

Romantic Era Dress Pattern Instructions



Notes:

The inspiration for this pattern came from repeated viewings of the superb [A&E adaptation](#) of Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters*. I had never found myself drawn to the styles of the late 1820s and early 1830s until I saw this miniseries and enjoyed the beautiful outfits of “Molly” and “Cynthia!” Seeing the film's costumes prompted me to pull out Janet Arnold's *Patterns of Fashion 1* and study the examples of real Romantic Era gowns she had sketched. I also began to search through fashion plates and museum pieces from 1825-1835, noting how necklines, waistlines, and skirts changed from the columnar Regency silhouette to the more rounded and “fluffy” look of the Romantic Era.

The Romantic Era fills the gap between the Regency and the Victorian eras. George IV reigned as regent of England from 1811 to 1820, but, as far as fashion is concerned, the Regency/Empire look lasted from 1795 to 1825. The Romantic Era (named also for the popular poets and musical style of the day) dawned rather gradually in the fashion world. First came the puffed hemlines and more elaborate self-fabric bodice trimmings. Next, the waistline began to creep down from the familiar empire silhouette, reaching the natural waistline by the end of the 1820s. Necklines went from low to high as the bateau neckline came into favor. At the same time, the armhole seam of the Romantic era dropped off the shoulder to create a rounded, sloping shoulder look. Skirts that were once narrow now grew full, and gathers or pleats once concentrated in the back crept around to the front, held out by layers of petticoats. Finally, sleeves changed from the small puffed or long fitted sleeves of the Regency to the more flowing leg o' mutton sleeves of the mid-to-late-1820s and, at last, the huge gigot sleeves of the 1830s. I focused my efforts on recreating the silhouette that appeared in the transition from Regency to Romantic Era in the mid-to-late-1820s, avoiding the later extremes of fashion so you get a more wearable, less “costume-y” look.



Original Romantic dress from the V&A Museum collection.

I've worked to make this pattern as versatile as possible. You will be able to create day dresses with darted or gathered bodices that fasten up the back or the front. There are options for small and large bateau necklines, a ballgown neckline, and a “V” neckline (with or without a collar). You can also use the dress pattern and special neckline guide to create a sleeveless jumper with scoop neckline, which can be worn over my [Romantic Blouse pattern](#). The long sleeve pattern creates the leg o' mutton sleeves you see in the photograph above (which shows a real Romantic dress from the Victoria and Albert Museum collection). Using the short sleeve cutting lines, you can create puffed “balloon” sleeves appropriate for a ball gown (short, puffed sleeves are also appropriate for younger women for day wear, though long sleeves became *de rigueur* for those past their 'teens). As an added bonus for nursing moms, you can use this pattern to make a dress with a secret front nursing panel. I had the opportunity to study an original ca. 1825 nursing gown in the Williamsburg, Virginia, costume collection and based the instructions on that example. (If you're familiar with my 1914 Afternoon Dress pattern, you'll see that the nursing panel operates along the same lines.) You can easily create a whole wardrobe of Romantic dresses that all look different and take you from one season to the next in a wink!

You may wonder why there are no pattern pieces for the dress skirt. Skirts of this time period are just rectangles of fabric sewn together, then gathered, pleated, or gauged into the bodice or a waistband. I provide instructions on how to create both narrow (early Romantic) and extra full (late Romantic) skirts and give you guidelines to help you purchase the correct yardage to create your skirt. A waistband is optional on a dress with a darted bodice, but dresses with gathered or pleated bodices look much nicer with the waistband in between the bodice and the skirt (and nursing dresses require the waistband in order to work properly). Instructions are included to help you create a waistband from your measurements.

At the end of these instructions, I've included some original fashion plates from 1829 to give you a better idea of the silhouette of the time and to provide you with some inspiration. Many thanks to Katherine of [Koshka-the-Kat.com](#) for the loan of these

wonderful images! Be sure to visit Katherine's site to see more beautiful Romantic fashion plates and Katherine's own lovely historical reproductions!

Before you cut into your fashion material, please read all of the instructions. There are so many options to explore, and you'll need to calculate your yardage carefully before you begin. Don't feel intimidated by the length of the instructions – this is not a difficult pattern to use; I've just given you lots of options so you get more bang for your buck! When you are ready to start, trace all of your pattern pieces onto interfacing or pattern paper. This keeps your original pattern intact and gives you a sturdy master pattern you can use over and over again. You will be making a bodice toile first in order to check the fitting of the dress. This step is crucial for creating a gown that fits perfectly (darted bodices especially). The sizes have been carefully drawn, but each woman's body has its own unique shape, and fitting a muslin bodice at the beginning will save a lot of trouble in the long run. Be sure to fit the toile over the undergarments that will be worn with the dress (chemise and stays or regular bra if you're not going for a period correct silhouette). If you don't have period underthings and would like to create them first, I recommend the Regency Stays pattern from *The Mantua Maker* (the style is still appropriate for the Romantic Era) or the 1820s-1840s Corded Stays pattern from *Past Patterns*. You can also obtain a chemise pattern from *Past Patterns*.

Many different fabrics will work for this pattern. Your choice will depend upon the type of dress you want and during what season you plan to wear your dress. For a basic day dress, you can use cotton (there are reproduction calicoes from this period at [Reproduction Fabrics](#)), linen, shirting, wool, and other natural materials. For a ball gown, dupioni silk, taffeta, organdy, voile, and batiste all work beautifully (you'd need interlining as well as lining for the sheer fabrics). For lining, you can use your fashion fabric, pima cotton, or muslin. Acetate lining also works, but it tends to be hot and isn't correct for the time period, of course. If you're creating a nursing dress and will be using a thin fashion material, I strongly recommend interlining the bodice to prevent the nursing slits from showing on the outside. Once you have your fabric pre-washed, you are ready to go!

Pattern Layout:



Click thumbnails for larger images.

Here is the suggested layout for the bodice and sleeve pieces up to size 20 on 45" wide material. (Bodice with back closure is shown.) The remaining fabric will be used for skirt pieces (see instructions). For sizes over 20, the bodice pieces won't fit exactly the same way; instead, the side back piece will go slightly below the center back piece.

The sleeve (long or short) must be cut out on doubled material as shown on the right, since it is too wide to fit on fabric folded lengthwise.

Making and Fitting the Bodice Toile:

First off all, here are pictures of my period stays on my mannequin. If you plan to wear period undergarments, you will try your toile on over top of those. This is very important! (Click thumbnails for larger images.)



- A. Cut out your bodice pieces in muslin or another inexpensive material. If you plan to make a darted bodice, *do not* cut the darts open now. Instead, mark the dart lines with tailor's chalk, basting stitches, or pins. Use the appropriate cutting/fold lines for a dress with either a front or back closure. You will sew all the seams on the toile with basting stitches.



Here are the darts marked with pins
(Click for larger image.)

- B. Pin the side backs to the bodice back, beginning at the bottom and easing the curve with basting stitches if necessary. [Note: Easing depends entirely upon what kind of fabric you use. You will find that cotton fabric stretches easily around the curve and may even leave some extra fabric “hanging” at the end. You can trim away excess as needed. Stiffer fabrics (like silk taffeta) are harder to ease and do not stretch. Some fabrics will just barely make it to the top of the curve. Don't worry if it is not an exact match! There's enough give and take in the seam allowance that you can afford to “lose” some of the side seam at the upper portion of the curve.] Stitch, clip curves, and press seam toward side. [Note: Forgive the change in colors below; I lost my lining photos for the next couple of steps!]



Left: Side back pinned. Right: Side back piece stitched and curves clipped.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)



Left: Side back seam pressed. Right: Bodice back showing side back pieces stitched and curves clipped.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)

- C. Pin the bodice back to the bodice front at the “shoulder” seams, matching notches. Stitch.



*Left: Shoulder pinned. Right: Shoulder stitched and pressed.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

D. Pin the side seams of the bodice together, matching notches, and stitch.



*Left to Right: Side seam pinned; seam stitched; seam pressed open.
(Click for larger images.)*

Now you're ready to try on your toile. It is handy to have a helper if your dress is going to fasten up the back. Pin the closure so that there is a one-inch overlap—just be sure to leave room for the 5/8" seam allowance on either side in addition to the overlap.

E. Check the armholes for ease of movement. (Armholes are set in such a way that they will help you keep an upright posture, but if you aren't wearing stays, they may bind a bit in the front. You can easily cut them down – see [THIS LINK](#) for help). Remember that you'll be taking up a 5/8" seam all the way around the armholes and that you will clip the curves as well, which will affect the fit.



Click thumbnails for larger images.

Above is my test bodice on the mannequin with the back pinned closed. In the photo at right you can see where I pinned the bodice to the mannequin right at the side seams. This is to keep the bodice from shifting around while you are fitting it and making any darts or pleats on the front. It will also help you to see if you need to take up any slack in the side seams or side back seams. Below are photos to show side bulges:



*Left: After darts have been pinned, there is still fabric bulging at the side seam.
Right: The excess has been taken up by pinching the side seam tighter.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

- F. If you're creating a gathered or pleated bodice, you can go ahead and run gathering stitches or pin pleats in place to try them out. If you're pleating the bodice to wear over stays, you may also opt to top-stitch the pleats, which was popular at the time. This works beautifully over a corseted silhouette but will not work with a conventional bra. If you used the front fold line to create a gathered neckline, you can also go ahead and run those stitches to check the neckline. (See [Section 3](#) for photos of fan-pleated and gathered bodices. It is fun to try a variety of options before you decide what to do with your own bodice!)



*Left: Long darts pinned in place. Right: Close-up of darts.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

- G. If you're making a darted bodice, this step is the most crucial—whether you wear correct undergarments or a modern bra. The placement of the dart lines on the pattern is approximate, because no two women have the same bustline! Even if you exactly fit a “size” on the chart, your bustline is as unique as you are. Fitting darts is therefore vital before you sew your dress together. As-is, the darts are drawn low enough to be worn with a regular bra. The letters next to the dart lines indicate cup size (A, B, or C—if you are D or DD, please see [Appendix ii](#) for instructions to modify the bodice to fit correctly). Pin the darts closed, placing the pins 3/8” away from the dart lines (this is the seam allowance for all darts). Try on the bodice to check dart placement. The darts should sit on either side of your center bust point and should not ride up over the bustline. Adjust darts accordingly to fit. Your aim is to have the bodice fit smoothly, leaving just enough room to be comfortable but not so much that the bodice wants to shift or pucker. If you are wearing modern undergarments and do not like the period look of double darts, you can ignore the dart lines entirely and pin a single dart below the bustline on each side, centering the dart on the bust point. If you're fitting the bodice over period undergarments, you will find that your darts need to be much longer, since the bustline is pushed up by stays. Use the lines on the pattern as a guide for dart placement, but ignore the height of the darts and pin according to the fit of your stays instead. The “A” cup darts are a good starting point, since they are longer already. Again, adjust the darts so they hit on either side of the bust point and create a smooth fit without puckers or shifting. Mark any changes to the darts with tailor's chalk, basting stitches, or pins.



Click thumbnail for larger image.

*Above is a bodice with more conventional darts made to fit over a bra rather than stays.
You can see that the darts are shorter. This bodice was made for a D cup.*

- H. Now that you've fitted your toile, you can take it apart and use it as your pattern to cut out your real bodice from the fashion material. Be sure you've made any necessary changes to the toile first (like clipping away excess material from seams you've taken up, etc.). If you like, you can also use your toile for lining or interlining, minimizing waste. **[Do remember that you want to look through all of the instructions here before you really take apart your toile. You may get ideas from other photos that change your mind about the look of your bodice! Once you've gone through the other sections and fitted your toile, you can proceed with the cutting out and sewing steps below.]**

Assembly Instructions:

Note: Because there are so many ways to put this dress together, I am going to show the various bodice options first, then provide instructions for sleeves and skirts last.

1. Basic Darted Bodice:

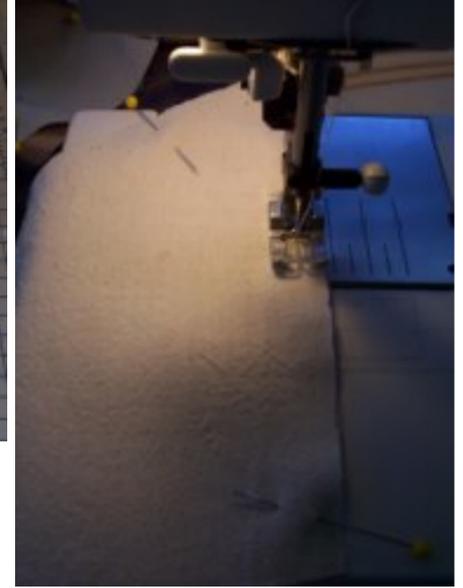
(Blue dress shown in photos has a front closure.)

