

Keep Your Balance

Make this key design principle work for you
BY SANDRA ERICSON

Like all excellent design, beautiful clothing possesses the sometimes elusive quality of balance. Balance, as described here, is a design principle that's achieved through an agreeable allocation of elements and features. If you're a sewer, having an understanding of balance enables you to produce beautiful, comfortable garments.

The balance of a design determines how a garment will feel when it is worn. When garment weight is evenly distributed on the body, the wearer

feels comfortable and forgets about his or her clothing—he or she is free of constraint or the need for constant wardrobe adjustments.

Balance also determines how a garment looks. The distribution of visual elements such as texture, color, and focal-point placement allows you to develop a well-designed garment—whether in the form of a handsome silhouette or beautiful surface characteristics.

We know when a garment doesn't feel right; balance is often intuitively

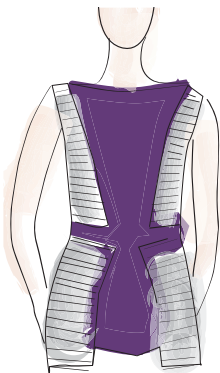
sensed. And the deliberate absence or presence of balance can become a designer's trademark. It's the stuff that makes an iconic designer.

When someone says, "you have an eye," they mean an eye for the "most pleasing distribution." Balance is everything, so put it to work for you.

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Like shapes arranged equally on each side of a fulcrum creates formal (symmetrical) balance.



Like shapes placed at different distances from a fulcrum destroys a sense of balance.

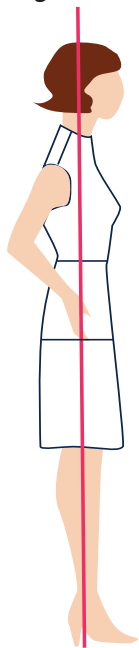


Different shapes placed at different distances from a fulcrum create informal (asymmetrical) balance.

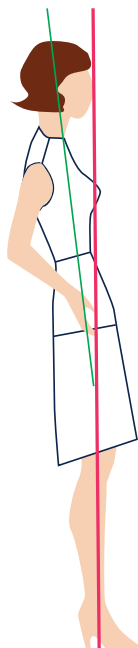


Consider balance in the wearing

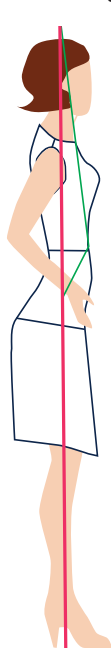
In garment construction, balance relates directly to fit and is the magic that marries fabric to the contours of the body.



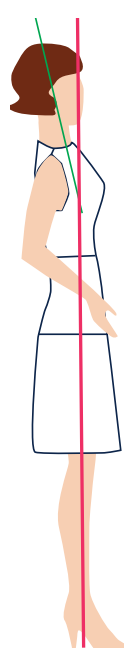
Correct posture
Waistline and hipline
are parallel to
the floor



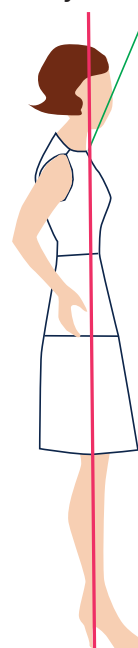
Body leans back
Waistline and hipline
are lower in the back



Swayback
Waistline and hipline
are lifted in back



Military posture
Center back is shorter, and the
center front is longer



Head tilts forward
Center back is longer and
center front is shorter

When a basic dress hangs on the body with the straight grain perpendicular to the floor and the cross-grain parallel to the floor, the garment is balanced on the figure, no matter what the individual's size, figure contours, or posture. In practice, if you fit a dress for an individual with uneven shoulders, for example, you have to adjust the garment's shoulders to make the grain lines perpendicular and parallel to the floor. Whenever you do this, the result is the

