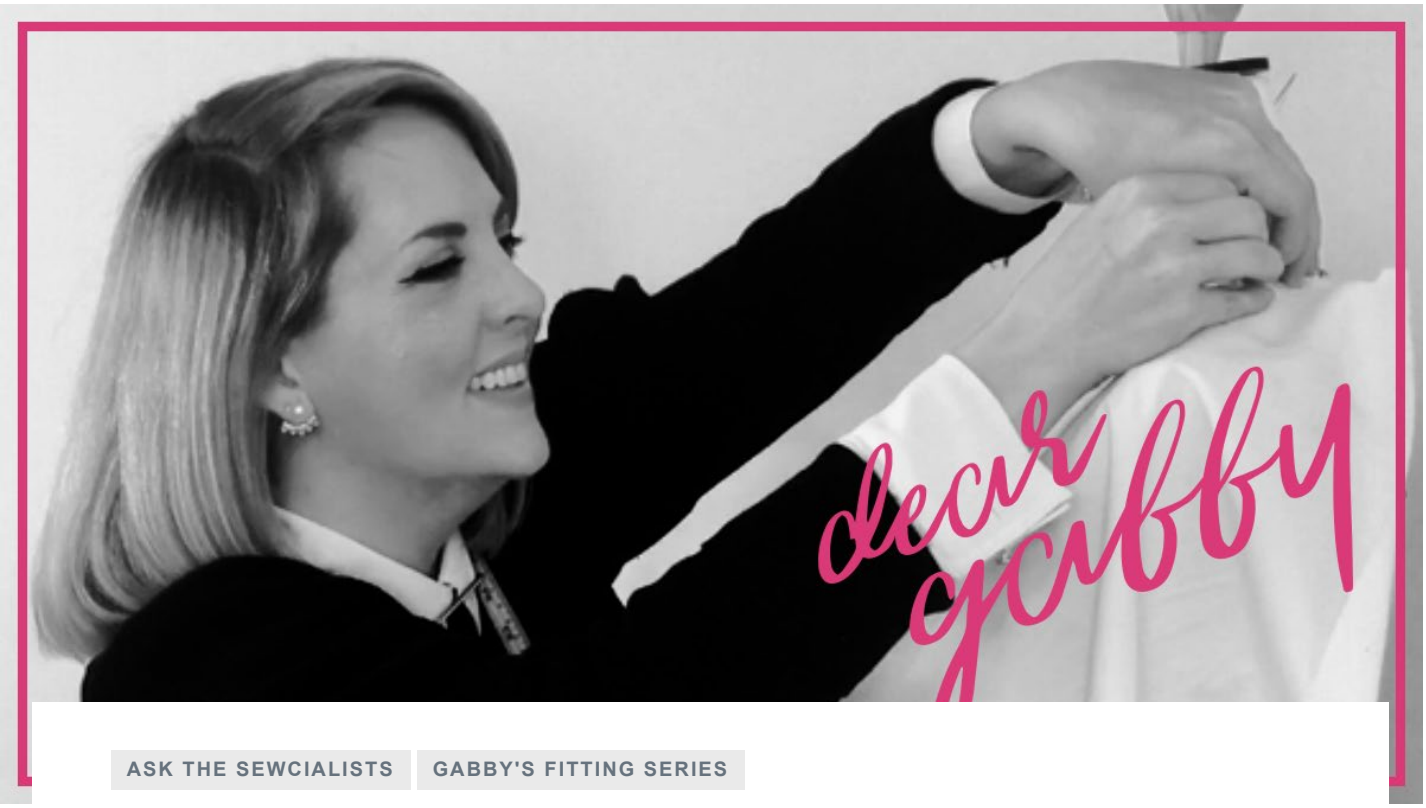

ASK THE SEWCIALISTS GABBY'S FITTING SERIES

27. Dear Gabby: The Great Shoulder Adjustment Digest—Part 1

October 12, 2020 | 17 Comments

This certainly can't touch the idea of the Great American Novel, but if you've been looking for a place to learn how to identify common shoulder fit issues of all flavors, you're in the right spot! (For part 1, that is!)

The shoulder is arguably the most fit critical area in garments made for the upper half of the body. Problems stemming from the shoulder affect overall garment balance, can cause draglines through the entire garment, and can cause great discomfort while wearing. So what's important to know, you ask? Keep going, gentle reader, resources will be italicized throughout!

