

Virtual Author Talk



How to Make Sewing Patterns Don McCunn*

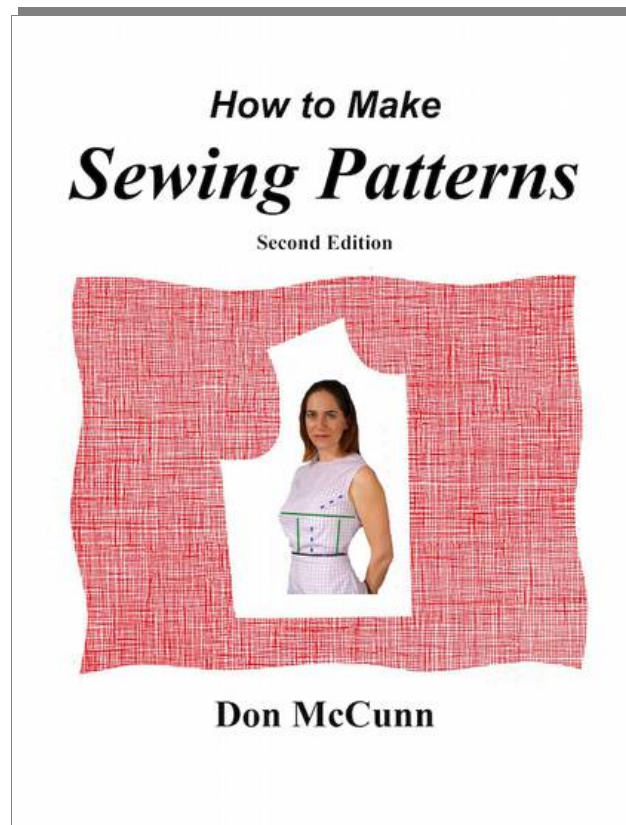
The author of a how-to book on practical patternmaking talks about what is new in the recently-published second edition.

My book, *How to Make Sewing Patterns*, has been continuously in print since 1973. I came to patternmaking because of my interest in theatre which I discovered as a junior in high school in 1959. I was a social klutz until I discovered the joy of collaborating with others to create live theatre. In the arts I am both cursed and blessed because I have no natural talent for anything. This is a curse because nothing comes to me quickly or easily. I have to struggle to learn how to do things. It is a blessing because once I do figure out how to do something, it is easy for me to share with others what I have learned. And I do enjoy teaching in the classroom, through my how-to writing, and even as a director in the theatre.

When I started doing theatre I really wanted to be an actor. But because of my lack of natural talent, I was relegated to being the stage manager for a production of "George Washington Slept Here." Believe it or not it was my good fortune that one of the

leads literally broke his leg a week before the show was to open. Because I was the stage manager I knew the blocking, the part, and the show better than anyone – so I got the part.

Actually as I look back on that experience I realize it is prophetic of how my life in the arts has evolved. Rarely do my plans for the future materialize the way I foresee. Instead the fates direct my future



and I am more than willing to grab the opportunities that arise.

As I progressed in theatre my focus was on directing productions. But I quickly learned that while many love to act, I encountered few people who were willing to commit themselves to the time and effort required for the technical end. And many of those who were willing to do the work had limited abilities. So being a control freak and rabid do-it-yourselfer, I determined to learn all the technical arts so I could fill in whenever it was necessary to achieve my vision for a production.

For my undergraduate work I had the good fortune to attend the University of Texas in Austin which had an amazing teaching staff. The costume professor was Dr. Paul Reinhardt who had been a student of Lucy Barton, author of the classic *Historic Costume for the Stage*. He introduced me to the idea of measuring the body to create patterns. But for the productions we students were relegated to sewing the costumes from the patterns someone else made—I don't remember who.

