Fix Your Before You Sew

To avoid disasters, solve errors at the tissue stage

BY JUDY BARLUP

We've all made at least one garment that just didn't turn out quite right. What was to blame? Perhaps it was the pattern. Believe it or not, all patterns aren't perfect—some contain drafting glitches, both minor and major. Unfortunately, you rarely discover these errors until you've begun sewing, when it's too late to fix the problem.

To help you avoid this sort of disaster, I'll show you how to proofread patterns so you can catch inconsistencies in drafting, marking, and printing before they ruin your project. The proofing process outlined here can be used on commercial and computer-generated patterns as well as on patterns drafted by hand. If you're going to invest time and skill in sewing, it's worthwhile to ensure that your patterns are accurate.

Judy Barlup shares her tailoring and patternmaking expertise at UniqueTechniques.com.

Patterns

1 Prepare the pattern

To accurately assess a pattern's drafting, you need to work from the stitching lines, not the cutting lines. It's also essential to maintain the proper grain orientation of each pattern piece.

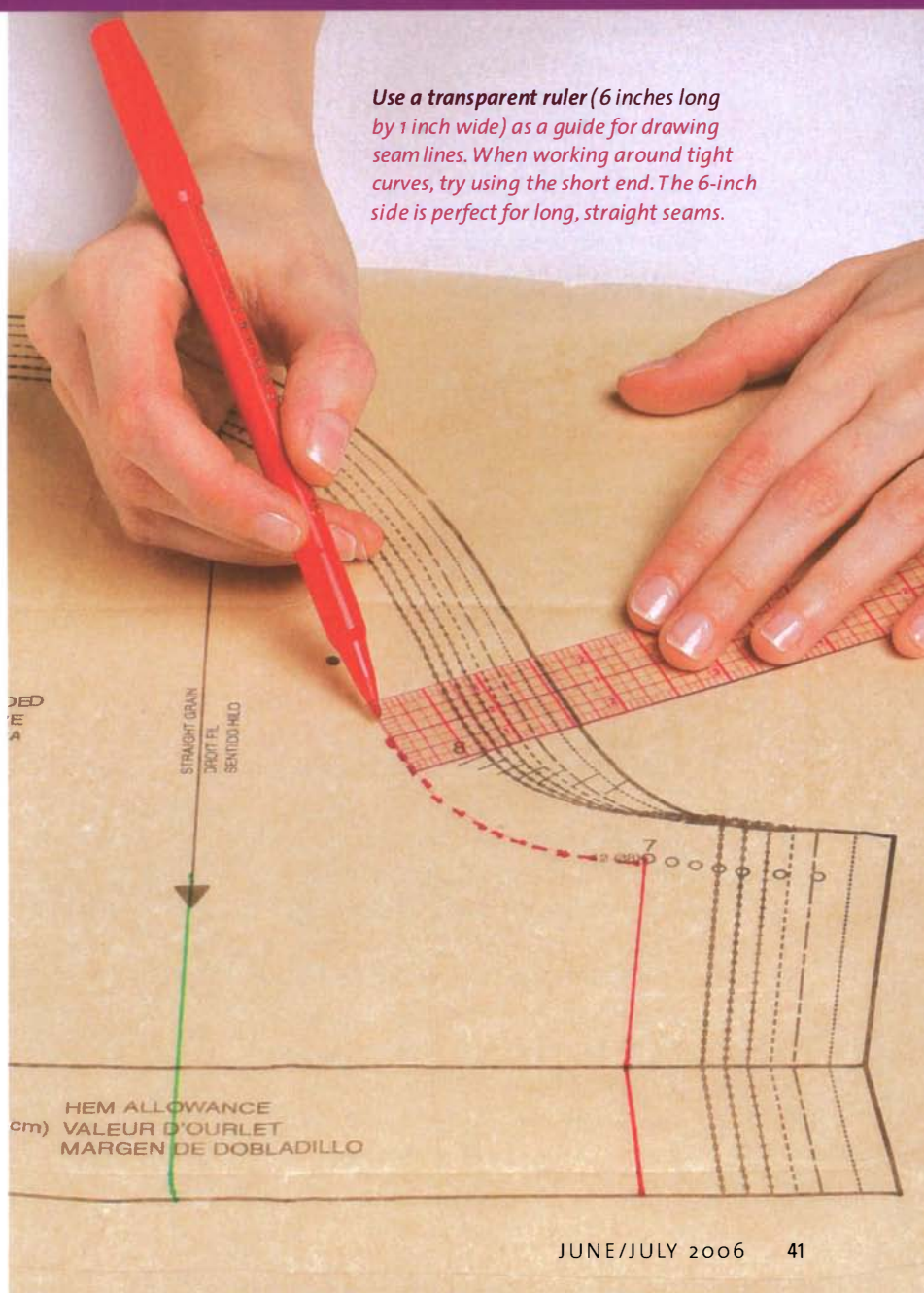
STITCHING LINES GUIDE EDITS

Study the pattern. Lay out all the pieces of your pattern, and visualize how they go together. Compare them to the line drawings on the guide sheet to be sure you have all the pieces.