* A quick note- I reviewed all the resources linked for clarity and ease of instruction. There are simply gobs of knowledge out there, pattern books, videos and courses galore. Of course, the best way to learn how to fit is to take classes and practice, but barring that, I specifically looked for approachable, easy to follow instructions that will provide a good base and allow entrée into more specific and focused areas. (In other words, don't scare off the newbies!)

The first thing to understand is the "slope" of a shoulder. **Shoulder slope** is, in essence, the measurement created by the angle that the trapezius muscle slopes downward, between your neck and your shoulder. For our purposes, imagine a pattern piece: the shoulder seam line is drawn starting at the side of a neck, follows the top of the shoulder, and ends at the armhole. The measurement between the highest shoulder point and the lowest shoulder point (measured vertically) is your shoulder slope. This is applicable to all ages and sexes and will not change based on who you are sewing for.

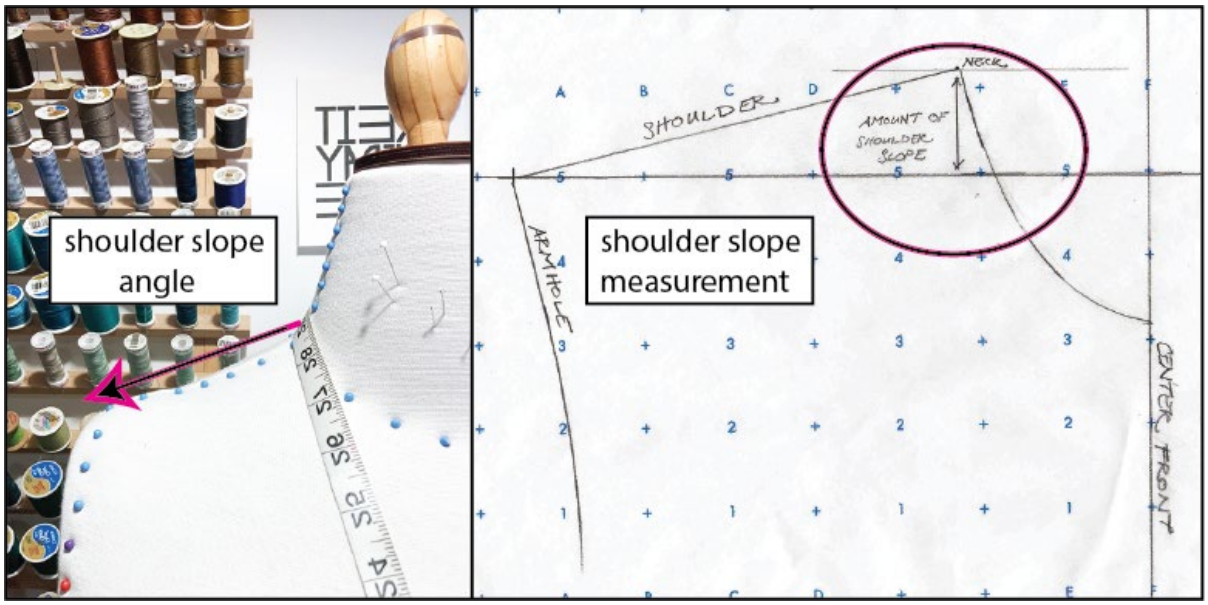

Image shows a dressform with an arrow indicating the downward slope of the shoulder, and a pattern with a shoulder slope placement indicated for how to take the measurement.

**Freesewing.org has an excellent explainer diagram and measuring method on shoulder slopes.)*

**Below is a video from Threads that quite clearly illustrates shoulder slopes:*

Threads: Shoulder Slope 101

Now that we've covered what a shoulder slope is, how can you measure this on yourself? There are a myriad of ways to do this:

- Tape a piece of paper on the wall. Stand facing out, and have a partner trace your shoulder line from neck to arm. True this line, and measure the angle amount. Again, a video from Threads that has many helpful tips.
- As freesewing.org recommends, take a selfie. The amount you need to rotate the photo to make your shoulder line horizontal is your shoulder slope measurement.
- There are several smart phone apps that will measure angles, you may need a helper for these as well.
- Of course, you can always use a pattern that fits well to check this measurement, depending on the neckline and armhole. Something very basic will work best for this.