- A. Cut out all of your bodice pieces, lining, and interlining (if necessary for sheer fabrics).
- B. Using the markings you made on your toile, pin and cut your darts. Stitch, taking up a 3/8" seam. Press dart seams open or to one side. Repeat for lining.



*Left: Darts sewn and trimmed. Right: Darts pressed to one side.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

- C. Following the [same steps](#) given to put the toile together, sew the side backs to the back(s), easing as needed. Clip curves and press seams toward the side. Sew shoulder seams, matching notches. Press upward. Sew side seams, matching notches. Press seams open. Repeat for lining. [Note: If you need to interline your bodice (for sheer or thin material), you will baste the interlining directly to the wrong sides of the bodice pieces prior to sewing the bodice together (see photos below).]



Left to Right: Internlining pinned to wrong side of bodice front; internlining pinned to wrong side of back pieces; basting interlining to bodice.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)

- D. Pin the lining to the bodice, right sides together as shown below (back closure is used in the photos). If you are not going to add a waistband, start and end your stitching 5/8" above the bottom of the closure on either side. If you do plan to add a waistband, you can start and end at the bottom.



Left: Lining pinned to bodice. Right: Lining stitched to bodice, curves clipped, and seam allowance graded.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)

- E. Grade seam allowance and clip corners and curves.



Close-up of clipped curves and graded seam allowance.
(Click for larger image.)

- F. Turn bodice right side out and understitch lining to seam allowance, keeping presser foot at the edge of the seam line. This prevents your lining from rolling toward the outside of the dress at the neckline and closure. [Click [HERE](#) to see a video clip demonstrating understitching!]



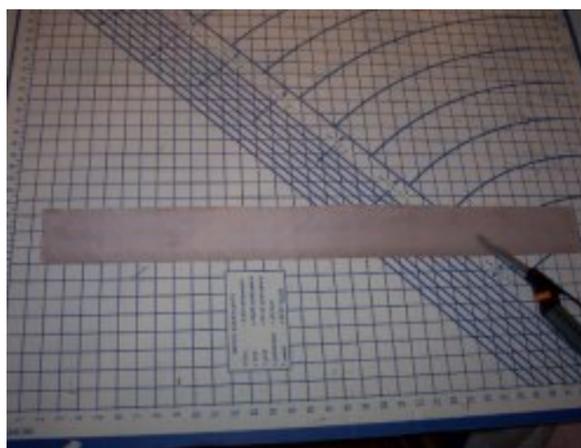
Understitching lining to neckline seam.
(Click for larger image.)

- G. Iron bodice. If you do not wish to add a waistband, you can skip to the sleeve section at this point. If you wish to add a waistband, follow the directions below.



Pressing bodice; Bodice front and back, pressed and ready for sleeves.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)

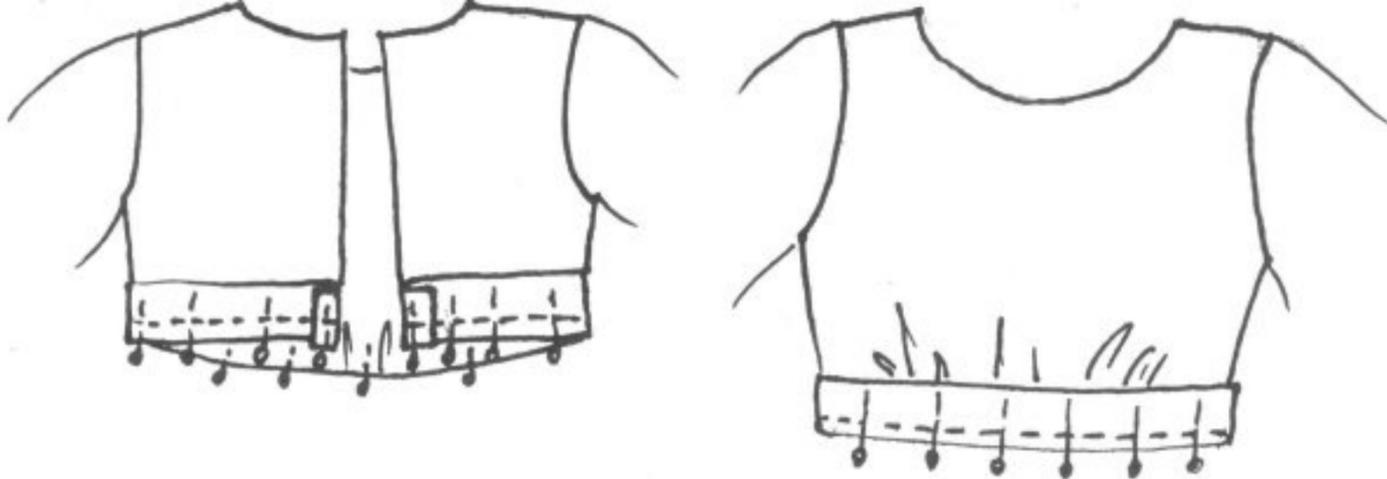
- H. To determine the length of the waistband, measure around the completed bodice from one side of the closure to the other. Now add 1 1/4" to give you 5/8" on either end to turn under. The width of the waistband is up to you, but at least two inches seems to be the norm during this period. This means your waistband will need to be 3 1/4" wide to give you room for a 5/8" seam allowance on top and bottom. Cut the waistband across the width of your material (not down along the grain line, since that will tend to stretch):



Waistband measured and cut.
(Click for larger image.)

Note: Waistband shown is for a ballgown; not the blue dress in the examples above.

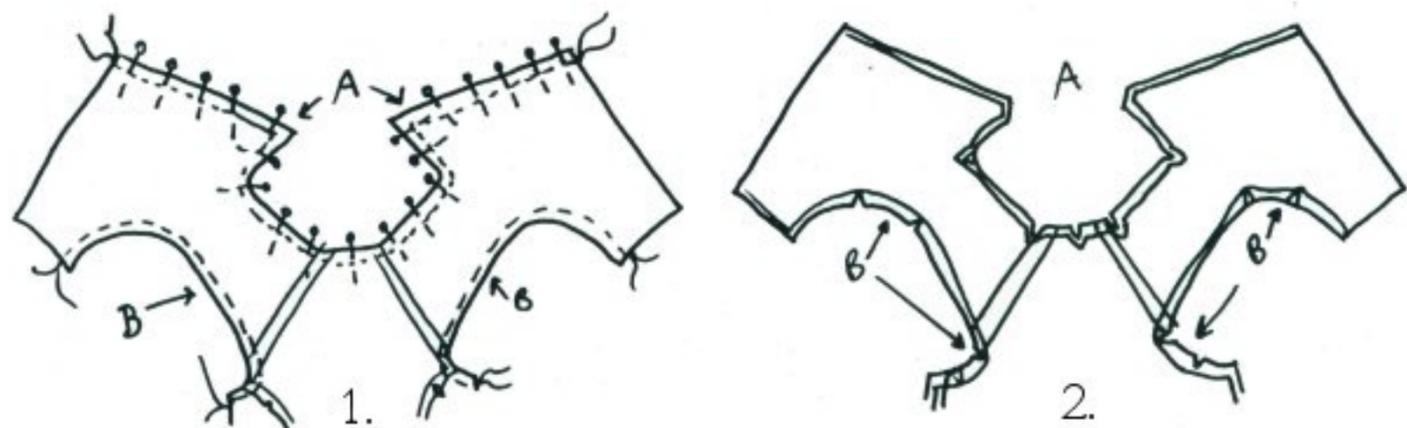
- I. Pin waistband to bodice, turning under 5/8" at each end toward wrong side. Stitch. Press seam allowance down toward the waistband. You're finished with your bodice. Time to move on to the [sleeve section](#)!



Left: Waistband pinned. Right: Waistband sewn.

2. Making a Jumper with Darts:

- A. If you'd like to make a sleeveless jumper instead of a dress, you'll follow the same basic assembly instructions with two differences. First, you will need to use the jumper neckline cutting guide when you cut out your bodice pieces. The guide lines up with the shoulder and the edge of the armhole on the regular bodice front pattern piece. You can trace the guide onto tissue paper or tracing paper, then lay it over top of the regular pattern piece and trace a jumper bodice, following the modified neckline curve. Once you have the new bodice front piece, you can cut out your toile using it and the regular back piece with its special line for the jumper neckline.
- B. Follow the fitting instructions above, then cut your jumper bodice from your fashion material. Follow the basic instructions to assemble your jumper and lining, but do not sew the side seams together. Instead, pin the lining to the jumper bodice, right sides together, matching closures and center back (1A). Also pin the armhole edges, leaving the side seams free (1B). If you are not going to add a waistband (it isn't necessary with a darted bodice), start and end your stitching 5/8" above the bottom of the closure on either side. If you do plan to add a waistband, you can start and end at the bottom. Now stitch the armholes together, starting at the top of each side seam (1B). Clip curves and corners and grade seam allowances (2)



- C. To turn bodice right side out, "feed" the fronts through the shoulders on either side and out the back of the bodice. Press neatly.



*Left: Pushing bodice front through shoulder "tube." Right: Bodice turned (shoulder shown).
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

- D. Sew side seams together, taking care to match the underarm seam at the center so that your lining doesn't try to peek out at the armhole. Press seams open. Iron the armhole and side seam area to make everything nice and neat. Now you're ready to move on to the [skirt section](#)!

3. Gathered or Pleated Bodices:

Note: You can create bodices with gathers or pleats along the bottom of the front, and you can also use the special fold line to create slightly gathered necklines. You can, of course, use the "V" neckline or the special neckline guides to create different necklines if you prefer (see 2A for instructions on using the extra neckline guides). Mix and match to your heart's delight! Gathered/pleated bodices can fasten up the front or back,

and you can use the special nursing panel option with either gathers or pleats. To keep this section as simple as possible, I'll let you follow the assembly instructions from the first section and provide photos of the various ways you can gather or pleat the bodice front. I'll also demonstrate the nursing panel option in greater detail below when I show you the ballgown I made. Finally, I'll show you how to add the collar to a "V" neckline dress. You will wish to experiment on your muslin toile prior to cutting into your fashion material. Just keep in mind that your fashion fabric might behave differently than the muslin (unless you're using cotton for your dress), so you'll want to double-check your experiments once you have your bodice together.

A. Gathered Bodices Fastening in Back:

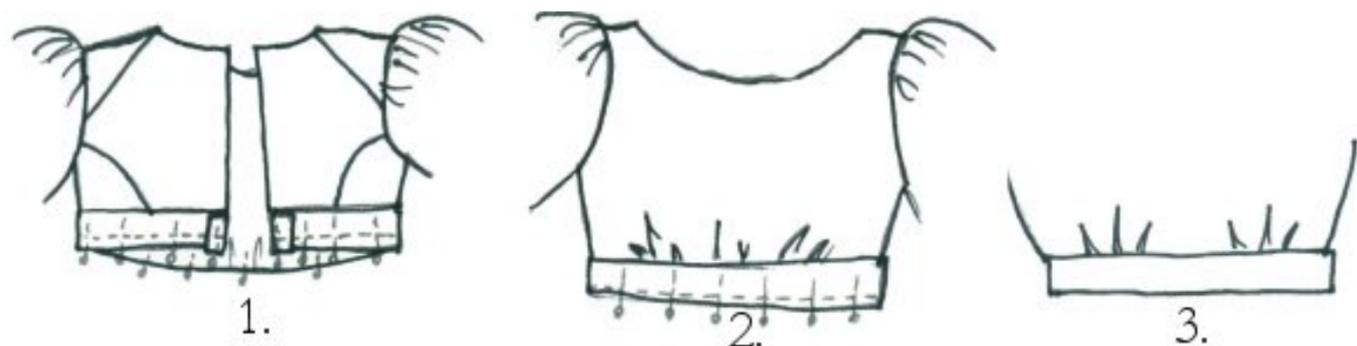
- i. Follow basic instructions for putting together the bodice pieces (back, side back, shoulders, side seams). Repeat for lining, then sew lining and bodice together as explained above (unless you're making a gathered neckline – if that's the case, read on first!).
- ii. Run gathering stitches across the front "curve" of the bodice (catching the lining at the same time, since both lining and fashion material will be sewn into a waistband).



Here is a photo of a gathered bodice front made of muslin. This will give you an idea of what a gathered bodice looks like. This one is pin-gathered just to check the look.

If you prefer, you can run basting stitches and pull them up to look at the gathers. Experiment with the placement of the stitches, since you can create totally different looks with light gathering or clustered gathering. (Click for larger image.)