Press the pattern. You can use the pattern tissue right out of the envelope or trace a duplicate copy. Press the pattern pieces flat with a dry iron (steam can shrink the tissue).

Extend the grainlines along the length of the pattern piece. Add stitching lines, following the seam allowance provided in the pattern. Make your normal fit adjustments now (e.g., lengthen, shorten, move darts, etc.). If you make further adjustments later, proof and edit the pattern again.

continued ▸▸▸



Use a transparent ruler *(6 inches long by 1 inch wide) as a guide for drawing seam lines. When working around tight curves, try using the short end. The 6-inch side is perfect for long, straight seams.*

2 Walk the seamlines

Seamlines that are stitched together in a one-to-one ratio (that is, without gathers or easing) must be the same length. Here's how to check that they match so that you're not left with extra fabric on one side at the end of a seam.

SEAMLINES MUST MATCH

Gather a few tools. You'll need a sheet of foam-core board large enough to support an entire pattern piece, pushpins, and a pencil.

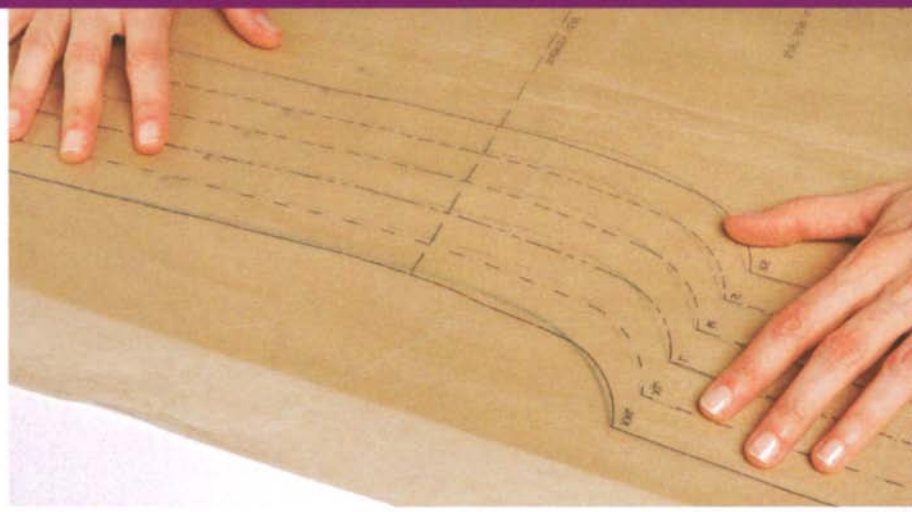
Pair pattern pieces. Layer two pieces that will be sewn together, as if to stitch the seam. If one piece attaches to two joined sections, pin those sections together first and treat them as one unit.

Work from bottom to top. For vertical seams, match the bottom ends of the seamlines perfectly, and anchor them temporarily with the pencil point. Shift the uppermost pattern piece so that the first few inches of its seamline are aligned directly on top of the corresponding seamline (1). Holding the pattern pieces in place, move the pencil point to the top of this segment and anchor the pieces again. Repeat until you reach the top of the seam, walking shorter segments for more sharply curved seamlines (2).

Mark notches. If existing notches don't meet when you're walking the seams, correct them. Add notches as desired to aid in construction.

Skip over darts and pleats. When you reach the first leg of a dart or pleat, lift the pattern and match the seamline to the other leg.

Check whether the tops of the seams meet perfectly. At the top of the seam (3), pin the pieces in place, with the last seam segment properly aligned. If the upper ends of the seamlines don't meet, redraw them as shown in step 3 on the facing page.



