

Setting a sleeve by hand

Keep your eye on the grain and take it a stitch at a time

(from issue # 122)

After “Inside a Chanel Jacket” appeared in issue 121, many readers requested more information about sewing a sleeve into a jacket by hand. For all of you, this is unquestionably a master class technique.

The exquisitely set sleeves we admire in haute couture don’t happen by accident. Control is the key element to their success—control of fit, fabric, and the techniques used to shape the fabric into the desired form.

Successfully setting in and sewing a sleeve by hand starts by carefully fitting the sleeve and choosing an appropriate fabric that works well with the technique. This haute couture technique enables you to position the horizontal and vertical grainlines perfectly, ensure a full range of motion in your sleeve, and establish a well-placed and elegant armscye seam.

A WELL-FITTED MUSLIN IS ESSENTIAL

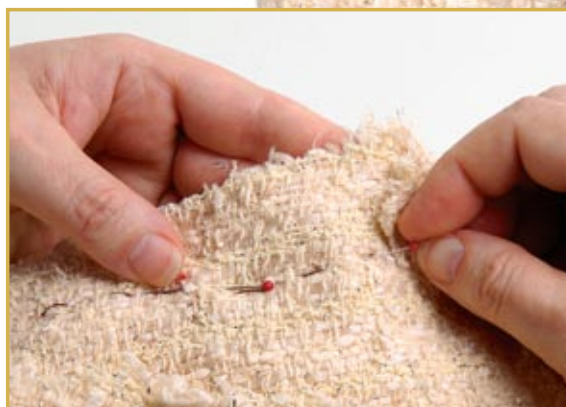
Although fitting the fashion fabric establishes the final sleeve placement, the groundwork laid in the muslin fitting is essential. It allows you to determine the circumference at the top of the sleeve and armscye, mark the exact placement of the sleeve at the end of the shoulder seam,

and establish the amount of arm movement.

Equally critical is choosing a fabric that lends itself to shaping, especially in the sleeve-cap area, and is lofty enough to hide the hand stitches. A soft wool boucle, such as the one shown at right, is a perfect choice.

If both the horizontal and vertical grains aren’t

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obvious in your fabric, mark them clearly with basting thread on the sleeve pieces so you can easily refer to them. Measure the length of the sleeve-cap seamline; it should be $1\frac{1}{4}$ to $1\frac{1}{2}$ inches larger than the circumference of the armscye seamline.

The higher the armscye under the arm, the greater the arm movement, but it mustn't be uncomfortably tight. Clearly mark with basting thread any changes made during the fitting. Unless the body indicates otherwise, your two armscye seamlines and two sleeve seamlines should be identical.

Once you've perfected the fit, cut the fashion fabric with 2-inch seam allowances. Mark the seamlines with basting stitches in contrasting thread before you begin.

Susan Khalje is a Threads contributing editor.

Shape a graceful sleeve cap

Shaping serves two purposes: It creates an elegant contour and a seamline devoid of uneven fabric distribution and bumps, and it allows excess fabric to be eased in.

If the sleeve circumference is considerably larger than the armscye circumference—due to a full upper arm, for example—then the excess fabric needs to be reduced to create a smooth armscye seam.

There are a number of ways to ease the sleeve-cap seamline into the armscye: You can shrink the fabric with steam or apply gathering stitches to the seam allowance and pull them, almost like a drawstring, to reduce the excess. If there's a seam down the outside of the arm, as there would be in a three-piece sleeve, you can taper the shoulder end of the seam to pare down some of the sleeve's fullness. Finally, you can apply subtle rows of hand-stitching horizontally across the sleeve-cap area and pull them to compress the fabric.