- iii. See Step [1H](#) to create a waistband (if you plan to use a waistband--otherwise skip these steps).
- iv. Pin bodice to waistband, matching center fronts and turning under 5/8" of the waistband on either end at the back closure (1). Now pull up gathering stitches and distribute them evenly across the front of the bodice, pinning as you go (2). Depending on your tastes, you can distribute gathers all the way across (2) or just under the bustline on either side (3). Once you have them where you want them, stitch the bodice to the waistband.

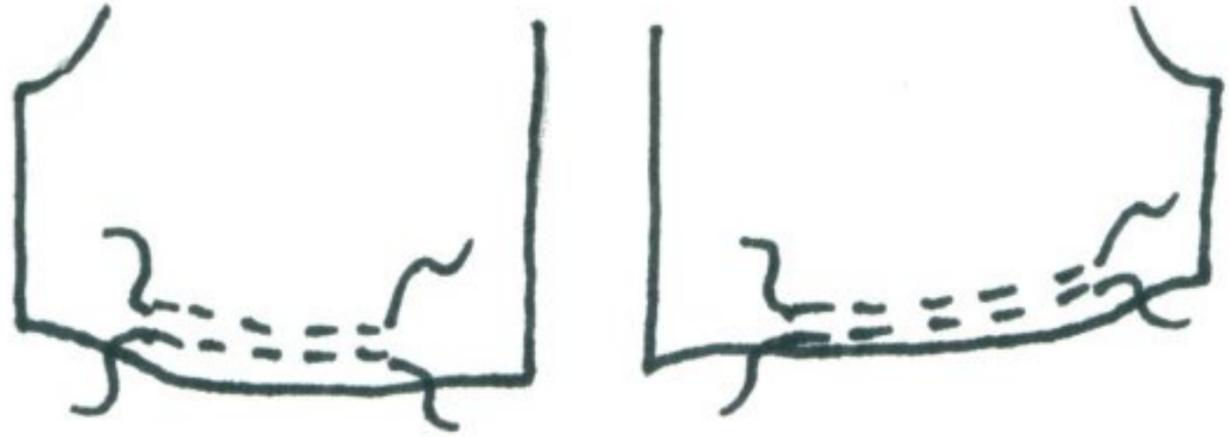


- v. If you've opted for a gathered neckline, you will cut the bodice out using the special fold line, but you will cut the lining out using the regular fold line. This way, you can gather the neckline, then anchor it to the ungathered lining. Gathers can be spread across the front (1) or concentrated in the center of the neckline (2).



B. Gathered Bodices Fastening in Front:

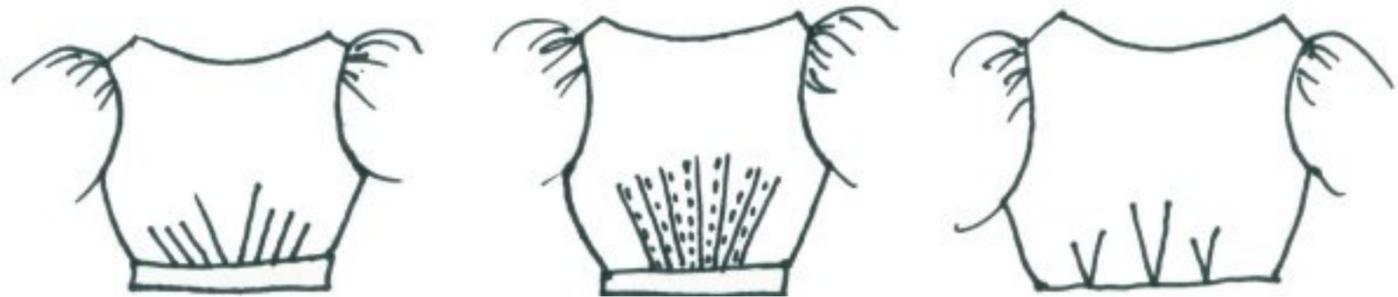
- i. You'll follow the same basic instructions, only you'll use the center back fold line and cut the bodice front on the special line for an overlapping front. Once you have your bodice and lining together, you can run gathering stitches on the curve of either side of the front closure (catching the lining at the same time, since both lining and fashion material will be sewn into a waistband):



- ii. Follow [instructions above](#) to create your waistband (unless you choose not to use one). Pin waistband to bodice, matching center back with center of waistband and ends of waistband with edges of front closure, turning under 5/8" of each end of the waistband. Pull up gathering stitches, distributing evenly and pinning to waistband. Stitch waistband to bodice (see illustration above).

C. Pleated Bodices Fastening in Back:

- i. Follow the [basic instructions](#) to make your bodice and lining and put them together.
- ii. Pleating evenly takes patience, but it is worth the effort. You can use a measuring tape and a calculator to make precise calculations for the width and number of pleats, but I just prefer to pleat by eye until I'm happy with the results! Below is an illustration with three different pleat options. The photos following the illustration show a "fan front" pleated bodice (you can also try pleats spread out more rather than concentrated in the center front).



Left: "Fan" Front Bodice; Center: Top-stitched Pleats; Right: Inverted Box Pleats

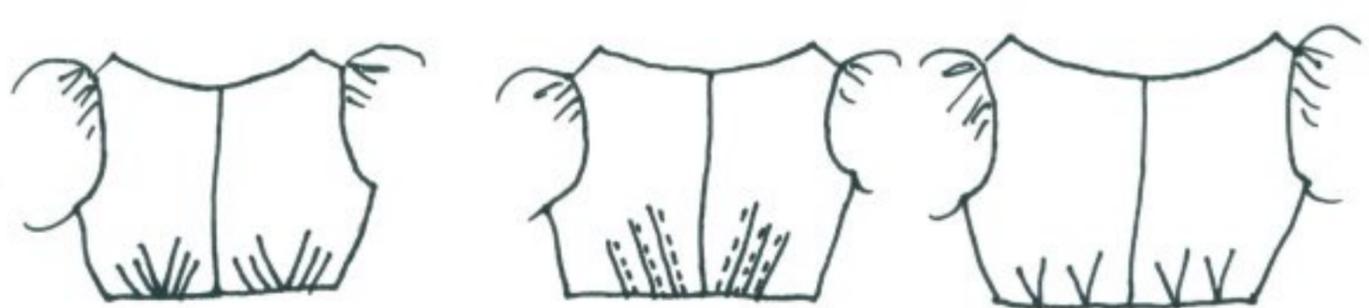


*Left: "Fan" pleats pinned and ready for basting. Right: Close-up of pleats.
(Click thumbnails for larger images.)*

- iii. Follow the instructions above to create and attach your waistband.

D. Pleated Bodices Fastening in Front:

- i. Again, follow [the basics](#) to put the bodice together. You can use the same pleating ideas shown above, only they'll sit on either side of the front closure:

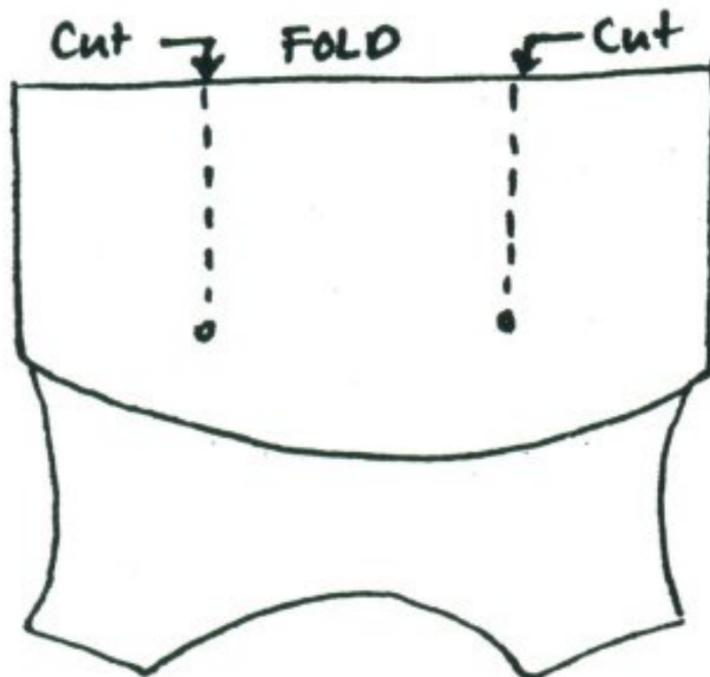


Left to right: Double “fans”; top-stitched pleats; inverted box pleats

- ii. Follow [instructions for waistband](#) if you plan to use one.

E. Creating the Nursing Panel:

- i. First, you need to cut the nursing access slits in your lining. I did not mark slits on the pattern piece, because it would have been too confusing with all the lines already there. Basically, you want the slits to be centered over each bust point and long enough to allow easy access. It is easier to cut straight slits if you fold your bodice front in half horizontally as shown below:



Folding bodice to cut slits.

- ii. You will bind the slits with bias tape or self bias binding cut from your lining material. The photo below shows the inside of the bodice of my nursing ballgown with slits bound by cream-colored bias binding:



(Click for larger image.)

- iii. Follow the [basic dress instructions](#) with *one exception*: you will not sew the bodice together at the side seams. Instead, you will sew the bodice back *and bodice back lining* to the front *lining*. This means you leave the front of the bodice “free” at the side seams (see #1 below). Turn under a tiny amount of the side seams, then turn under again and hem stitch, taking up just enough material to use up your 5/8” seam allowance (2). Hemstitch by hand (or use a blind stitch on your machine). You can pin the top of the bodice front side seams to the armholes at that spot (3), then go ahead and sew your [sleeves](#) in.



Below are photographs to show you how I stitched my ballgown together, including using a zipper foot to sew the seams next to piping (like the neckline and side back seams). If you want to add piping, go to the [Bonus Section](#) below for instructions. When we get to the waistband, I will give step-by-step photos so you can see how the nursing front option is different from the conventional waistband.



Left to Right: Side back pinned; stitching side back along piping with zipper foot; clipped curves on side back.
(Click for larger images.)



Finished side back seam with piping.
(Click for larger image.)



Left: Bodice pinned to lining (looking at bodice side). Right: Lining sewn to bodice with curves clipped (looking at lining side).
(Click for larger images.)



Bodice sewn together without sleeves. Front pleats have been pinned to show how they will look.
(Click for larger images.)

- iv. Follow the [directions above](#) cut out your waistband.
- v. Before proceeding through the rest of the steps, you're going to take a little detour. Instead of sewing the entire bodice and lining to the waistband at this point, you're going to sew the waistband to the bodice back/lining and bodice front lining. Basically, you'll just ignore the bodice front (which you've left hanging free) and pin the waistband (as shown in step 1H) to the back and the *front lining* (which is attached to the back at the side seams), keeping the bodice front free. This is your nursing flap to access those handy nursing slits in the lining. Once you have the large waistband on, you are ready to create the smaller waistband for your nursing flap. I have photos below that will walk you through this.
- vi. Try the bodice on, having a helper pin it closed in the back. Pin the "free" side seam openings so that they meet the bodice back/front lining side seams (as shown in step 2). Now you can pull up the gathering stitches in the bodice front and distribute them evenly to your satisfaction (or make pleats-- whichever you prefer). Once this is accomplished, measure from one side seam closure across the front to the other, pulling the tape tight against your waist. Add 1 1/4" to this measurement, and that is the needed length of your false waistband front. Cut the false waistband out the same width as the full waistband. Cut a second one to use as lining.



*Here is my small waistband for my front nursing flap.
(Click for larger image.)*

- vii. Pin false waistband to the free bodice front, starting at either side seam opening and turning under 5/8" of the waistband. Make sure gathering stitches (or pleats) are even and pin in place. Stitch.

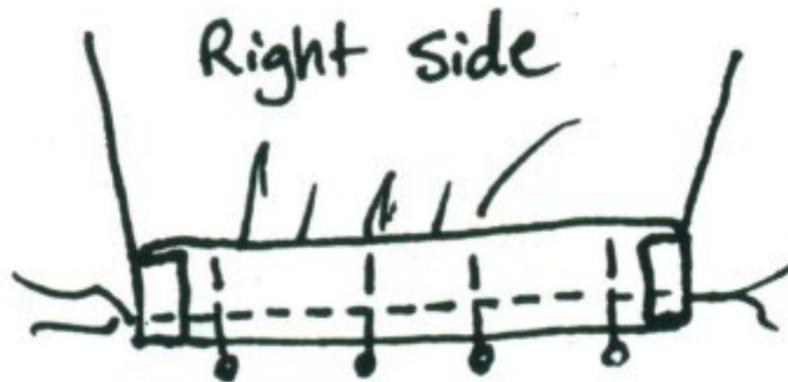


Illustration of how to pin small waistband to flap.