Not knowing how to make patterns wasn't good enough for me. My perception is that if you want to create costumes, you need to be able to make patterns for any body shape, for any design, from any period of history, or maybe even imagine the

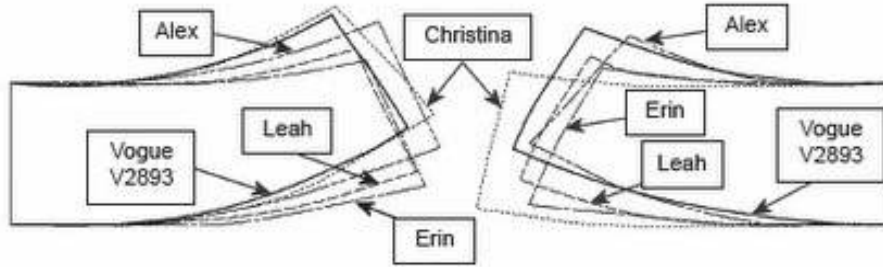


Illustration from the Introduction showing the difference between a commercial pattern and the pattern shapes required for real bodies

future. So after I graduated from UT I set about researching the techniques for making patterns. What I found were approaches to creating patterns that were designed primarily for the fashion industry. There is a huge difference between the process of creating a pattern designed to fit as many bodies as possible as opposed to creating a pattern for the custom-fit of a specific body.

So I set about to create my own approach to making patterns for costumes. It was after graduate school when I was looking for work that I decided to put my ideas into book form. I sent out letters of inquiry to about 100 publishers I thought might be interested, about 10 responded. But one publisher, Harold Hart Publishing, wanted me to convert it to a pattern making approach for the general home sewer. He thought it would have a better market potential (the hand of fate at work).

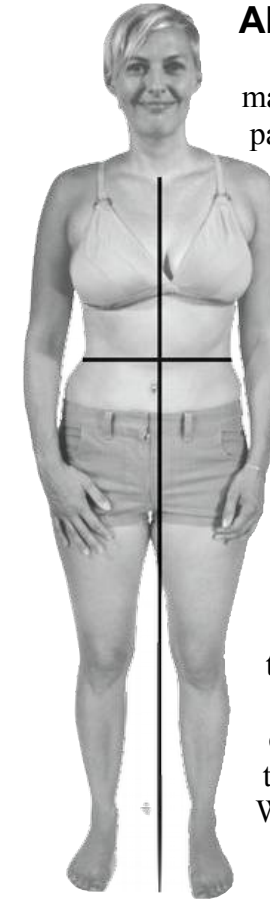
He assigned one of his editors to try out every instruction to verify that what I had come up with would actually work in real life. After a full year of going through my book and making all the garments, she did make one very useful suggestion: she recommended I use numbers for my step-by-step instructions.

With a published book in hand I was able to get a teaching job through the San Francisco Community College Adult Education program. This was an invaluable experience for me as I was able to see my approach applied to hundreds of different bodies. But the hand of fate was again at work. Harold Hart decided to close his publishing business.

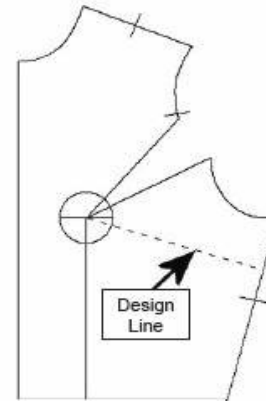
All of a sudden I had hundreds of students and no books to use. I decided, as an avid do-it-yourselfer, to take control of the publishing myself so I wouldn't have to worry about it going out of print again.

About the Book

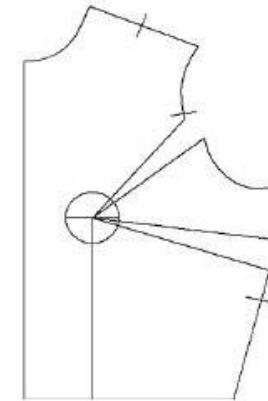
I strongly believe that making custom-fit sewing patterns is not “rocket science” that requires four years of study at a fashion academy. What you need to learn is how to look at the human body and see reference lines on the three-dimensional body that can then be applied to create two-dimensional patterns.



