



A QUICK WIN **FOR PLUS-SIZE SEWISTS**



ChaCha N. Hudson specializes in size-inclusive design, and shares insights for skipping straight to wearable, stylish sewn garments.

Steps to success for new—and not-so-new—garment makers

BY CHACHA N. HUDSON

For anyone who loves the idea of sewing their own clothes but has been let down by projects that don't fit or turn out quite right, take heart. This article is for you. We've all spent hours, or even days, working on a garment, only to find it isn't wearable. The challenge can be even greater for plus-size sewists, as many commercial patterns are not size inclusive. It's frustrating, demoralizing, and can make you want to give up on sewing altogether. But I'm here with a solution that will move you forward.

I'll show you how to find that quick win, using sewing patterns that are beginner-friendly, forgiving, and almost guaranteed to leave you with a garment you love. We'll talk about how to take accurate body measurements, how to choose the right sewing pattern to minimize fit issues, and why you should always make a prototype before cutting into a favorite fabric. I'll also share my experiences working with three simple and stylish designs—each of which could easily be the basis of a wardrobe you'll love sewing and wearing. Let's get started.

ChaCha N. Hudson is completing her PhD in Apparel, Merchandising, and Design at Iowa State University. She is the featured instructor in the Threads online course Fundamentals of Fashion Draping.

Find Your Size

It's essential to start with accurate body measurements.



PATTERNS VS. READY-TO-WEAR

Most people don't know their exact measurements and often rely on the clothing sizes they are accustomed to buying from stores. However, most sewing patterns sizes are entirely different from ready-to-wear clothing.

For example, I compared a popular ready-to-wear brand's size 20W and a sewing pattern size 20. The ready-to-wear brand's size was 4 inches to 5 inches larger than the pattern at each body location. This is why taking accurate measurements is crucial to achieving a good fit.

MEASURING METHOD

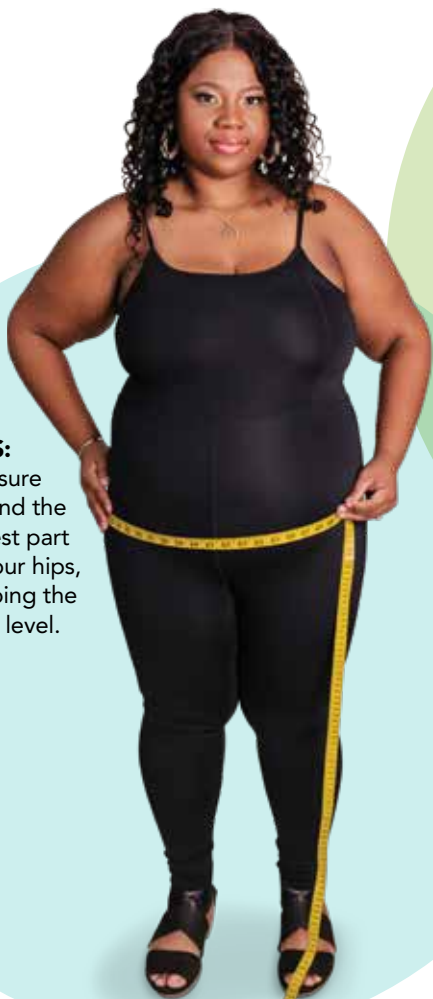
To get the most accurate results, use a soft, flexible tape measure. My design and teaching focus is on inclusive design and sizing, so I always recommend purchasing a measuring tape that's at least 120 inches long; the standard is 60 inches.

Wear the undergarments you plan to wear with your finished garment when you're taking measurements. Alternatively, wear form-fitting garments, like a unitard or tights and a tank top, to avoid adding bulk that might skew the measurements. Record your measurements.

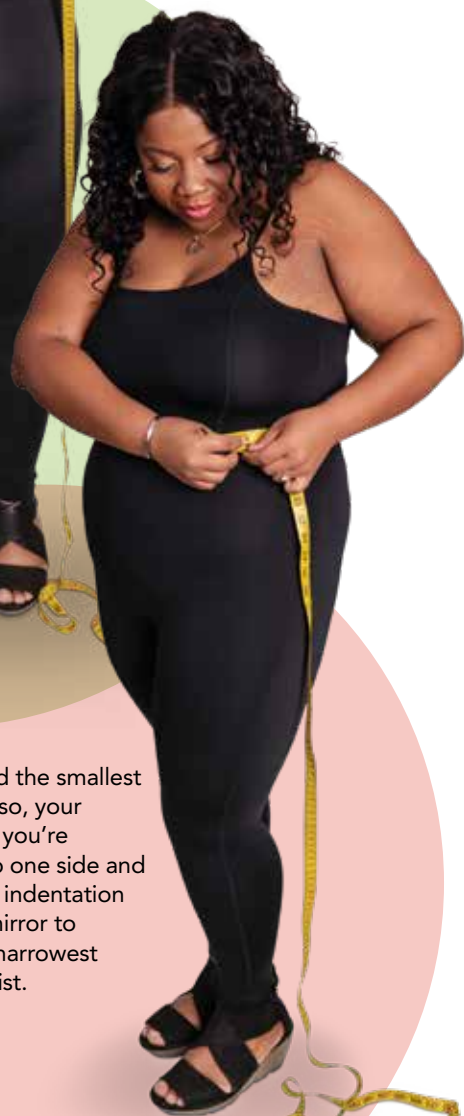
Compare your measurements to the pattern's size chart. If you are between sizes, don't worry. You can blend sizes or make small adjustments to achieve the perfect fit.