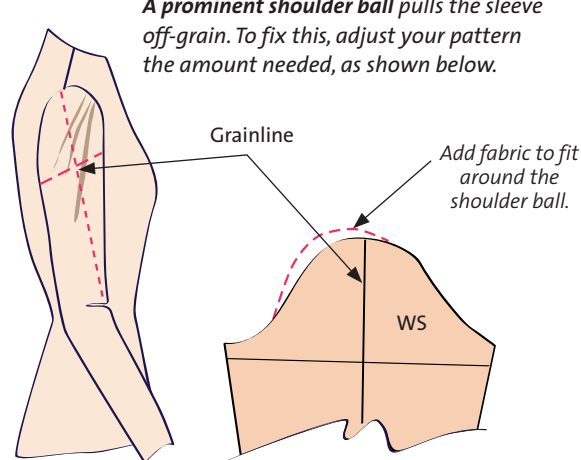
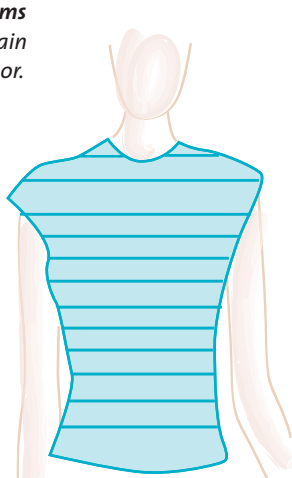
same: a dress that fits because it's balanced (see an example of this in the drawings at lower left).

With the garment on the body, dressmakers measure from the floor to the horizontal cross-grain on the right, left, front, and back to make sure that the grain is parallel to the floor. They also ensure a straight (vertical) grainline and perpendicular seams by comparing them to a plumb line that's perpendicular to the floor.

If a dress design has a large flare in a portion of the skirt, designers stabilize or balance that weight in another portion of the skirt so the flare doesn't cause the grain to shift throughout the dress and result in a poorly balanced design. Checking the grain is one way fashion designers test their work. If they don't, patternmakers and machinists sometimes have to perform the often difficult task of engineering a solution to the problem of an out-of-balance garment.



Adjust shoulder seams
to keep the cross-grain
parallel with the floor.



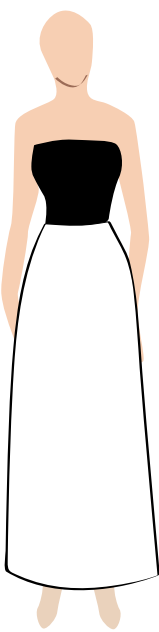
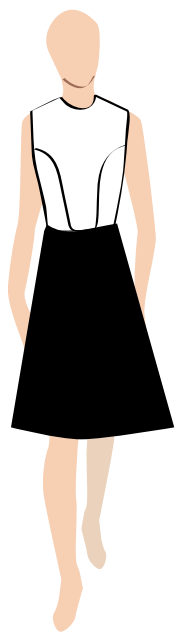
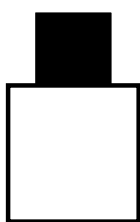
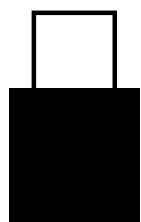
A prominent shoulder ball pulls the sleeve off-grain. To fix this, adjust your pattern the amount needed, as shown below.

