



*Mold flat fabric with darts  
and pins right on your body  
to find the perfect fit.*

*Try Plus-Size Draping—*

# For the Best Bodice Ever

When your measurements go off the charts, draping gives design freedom

**BY KATHLEEN CHEETHAM**  
(from issue #130)

If you're plus sized, draping is the answer to your pattern woes. It's the perfect way to get your proportions right and turn pattern fitting into a breeze. But this technique can also work for anybody, regardless of what shape you're in. In this article, I'll take you through the steps of draping a bodice and then transferring the information to paper. When you're finished, you'll know how to make a bodice pattern block—sometimes called a sloper—that basic close-fitting pattern with minimum wearing ease that just might change your relationship with patterns.

We are all uniquely shaped—torso length, crotch depth, leg lengths, shoulder width, bust cups, rib-cage circumference, tummy, seat, hip placement, back hump, and even our posture affect how a pattern fits. Standard commercial pattern companies just can't make enough sizes to fit all of us. My technique puts you in the driver's seat for altering commercial patterns or making your own.

## **Drape for an exact copy of your body**

By draping, you can put your energy into one master fitting that allows for your personal lumps, bumps, and slopes that no commercial pattern can account for. From this block, you

continued >>>

can design tops, vests, jackets, and coats in different styles that will automatically fit you. Your own custom block enables you to work on design without all the fitting concerns.

### What it takes

You will need a sewing friend, 2 to 3 yards of lightweight fabric as described in “What Can You Use for Muslin?” on p. 17, and the ability to stand for about 1 hour.

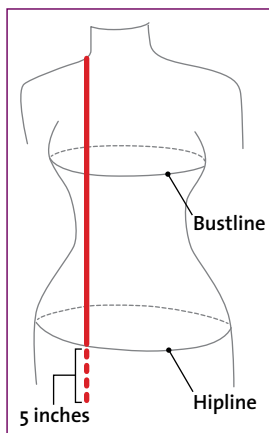
Trade off with your sewing friend. You drape her in the morning and she can drape you in the afternoon. Wear your best-fitting foundation garments and a close-fitting T-shirt, one that can be used to pin the draping cloth to. Wear shoes to ensure that your posture is the same as when you’re dressed to the nines.

If you have a custom dress form, you can drape her to get an accurate fit as well, but pad her first to build in some room for breathing. Otherwise, the resulting pattern will be too tight.

In *Threads* No. 131, I’ll show you how to make a custom sleeve to go with the bodice. And in future issues, I’ll explain how to drape more garments and how to design with your blocks.

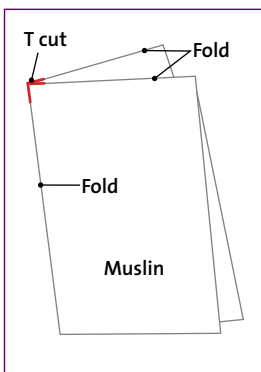
### Prepare the cloth

To get ready for the drape, you’ll need one piece of muslin the right length and width to cover your body. To calculate the length of your muslin, measure



Measure your body.

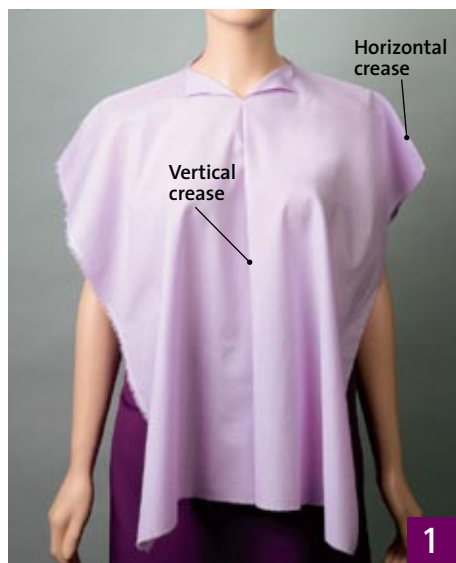
from the top of your shoulder to your hip as shown at left. Add 5 inches to this measurement, then multiply by two. To calculate the width of your muslin, divide your body’s largest circumference by two and add 5 inches. Rip the muslin, then fold it in half, first lengthwise



Fold, press, and clip a neck opening in your muslin.