Now that we have our shoulder slope measurement, you can use this to create a tool to help you check this on patterns, or simply keep this measurement in mind to measure patterns before sewing, so you can adjust before cutting into your fabric.

So, what happens with shoulder slopes? What would we need to adjust? Drumroll please… presenting the two most common problems that can happen with shoulder slope! Too much and not enough. Let's explore.

I've created a mockup showing too much slope, just the right amount, and too little, by sewing a shoulder line in 1/2″ increments. The shoulder/armhole join point has been left the same throughout, only the slope has been changed. I also left the seam allowance and stitch line visible, and I want to point out especially

the draglines. The first image shows too much slope:

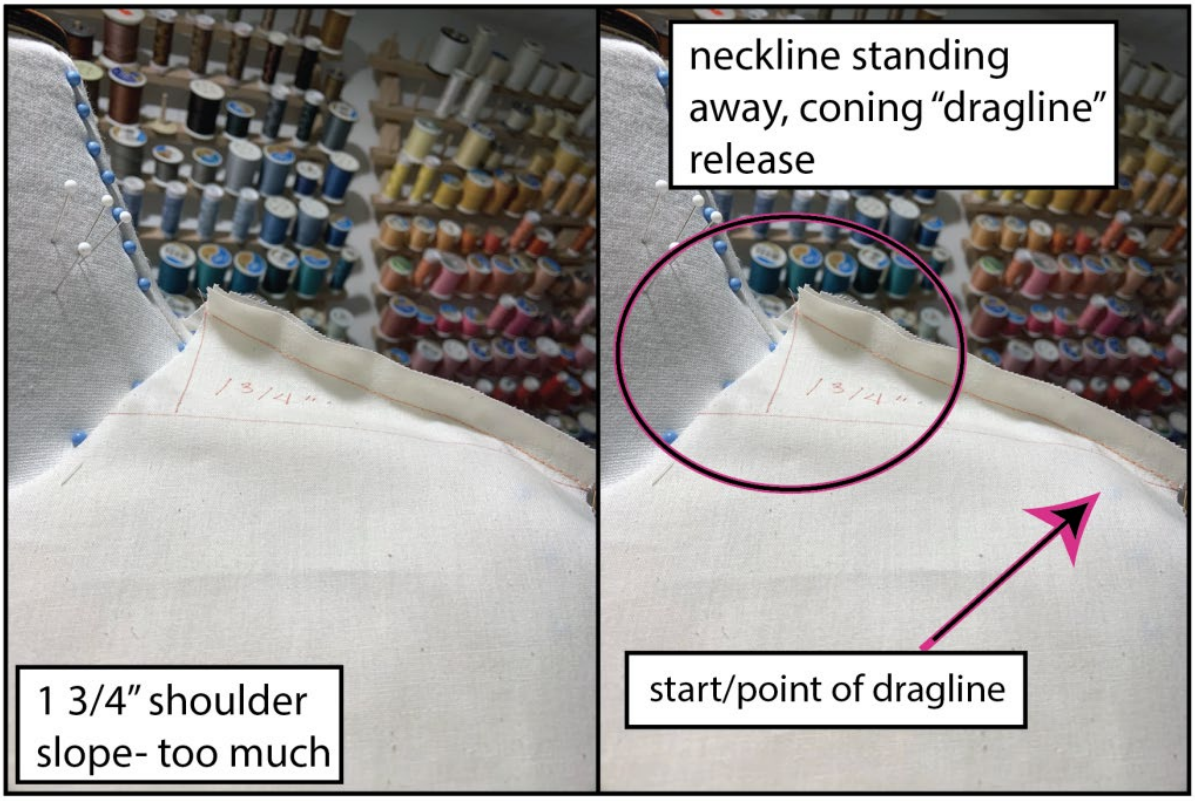

Image is a muslin mockup on a dressform, one side with no notation, and the other noting the presence of a dragline that starts at the shoulder and releases at the neckline. Shoulder seam does not sit along the shoulder, it stands up at the neck.

Do you see how there is a slight point at the shoulder/armhole join? And how it starts coning at the neck? That's a hallmark of a Too Much Slope dragline. You can also see how the neckline is standing away at the neck/shoulder join.

Workroom Social has a very good visual of the unevaluated problem and how they've pinned out the excess to show the issue over on the old IG.