Evaluate the visual balance

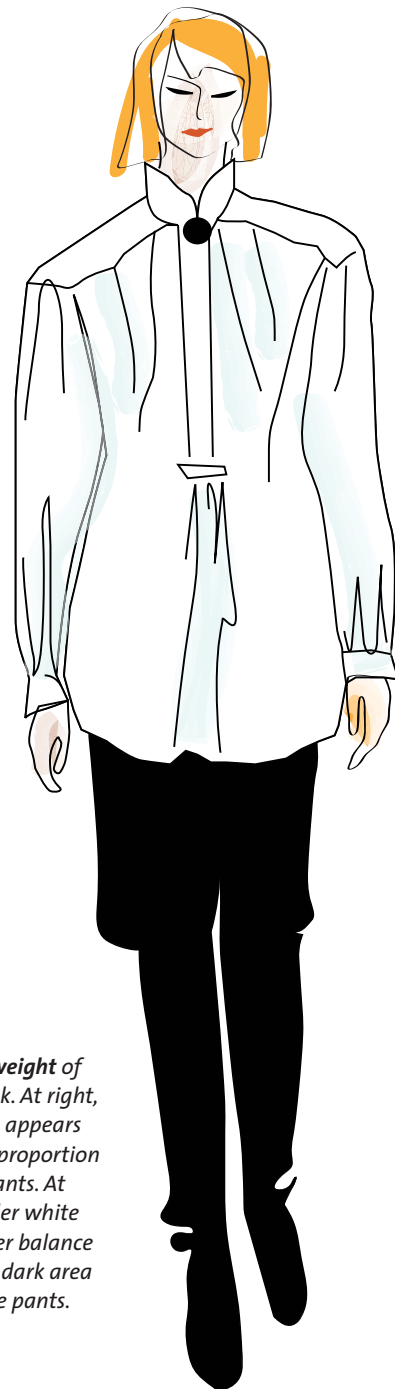
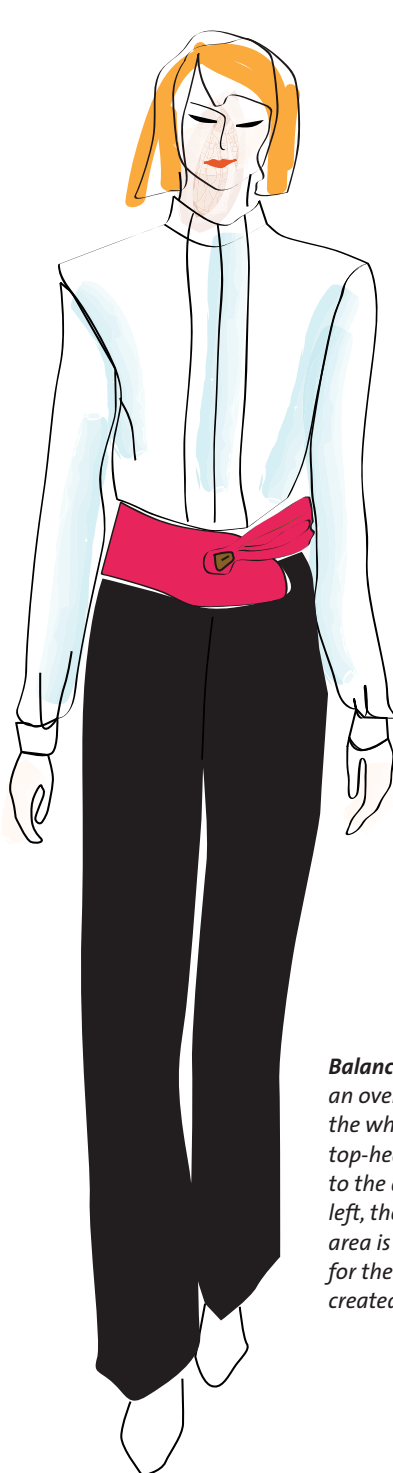
Every element of a design can be evaluated in terms of whether it looks or feels balanced. Though a comfortable balance is desirable, a garment can also be too balanced and lack spontaneity or creativity. This is why designers are always testing their designs and pushing the boundaries between taking a risk and not threatening one's sense of security—a balancing act in itself.

SENSE THE VISUAL WEIGHT

You can sense correct balance in not only the distribution of visual weight but also the actual weight. When considering horizontal balance, if a design is considered “top-heavy,” it’s because the weight appears to be concentrated at the top and gives the sense that the wearer could lose his or her balance and tip over.



Study the dark and light values (tints and shades), their relationships, and the proportion of the sizes of those elements. Balance is achieved if the proportions of the values are successful. Traditionally, light values advance while dark values recede; however, not all light values advance equally and not all dark values recede equally. Given two differently sized areas of a light color value, the lesser one balances a proportionally larger amount of a dark value (as shown above left), while the greater one balances a proportionally smaller amount of a dark value (as shown above right).



Balance the weight of an overall look. At right, the white top appears top-heavy in proportion to the dark pants. At left, the smaller white area is a better balance for the larger dark area created by the pants.

WEIGH THE GARMENT COLORS

When considering visual balance, weigh the garment colors against each other, and ask, “Does one recede or advance too much?” Ask the same questions when reviewing texture, prints, light reflection, mood, garment lines (“Are they too angular or too soft?”), or any other visual element at play in the design of the piece.



The relationship between colors can affect how large an object looks and alter balance. Here, the inner squares are the same size, but the color relationships create optical illusions, so the square on the right appears larger.