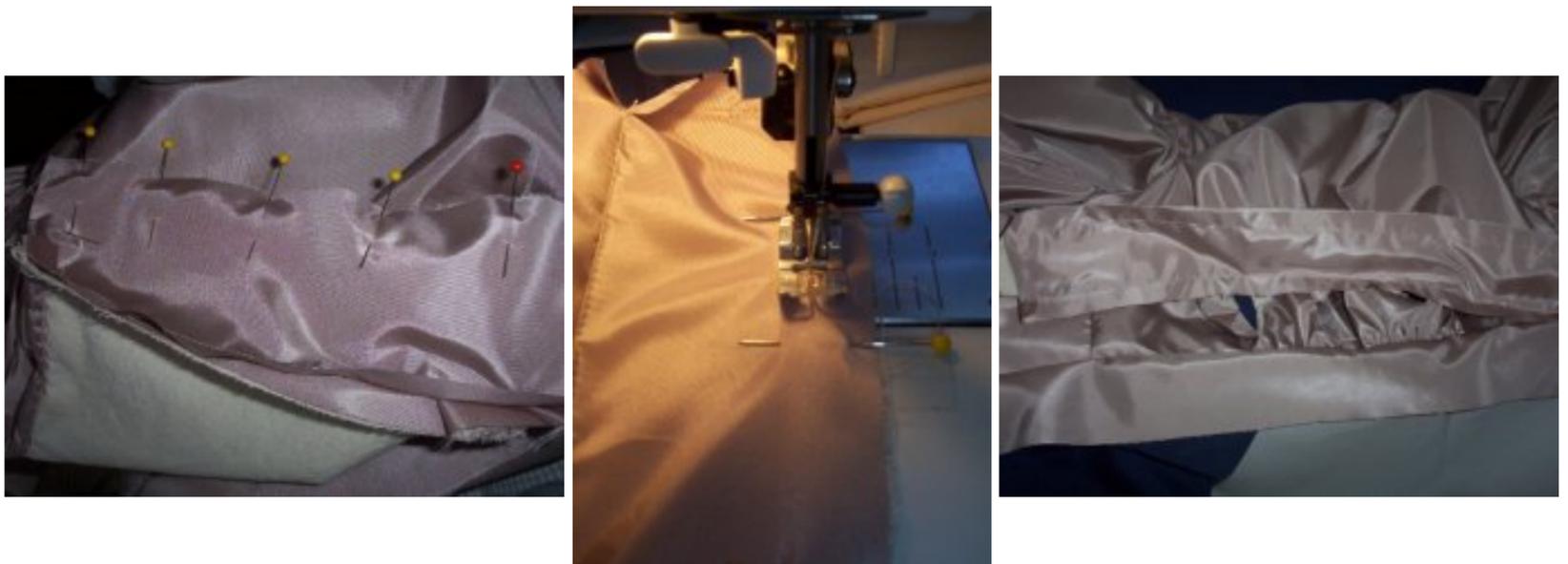
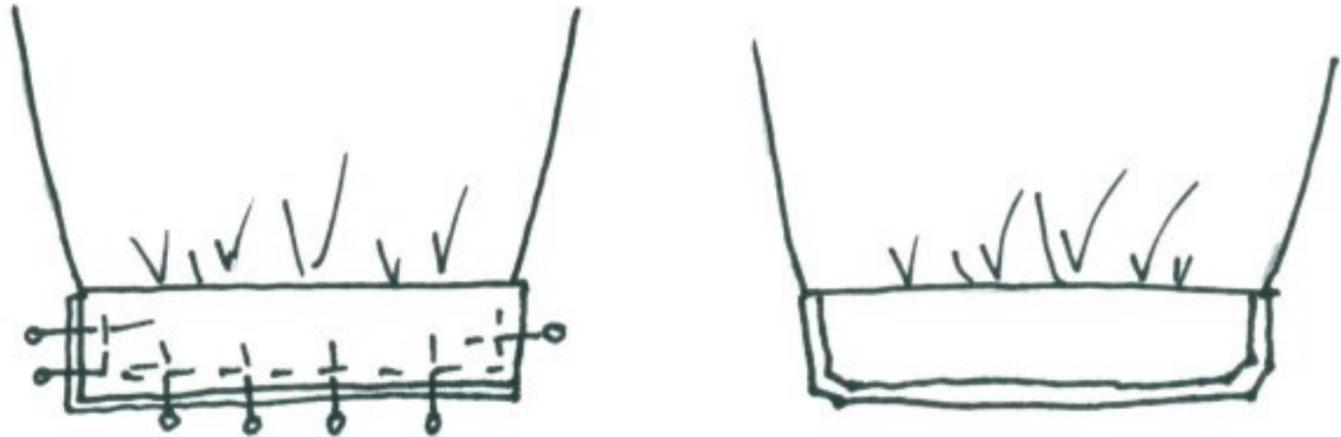
Left: Small waistband pinned to bodice front flap. Right: Bodice on mannequin with pinned small waistband.

(Click for larger images.)



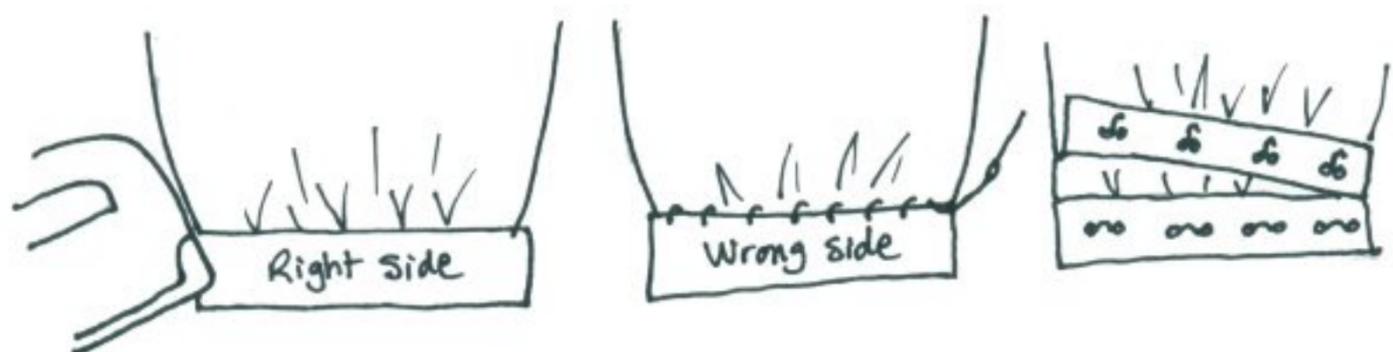
*Left: Small waistband flipped down to show the bodice pleats. Right: Close-up.
(Click for larger images.)*

- viii. Pin false waistband lining to false waistband, right sides together. Stitch as shown below, starting and ending as close to the bodice seam as possible (left). Clip corners and grade seam allowance (right).



*Left to Right: Small waistband pinned to lining (lining is underneath and doesn't show); sewing lining to waistband; waistband lined and ready to turn for pressing.
(Click for larger images.)*

- ix. Turn lining to inside and press neatly (1). Turn under the top of the lining and whipstitch it to the bodice seam (2). Now your false waistband is completed. To make the nursing panel work, all you have to do is attach hooks to the underside of the false waistband and corresponding eyes or bars on the waistband beneath (3). Do the same for the side seam closures (or use heavy-duty snaps). When closed, the nursing panel is a complete secret! When in use, the front panel lifts easily and covers you up nicely.





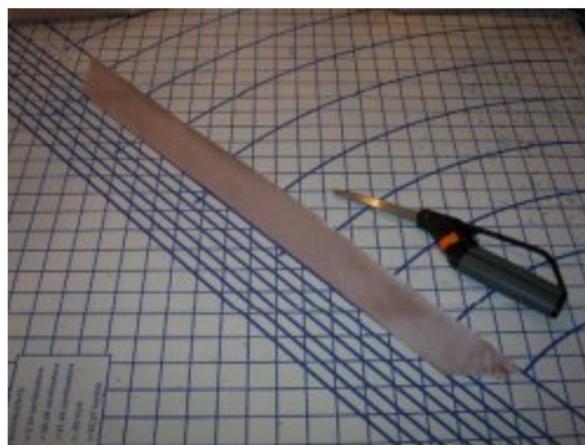
*Left: Small waistband lining pinned in place. Right: Whipstitching lining in place.
(Click for larger images.)*



*Here you can see the lifted flap and the hooks and bars that anchor it when not in use.
(Click for larger images.)*

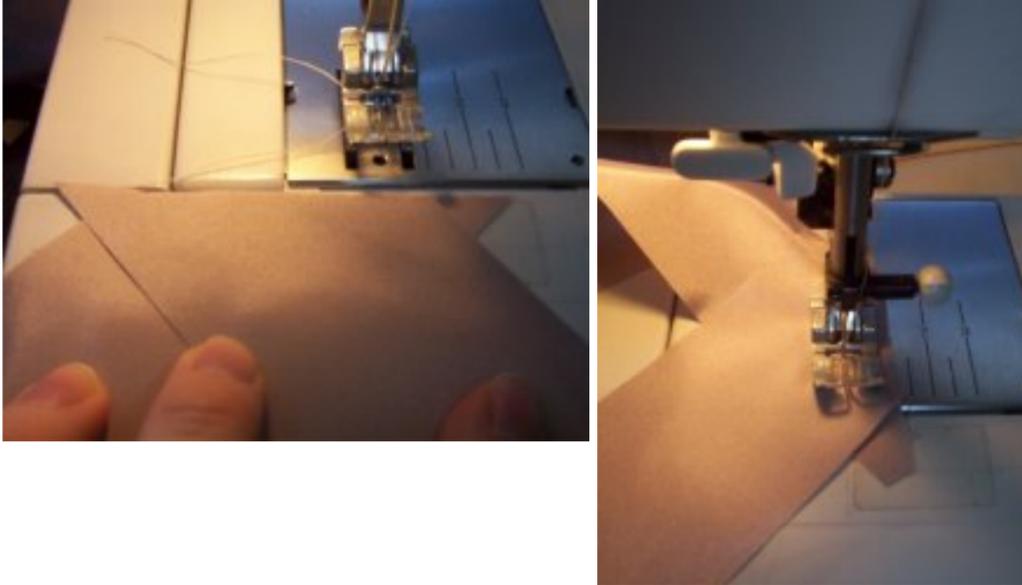
BONUS MATERIAL: I used piping on the seams of my ballgown, so I am going to take a little detour here and show you how to make and attach piping prior to sewing your bodice together. It is not difficult to create piping, and it makes for a beautiful effect. So, here we go!

- First off, you need to take your leftover material and cut bias strips from it. Make enough strips so that, once they are connected, they will be long enough to go around the areas you wish to cover (neckline, armholes, side back seams, etc.). The width of the strips will depend upon the width of your piping cord. [Note: I buy medium-width cord rather than the ultra-thin stuff or the fat stuff. Get cord that is not too stiff so you don't have trouble going around curves later.] You want the bias strips to be wide enough to enclose the cord *and* leave a 5/8" seam allowance. Here is a picture of a bias strip cut from my gown material:



*Note that each end of the strip is cut at a 45-degree angle.
(Click for larger image.)*

- After you have cut out enough strips, you are ready to sew them together. You are going to match one strip to the next at the angled end, overlapping the angles like this:



*Left: Matching angles. Right: sewing the strips.
(Click for larger images.)*

When you sew the strips together, you will start and end with the needle in the little "V" created by the overlapped angles.

