



Dress it up!
*A little black dress
made with couture
techniques stands out
at special occasions.*



Little Black Dress *from Start to Finish*

Couture dressmaking techniques
make it easy for anyone to give this
fashion icon the all-star treatment

BY SUSAN KHALJE

The ubiquitous little black dress: Coco Chanel referred to it as the “Ford Model T” of its day; Audrey Hepburn seldom comes to mind without picturing her in her *Breakfast at Tiffany’s* dress, and it continues to appear on every list of iconic fashion garments. But what is it that makes the little black dress so coveted?

In short, it’s little—typically, fairly close to the body and at least somewhat fitted; it’s black—that universally slimming color; and it’s a dress—not a suit, not a long gown. But a truly outstanding little black dress also has interesting style lines and design details; it can go from dressed up or dressed down with a quick change of accessories, and when created with couture dressmaking techniques, it receives its celebrated due.

To walk you through the process of creating a couture-quality little black dress, we chose a charmingly simple vintage Vogue pattern (no. 6934) from my own pattern archives and worked it up in a combination of French fabrics—a beautiful matelassé for the bodice band and an elegant, textured wool for the short kimono sleeves and skirt.

Once you’ve chosen your all-important pattern and fabric, follow the techniques to elevate your little black dress (or any other dress, for that matter) to couture status. It may just live forever.

Contributing editor Susan Khalje is a couture expert, designer, and teacher.



Dress it down!
With a quick change
of accessories, a little
black dress works for
day or night.

Make it couture

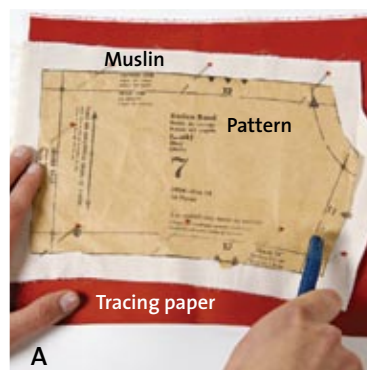
Any special garment—especially one that garners as much attention as the little black dress—should be carefully crafted using couture techniques. Here's how to do it:

1 MAKE A MUSLIN

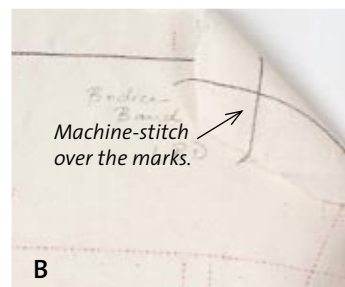
Making an accurate muslin is an essential first step for any couture garment. The word “muslin” refers to the test garment as well as the inexpensive fabric from which it's made.

A To make the muslin, cut out the inexpensive test fabric with wide seam allowances to allow for changes.

Since couture doesn't rely on $\frac{1}{2}$ -inch seam allowances, you mark relevant lines onto the muslin, and the most efficient way to apply them is with a tracing wheel and waxed tracing paper. Transfer the stitching lines and other pertinent information such as darts, and button and buttonhole placement to the muslin.



B Then, stitch over the traced marks with long machine stitches so the traced information now appears on both sides of the muslin. Having the marks on the inside simplifies the construction process while clearly indicating the placement of design elements and seamlines. The machine stitches also strengthen the muslin. A second fitting is often needed at this point. Once any changes have been clearly marked on the muslin, take it apart, press it, and use it to mark the underlining fabric. The muslin will also be used as a pattern for the fashion fabric and lining.



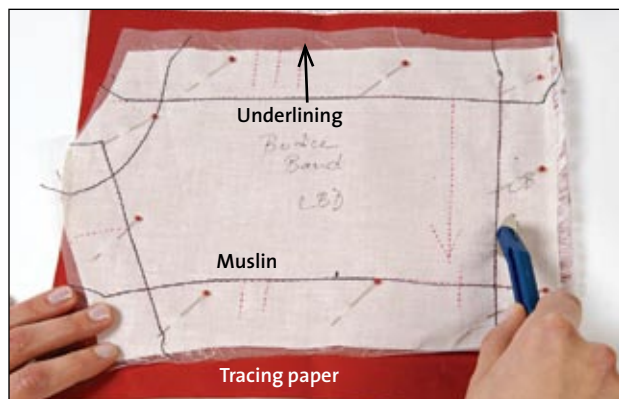
Tip: Couture garments are generally cut in a single layer, and having a full set of pattern pieces allows you to reflect—courtesy of the muslin—subtle differences in fit.

CHOOSE YOUR FABRICS WISELY

Any designer will tell you the fabric is almost always the impetus for the design process. Here are some points to consider.

MUSLIN

First, you'll need muslin that isn't too light and isn't too heavy. Think of it as your laboratory fabric; although it isn't disposable, it's inexpensive enough to discard when a pattern or a design isn't working.