BUST:
Wrap the tape measure around the fullest part of your bust, keeping it level across your back.



HIPS:
Measure around the widest part of your hips, keeping the tape level.



WAIST:
Measure around the smallest part of your torso, your natural waist. If you're unsure, bend to one side and find the natural indentation or look in the mirror to determine the narrowest part of your waist.

Choose the Right Pattern and Suitable Fabric

Pairing a pattern with its ideal textile can make the process and result of a garment-sewing project feel like magic.

STYLE PLUS SIMPLICITY

Avoid garments with zippers, buttons, or snaps for now. Those closures can be tackled later, but for a first project, go for something simple and satisfying that boosts your confidence and leaves you ready for more.

Any one of three patterns on the following pages is a suitable place for a beginner to start—and all are versatile and modern enough to appeal to experienced sewists, too.



A wide-leg trouser, trapeze-style dress, and knit maxi are versatile—and ideal beginner projects.

STRETCH, DRAPE, AND FIBER CONTENT

When choosing fabric for these patterns, consider stretch and drape. I've featured two patterns for knits, a maxi dress and wide-legged pants. Both designs use the fabric's stretch for a forgiving fit and comfort. There's also a flared dress that calls for woven fabrics with body, from linen to denim. Choose fabric with a softer drape, such as crepe or challis, if you'd like a less full silhouette.

Additionally, think about fiber content. For example, cotton knits are breathable and comfortable, but they may not drape as well as polyester blends or rayon, which offer smoother finishes. Polyester or spandex blends provide more elasticity and resilience, making them great for patterns requiring stretch knits.

Finally, if you're a novice sewist, stitch some sample seams in the fabric of your choice to see how it feels to work with it. Some knits are unstable and slithery and may require more control than you're ready to take on in an early project. Test seam finishes, gathers, or any other details to ensure they work well with your fabric choice.



Sew a few test seams on your chosen fabrics.



A prototype garment helps you assess a pattern's fit. ChaCha learned she needed to shorten her maxi dress by several inches.

Take a Practice Run

Before you cut into that beautiful fabric you've been saving, let's talk about prototyping.

MAKE A MUSLIN

Always make a muslin, or test garment, first. It's essential to ensuring a good fit. A muslin enables you to work out any fit issues before committing to your final fabric. You can use inexpensive fabric that's similar to your final choice, or make a wearable muslin that you can tweak and wear later. I prefer the second option.

When fitting your muslin for the recommended patterns, you'll likely only need minor adjustments, if any. For example, you may want to add darts for more shaping or adjust the length to suit your height. Shortening or lengthening is an easy fix using the lengthen/shorten lines on the pattern. The goal is to fine-tune the muslin to ensure your final garment looks and fits exactly the way you want.



Length was an issue in the pants design, and ChaCha had to adjust her test garment to suit her petite height. The A-line dress was just right.



PLAN YOUR PACING

Pacing your project is key to enjoyment. Break it into manageable steps: cutting, sewing, fitting, and taking breaks as needed. Sewing rewards patience, so focus on one task at a time to avoid mistakes and to build confidence. The process is just as important as the final result.

Versatile Maxi Dress

This design is almost as simple to make as a T-shirt, but it offers a lot more style impact. The pattern is size-inclusive, up to bust of 66 inches and hips of 70 inches.

PATTERN

Signature Maxi Dress
(ChaChaNKole.com)

This knit maxi is a favorite among sewists of all skill levels. This pattern's beauty lies in its simplicity: only three pattern pieces, if you skip the neckband. It's quick to sew.

The final dress is made in embroidered sheer mesh, with white scuba double-knit lining cut using the front and back patterns.

Fabrics: Jomar Stores, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania.



PROJECT DETAILS

Fabric choice: With a wide sweep, this pattern requires 60-inch-wide fabric. Lightweight knits like ITY (interlock twist yarn knit) or DTY (drawn textured yarn knit) ensure the garment's flow and movement. I used stretch mesh.