- Now press all the seams open like this:



*Pressing the seam open.
(Click for larger image.)*

- Now it's time to place the cord in the center of the strip, fold it over, and sew the cord inside. Use your zipper foot to sew with the needle right next to the cord. Here are the steps:



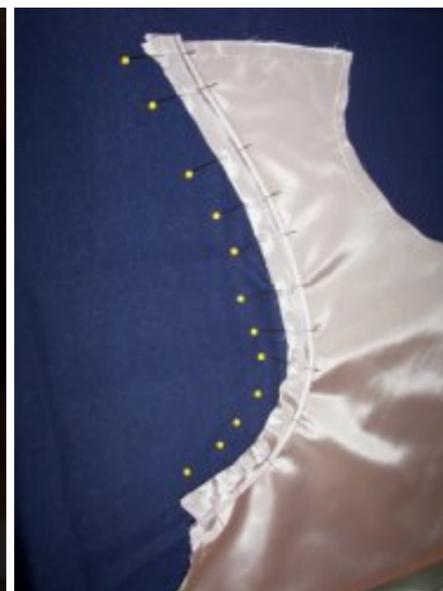
*Left to Right: Placing cord on the strip; stitching down the folded strip next to the cord; final piping.
(Click for larger images.)*

- Check to make sure that you have a 5/8" seam allowance on the other side of the cord. Use your measuring tape (which is exactly 5/8" wide) to do the check. If there is extra fabric, trim it away, like this:



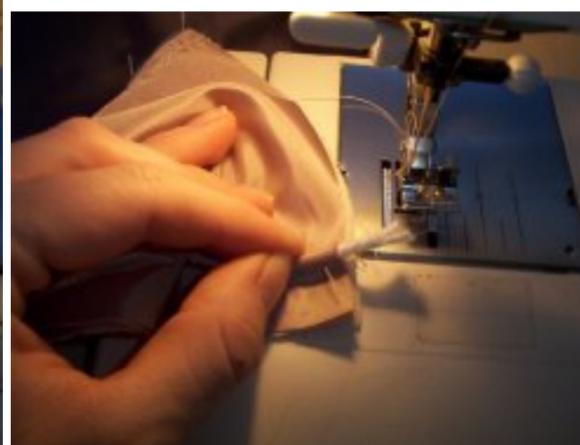
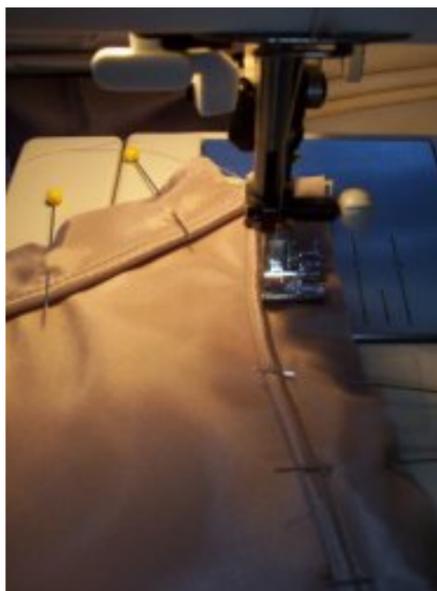
*Trimming away excess material from the allowance.
(Click for larger image.)*

- Okay! Now you have a length of beautiful piping to use on your gown! Because you trimmed the piping to exactly match your seam allowance, you can just match its raw edge to the raw edges of your bodice pieces. Below are photographs that show where I pinned the piping on my dress (neckline, shoulder and side back seam, armhole edge):



(Click for larger images.)

- Baste the piping to the gown with the zipper foot:



*Left: Basting piping to bodice piece.
Right: When you finish basting, carefully pull out 5/8" of the cord from each end of the piping and cut it off. This will make it much, much easier to sew your dress seams together--otherwise you have to go over piping "bumps," and that is not smooth or nice-looking.
(Click for larger images.)*

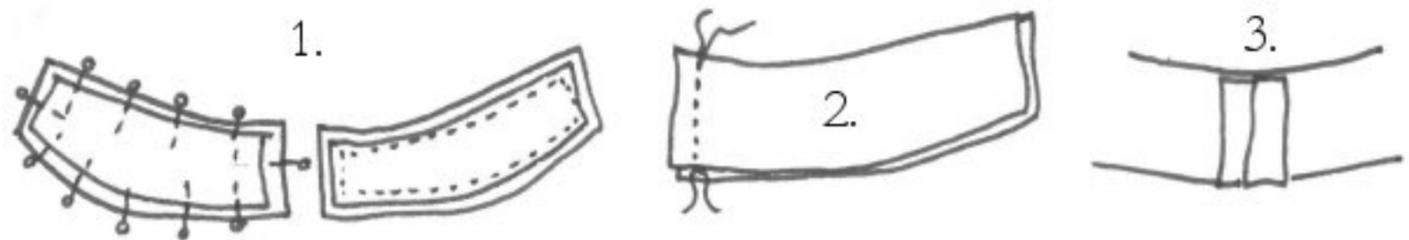
F. Making a “V” Neckline Bodice with Collar:

Note: I do not have photographs of this dress option yet, but if you need help figuring out how to make a collar, see my [Spencer Jacket Instructions](#). The collar is the only step that is substantially different from the rest of the basic dress instructions.

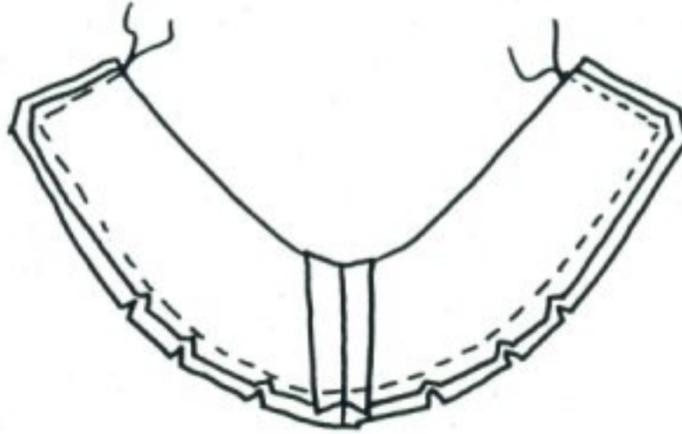
- i. You can use the “V” neckline with any of the above bodice options, but I created it especially for a front-fastening bodice with collar, taking my inspiration from “Molly's” burgundy silk dress in “Wives and Daughters.” Follow the [basic](#) directions to assemble your bodice and assemble your lining. Set the lining

aside for now.

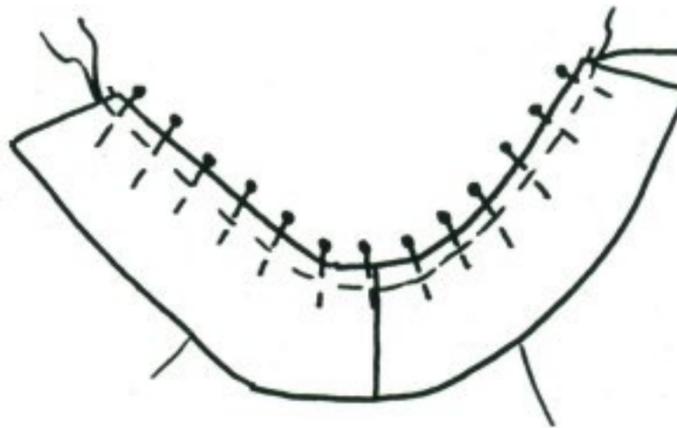
- ii. Cut out the four collar pieces and the two interfacing pieces. Baste interfacing to two of the collar pieces (1). Stitch two collar sections together at the center seam (2). Press seams open (3).



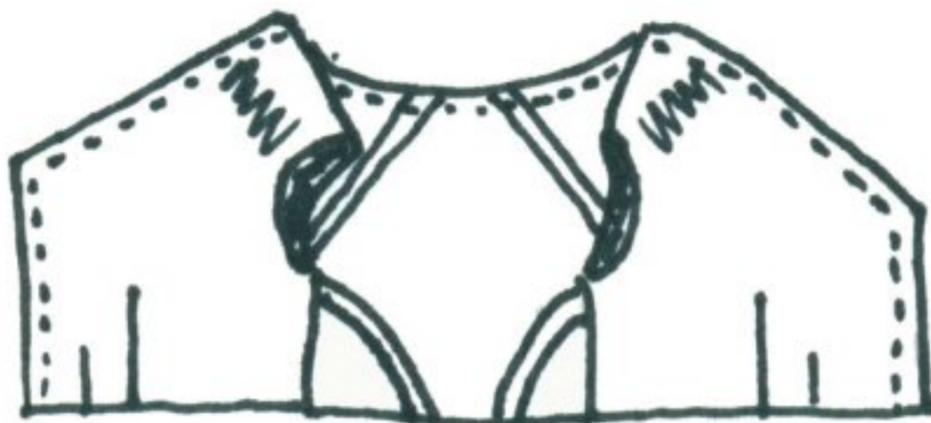
- iii. Pin collar sections, right sides together. Stitch, leaving upper edge open. Grade seam allowances and clip corners and curves. Turn collar right side out and press.



- iv. Pin collar to bodice neckline, matching center back with center seam on collar. Baste in place.



- v. Pin lining to bodice and collar, right sides together. Follow [basic instructions](#) to attach lining to bodice, clip curves and corners, understitch, etc. When complete, iron bodice neatly and move on to the [sleeve section](#)!



4. Sleeves

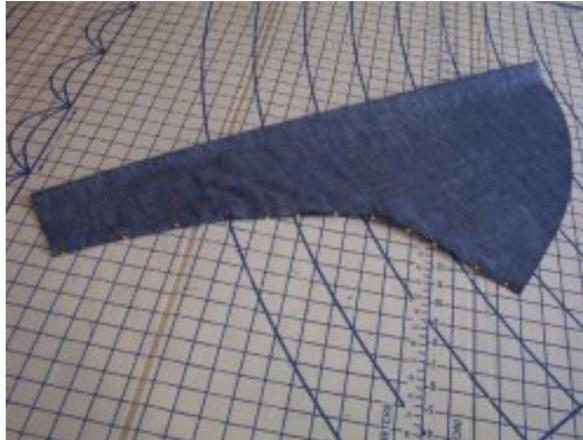
A. Sleeves:

- i. Run gathering stitches as marked on the pattern piece:



Basting stitches run for gathers.

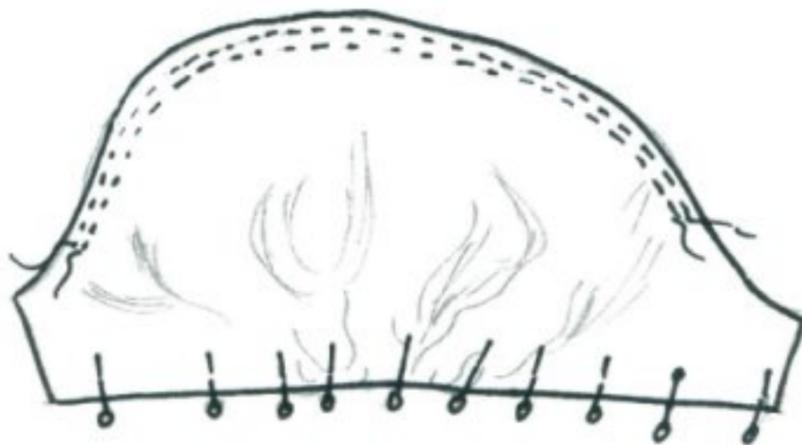
- ii. Sew sleeve seams together, then turn right side out and press.



Long sleeve pinned for stitching.
(Click for larger image.)

B. Short Sleeves:

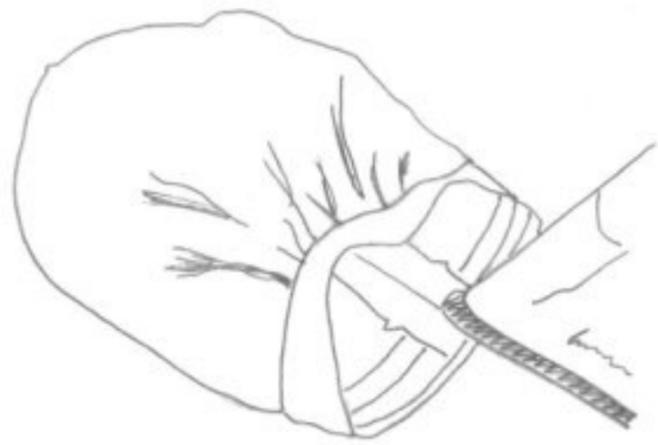
- i. Run gathering stitches as marked on top and bottom of the pattern piece.
- ii. To make sleevebands for short sleeves, measure around your flexed bicep. Add 1 1/4" to this for your seam allowance, then add anywhere from 1/2" to 1" for comfort (so the sleeve doesn't bind). For example, if your arm measures 13" around, you will make your sleevebands at least 14 3/4" long. Cut two sleevebands on the bias. Width is up to your personal taste. If you want very narrow bands that barely show, cut them 1 3/4" wide. This leaves just enough room to turn the sleevebands to the inside. If you want wider ones that show, cut the bands anywhere from two to four inches wide.
- iii. Pin sleeveband to bottom of short sleeve, right sides together. Pull up gathering stitches to fit. Stitch sleeve to sleeveband, taking up a 5/8" seam.



(Click for larger image.)

Left: Stitches for gathers. Right: Sleeve pinned to sleeveband with gathers pulled up.

- iv. Stitch sleeve seam, then press open:



(Click for larger image.)

Left: Sleeve seam sewn. Right: Pressing seam open.