Corresponding seamlines should be the same shape. *If they're not, as in this photo, redraw one to match the other.*

Walking a seam is like test-stitching a seam. *Start from the bottom of vertical seams (1) and work upward (2). At the top (3), the red waist seamlines don't meet properly.*

3 Smooth out seam endings

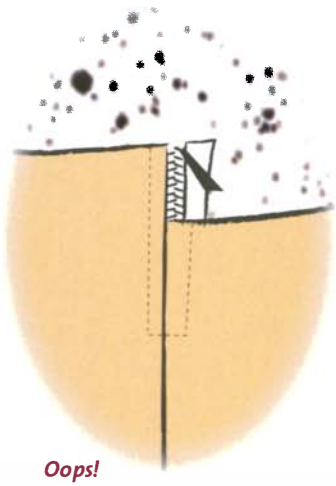
Once a seam is sewn, the two fabric sections should work as one for the rest of the construction of the garment. If seam ends are uneven or ill-shaped, you'll have trouble joining additional pieces at that edge.

UNEVEN EDGES MUST BE CORRECTED

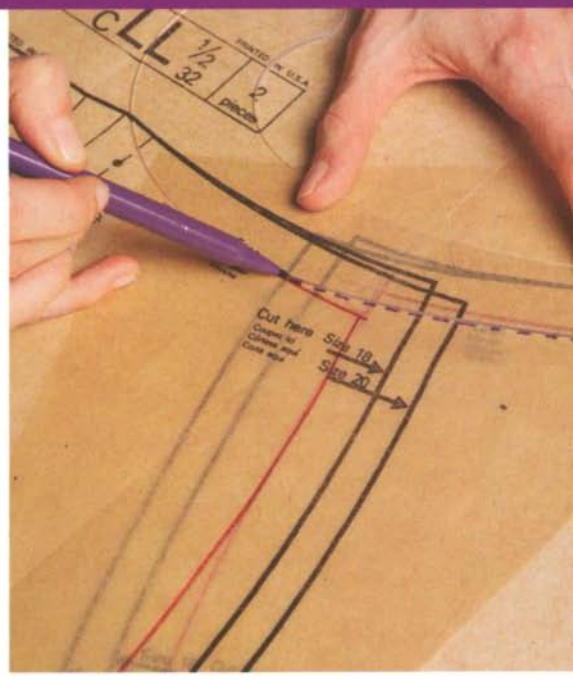
Make unequal seamlines even. If, after walking a seamline, you discover that one seamline is longer than the other, correct the difference. To do so, lay both pattern pieces right sides up, abutting the vertical seamlines at the upper, mismatched end. The seam corners will form a "step" from one pattern piece to the other (at far right, the red line on the underlapped pattern tissue). Using a curved ruler as a guide, blend the horizontal, intersecting seamlines, as though drawing a curved ramp over the step (dotted purple line). You might have to shorten one seam, lengthen the other, or split the difference, as shown at right.

Refine the shape of seam ends. If the seam doesn't intersect a perpendicular edge at an exact right angle, that edge will have either an obtuse point or a shallow, V-shaped indentation (shown at right) at the point of intersection. To correct this, lay the pattern pieces right sides up and abut the joining seamlines. Reshape them on both sides of the joining seamline, using the curved ruler as a guide. Treat center-front and back foldlines as seams, and check them as well.