This next photo shows a shoulder slope with just the right angle- the mockup lays smoothly along the shoulder, with no gapping or draglines anywhere.

Image shows the same mockup, sewn with less of an angle at the shoulder seam. Mockup lays smoothly along the shoulder of the dressform.

This next photo shows not enough shoulder slope- the mockup itself is clinging at the neck/shoulder join, and there is a point formed along the neckline and the coning is releasing in the armhole area.

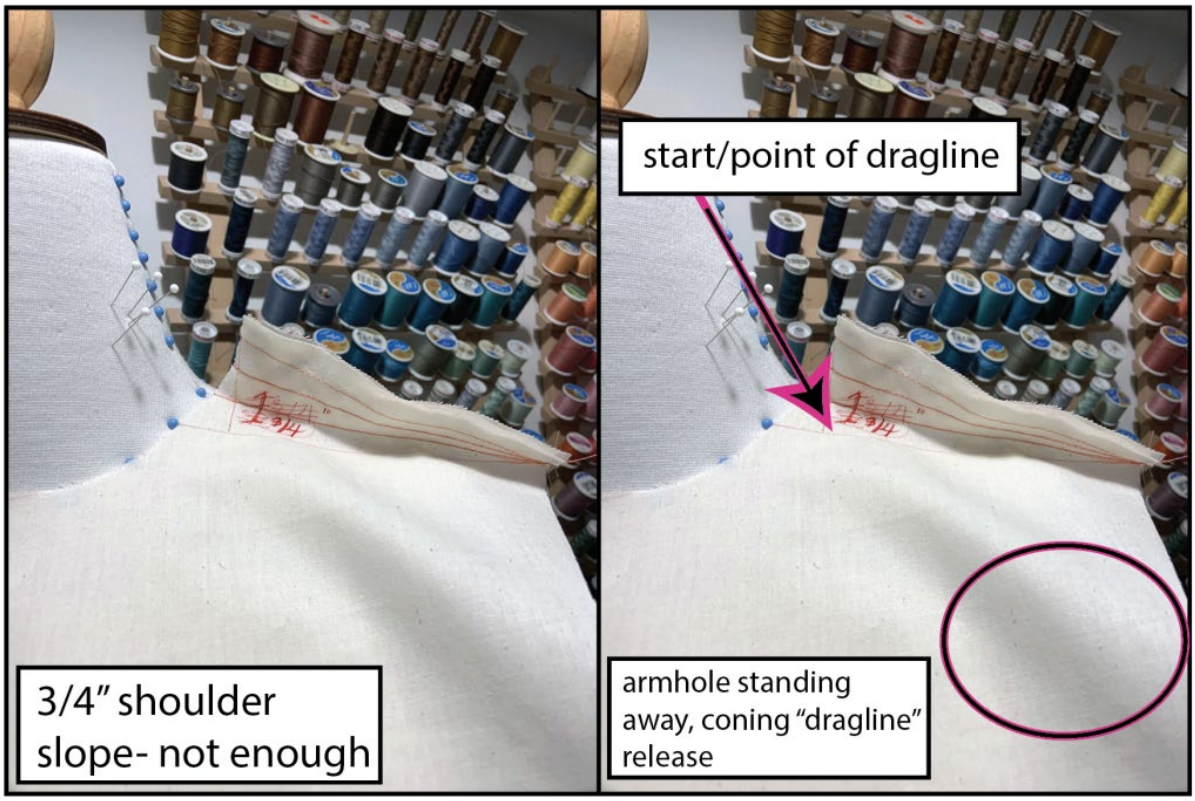

Image is a muslin mockup on a dressform, one side with no notation, and the other noting the presence of a dragline that starts at the neckline and releases at the armhole. Shoulder seam does not sit along the shoulder, it stands up at the armhole.

This next photo is the same slope—it's still too square, and you can see how the point/coning is shifted down in to the body area. This is what people mean when they say "a dragline is pointing to the problem"—draglines are not actually a line, they're fullness and folding, created when a point needs to be released at the very start of them. Look for the smallest point of a "dragline", and there you shall see your problem area (the "pointing!"). Imagine, such a large "dragline" being created by a difference of only 1/2″ in slope. This is what I mean when I say shoulders are arguably the most fit critical on a top…

Image shows the same mockup on a dressform, but the dragline has been shifted so the coning releases at the hem. The point of the dragline is still at the neckline/shoulder join.