Attaching Both Sleeve Types:

- i. Pin sleeves into armholes, matching sleeve seam with bodice side seam. Match “+” on sleeve with “+” on the shoulder of the dress. Pull up gathering stitches so that they start just above the dropped shoulder seam on the back and continue over the top and slightly down the front of the bodice. There is no “wrong” way to distribute the gathers. They do not need to be pulled tight—just distributed evenly so that they are pleasing to your eye.



Left: Long sleeve pinned in. Right: Ballgown sleeve pinned in.
(Click for larger images.)

- ii. Stitch sleeves into armholes. Clip curves (this makes the armhole more comfortable).



Left: Stitching in the sleeve. Right: Sleeve stitched in (detail).
(Click for larger images.)

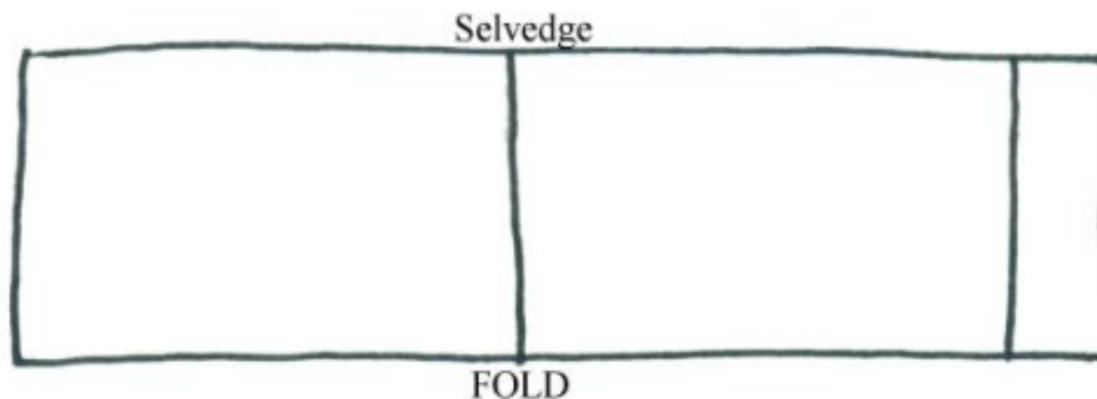
- iii. Turn edges of sleevebands under once, then under again so that they cover the seam inside. Whipstitch the bands to the seam (short sleeve only):



*Here is the long-sleeved dress with the sleeves in.
(Click for larger images.)*

5. Making the Skirt

- A. Skirts from this time period were simply rectangles of fabric sewn together, then gathered, pleated, or gauged into the waistline or waistband of the dress. You'll need to decide if you want a comparatively narrow skirt (early Romantic) or a full skirt (mid-to-late Romantic). For a narrow skirt, you'll need two rectangles cut long enough to sew onto the bodice, then hem. To create your rectangles, you'll use the entire width of your material (fold to selvedge), cutting each section to the proper length (if you're using 54"-wide material, you can opt to use just one rectangle if you want to keep the skirt narrow):



For example, if you need a skirt that is 38" long when hemmed, you'll cut each rectangle at least 39 5/8" long. That would allow 5/8" for the waistline seam and one inch for a very narrow hem. I personally prefer deeper hems (three to four inches). Deep hems seem to be more common in this time period, particularly since horsehair was often used as a stiffener within the hem to help skirts stand out a bit (especially on late Romantic ball gowns). If you want a full skirt, you can opt for three or four rectangles. Calculate the length (including seam allowance and hem), then multiply that by the number of rectangles you wish to use. Now you have the yardage requirement for your skirt. Add this to the yardage for the bodice and sleeves given on the chart, and you can go shopping for your material!

- B. If you opt for the full skirt (like I did on the ballgown shown here) and want to help it stand out a bit, you can purchase "horsehair" stiffening in various widths at most fabric/upholstery stores. This can be sewn inside of the hemline or used as a hem facing. Here is a picture of modern "horsehair" stiffening (approximately 2.5 inches wide):

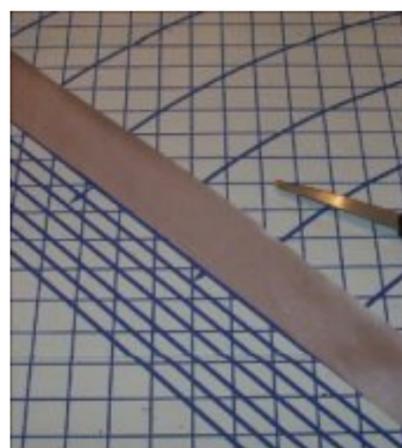


(Click for larger image.)

- C. Layers of petticoats also became standard during the Romantic Era. You can easily create your own petticoats by making full cotton skirts sewn into a waistband that closes in the back. Add flounces or tucks to help the petticoats keep the dress skirt fluffed out. I recommend using 100% cotton (muslin, pima, etc.) for comfort and durability.
- D. Putting your skirt together is simple, but there are several different ways to attach it to the bodice/waistband, and there are two different ways to make the placket. I'll give instructions for a narrow skirt and its placket first.
- Sew the skirt rectangles together at the side seams. Mark the center front and center back with pins.
 - Cut a slash in the center (front or back) of the skirt for the placket (unless you are making a 3-panel skirt; then [see below](#)). The slash should be no more than six inches long:



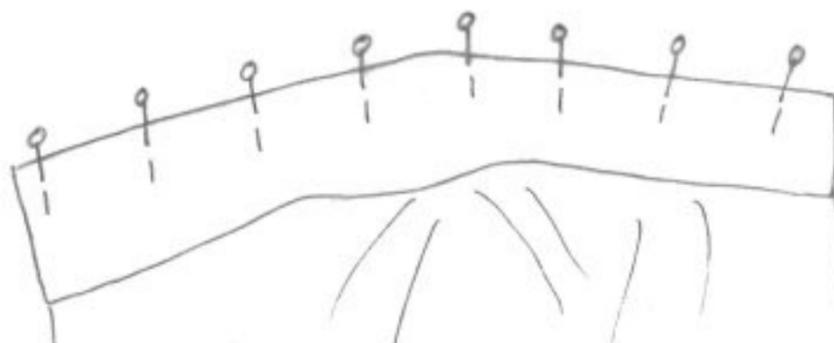
- Cut out a placket on the bias that is twice as long as the slash and at least 2 1/2" wide:



Cutting placket on the bias.

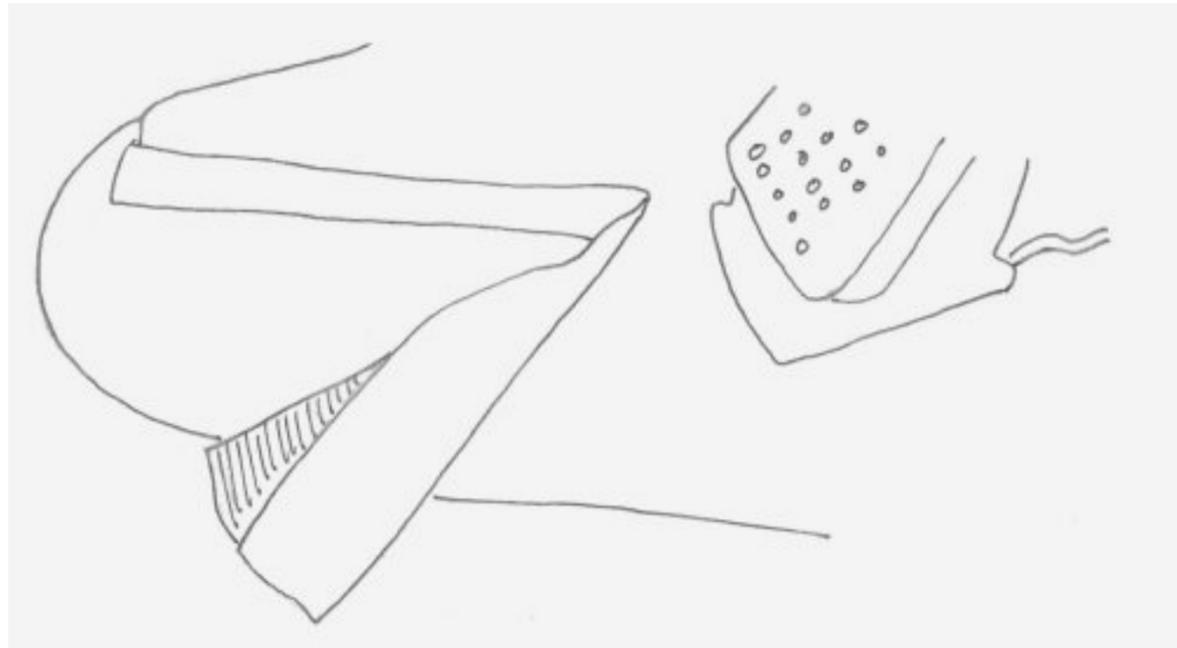
(Click for larger image.)

- Pin the placket to the slash, opening the slash so that it is as close to a horizontal line as it can be:

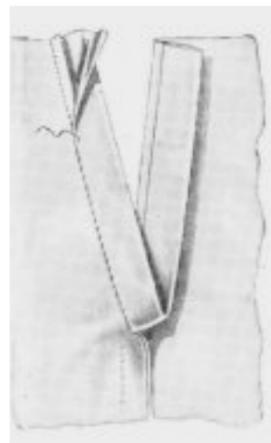


- Stitch placket to skirt, starting with a 3/8" seam allowance and gradually bringing the presser foot to the

edge of the fabric at the center of the placket. When you reach the center, leave the needle in the center, lift the presser foot and pivot the fabric to head back up the other side of the placket. Gradually come back to a 3/8" seam allowance as you finish the seam. Press under 1/4" of the free edge of the placket or finish with a zig-zag stitch. Press the placket as illustrated so the left side overlaps the right and makes an even closure:



- vi. If you're making a full skirt with three panels, you will not need to cut a slash. Instead, when you sew your rectangles together, leave the last six inches open on one of the seams. You will place your placket into this opening. Pin the placket as illustrated in step C above. Stitch placket to skirt, starting at the top edge of the left side of the skirt opening (left as you are looking at it) and taking up a 5/8" seam. When you reach the center, leave your needle in the fabric (right in the center of the skirt seam), lift the presser foot and pivot the fabric to head back up the other side of the back opening. Follow the instructions above for pressing the placket.



In-seam placket seen from the inside of the skirt.
(Click for larger image.)

If you're making an extra-full skirt with four panels, you can either use a seam to place the placket, or you can cut a slash. It all depends on how you want to attach the skirt to the bodice/waistband, which leads us to our final skirt instructions!

6. Attaching the Skirt:

Note: If you go to [Appendix i](#), you can see examples of skirt treatments from Romantic fashion plates. Early Romantic Era skirts resembled mid-to-late Regency Era skirts by having the skirt front nearly smooth and the majority of pleats or gathers between the hip and the center back. By the mid-1830s, skirts were full all the way around. Whatever you prefer is fine, and it is really fun to experiment!

- A. **Gathers:** If you're making a narrow, gathered skirt, you can simply run basting stitches around the top of the skirt (breaking at side seams), then pin the skirt to your bodice/waistband, matching the placket to your opening, side seams to side seams, and center front or back to the center front or back. Pull up the gathering stitches evenly. Stitch skirt to bodice/waistband. This is how I attached the skirt of the blue dress used as my example:



(Click for larger images.)