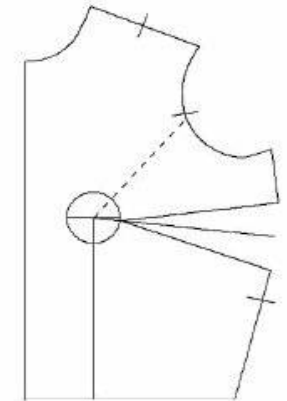
To create custom-fit clothes for an individual the basic process is to first create fitted patterns, called slopers, that show the contours of the body. While measurements of the body are important, they can not predict all the



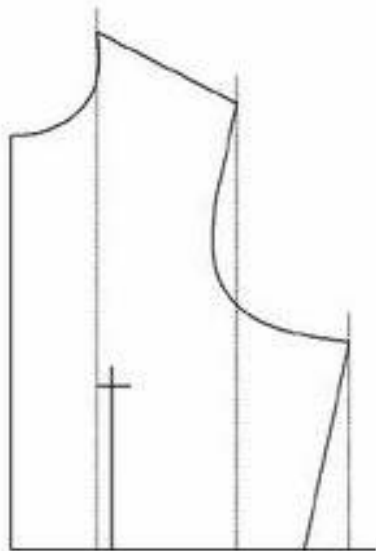
Draw a Design Line



Change the Dart Location



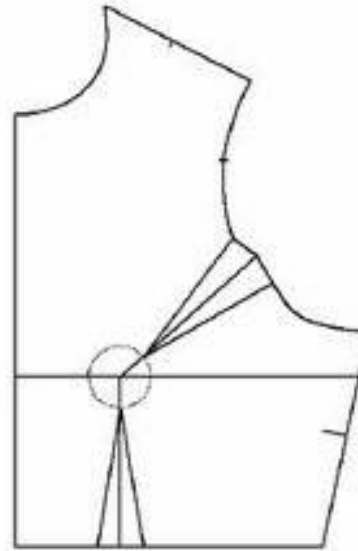
The New Design



Initial Draft



Gingham fitting matches the fabric grain to reference lines of the body.