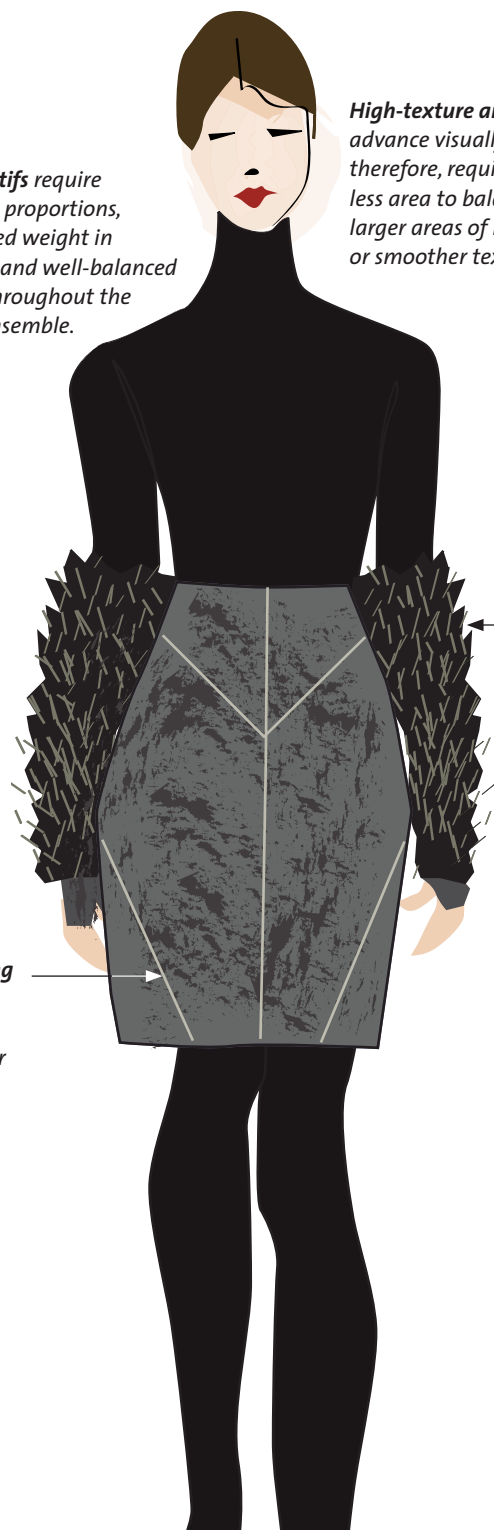
CONSIDER EVEN THE SMALLEST FEATURES

In terms of balance, you should also consider the smallest design features, such as the buttons, in relation to the larger issues, such as the proportion or overall harmony. Some design elements, such as contrast, make balance more obvious and interesting. Study specific garment features and how they help balance the garment. For example, make sure the shape and placement of the pockets support the balance. Does the line of the collar work with the line of the bodice? All details should enhance the overall design.



Individual motifs require well-balanced proportions, well-distributed weight in arrangement, and well-balanced distribution throughout the garment or ensemble.

Subtle seaming divides space to help create symmetry—or asymmetry, if desired.



High-texture areas advance visually, so therefore, require less area to balance larger areas of lighter or smoother texture.

Develop an eye for balance

How can you tell if a garment is balanced? Take time to study and evaluate your creation. It could be unbalanced in subtle ways.

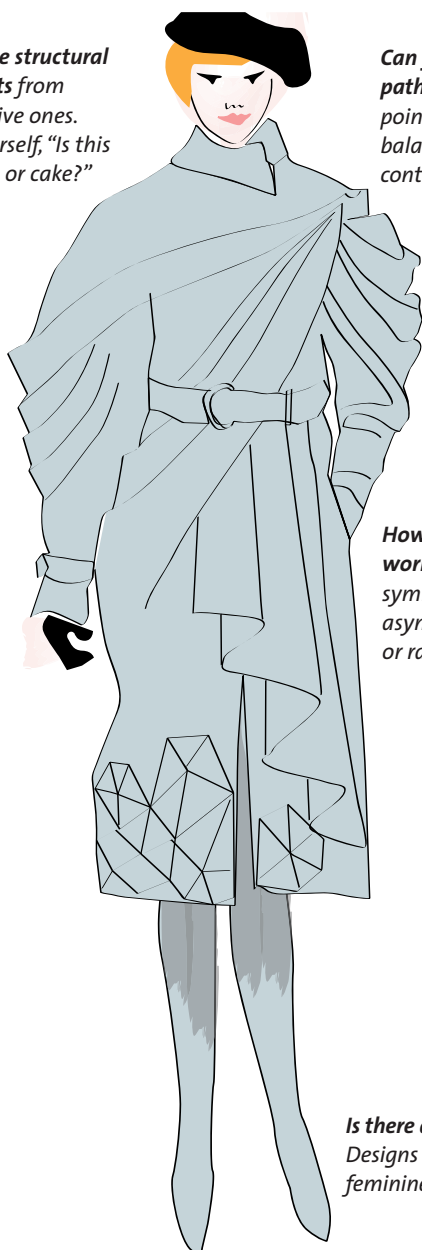
DECIDE HOW IT MAKES YOU FEEL

When you look at your design, are you excited about what you see? Or do you feel that something just isn't right? Do you have a sense that it's physically secure? When it's right, it's instantly exciting, and you can think about fine ways to improve its perfection. But if that excitement isn't there, analyze why it isn't working.

