

Basic Dressmaking Processes

SELECTING AND PREPARING THE FABRIC

Introduction

Having considered sewing equipment, basic stitches, and the technique of using a sewing machine, it's now time to progress further and tackle some of the processes involved in the construction of garments. After all, dressmaking is a matter of converting a length of material into an attractive shape that fits, and a certain amount of manipulative skill is required to do this.

This study unit deals with very basic sewing processes, all of which you need to master before attempting to make a garment. Each step is explained in detail, with alternative methods where these might apply to various fabrics. Before you can begin to sew, you have to purchase the fabric, prepare it for use, and cut it out. Care taken during these initial stages makes for a good start on the garment.

Good dressmaking is really a combination of accurate sewing and correct pressing. Pressing comes into every process. For example, stitching is more accurately and easily done if the seams, darts, etc., are first pressed flat. It's therefore necessary to learn something about pressing methods and techniques even before learning the most basic of sewing processes. For this reason, pressing is the first subject we'll cover in this study unit.

Beginners often make the mistake of thinking that pressing will spoil a fabric, but all materials are robust enough to stand up to pressing, and a satisfactory method can always be found for every fabric. By using a variety of materials, you'll build onto the knowledge of fabrics gained in your unit entitled *Fibers and Fabrics*. Make a note in these early stages of the way in which each material reacts. For example, does it fray, does it crease, is it hard to hand sew, etc.?

Before you continue with this unit, set up your equipment (if available) ready to sew and go through every stage carefully,

trying out all the processes described. Most importantly, always set up your pressing equipment before you begin to sew—you're sure to need it. Figure 1 illustrates the pressing equipment you'll use most often.



FIGURE 1—Pressing equipment (L to R, iron, pressing cushion, seam roll, sleeve board)

The Importance of Pressing

Good pressing is absolutely vital to good dressmaking and it's essentially a very accurate art. A professional finish can be achieved only by constant and correct pressing in the right way for the fabric being handled. Of course, overpressing is *possible*, but it's fairly uncommon, except with a few materials. No matter how beautifully constructed a garment may be, it will still look very homemade if it hasn't been well pressed. Pressing must be done during creation as well as when the garment's finished.

Pressing, as done in conjunction with sewing, isn't a case of pushing an iron along the fabric to smooth it; it's the use of an iron—held still or manipulated—for long enough to set the

fabric in its new position. Pressing is a slow process and it's important to remember that the only part being pressed is that directly below the iron.

Pressing is a combination of

- *Pressure*—the weight of the iron, plus a certain amount of strength exerted by your arm when the fabric needs it
- *Heat*—a temperature suitable for the fiber, not for the fabric
- *Moisture (in most instances)*—provided by a steam iron for thin and lightweight fabrics, by a piece of dampened and wrung out muslin, or by a well-wrung piece of damp, thicker cotton fabric.

When this heat, pressure, and moisture are applied, care must be taken not to spoil any particular feature of the fabric. A fabric with a raised surface or bouclé weave, for instance, should be pressed over a layer of Turkish toweling and not on a hard ironing board. Great care must be exercised with certain synthetic fibers, which are liable to crack under excess heat and pressure—thus causing permanent creases in the fabric. Half-hearted pressing is very ineffective. An exact amount of pressure must be applied to produce the best result in each fabric. Some fabrics require very careful handling or special treatment, as noted in your unit entitled *Fibers and Fabrics*.

During the sewing of the garment, most pressing is done on the wrong side, but it's also necessary to check the right side to see that ridges don't occur. Always use a cloth to protect the fabric when pressing on the right side.

Every process must be pressed before stitching and again after the tacks have been removed. Never stitch across a seam, dart, or other process until after it's been pressed. When the garment has been assembled, it will need a final all-over pressing, after which it should be hung up and not touched for at least a day.

Pressing Methods

There are several methods of pressing, and it's necessary to take a small scrap of material, fold it, and press it to discover which method is most effective for that particular fabric. By testing each fabric that you use and sewing with a variety of materials, you'll gradually gain experience and confidence.