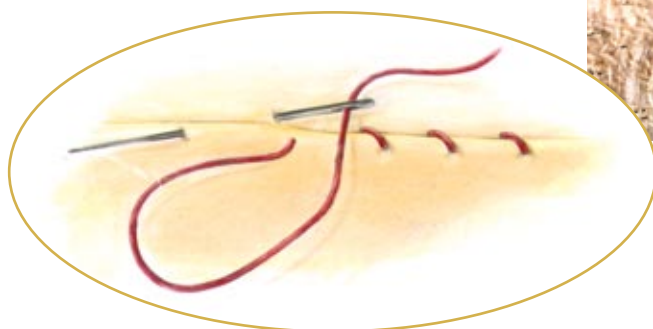
Photos: Sloan Howard; Drawings: Carol Ruzicka

Sew the upper half of the sleeve

Pin your well-fitted sleeve into place in the following manner:

First, fold the sleeve's seam allowances under along the sleeve's basted seamline—toward the sleeve. Keeping the vertical and horizontal grainlines perpendicular and parallel to the floor, respectively, bring the sleeve-cap and armscye basting stitches together, and pin the upper half of the sleeve into place. The very top of the sleeve may or may not line up with the shoulder seam, but at this point, grain placement is the more critical issue.

Sew the pinned section of the sleeve together from the outside using small, firm fell stitches and doubled thread coated with beeswax.

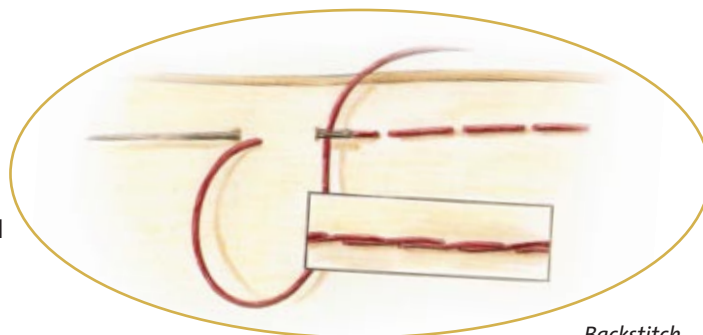


Fell stitches



Sew the underarm sleeve section

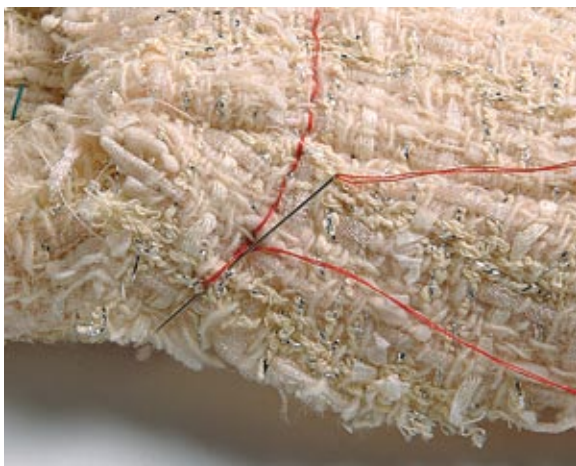
Working from the inside of the garment, hold the lower half of the sleeve and the lower half of the armscye together; they should fall into place with their stitching lines layered neatly one on top of the other.



Backstitch

Pin them together along their basted seamlines, from the bodice side, and sew the lower half of the seam with backstitches—small and firm, perfectly placed on the basting line, using, as before, doubled thread coated with beeswax.

Put the garment on a dress form and check the grainlines, the contour of the seam, the fit, and the sleeve movement. It's relatively easy to make adjustments now before cleaning up the inside of the sleeve.



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Open the seam allowances

One of the secrets to a smooth shoulder line is to divide—or open—the seam allowances at the top of the sleeve.

The bodice seam allowance folds toward the garment, and the sleeve seam allowance folds toward the sleeve. This necessitates clipping the bodice seam allowance in order to allow it to fold back toward the garment. Clip about 3 inches from either side of the shoulder seam. Tack the opened seam allowance to the shoulder seam, as shown. Do not open the lower seam allowances under the arm; they remain together.

Trim the upper seam allowances to about 1 inch. Trim the lower seam allowances to about ½ inch. To keep the lower seam allowances from fraying, firmly and thoroughly overcast the raw edges together.



BEESWAX ISN'T ENOUGH

Beeswax not only conditions your thread for easier sewing, it strengthens it, too. To get the full benefit from the beeswax, thread your needle and draw the thread through the wax. Then iron the waxed thread. With hand-sewing, it's a good idea to thread a few needles with an 18-inch length of doubled thread; that way, you won't have to stop sewing to rethread and wax your needle.



Overcast stitch