### Position your muslin

Pull the muslin over your head, and balance the hems evenly from front to back. Place the vertical crease accurately over the center front and center back of the body (1).



Align the vertical crease with the front and back centers and the horizontal crease along the shoulders.

### Start pinning in the shape

Next, smooth the fabric over the body and systematically pin excess fabric into darts, tucks, and seams as needed to define the figure. Keep two rules in mind:

1. Always keep the crosswise grain that sits at the bustline and across the shoulder blades parallel to the floor.
2. Below the bustline and shoulder blades, the straight of grain (center-front

and again on the cross-grain. Press a sharp crease along both folds. Cut a T at the intersection of the folds just large enough to fit over your head.

and center-back creases) must fall at right angles (perpendicular) to the floor.

### Pin the shoulders

Pin along the top of the shoulder following the contour and keeping the muslin smooth and undistorted, but leave a little excess fabric sitting above the shoulders for fine-tuning later (2).



Pin in the shoulder slope, keeping the shoulder fold parallel to the floor.

For women with sloped shoulders, wear a light shoulder pad to create a more balanced proportion, especially in a full figure.

### Fit and mark the bust

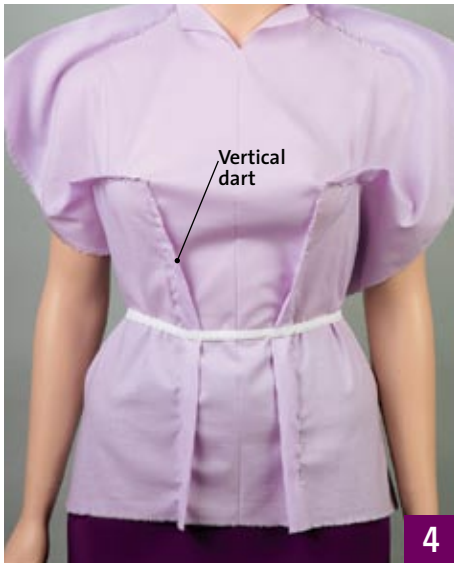
Smooth the muslin across the chest to make the crosswise grain parallel to the floor. A natural dart starts to form from the bust point and falls at an angle toward the side seam. Pin out the natural dart wedge, taking in enough fabric to lift the hem edge until it is parallel to the floor (3).

The muslin should hang like a box from the bust points. Crease the muslin vertically with the grain from the bust points straight down to the hem edge (4). Pin out the excess fabric along these creases into vertical torso darts on both the front and back. As needed, you can





Pin out the horizontal bust darts, and pinch a crease from the bust points to the hem.



Along the perpendicular creases from the bust points, pin out the vertical darts.

tie a narrow elastic around the waistline to hold the muslin to the body and facilitate pinning.

### Establish the side seams

Pin the side seams as close as you can to the body without distorting the muslin. Trim the excess fabric along the side

seam (5). Use your fingers to feel and “trace” how close you can safely pin up to the armhole. A ruler held high into the armpit helps you locate where the armhole sits and the side seam ends.



Pin the side seam and trim off excess fabric.

Go back, double-check, and pin the side seam again, getting close to the body and keeping the seam perpendicular to the floor. Mark the seam with a felt pen when you are confident the side seams are accurate.

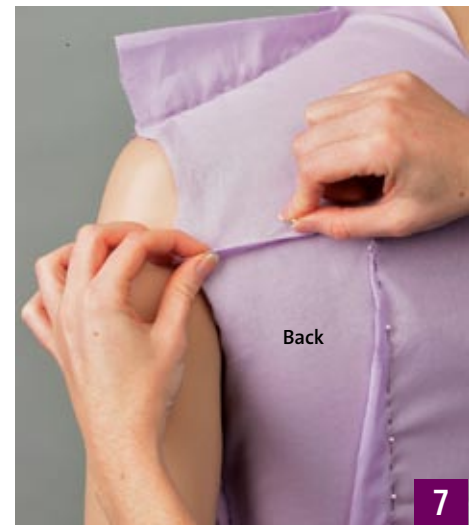
### Find and adjust the armhole

Use your fingers to guide the armhole shape, and mark as you go with a felt pen (6). Clip into the armhole fabric to allow it to shape nicely. If you clip too far, just tape the fabric back together. Then trim the muslin around the armhole to show the shape you want.