The main methods are

- Using a dry iron set at the correct temperature for the fiber
- Dampening the material by rubbing a damp muslin over the fabric and then drying it off with the iron
- Pressing over a damp cloth and then passing a dry iron over the wrong side
- Using a damp cloth under the iron and a wooden clapper (or a plain block of wood) to force in the steam after removing the cloth
- Pressing with a steam iron

Methods for particular fabrics will be given later, but the methods described above are generally used for the following fibers and fabrics:

- Pure silk, cotton lawn, muslin, voile, some rayons, nylon, chiffon made from nylon or rayon
- Cottons which are slightly stiffened (e.g., glazed)
- Rayons, cottons such as poplin, blends of wool with synthetics, some dacrons
- Woolens, dress woolens, tweeds, worsteds, blends of dacron or acrilan and wool
- Tricel and other rayons, cotton poplin, gingham, lawn

Selecting the Materials

It must have been comparatively easy to buy fabric when there were simply wool, silk, cotton, linen, and rayon. In those days there were also just basic weaves and only a few fabric finishes, such as the pre-shrunk process. Today, there is an ever-increasing range of synthetic fibers. The synthetic or “man-made” fibers are the result of the chemical treatment of certain raw materials, such as petroleum and the by-products of coal. These fibers are by no means substitutes for natural ones, as rayon was originally intended to be (it was even called “artificial silk”). They have their own properties and merits. On the whole, they’re hardwearing, easy to care for, less liable to crease, and altogether very suitable for the demands of modern

life. However, they're marketed under a bewildering number of trade names and it's often very difficult to discover what's the basic fiber in a particular material.

Each length of fabric should be chosen with consideration for the purpose for which it's to be used, and its inherent properties, such as thickness, crispness and softness, should be kept in mind. This subject is covered in detail in your unit entitled *Fibers and Fabrics*, but whatever the fabric, there are certain basic points to consider.

First, take great care to choose a fabric that's correct for the style and the wearer because no amount of excellent sewing will make a garment a success if the wrong fabric is used. An attractive length of material on a display stand will sometimes start a search for a suitable pattern, but usually the pattern is chosen first.

Whichever is the case, however, the following rules apply for choosing fabric:

1. Choose a suitable color and weight for the individual, the season, and the style.
2. Choose a fabric which has the qualities demanded by the style. For example, jersey fabrics don't pleat easily and fine soft fabrics don't give a firm outline.
3. Crush the fabric to see whether it creases. Beware if it springs too readily or if it creases quickly.
4. Select fabric suitable to your experience level. If you're a beginner, remember that woolens and cottons (with the exception of poplin) are easiest to handle. Synthetics may have advantages in wear, but they're more difficult to work with.
5. In most instances, follow the recommendations on the pattern jacket. Most commercial patterns list a selection of suitable fabrics on the pattern jacket and also indicate if the pattern is unsuitable for napped fabrics, stripes, checks, plaids, or diagonals. Don't depart from these recommendations unless you're very experienced and have a definite reason for doing so.

6. When buying a printed patterned fabric, check that the pattern has been printed true to the grain of the material. This particularly applies when buying at sales or flea markets.
7. Pay as much as you can afford, particularly if it's for a much-worn garment, or if it's to have handwork on it.
8. As the sales clerk unwinds the fabric from the bolt, watch for flaws and check the cutting. Bad cutting (not on the weft thread) can cost you a serious amount of material.

In addition to the fabric, you'll need to buy some, if not all, of the following materials to make your garment.

Interfacing. Stiffening of some kind is generally required in some part of the garment. Ideally, it's better to handle the fabric first before deciding on the interfacing because it's important that the interfacing should work well with the top fabric. Non-woven interfacings are available in a range of weights to suit all fabrics and there are also woven interfacings such as organdy and canvas. But whatever type is chosen, it shouldn't be too stiff for the fabric.

Mounting fabric. Transparent or loosely woven fabrics will need to be mounted onto an underlining. Doing this will ensure a better finish to most garments. Again, it's important that the mounting fabric chosen should complement the top fabric, and it certainly should be lighter in weight so that it doesn't alter the character of the material with which it's used. Soft taffeta, cotton lawn, and Japanese silk are all suitable mounting fabrics.

Lining. Coats, and most jackets, need lining. Good-quality rayon taffeta or satin are most often used. Japanese silk is another possibility, the heavier types of silk such as crêpe de Chine being, unfortunately, too expensive for the average dressmaker.