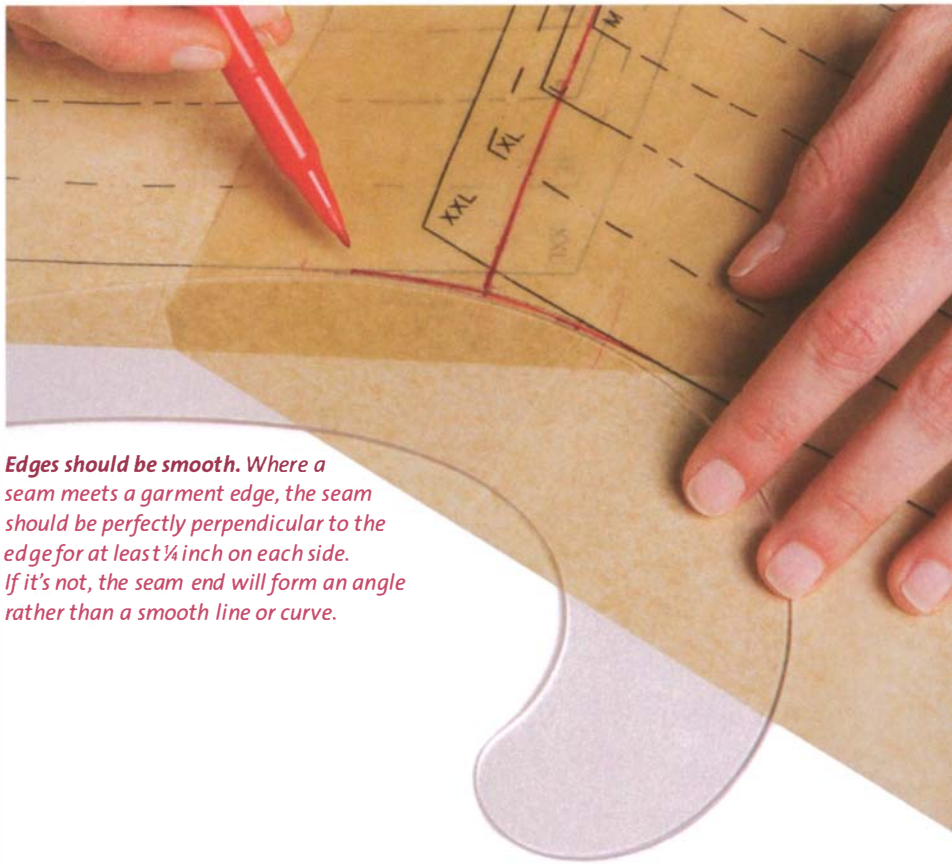
Transfer seam adjustments. After drawing the new seamline or edge on the uppermost layer of pattern tissue, prick along the length of the line with a pushpin to transfer its contour to the pattern piece that's underlapped. Remove the top layer of pattern tissue, and trace over the pricked line with a pen on the underlayer.



Oops! *Correct uneven seams before they end up like this.*



Use a curved ruler to redraw uneven seamlines *(the purple dotted line shows the correction).*



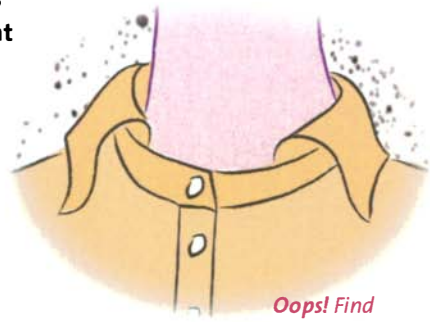
Edges should be smooth. *Where a seam meets a garment edge, the seam should be perfectly perpendicular to the edge for at least ¼ inch on each side. If it's not, the seam end will form an angle rather than a smooth line or curve.*

Photos: Scott Phillips. Illustrations: p. 40, Linda Boston; p. 43 and p. 44, Robin L. Mazzola

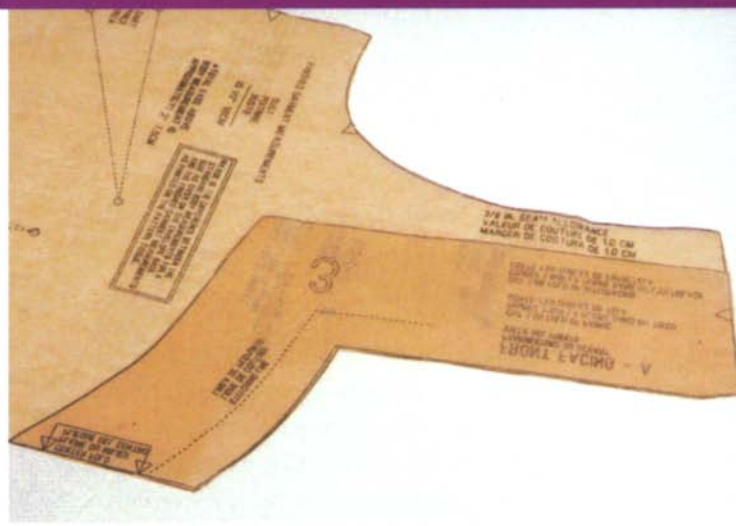
continued ▸▸▸

4 Check facings and collars

If facings and collars don't fit the garment exactly, no amount of fussing will get them to lie flat, roll properly, or maintain the shape of the edge where they are attached.