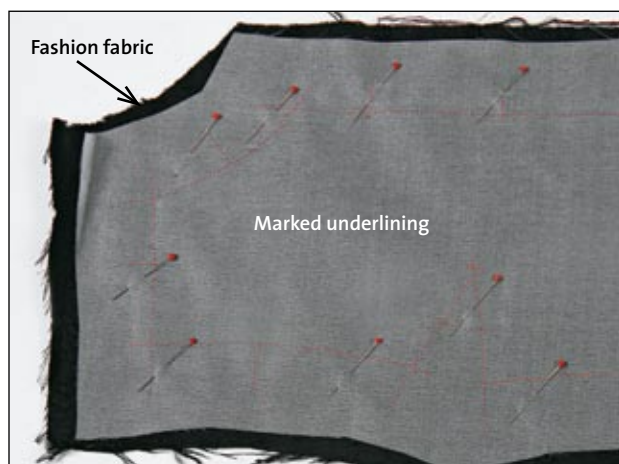


2 CUT OUT AND MARK THE UNDERLINING

Underlining adds strength to the fashion fabric.

You can also transfer important marks on the muslin to the underlining rather than the fashion fabric itself. Cut the underlining with wide seam allowances (at least 1 inch wide), and transfer the marks from your muslin with a tracing wheel and

waxed tracing paper. With black fashion fabric, the color of your marks is not a consideration, but most of the time it is. White fabrics have to be marked with white, and although light applications of blue and red can be used with colored fabrics, it must be done very carefully. (See “You Say Underlining, I Say Interlining” on p. 40 for more information.)



3 CUT OUT THE FASHION FABRIC

With the fashion fabric right-side down, place the marked underlining face up on top. Be sure the grainlines are perfectly aligned. Use plenty of sharp pins to attach the underlining to your fashion fabric (blunt pins cause the fabric to shift when you insert them), and place them in the seam allowances. Cut your

fashion fabric in a single layer using the marked underlining as the pattern and with similarly wide seam allowances. When the underlining is particularly shifty—silk chiffon or silk crepe de Chine, for example—keep the muslin pinned to the underlining for the sake of stability, and pin them to the fashion fabric as a unit. Remove the muslin pattern before you baste the fashion fabric and underlining together.



4 JOIN THE LAYERS

With a running stitch along each seamline, hand-baste the fashion fabric and the underlining together. Machine-basting can shift the layers and mark the fabric. This is also the time to mark darts, button and buttonhole placement, and any other design details that need to be visible from the outside of the garment. Lightweight silk basting thread is an ideal choice. The trick is

to control the layers; with the underlining on top, double-check that the grainlines are as they should be, and flip the layers over to smooth the fabric out on the fashion fabric side. Repin as necessary to eliminate any bubbles. If any remain after you’ve basted, re-baste. Knot each thread as you begin, and finish by repeating a stitch or two in place; be sure you begin and end before the cross points of each seam.

continued >>>

LINING

As for lining fabric, my favorites are silk crepe de Chine, silk charmeuse, and lightweight silk broadcloth. They’re breathable, relatively easy to work with, and match the quality of the rest of the project.

UNDERLINING

Underlining must be chosen with care. It can affect the color of your garment, lessen wrinkling, fill out pleats and gathers, and make a firm fabric firmer or a flowing fabric even more graceful.

FASHION FABRIC

The better the fabric, the more expensive it will be. Fortunately, a little black dress takes a relatively modest amount, so high-quality fabric shouldn’t be out of the question.

5 HAND-BASTE FOR A FITTING

The garment in muslin is one thing; the garment in fashion fabric is another. This is your chance to check the seamline placement, the neck edge position, the armholes, the dart fullness, the hemline, how the fabric is hanging, and so on.

A Again, using a running stitch, hand-baste the entire garment together for a fitting. Also make sure that your hand stitches are secure—but not too loose—or you won't get an accurate read of how the garment fits. And secure your stitches firmly at the ends of the seams so they don't pull out as you're fitting the garment.

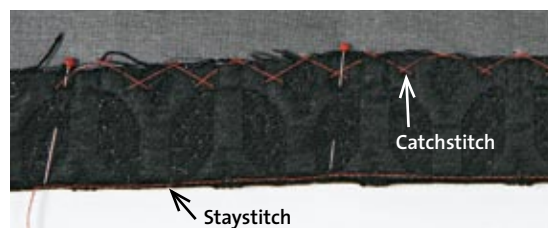
B At the fitting, mark any changes with pins; then re-baste, and check again. And of course, mark any changes to the muslin as it's used as pattern for the lining.

6 MACHINE-STITCH THE GARMENT

First, on scrap fabric, experiment with the stitch length and tension, using the same layering used with the garment. Then press the seam carefully to make sure you're happy with the result.



