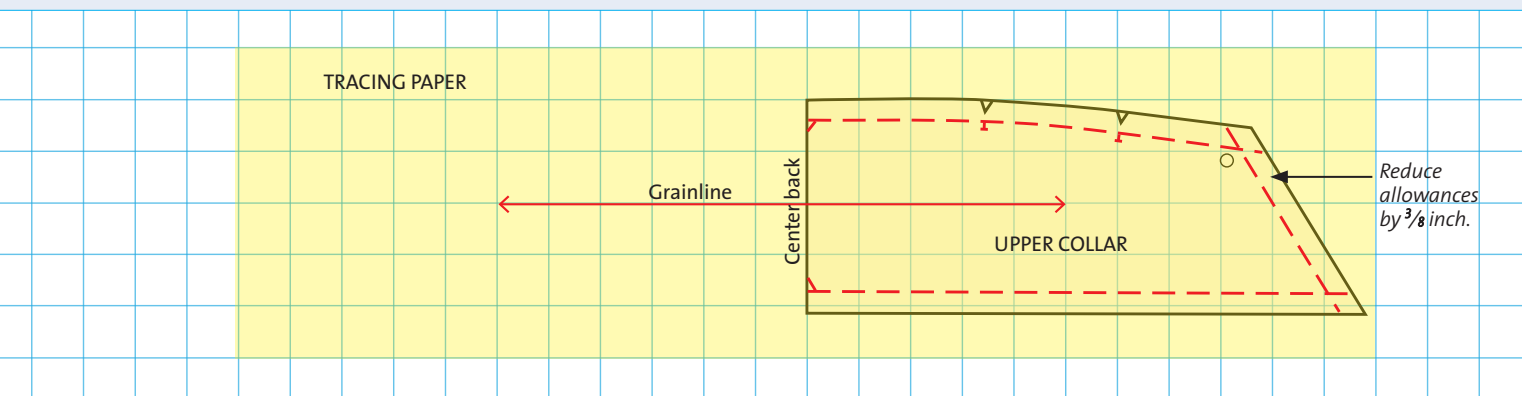
The process shown is for a collar pattern cut on the fabric fold. You'll adjust the seam allowances and make a complete pattern at the same time. Cutting the collar with a complete pattern, rather than on the fold, ensures the fabric is cut on grain.

DRAFT THE UPPER COLLAR

1 Prepare the tracing paper. Tape the half-collar pattern to the worksurface and overlay it with a tracing paper sheet that's twice as long. Tape the tracing paper to secure.

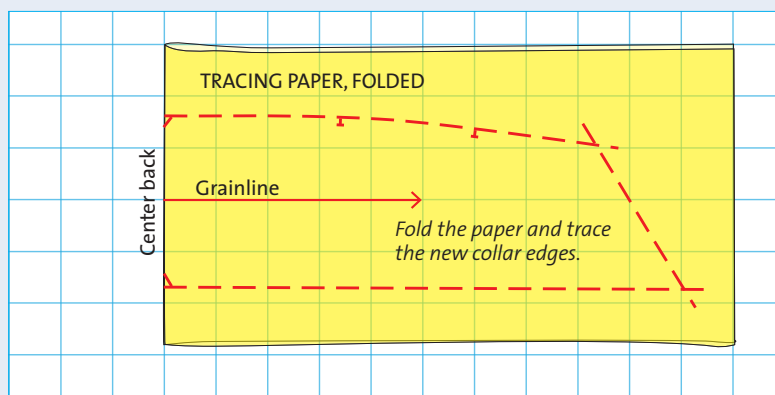
2 Extend the grainline. Trace the marked line and extend it to twice its length.

3 Adjust the seam allowances. Reduce them by $\frac{3}{8}$ inch, to $\frac{1}{4}$ inch. Add V notches at the center back, and transfer all other notches to the new cutting lines.