Oops! *Find out how the collar fits the neckline or collar stand before you sew.*



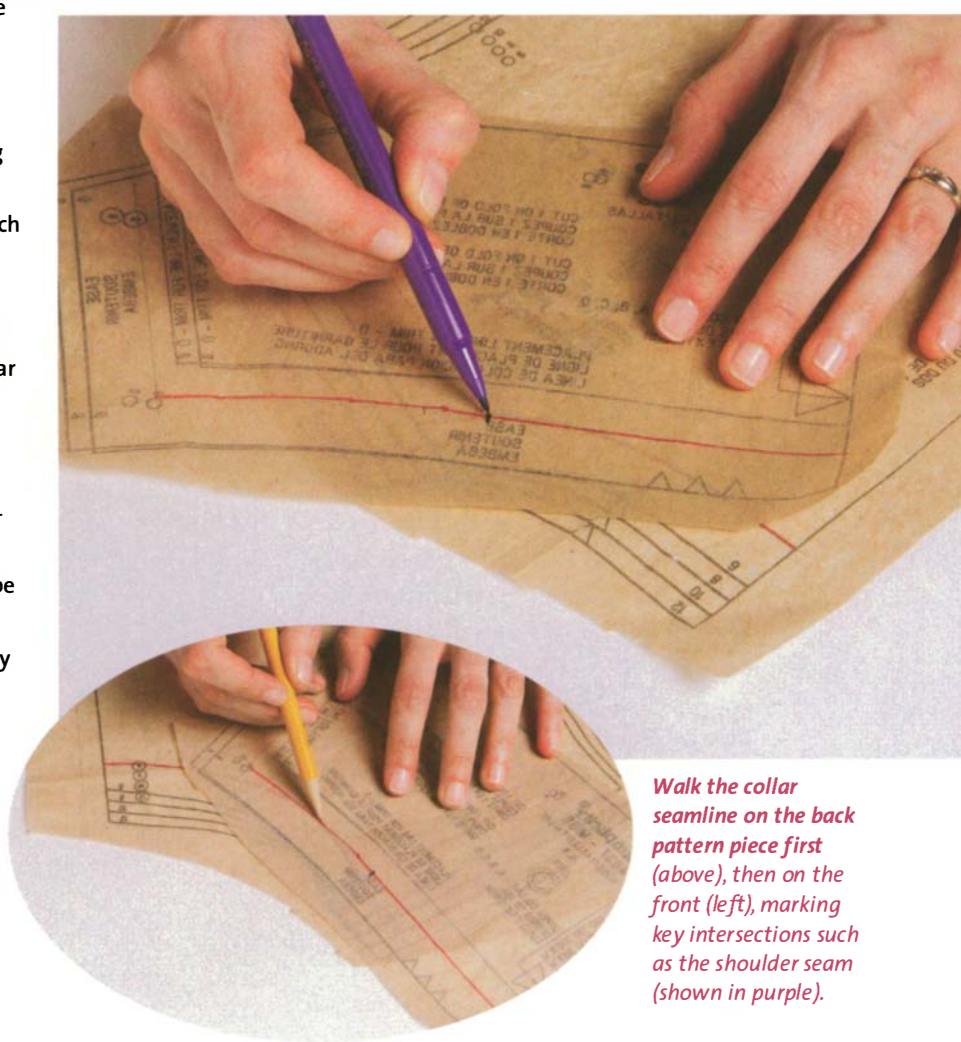
The neck facing's seamline must duplicate the garment's neckline *in both length and shape.*

NECK FINISHES MUST FIT

Make sure a facing matches its corresponding garment section. Lay the facing pattern on top of the garment pattern to check whether they are identical along the seam of attachment. Redraw the facing if necessary. (Some facings, such as lapels, are drafted slightly large to account for rolling or turn-of-cloth.)

Locate match points for collars. Beginning at center back, walk the collar seamline toward the shoulder seam, and mark a notch on the collar at that point. Walk the collar on the bodice-front pattern, starting with the collar notch at the shoulder seam and proceed toward center front. Mark the collar termination point with a notch on the bodice neckline.

Compare upper and under collars. If separate pattern pieces are provided for upper and under collars, the under collar should be smaller than the upper collar. This ensures that the collar's outer seamline rolls slightly to the underside.



Walk the collar seamline on the back pattern piece first *(above), then on the front (left), marking key intersections such as the shoulder seam (shown in purple).*

5 Evaluate and adjust ease

When you're walking seamlines, mismatched seam ends can represent a drafting error or they can signal built-in ease. Look for ease in waistlines, sleeve caps, two-piece sleeve seams, princess lines, the back shoulder, and inseams of pants.

BUILT-IN EASE ADDS SHAPE

Lengthen or shorten the waistline. A garment's waistline should be ½ inch to 1 inch larger than the waistband. Start with the desired waistband length, and adjust the garment waistline at the darts or side seams so that it is 1 inch longer. You can make minor adjustments during the construction process.