Notions. A list of buttons, fastenings, zippers, and threads is generally printed on the pattern jacket. However, unless it's difficult to reach the stores, it's advisable to postpone the purchase of buttons or zippers until after the first fitting because you may change your mind about the style of fastening or the type of opening. Buy plenty of suitable thread. It should be a shade darker than the fabric because this will show less.

Lengths and widths. Check the lengths and widths given on the pattern jacket and buy the correct quantity. Many garments can be made from an amount of material slightly less than stated if the person is of less than average height. There's no point in buying an extra quarter of a yard, because such a small amount is unlikely to be of help if you make a mistake.

However, the serious dressmaker shouldn't have to rely solely on the amounts given on commercial patterns. There will be occasions when you'll want to make a decision without consulting a pattern—for instance, when you find an attractive remnant or when the pattern doesn't give a length for the width of material you wish to buy. This is particularly so with very wide fabrics, but care should be taken if the pattern doesn't give a layout for a narrow width, because it may be that it's impossible to cut the style from a narrower width than the one stated.

Table 1 will help you calculate length for some of the most classic layouts. In addition, however, you can increase your knowledge by measuring and noting the sizes of a variety of pattern pieces, e.g., a basic bodice back and front, skirt back and front, sleeves, etc. The maximum width, as well as the length of these pattern pieces, is obviously a very important factor when calculating the amount of material required.

If you also practice trial layouts for various widths and styles without reference to those given in the pattern, you'll soon begin to understand the relationship between pattern and material in terms of lengths and widths.

The widths most commonly found on sale are

25 in. (65 cm)	48 in. (122 cm)
27 in. (70 cm)	50 in. (127 cm)
35–36 in. (90 cm)	54–56 in. (140 cm)
39 in. (100 cm)	58–60 in. (150 cm)
44–45 in. (115 cm)	68–70 in. (175 cm)
	72 in. (180 cm)

The lengths given in Table 1 are based on 36-in. (91.5-cm) wide fabric and are for straight basic garments. They include additions for hems and seam allowances, but make no allowance for trimmings (collars, cuffs, belts, etc.), flares, pleats, or gathers. They, therefore, give a guide to the absolute minimum required. A shorter length is, of course, required for the wider

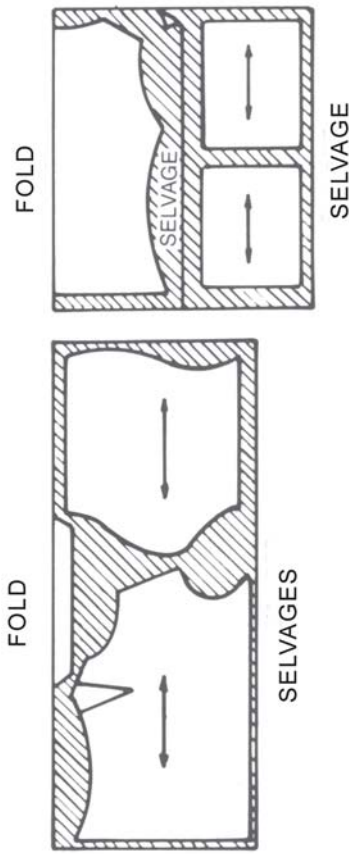


FIGURE 2—Classic Blouse Layouts—Short and Long-Sleeved

fabric. Much depends on style and layout, but you'll generally find that about three-quarters of the 36-in. (90-cm) length for 45-in. (114.5-cm) wide fabric, or two-thirds for 54-in. (137-cm) or 66-in. (168-cm) widths is quite a good guide.

Table 1	
FABRIC LENGTHS FOR CLASSIC LAYOUTS	
Garment	Lengths of 36-in. (90-cm) fabric
Skirt	Twice length of skirt from waist to hem, plus 9 in. (23 cm) for seam allowances and hem. Refer to Figure 4.
Blouse (sleeveless)	Twice back length of blouse plus 5 in. (12.5 cm) for seam allowances and hem.
Dresses (sleeveless)	Twice full back length, plus 9 in. (23 cm) for seam allowances and hem.
Sleeves (blouse or dress)	From 18 in. (46 cm) for short sleeves to 27 in. (68.5 cm) for long sleeves, plus 3 in. (7.5 cm) for seam allowances.

To help you visualize patterns in conjunction with lengths and widths, some examples of classic layouts for simple garments are shown in Figures 2–4.