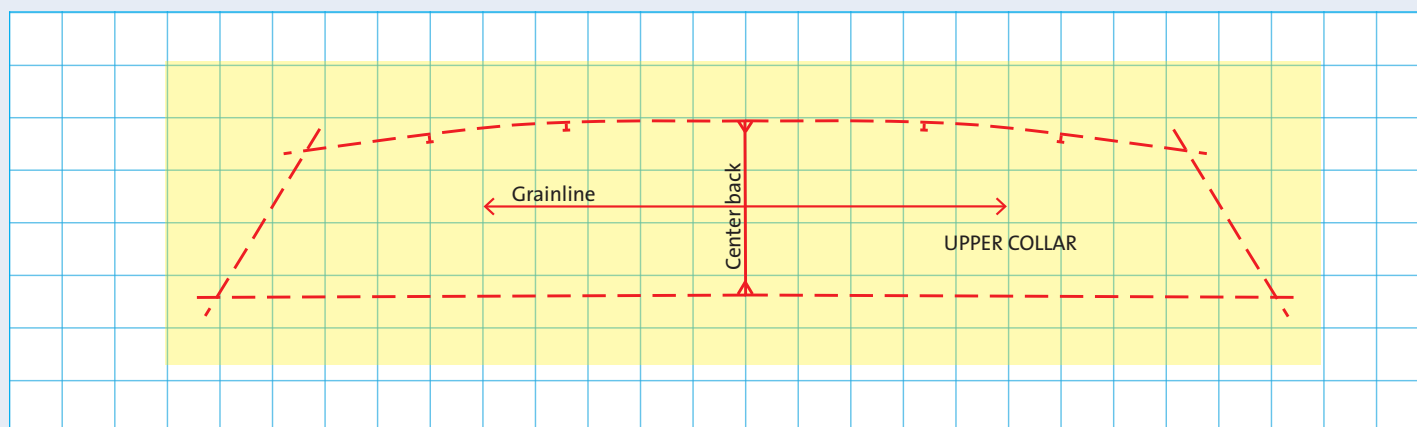


4 Fold the tracing. Release the tape and slide the original pattern out. Retape the traced side of the new pattern. Fold the blank portion of the tracing paper along the center-back foldline, aligning the grainline accurately. Tape the top paper ply.

5 Trace the collar. Transfer the newly traced collar to the upper paper ply.



6 Complete the pattern. Remove the tape from the top ply and unfold for the new, complete pattern.

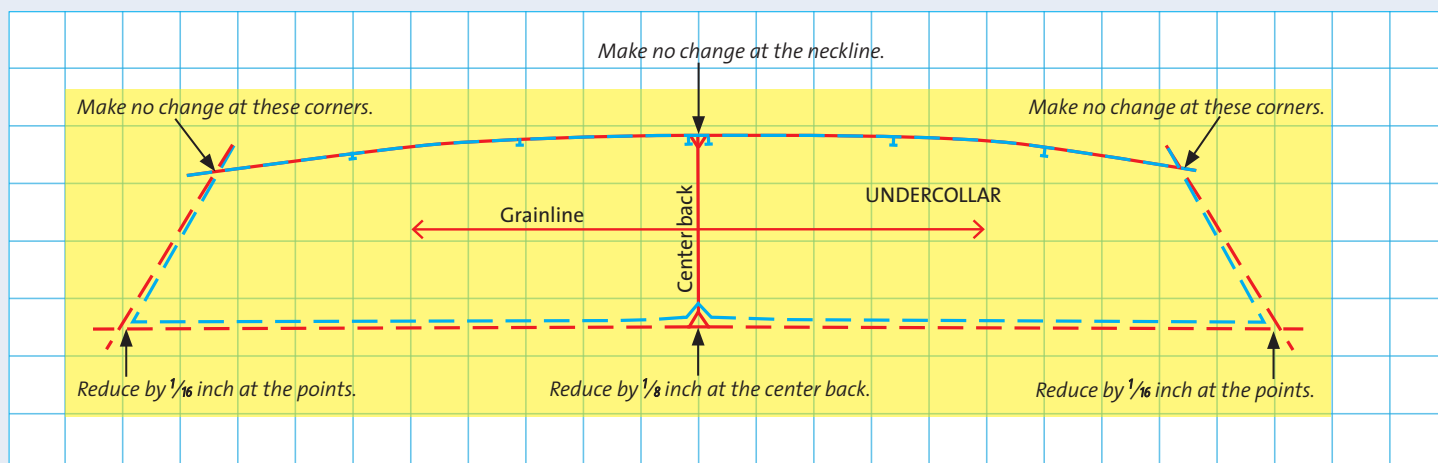


DRAFT THE UNDERCOLLAR

1 Tape the upper collar. Cover it with tracing paper and tape the new layer in place.

2 Trace the neckline edge. Work with blue pencil to differentiate the lines from the upper collar. Add a notch at each side of center back to identify this as the undercollar.

3 Reduce the pattern's long outer seam allowance. At the points, reduce the allowance by $\frac{1}{16}$ inch. At center back, reduce it by $\frac{1}{8}$ inch. Blend the short ends, using a straightedge as a guide. Blend the long edge using a curved ruler as a guide.



SUGGESTED SEAM ALLOWANCES

Choosing the optimal allowance for seams and hems helps you sew more efficiently and accurately, and it can provide the option of future alterations. These widths are based on industry standards.

$\frac{1}{8}$ inch: Knit placket lapels.

$\frac{1}{4}$ inch: Curved or difficult-to-sew seams with no stress: collars, necklines, sleeveless armholes, cuffs, lapels, and center-front openings.

$\frac{3}{8}$ inch: Curved or difficult-to-sew areas with stress: armhole seams, cuffs with a stitch-in-the-ditch finish; waistbands; crotch seams; knit side seams; seams in silky fabric; invisible zipper opening seams in knits; any seam to be serged.

$\frac{1}{2}$ inch: Shoulder and side seams. Armhole seams that will be finished with serging.

$\frac{5}{8}$ inch: Occasionally used in zipper-opening seams.

$\frac{3}{4}$ inch: Zipper-opening seams; some side seams to allow for alterations.

1 inch: Hem allowances in moderately priced garments.

2 inches: Hems in better women's garments.

2½ inches: Hems in better men's pants.