Fit adjustments: I am 5 feet, 2 inches tall, and shortened the pattern by 3 inches to wear with flats. I left the sleeves long because I like the scrunched effect at the wrists. However, you can customize the sleeve length if you prefer a smoother style. Measure from the top of your shoulder to your wrist, with your elbow slightly bent. Mark the desired length on the sleeve pattern, maintaining a 1-inch-wide hem allowance.

Sewing techniques: On a regular sewing machine, use a narrow zigzag for seams with some give, making sure the needle is centered. Alternatively, a four-thread serged seam works well with stretch knits. This is a good starter project for those who haven't used a serger.

TAKEAWAYS

This is a single-size, printed pattern, so there's no pattern assembly needed. Because it's not a multisize pattern, choose your size carefully, based on your measurements. Each size includes a range of about 3 inches, and the required stretch-knit fabric is forgiving. Don't mistake the pattern's simplicity for lack of versatility. You can make it with or without a split, add style lines, or alter the length to create an A-line dress or a shirt. It works beautifully in lightweight and medium-weight fabrics, and the sleeves can be as dramatic or understated as you like.



Measure from shoulder to wrist if you need to adjust the sleeve length.





A firm but stretchy knit, wide elastic waistband, faux-fly front, and pockets give the impression of tailored trousers—but with user-friendly construction.

Fabric: Joann stores.

Wide-Leg Pants

Season after season, wide-legged trousers appear on runways and in stores. They're comfortable, elegant, and work in any season. The pattern I used extends to size 30, for hips to 58³/₄ inches.

PATTERN

Walk Boldly Wide Leg Pants, high-waist variation with curved front pockets (PatternEmporium.com)

I can't say enough good things about this pattern. It presents few sewing challenges, and is a wardrobe staple. What's more, the pattern includes several pocket options, ranging from simple to intermediate construction.

PROJECT DETAILS

Fabric choice: Designed for knits with 30 percent horizontal stretch, and 20 percent vertical stretch. If your fabric has no or minimal vertical stretch, you'll want at least 50 percent horizontal stretch. Be mindful of the fabric weight; thinner fabrics may allow the pocket outlines to show through. My choice was a modal/poly/spandex blend. I found I needed more fabric than was listed to cut the waistband. Buy extra yardage if you need to match a print or plaid. You'll need 1½-inch-wide elastic for the waistband; wrap it snugly around your waist, then add ¾ inch for seam allowances.

Fit adjustments: For my petite height, I cut the pattern on the "short" line, then removed 2 additional inches at the hem. For a snugger fit in the center back, I sized down for my final pair.

Sewing techniques: This design can be sewn effectively on a serger. If you're including the faux-fly front, interface that area for a clean, pressed look. Pattern Emporium offers helpful videos to guide you through the construction process.

TAKEAWAYS

With six variations, this pattern is a good choice for skill-building. The wide, elasticized waistband is an easy and comfortable treatment with a tailored look. There's a choice of mid- or high-rise versions. The pattern is downloadable and includes A4, A0/ print-shop size, and projector files. If you're after a speedy, cute pair of pants, you can opt to skip the faux fly front and pockets. That's a quick win for sure.



Photos: Mariayna Demond. Styling credits: garments and accessories—author's own. Hair and makeup: ChaCha N. Hudson.

Trapeze-Silhouette Dress

Playful and elegant, this design changes moods depending on your fabric choice. It fits busts to 60 inches and hips to 62 inches.

PATTERN

Allison Tent Dress (JréeDesireé.com)

A knee-length dress with ruffled sleeves and hem makes a statement. The design changes dramatically with your choice of fabric.

PROJECT DETAILS

Fabric choice: The design is intended for wovens, and the silhouette depends on the fabric's drape. I chose taffeta, which delivers volume and a beautiful sheen. The size I made called for 54-inch-wide fabric. However, when I made my prototype, I found that 60-inch-wide fabric would have been a better fit for the wide front and back pieces. I cut the fabric on the cross-grain to accommodate those pieces.

Fit adjustments: I made no changes and am happy with the fit. Length adjustments would be simple, so this design lends itself to being transformed into a flowy shirt or a maxi dress.

Sewing techniques: Be sure to join the long ruffle pattern's two pieces and cut as one. Staystitch the necklines to prevent stretching during fitting and sewing. If you plan to shorten the dress to make a top, raise the side-seam pocket placement notches, as they are positioned low. The most time-consuming part of this project is gathering and attaching the ruffles.

TAKEAWAYS

With the right accessories, this dress looks magnificent, belted or unbelted. It's uncomplicated, and if you get stuck, there are step-by-step videos on YouTube to guide you. The pintucks at the front shoulders can be changed to gathers, and the hem and sleeve ruffles can be omitted or replaced with trim, fabric bands, or a simple topstitched hem.

A flared dress in a bold color is just right for dining and dancing, or simply for looking and feeling good any day.

Fabric: polyester taffeta, Joann stores.