NOTICE RELATIONSHIPS WITHIN THE DESIGN

Start by comparing contrasts—dark versus light, dull versus shiny, soft versus stiff—and then branch off into less noticeable relationships as you examine the garment further. With each characteristic that you compare, ask yourself whether you could have designed it differently—better. If your answer is “yes,” you're probably noticing something that can be improved by greater attention to balance.

Separate structural elements from decorative ones. Ask yourself, “Is this frosting or cake?”



Can your eye follow a path? Is there a focal point? Is there a good balance between contrast or texture?

How's the balance working? Is it symmetrical, asymmetrical, or radial?

Is there a gender balance? Designs that are too feminine are weak.



A focal point and emphasis draw the eye to what's interesting. Emphasis establishes the balance between dominant and subordinate elements. Here, the bow with a touch of black is the emphasis that brings the asymmetrical balance and dominant and subordinate elements together.



Train your eye to see paths. Then learn to recognize broken paths so you can fix them and strengthen your design.

IMAGINE THE CHANGES

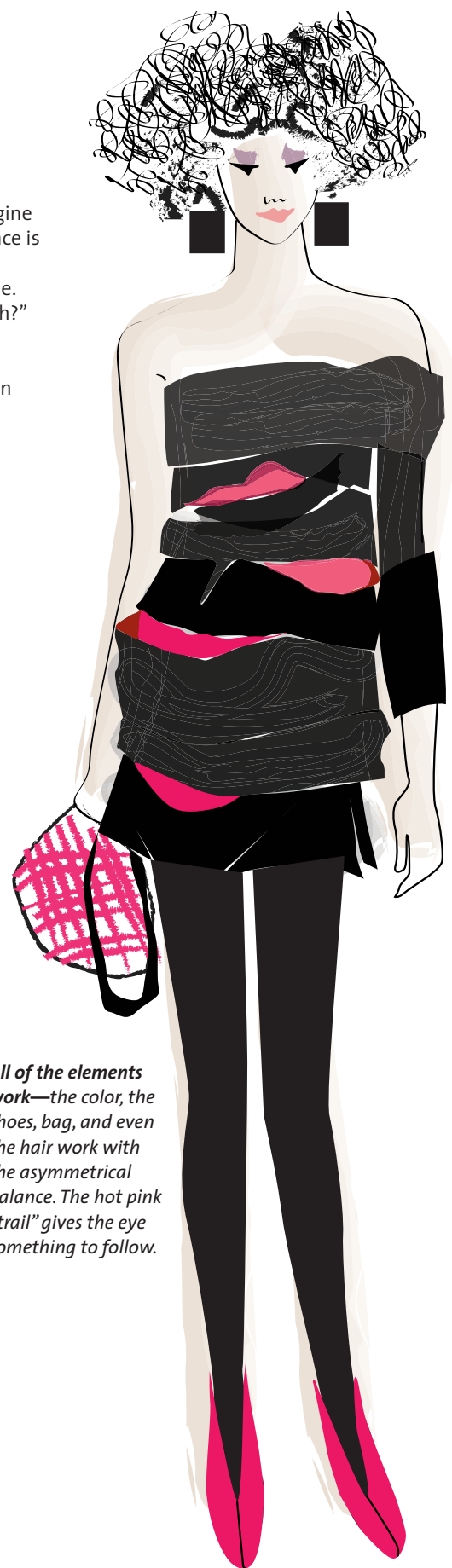
It's a difficult principle to describe, but you've probably experienced the excitement that comes from making a change to a design that pulls everything together. When you imagine changing the design-element relationships and "feel better" about the design, the balance is working again.

Dressmakers correct imbalance in the grain all the time; it's fundamental to the trade. The rest of us consider balance daily when we get dressed and ask ourselves "Too much?" or "Not enough?"

With a little practice, anyone can notice successful visual balance, detect inequities in designs, and develop an "eye." With more practice, you can consistently design garments in which the elements are successfully balanced.



In the example above, the addition of color alone doesn't establish the necessary balance because the accent sizes are too similar—so one doesn't dominate enough. They're also too far apart—so the eye has to look back and forth. To improve the balance further, I would fold the lapel back even more to reveal more purple and create a stronger upper focal point—usually more attractive for the face—and/or eliminate the lower purple section. When the distance between the points of emphasis is too great, there is a lack of rhythm.



All of the elements work—the color, the shoes, bag, and even the hair work with the asymmetrical balance. The hot pink "trail" gives the eye something to follow.