Women with full (and mature) figures often have gaping at the back armhole. To solve this problem, pin a horizontal dart from the armhole to the shoulder



Mark the armhole as you feel the shape with your fingers.



Pin a horizontal dart into a gaping armhole if needed.

blade (7). Don't worry about the odd positioning of the dart: You'll rotate it to the shoulder when making the pattern.

### Take one last check before marking

You will not get everything perfect on the first pinning. Set your pins as close as possible. Evaluate your darts and seams and reset pins as needed. Check the darts, side seams, and armholes, then

## WHAT CAN YOU USE FOR MUSLIN?

**MUSLIN** is a term that sometimes means a test garment, but it is also broadly used to mean inexpensive test fabric. For draping a block, use a lightweight, reasonably priced cotton/polyester drapery lining. Here, we used a smooth, inexpensive quilting cotton.

make sure the seams sit nicely on the shoulders. Establish ease between the muslin and the body by sliding your fingers under the fabric and resetting the pins. Now you're ready to mark your seams and edges.

Begin by taping the T slits closed just below the neckline. Then use your fingers to feel the outline of the neck while marking the fabric with a felt pen. When you are satisfied with the overall fit and smoothness of the muslin, mark key points such as shoulders, neckline, armholes, darts, bust points, shoulder blade apex, waistline, and side seams directly on the muslin (8).



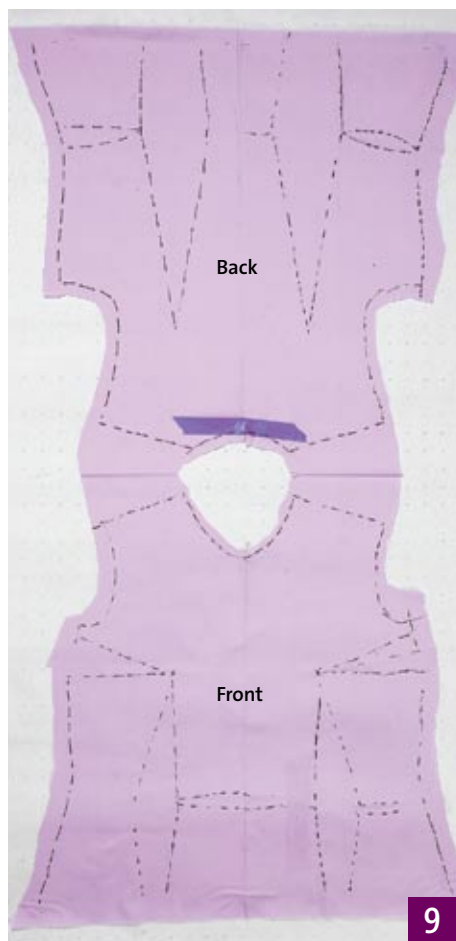
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*Use a felt pen to mark along all pin lines and essential body landmarks.*

### Turn your muslin into a paper pattern

Asymmetrical figures need right- and left-side pattern pieces. However, a symmetrical figure can work with just one side of the muslin to make a more conventional pattern that is cut on folded fabric.

Remove the pins and lay the muslin out flat over pattern tracing paper (9). Secure with weights and use an awl or pinwheel to punch the key lines you've marked. Begin with the center-front and center-back lines, which are also your straight-

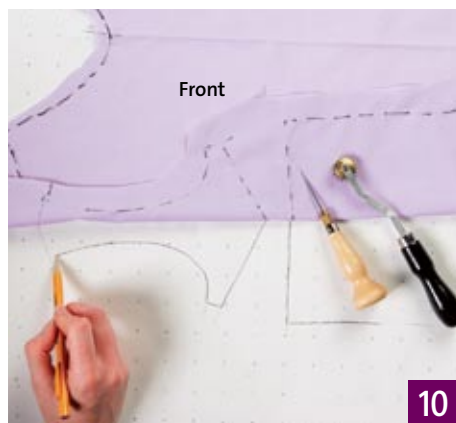


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*Remove the pins, lay your muslin flat over pattern paper, and pinwheel-trace the lines.*