Blouses. The fabric required for a blouse, Figure 2, is twice the back length of blouse, plus 5 in. (12.5 cm) for seam allowances and hem. For sleeves, 27 in. (68.5 cm) plus 6 in. (15 cm) for cuffs and collar.

Note that the straight shirtsleeve fills the double half-width of the fabric. Flared or fully gathered sleeves over 18-in. (46-cm) wide can't be cut double on 36-in. (91.5-cm) wide fabric.

Skirts. Figure 3 shows the layout for a straight skirt, up to 38-in. (96.5-cm) hip size with back kick pleat, in 54-in. (137-cm) fabric.

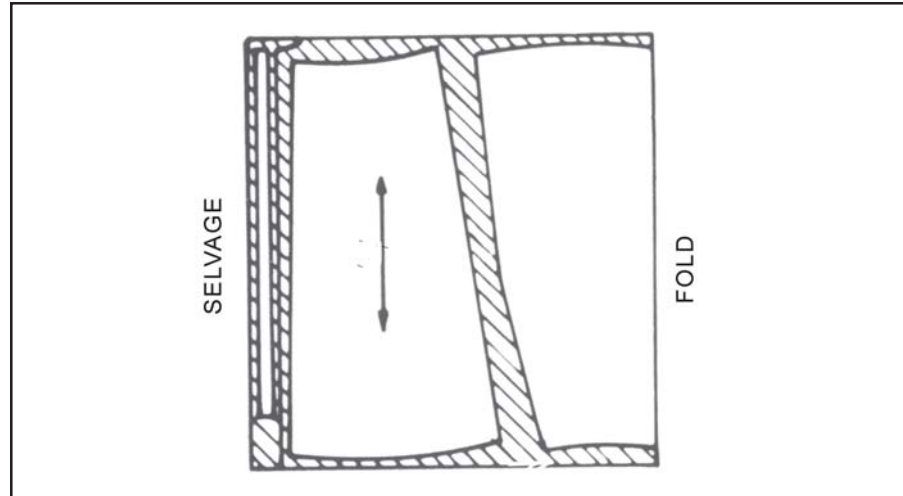


FIGURE 3—Classic Skirt Layout

The fabric required is the length of skirt, plus $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. (11.5 cm) for seam allowances and hem. The width of the material means that a shorter length is required than for 36-in. (91.5-cm) width.

For this layout, the fabric is refolded on the straight of grain to give enough single material along one selvage for the waistband. Note how the *dovetailing* of the pieces (placing the narrow top of one pattern piece to the wide hem of the other) enables this economical layout to be achieved.

For larger hip measurements, it's necessary to fold the fabric in half and allow extra yardage for the waistband to be cut across the end of the fabric.

Figure 4 shows this layout for the same skirt as in Figure 3, but up to 42-in. (107-cm) hip size and in 36-in. (91.5-cm) fabric.

The fabric required for this variation is twice the length of the skirt, plus 9 in. (23 cm) for seam allowances and hem.

Note that at this width of fabric, it's impossible to dovetail the back and front pattern pieces.

This layout can also be used for the lining of the skirt described for Figure 2. The fabric required in this case would be twice the length of the top skirt, plus $4\frac{1}{2}$ in. (11.5 cm) for seam allowances and hem. (Omit the waistband and pleat allowance.)

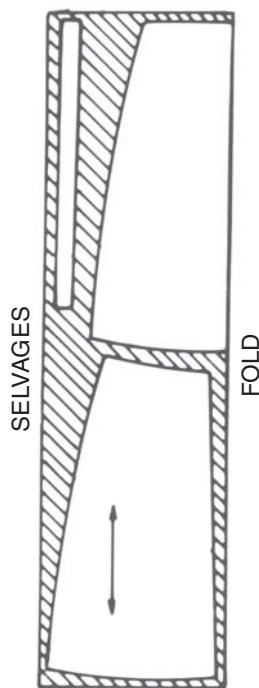


FIGURE 4—Classic Skirt Layout Variation

Shrinking the Fabric

Most fabrics need some attention before the pattern can be laid down on them for cutting. Most will need straightening and pressing; some will also need shrinking. Man-made fibers, such as dacron and nylon, don't shrink. Of the natural fibers, silk doesn't shrink, but wool, linen, and cotton do unless they've been pre-shrunk during manufacture.