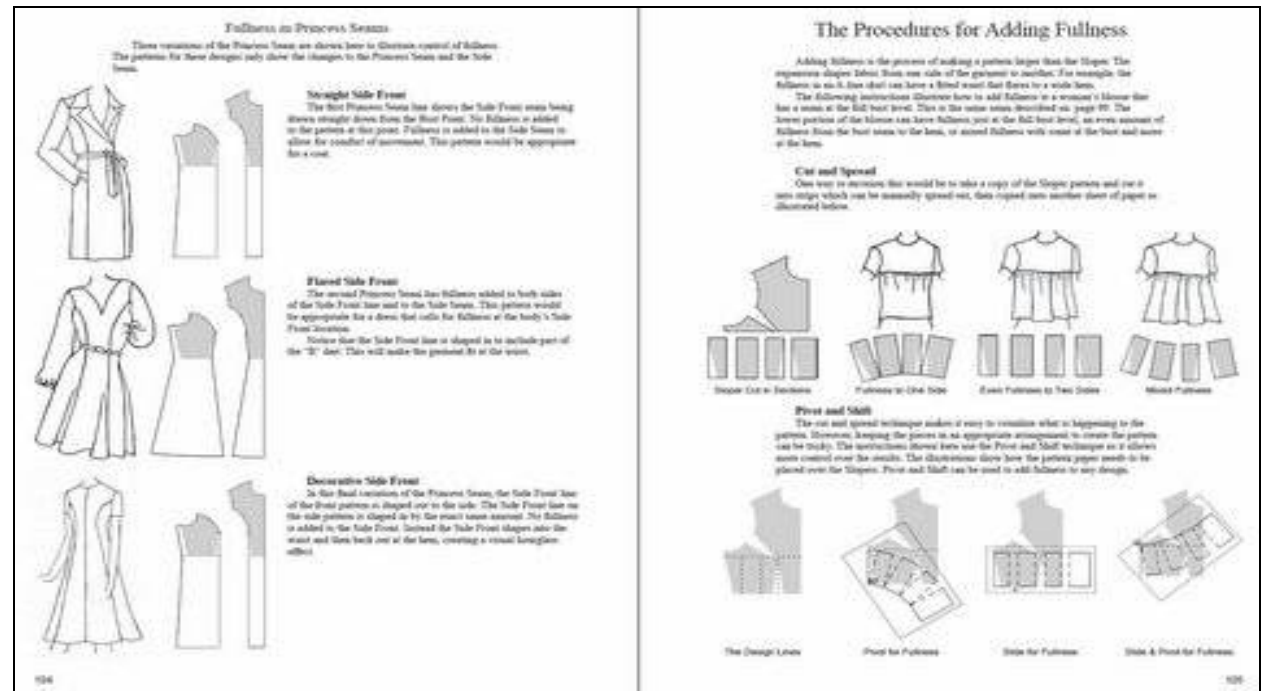
Final Sloper

Once you have recorded the shape of the body with these slopers, you can create the designs you want using a few simple pattern alteration techniques. If you are a costumer who needs to make patterns for many different bodies, once you have done this process a couple of times, you can frequently be more selective in the steps you follow to achieve accurate results.

The final 100 pages of the book give examples of how to create the patterns for a variety of different classic designs. I actually learned from the book I wrote for Mr Hart that it was important to use timeless variations rather than designs that are topical. The example of bell bottom hip huggers got dated pretty quickly.

contours of a specific body. In the new edition of my book I have eliminated all the darts from the initial draft. Measurements will tell you how much fabric you need to cover the body. But the only way to truly determine the shape of the body is to fit fabric to it.

When I first started teaching this process, I used what everyone uses for initial fittings – a fabric called muslin. I used to go around class with a magnifying glass to make sure the grain of the fabric was corresponding to the reference lines of the body. Then I was in a fabric store one day and my eyes fell on gingham. This fabric has threads in different colors that clearly indicate the grain lines, so now I use that.



Sample pages from *How to Make Sewing Patterns*, Second Edition.

Ease of Use

As I said, I really believe that custom patternmaking is not rocket science. One of the pleasures that I have had was a temporary assignment teaching a semester length introduction to costume class at a



Model with quarter-scale version of dress.

junior college. I taught the basics of design, patternmaking, and beginning sewing.

The class project was to make a costume for a local semi-professional theatre production. Each student took a design for a costume in the production, measured the performer, created the pattern, fitted it to the performer, and sewed the complete costume.

Some of the productions were fairly large with leads coming from Hollywood. I assigned the beginning sewers the simpler costumes and the more experienced sewers the more elaborate costumes. At the end of one semester I learned that one of the men in the class had never learned to thread a bobbin. When a machine ran out of thread, he would move to a different machine. But he completed his costume.

I found this process a great “division of labor” as, in addition to teaching the class, I was also responsible for running the costume shop. I had enough time that I was able to act in the productions. Being the tailor in Moliere's *The Bourgeois Gentleman* was particularly rewarding as I was able to do a particularly outrageous costume for “Monsieur Jourdan.”

One of the features which I wish I had during that class was to have examples of designs in three-dimensions. I have addressed that issue in this edition of my book by including instructions showing how to make a Mini-Me Dress Form. This dress form allows you to replicate the shape of a specific body in quarter scale.

How wonderful it would be to be able to teach the history of costume and have examples of garments from the different periods for people to look at similar to the scaled versions used in Theatre De La Mode.

Don McCunn has been helping people learn patternmaking for over 40 years. In addition to 'How to Make Sewing Patterns', he has created a series of Pattern Design Guides that are Interactive e-Books with embedded how-to videos. They cover topics including 'How to Make Custom-Fit Bras', 'How to Make Custom-Fit Corsets', and 'How to Make Custom Dress Forms'. Visit his [website](#) for more information.

How to Make Sewing Patterns Second Edition is available from Amazon.com, Barnes and Noble, and Alibris. Visit the [ordering page](#) to locate other sellers.

8-1/4" x 10-3/4", 182 pages.

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