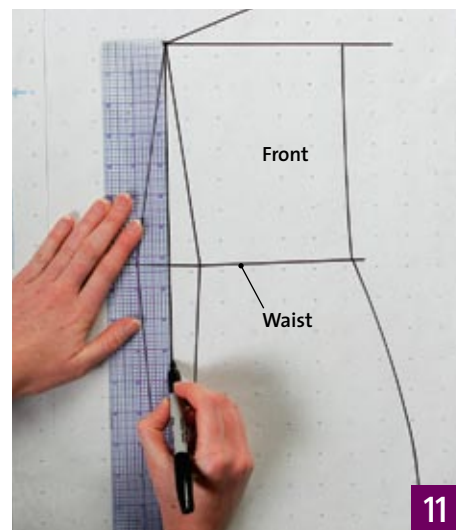
of-grain references. Seam allowances are not included.

Lift the muslin off the pattern paper, and mark all the punch holes with a pencil (10). Use a ruler or curve to make smooth lines.



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*Lift the muslin, and pencil over the pinwheel tracing.*



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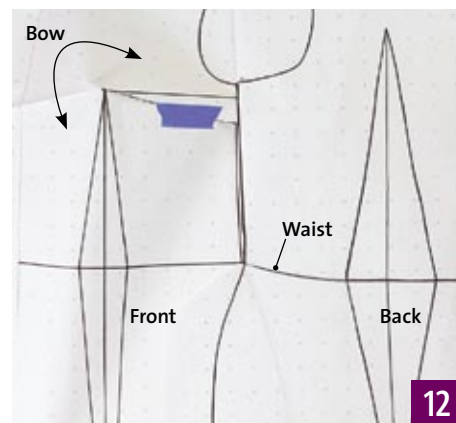
*Use basic drafting straightedges and curves to smooth seams, darts, and edges.*

Using a ruler, define the torso darts. Keep the vertical lines directly under the bust point on the front and shoulder blade apex on the back and, as always, perpendicular to the floor (11).

### Check bust darts before side seams

To create the correct shaping for the bust dart, temporarily tape the bust dart closed (12). Lift the pattern into a bowed shape to tape the dart without distortion. Once the dart is closed, lay the back side seam along the front side seam from armhole to waist.

Ensure that the front and back side seams are the same length and shape. For a length adjustment between waist and hem, add the difference at the hem.

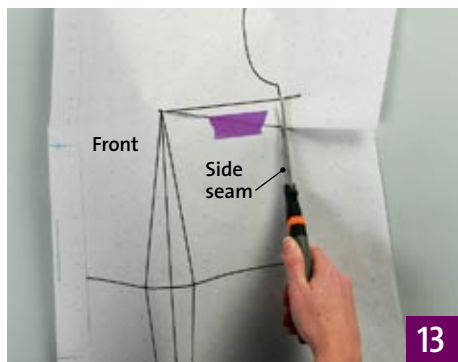


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*Compare the side seams with the darts pinned or taped closed to ensure accurate length.*

Adjust waist-to-armhole lengths at the armhole.

While the bust dart is taped shut, trim along the front side seam to remove the seam allowance (13). Then carefully remove the tape from the bust dart.



While the dart is taped, trim along the side seam.

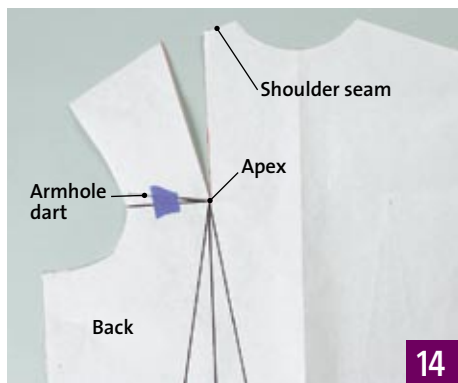
Compare the seamlines. The front and back shoulder length should match. Make refining corrections as necessary until corresponding seams are the same length.

### Rotate the back armhole dart

If you pinned a back armhole dart, now's the time to close it and rotate it to the shoulder before you shape the back armhole.

Draw a line from the shoulder blade apex to a midpoint on the back shoulder seam (14). Cut along the line.