With the exception of crêpes, which should never be pressed with a damp cloth, test for shrinkage as follows: chalk a measured square in the middle of the fabric, press with a damp cloth, then remeasure or examine for bubbles. If the test reveals slight shrinkage, the whole length must be pressed with a damp cloth, or by other methods given in Table 2, depending on the fiber.

Fabric Type	Shrinking Method
Woolens	Press all over with a damp cloth.
Linen or spun rayon	Either roll up in a damp sheet, leave for a few hours, and press carefully. Or, if material shrinks badly when tested, fold in half lengthwise and tack down the fold, across the ends, and up the selvage. Refold several times and immerse in warm water. Drip dry. Press, using a damp cloth if necessary.
Cotton	Many cottons are treated for shrinking (e.g., "sanforized") but if not, treat cotton the same as linen.

Straightening the Fabric

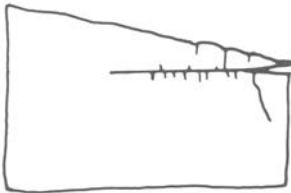


FIGURE 5—Straightening the End of the Fabric

Fabric may need straightening for two reasons:

1. The ends may need straightening because of bad cutting.
2. The grain may have been twisted out of line.

Straightening the end of the fabric. Your fabric should have been cut off the roll exactly on the weft thread. If this hasn't been done, straighten one end by one of the methods listed on the following page.

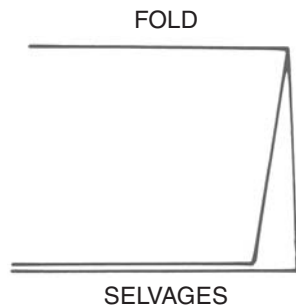


FIGURE 6—Straightening the Grain of the Fabric

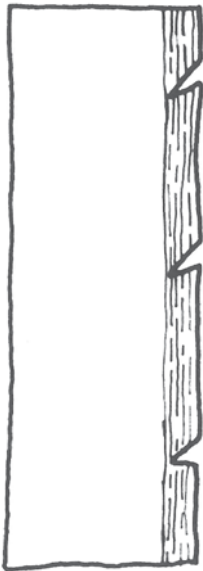


FIGURE 7—Clipping Selvage Edges

1. Woven fabrics—snip the selvage and tear, or loosen a weft thread with a pin, pull out the thread, and cut along the resulting line. The second method is gentler and preferable (Figure 5).
2. Corded fabrics—use a square (or ruler set exactly at right angles to the selvage) and mark across with tailor’s chalk.
3. Jersey—follow the stitch across on the wrong side and mark with pins.

Straightening the grain of the fabric. The grain of the fabric is frequently pulled out of line by being wound onto rolls by the manufacturer. This will be apparent if the edges of the straightened end won’t lie comfortably together (Figure 6). When this occurs, pull the fabric diagonally in the direction of the short corners throughout the full length of the cloth, so that the threads are drawn into line, and so that the edges of the straightened end lie evenly together.

If the selvage edges seem tight, clip them every 3 or 4 in., being careful not to cut into the fabric proper (Figure 7).

If you have the misfortune to find yourself working with fabric on which the design isn’t printed parallel to the weft threads, the ends must be cut to follow the line of the design—not the crosswise thread (unless it’s an all-over design where the error in printing won’t be obvious).

If the design is badly out of line, it may be necessary to cut each pattern piece out individually, having pinned down only one piece at a time, in order to avoid magnifying the error.

Folding the Fabric

Having prepared and straightened the fabric, check the layout and fold the fabric accordingly, e.g., down the center, halfway across, in half right across, etc. (The original fold, if there was any, should have been pressed out.)

If the fold is lengthwise, make sure it follows exactly the warp thread; if it’s across the fabric, it should follow the weft. Unless otherwise specified, the pattern is laid down on the wrong side of the fabric. As a general rule, silks and wools are sold folded with the right side inside, cottons and linens with the right side outside. Synthetics vary, but they are mostly sold right side out. Material that’s 36-in. wide is usually sold unfolded on a roll, generally with the right side out.

When the fabric has been correctly folded for the particular layout, pin together the selvages, the ends, and the fold, at 6 to 9 in. intervals (depending on the slipperiness of the fabric) with the pins at right angles to the edges.