B. **Gauging:** If you've opted for a very full skirt, gathers are not going to work, because the amount of fabric is too great to be gathered conventionally into the waistline. Instead, you will need to gauge the skirt to the bodice/waistband. Gauging is not difficult, but it is time-consuming, since it is best to do it by hand to make it work properly (using double needles and a very wide stitch on a machine will also work to run the gauging stitches, but the skirt will still have to be attached by hand). To begin, you'll need heavy quilting thread (or thread that will not easily break). You are going to run two lines of gauging (also called “double gathering”) stitches around the top of the skirt, and they must be spaced evenly and exactly parallel, as shown in the following illustration:

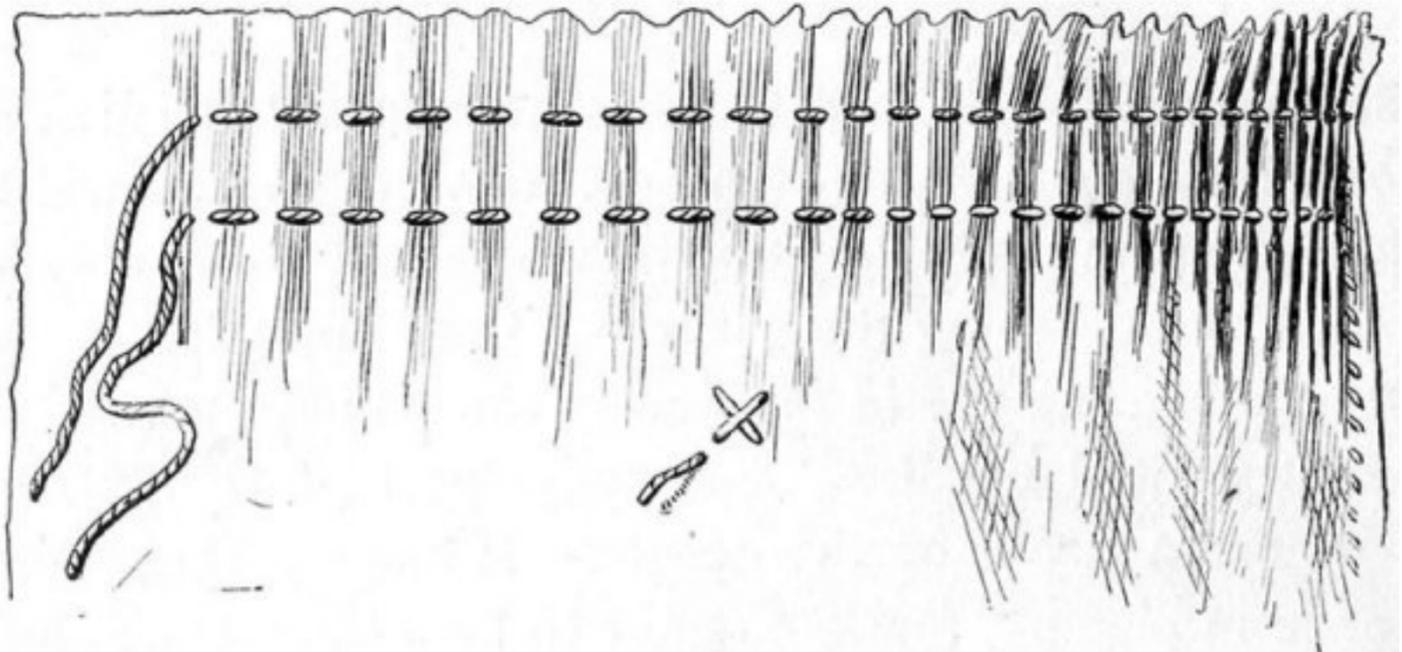


Illustration from *School Needlework* (1893)

Thanks to [Vintage Sewing.info](http://VintageSewing.info)

Here are gauging instructions from an 1893 sewing manual:

1. Gather one-fourth of an inch from the raw edge.
2. When the end is reached, remove the needle, but do not draw up the thread.
3. Make a crease one-fourth of an inch below the gathering.
4. On the crease make another row of gathering, taking each stitch directly below the one above it.
5. Remove the needle.
6. Take hold of both threads near the cloth, and gradually draw the gathers up to the required width.

To attach the gauged skirt to the waistband, you will first press under the seam allowance along the bottom of the bodice or waistband (whichever you're attaching the skirt to). It helps to baste the fold in place, since it will tend to pull as you attach the skirt. Match center front and back of skirt to center front and back of dress (placket to opening, etc.). You can use pins to secure these areas, but you will not be pinning the entire skirt to the bodice/waistband. Basically, instead of stitching over the gathers, you are going to “hang” the skirt from the bodice/waistband by stitching through each gather at the top fold and the bottom of the bodice/waistband. This is a little tricky at first, but you will soon get the hang of it:

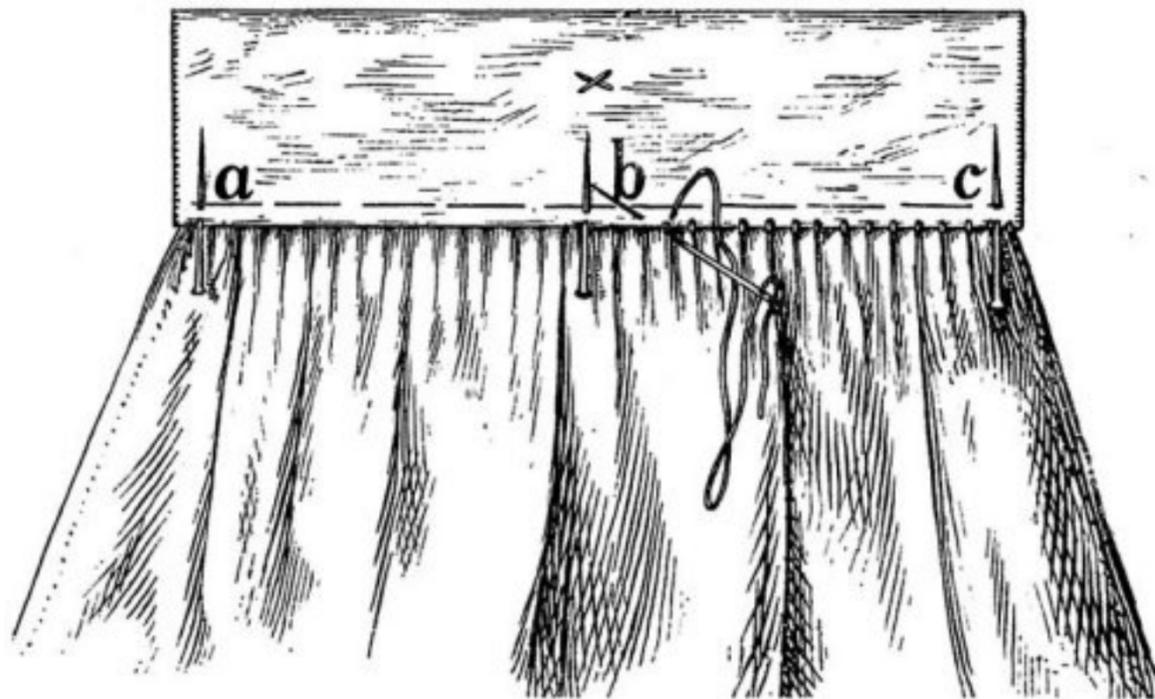
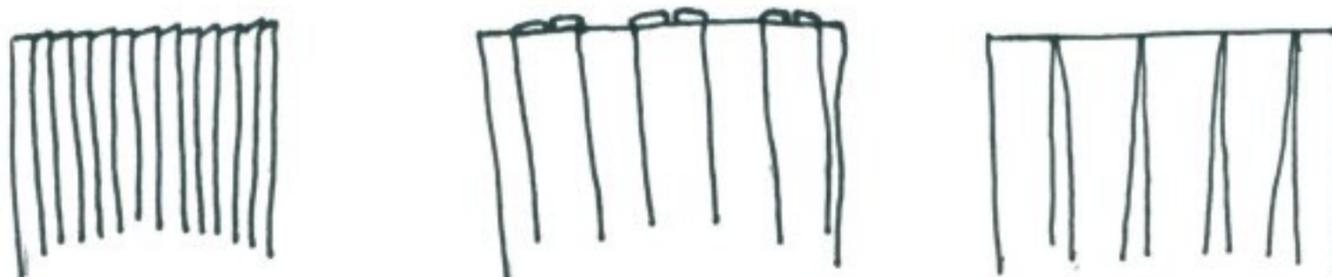


Illustration from *School Needlework* (1893)
Thanks to VintageSewing.info

Again, you want to use strong quilting thread to attach your skirt. This is by far the most involved and time-consuming method, but it is totally correct for the time period and a must if you are making a very full skirt.

- C. **Pleats:** You may also opt to pleat your skirt rather than gathering or gauging. This will work on both narrow and full skirts. You can use basic knife pleating, box pleating, or inverted box pleating when you attach your skirt. You can make the pleats go all the way around the skirt, start them on either side of the darts on a darted bodice, or start them at the bodice side seams, concentrating their fullness in the back. You can calculate pleats precisely to use up all the skirt fabric evenly, but I find it works just as well to “eye” the pleats and pin as you go, starting on one side, then duplicating the work on the other side. Here are some illustrations of different kinds of pleats to get you started:



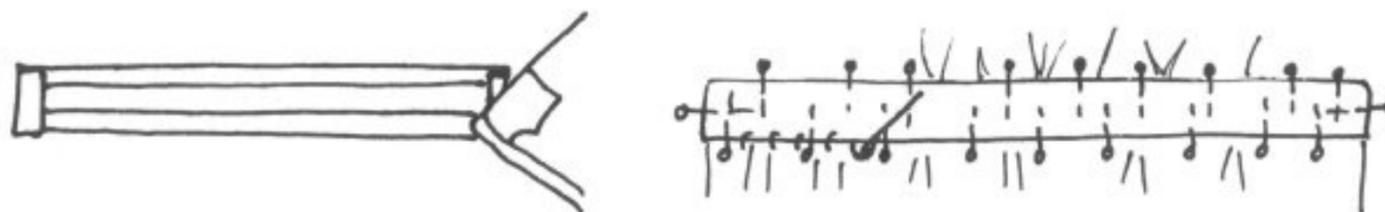
Left to Right: Knife pleats; box pleats; inverted box pleats.

Once you have your pleats properly placed and pinned, you can sew your skirt to your bodice/waistband. [Note: If you're sewing the skirt directly to the bodice instead of a waistband, keep the bodice lining free. You will use it to enclose the waistline seam when you finish the dress.]

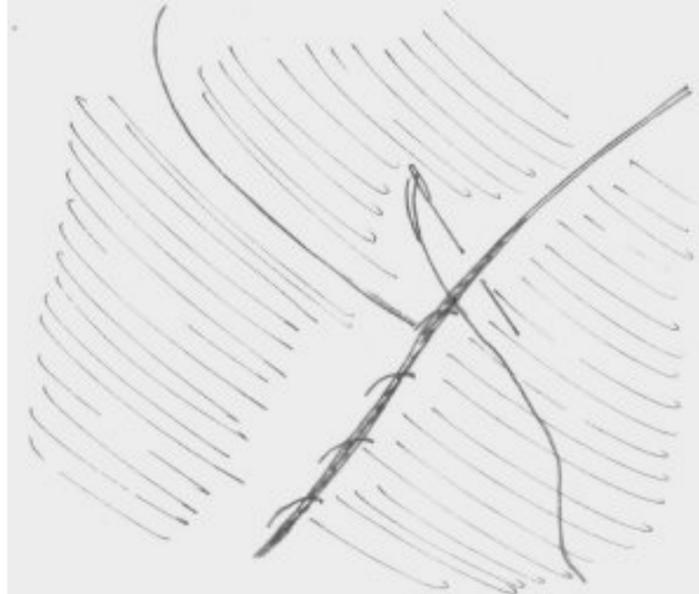
7. Finishing Your Dress

With the skirt attached, you are ready to finish off the inside of the waistband (if you used one) or lining, place buttons/buttonholes or hooks and eyes, then hem your dress.

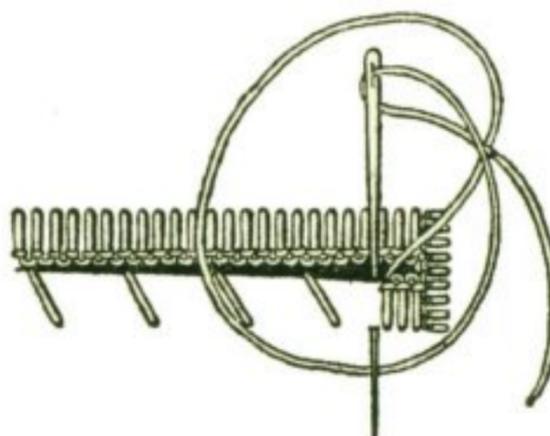
- A. To finish off the inside of a dress with exposed waistband seams, you will simply line the waistband by cutting a strip from your lining material that is the same width and length as your waistband. Press under the top and bottom edges 5/8", then press under each end 5/8" (left). Pin lining over waistband (bodice seam should be pressed downwards; skirt seam should be pressed upwards). Whipstitch lining to waistband seams, then slipstitch ends together (right). This completely encloses the seams and makes for a very comfortable finish. (See photos of the [small waistband lining](#) above; the method is identical.)



- B. If you did not use a waistband but sewed the bodice directly to the skirt, you are ready to finish off the lining on the inside of your dress. Turn under the bottom of the bodice lining fabric and pin in place just above the waist seamline. Whipstitch the lining in place, as shown below:



- C. Functional buttons did not seem to be as common during this period as decorative buttons were. I've seen dresses that fasten up the back with hooks and eyes but have buttons sewn down the center front as an embellishment. However, there are extant examples of gowns with working buttons and buttonholes, so either buttons or hooks and eyes will work if you are striving for historical accuracy. If you wish to use buttons, mark buttonholes on your overlapping closure, spacing them evenly from the neckline to just above the waistline. I recommend spacing buttonholes no more than two inches apart to avoid gapping. You can make your buttonholes on the machine, but if you want to be accurate, you'll need to do them by hand. Below is an illustration showing how to correctly stitch a buttonhole (I recommend horizontal buttonholes).