For reinforcement, place a small piece of tape on the pattern at the shoulder



Rotate the armhole darts to the back shoulder seam.

blade apex. From the armhole to the apex, cut along one leg of the armhole dart.

Close the armhole dart by pivoting the shoulder out and down until the dart legs meet. This step opens a new dart at the shoulder. Tape the armhole dart closed. Use a French curve to shape the back armhole, then trim away the excess paper around the armhole.

### Finishing your final bodice blocks

Blocks are meant to duplicate the body as closely as possible. Unlike a wearable blouse or jacket pattern, there is little ease in a block and darts come all the way to the apexes. When you design garments from these blocks, you will incorporate more wearing and design ease.

I like to cut and sew a final-fitting test garment to check the bodice block pattern. Lay the pattern on muslin fabric with the center front on a fold. Using a fabric marker, draw around the pattern. Add seam allowances to the seams. Add a 1-inch seam allowance to the center back. This provides something substantial to hold on to when pinning.

The test garment allows you to fine-tune the smoothness and fit of your block.

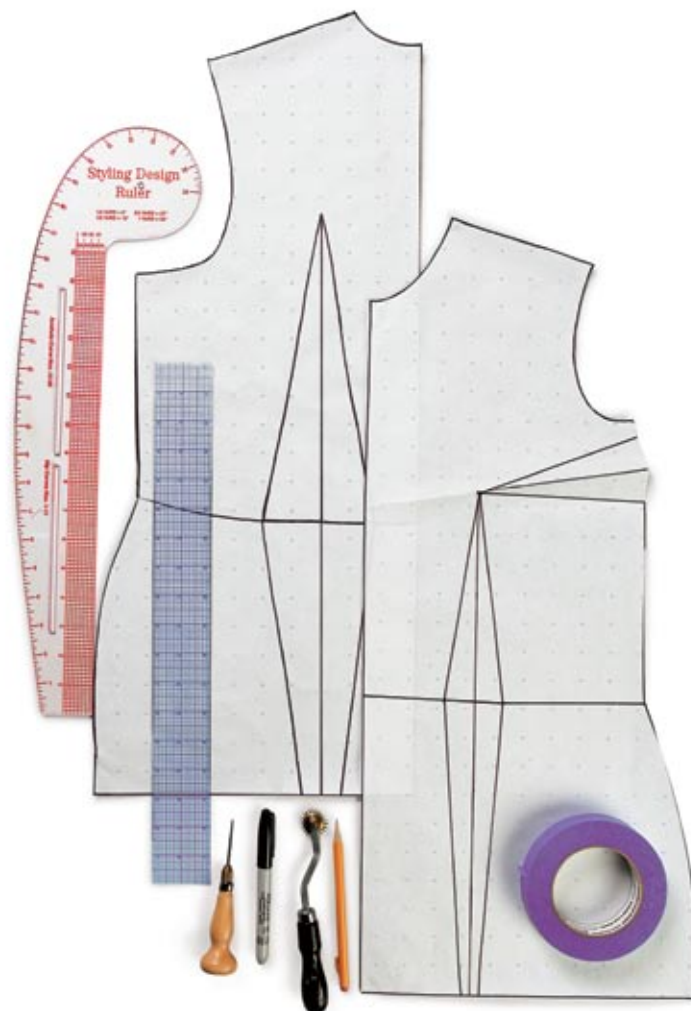
You may want to scoop the neckline a little, trim in a side seam, or raise or lower the armholes. Whatever adjustments you make to the fitting muslin, be sure to transfer them to the pattern block.

Label the front and back bodice blocks with your

name, the date, and your body measurements. In my shop, we trace the pattern onto hard tag paper (poster-board works, too), punch a hole, and hang it in storage to be ready for future design projects.

Label the test garment as well, and store it in a zip-top bag with your block. It can be used later on for fitting adjustments if you gain or lose weight.

*Kathleen Cheetham owns and designs Petite Plus Patterns (PetitePlusPatterns.com) and teaches fitting and sewing internationally.*



These simple tools (curve, straightedge, awl, felt marker, pinwheel, pencil, tape) will turn your draped muslin into a basic block or fitting sloper you can use to fit commercial patterns or to design your own.