A Stitch darts without back-tacking (instead tie a secure knot with the threads). Sew the seams from raw edge to raw edge without backtacking (except for a few exceptions: the top of a slit on a skirt seam or the vent on a jacket sleeve). Fit the garment again, and once all is well, remove the basting threads. Then remove, trim, clip, and press the seam allowances.



B Couture garments seldom have separate facings; the generous seam allowances serve that purpose. Hand-staystitch the neck edge, fold under the seam allowance, and catchstitch it to the underlining.

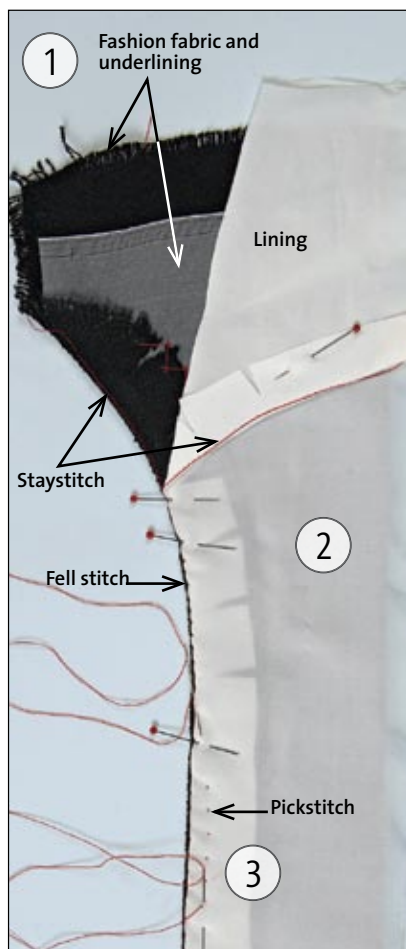


7 APPLY THE ZIPPER

Apply the zipper by hand from the right side with the zipper open, using a tiny pickstitch (see “Master Class: Master the Hand Stitch” on p. 62) and doubled-thread coated with beeswax. After you've pulled your thread through the beeswax a few times, press it (sandwich it between layers of paper towels to prevent it from melting onto your ironing-board cover). Be careful not to pull the stitches too tightly; you don't want them to cut the fibers of the fashion fabric or give the appearance of being tufted. Stitch spacing is a matter of taste, but I like stitches that are $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{3}{8}$ inch apart and the same distance from the folded edge.



Photos: (model) Jack Deutsch, hair and makeup: Christy McCabe using tarte cosmetics, stylist: Jessica Saai; (process—p. 32, top) Pamela Metcal; all others, Sloan Howard. Styling credits: black shoes—BCBG (BCBG.com); purple shoes—Via Spiga (available at select Macy's stores); yellow bag—BCBG (BCBG.com)



8 CUT AND SEW THE LINING

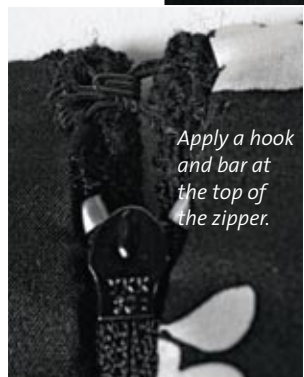
Use the muslin as the lining pattern.

A When applying the lining, don't forget to reverse it, though; the lining is a mirror image—not a duplicate—of the garment. This is especially critical if the design is asymmetrical or if fitting adjustments have been made on different sides of the body.

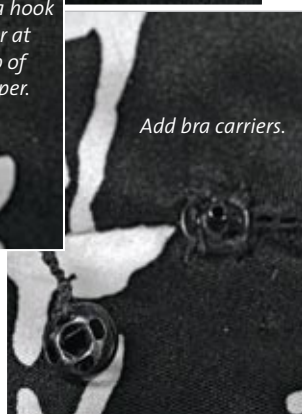
B Staystitch, trim, and clip the neckline; then press inward (1). Join the lining by hand with small fell stitches along the neck edge (See “Master Class: Master the Hand Stitch” on p. 62), the base of the sleeves, and along the zipper (2). Finally, sew a small row of pickstitches along the neck edge, about ½ inch from the edge, going through all layers except the outermost layer of fashion fabric to further hold the lining in place (3).



Create a small ease pleat to cover the hemstitches.



Apply a hook and bar at the top of the zipper.



Add bra carriers.

9 ADD FINISHING DETAILS

Turn up the hem, and gently press it (sometimes, the warmth of a hand is all that's needed to form the fold). Catchstitch the hem allowance to the underlining. The lining—formed with a small ease pleat—will cover the stitches as it's joined to the fashion fabric with a loose but secure running stitch. For the finishing touches, use a delicate chainstitch and tiny snaps to create bra carriers, and add a hook and thread bar at the top of the zipper.



Black isn't always black. When combining fabrics, as we did here, be sure the blacks match.