(Click for larger image.)

Here is a picture of machine-sewn buttonholes going onto the blue bodice (they will be finished by hand later):



(Click for larger image.)

- D. Once you have all the buttonholes finished, you can sew corresponding buttons to the other side of the closure. Fabric-covered buttons and mother of pearl buttons work nicely. I do not recommend placing a button in the waistband. Instead, I suggest using a heavy-duty skirt hook and bar. If you do not wish to use buttons at all, you can place metal hooks and eyes (or hooks and bars) on the closure. This seems fairly common in this time period and works nicely, particularly when you don't want the closure to be as obvious (like on a ball gown).



*Blue dress with buttons sewn on.
(Click for larger image.)*

- E. Try on the dress and have someone help you mark the hemline, trimming as necessary to make it even all the way around. Hem, using a conventional hemstitch or blind stitching. If you want to use the horsehair stiffening in your hemline, here are photographs to show you the steps:



*Left: Stitch horsehair to the wrong side of the skirt edge (skirt has been trimmed and is ready for hem).
Right: Horsehair sewn on (right side view).
(Click for larger images.)*



*Left to Right: First fold; second fold; whipstitching hem in place (it is a good idea to press the folds before you whipstitch).
(Click for larger images.)*

- F. If you made a dress with long sleeves, try on your dress and mark the sleeve hem now. Hem in place by hand.

Here are pictures of the finished blue dress and the ballgown, along with a sleeveless jumper made from the pattern:



(Click for larger images.)



(Click for larger images.)

G. If you're interested in embellishing your dress with fabric, lace, cord, or piping, be sure to see [Appendix i](#) for ideas.

Enjoy your new creation!

Appendix i



Left: Fashion plate from February, 1829; Right: Fashion plate from May, 1829

(Click for larger images.)

Thank you to [Koshka the Cat!](#)

These fashion plates give you an idea of what mid-Romantic Era fashions looked like. On the far left you can see a walking dress with a gathered skirt. Next to it is a ball gown with either knife pleats or gathers that start on either side of the bodice front, leaving the center front smooth. The walking dress in the fashion plate on the right has either gathers or knife pleats going all the way around, while the evening gown next to it features large inverted box pleats. Also note that all the skirts feature some kind of embellishment, including self-fabric trimming, flounces, lace, etc.

The ball gown at left has smaller puffed sleeves (a remnant of the Regency), while the one on the right has larger sleeves (like those I've included in my pattern). The wide bateau necklines on both of the ball gowns are enhanced by lace or fabric. All of the dresses have waistbands or belts. You can see how easy it is to take a basic dress and jazz it up with trim!

Common embellishments during this time included lace (around necklines and sleevebands), wide collars extending over the sleeves (often made of lace or edged with lace), piping, self-fabric binding, ruffles, and buckles. Piping became more and more common as the Romantic Era drew to a close, and it is nearly ubiquitous in early to mid-Victorian fashions. It is usually found around necklines and in the bodice side back and "shoulder" seams. I've also seen it placed above and below waistbands. It is made of the same fashion material as the dress. If you opt to use piping, you will, of course, sew it into place *before* constructing your bodice (see the [Bonus Section](#) above for instructions on making and attaching piping). One other fun embellishment for evening dresses were sheer oversleeves made of netting or lace. All you have to do is take the long sleeve pattern and make your oversleeves, then sew them into the armhole with the short puffed sleeves. The short sleeves show through the sheer material. Ladies often added lace flounces to the ends of the sleeves, making the sleeves extend to the knuckles.

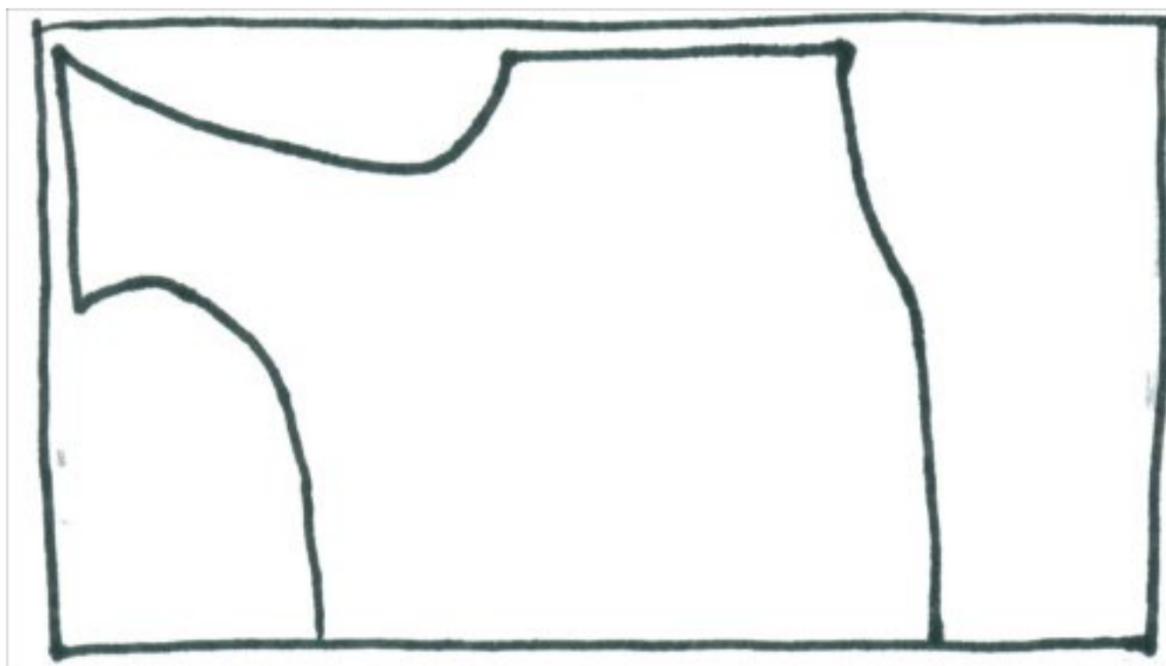
Keep in mind that fashion plates have always *guided* dress styles rather than *dictating* them. Most ladies (particularly middle class and lower class women) adapted popular fashions for everyday use and did not strictly imitate what they saw in *The Ladies' Monthly* or *La Mode Illustrée*. You can create simple day dresses without all the fuss and furbelows, or you can "go to town" with trimmings. Just have fun and enjoy creating your Romantic dress!

Appendix ii

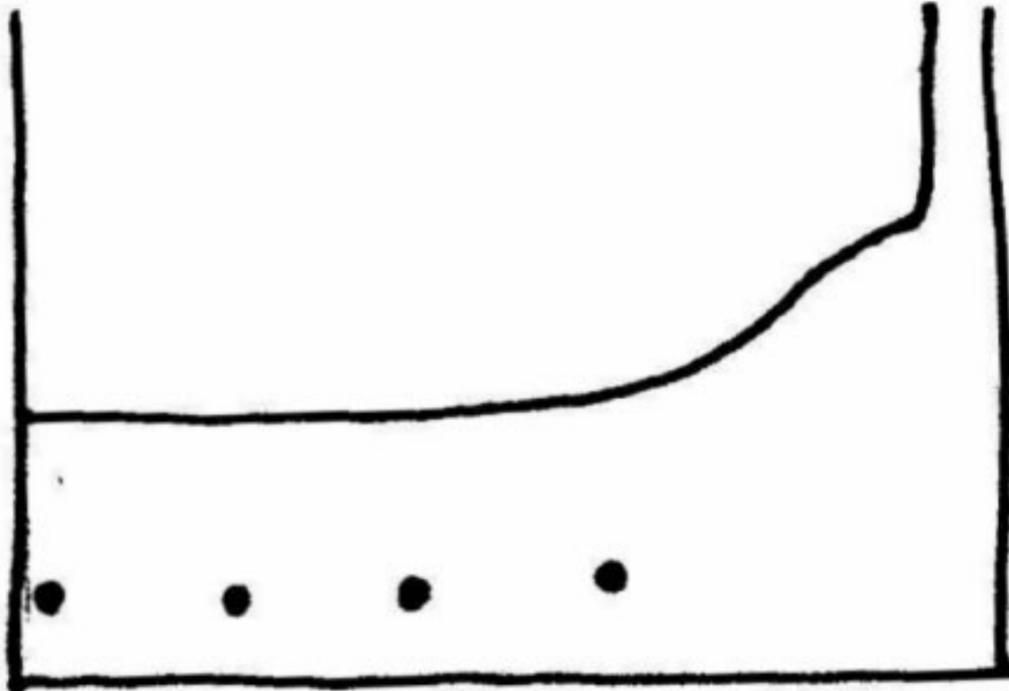
How to Modify the Bodice for "D" and "DD" Sizes

In order to keep printing costs down, I could not fit "D"/"DD" bodice cutting lines onto the pattern sheet. However, it is very easy to modify the pattern to accommodate a larger bustline. Essentially, all you need to do is to lengthen the bodice front in order to give you more room. The darts will need to be lengthened at the same time, but you can simply follow the bodice toile fitting instructions to achieve correctly proportioned darts. The bodice back pieces will not need to be changed unless you are very long-waisted. If that is the case, see [THIS LINK](#) for detailed instructions.

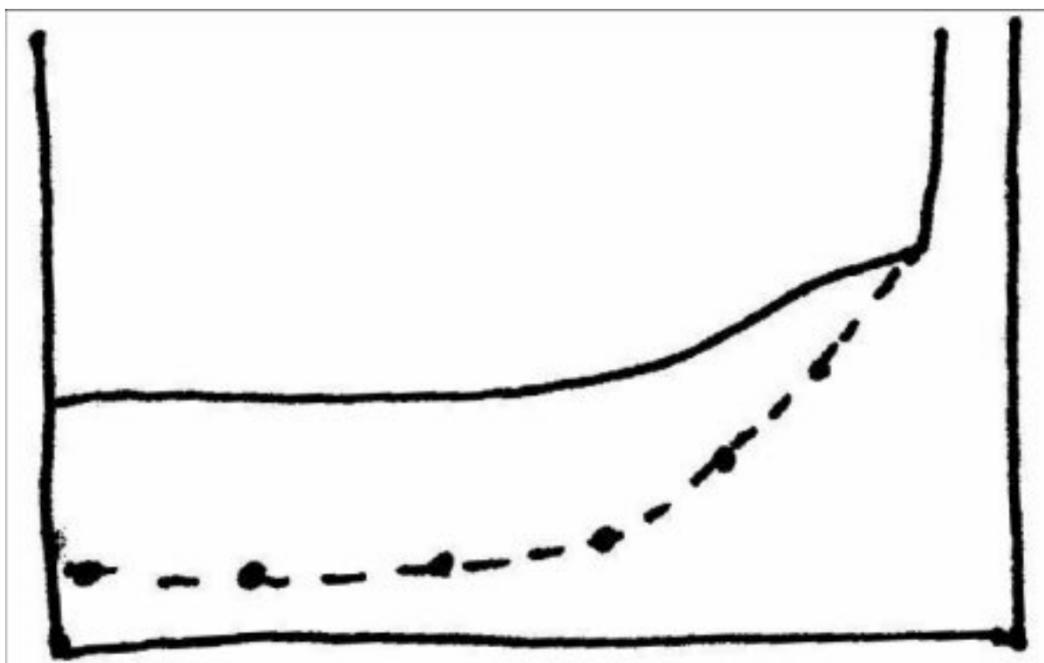
The average "D" bustline needs an additional 1 3/4", while the average "DD" bustline needs 3 1/2". To add the needed amount, first trace the bodice front that most closely matches your size. Leave room at the bottom of your tracing paper or interfacing to add to the bodice:



Take a pencil and mark a dot that is either 1 3/4" or 3 1/2" below the regular center front cutting line. Move two inches toward the side seam and repeat this step. Now measure two inches from that dot and repeat. Do this until you have four dots spaced two inches apart:



Now it's time to curve back up toward the regular side seam. Measure one inch out from your last dot and make a dot one inch below the original bodice cutting line. Measure another inch from that mark and make a dot half an inch below the original line. Now you have a line of dots ready to connect up to the side seam! Use your tracing pen to connect the dots (a French curve tool helps with creating a smooth curve). Use a straightedge to draw the lengthened center front fold and/or cutting line.



That's all there is to it! You can make your toile and try it on to double-check the fit. You'll be able to tweak the fit for your own unique shape. Enjoy creating your Romantic Era fashions!

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