Figure 8 shows some frequently used folds pinned in place. In Figure 8A, the fabric is folded in half on the lengthwise grain, with selvage to selvage. This is the most commonly used fold. In Figure 8B, the fabric is folded partway across on the lengthwise grain. This fold obviously results in some pattern pieces being laid on the right side of the fabric. In Figure 8C, the fabric is folded across on the weft thread.

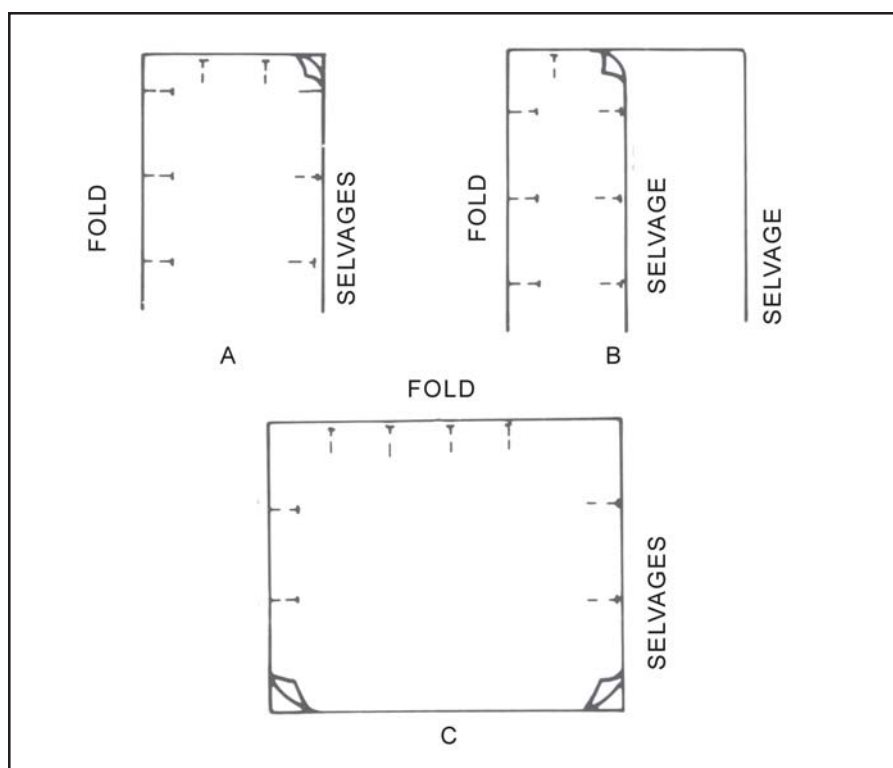


FIGURE 8—Types of Folds

Some layouts require more than one type of fold to be used. An example of this can be seen in the layout for the blouse shown earlier in Figure 2. In this case, work from the straightened end of the fabric and, after cutting the pattern pieces shown on the first fold, refold the fabric carefully, pin in place, and cut. Repeat as necessary.

Before moving on to the next section, take some time to complete *Sewing for Success 1*.

Sewing for Success 1



At the end of each section of *Basic Dressmaking Processes*, you'll be asked to pause and check your understanding of what you've just read by completing a "Sewing for Success." Writing the answers to these questions will help you review what you've studied so far. Please complete *Sewing for Success 1* now.

1. Pressing is a combination of pressure, heat, and _____.
2. *True or False?* Interfacings are used to add stiffness to parts of the garment.
3. Which of the following natural fibers won't shrink?
 - a. Wool
 - b. Cotton
 - c. Silk
 - d. Linen
4. Fabrics folded lengthwise follow the _____ of the fabric, and when folded across the fabric they follow the _____.
5. By pressing a damp cloth in the center of a measured piece of fabric and looking for bubbles, you're conducting a test for _____.
 - a. stains.
 - b. fabric type.
 - c. color fastness.
 - d. shrinkage.

Check your answers with those on page 67.

LAYING OUT, CUTTING, AND MARKING THE FABRIC

Preparing the Pattern for Layout

Unfortunately, not all figures match commercial pattern measurements. Adjustments must be made before cutting out the pattern pieces.

Pattern pieces will have lines for lengthening and shortening. Any other adjustments will have to be made by you. The bust, waist, and hips are usually the areas that need to be made wider or slimmer, depending on the particular case. Figures 9–13 are