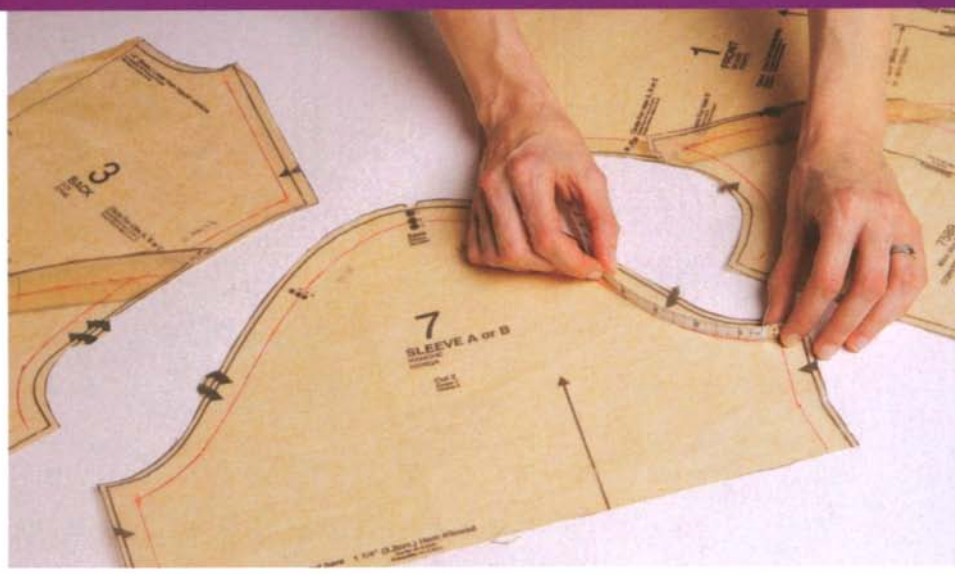
Measure sleeve-cap seamlines. They should be no more than 1½ inches longer than the armscye seam (unless your fabric is extremely easable).

Assess ease on two-piece sleeves. Two-piece sleeves often contain ease in both seams. To determine the ease, place notches 4 inches above the hemline and below the armscye seamline on both pieces. Walk the seamlines between these notches, looking for these differences:

Outer seam: The upper-sleeve seamline should be ¼ to ½ inch longer, with the extra length eased to the under sleeve.

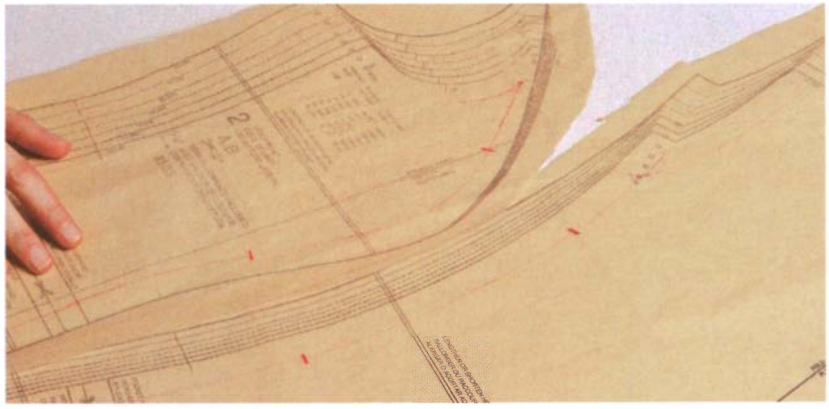
Inner seam: The under-sleeve seamline should be ¼ to ½ inch longer and the upper sleeve stretched to fit.

Examine the curves on princess seams. Some princess seams have built-in ease; others have none. To determine how much ease your pattern has, mark notches on the side-panel seamlines, 2 to 3 inches above and below the bust point. Mark corresponding notches on the center panel. Walk the seamlines between the notches to find out how much ease, if any, is included in the side-panel seamline.



Measure the seamline of the sleeve cap *and compare it with that of the armscye. Too much ease in the sleeve can result in a puckered armscye seam.*

Two seams fit better than one. *On a two-piece sleeve, the ease in both outer and inner seams provides excellent fit and shaping through the elbow.*



It's hard to tell at a glance whether princess seams contain ease. *To find out, mark notches (shown in red) above and below the bust point. Then walk the seamlines between the notches.*