Again, Workroom Social's visual of the problem and the pinning are great examples!

Additionally, I know that illustrations in pattern books or other resources can be highly confusing- often, they are just a bodice with some wiggly lines drawn on it, like so:

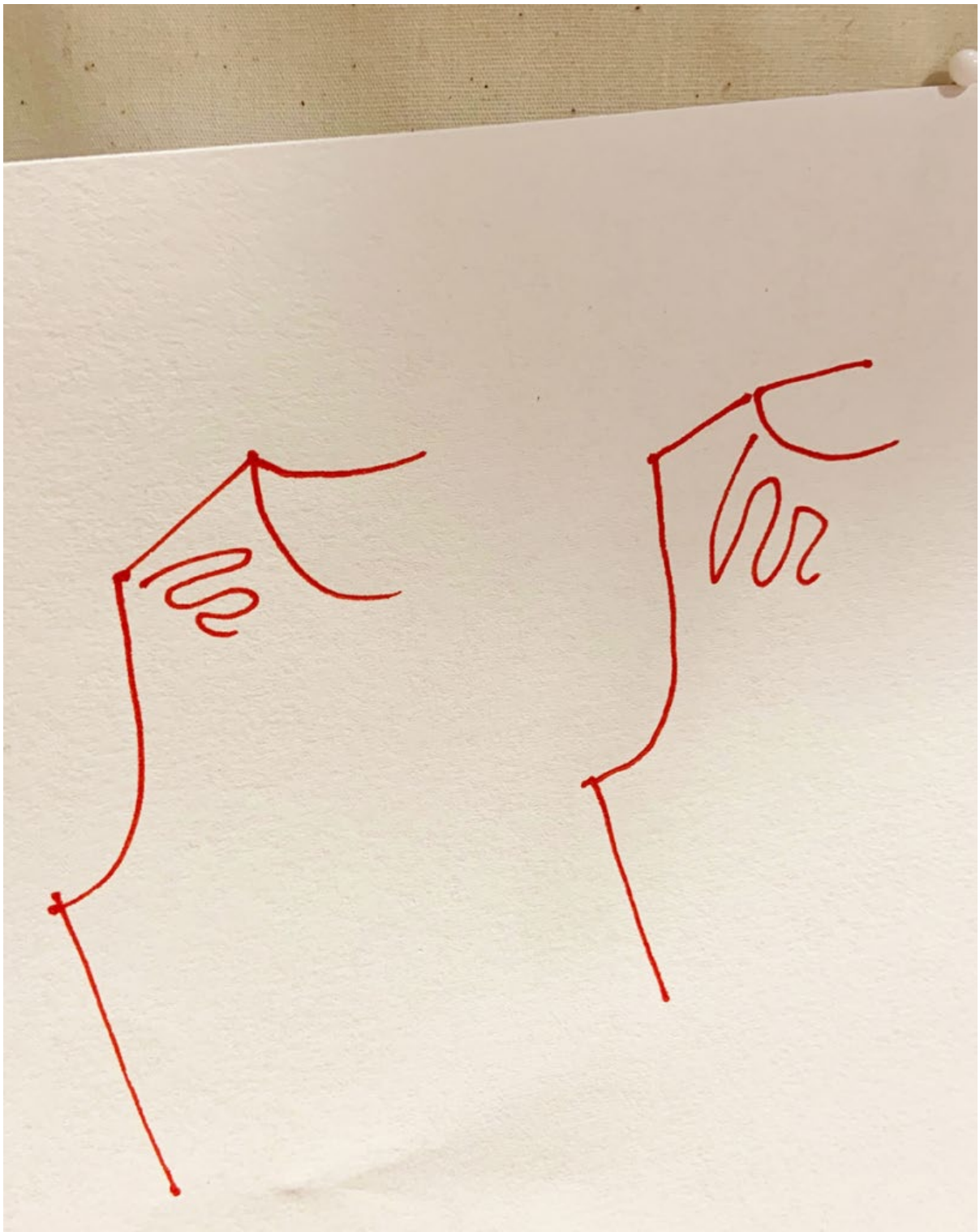

Image is an illustration that is supposed to show draglines on a bodice that will point out whether there is too much slope or too little, but the illustration

is not very clear and it is hard to distinguish the difference.

That tells me exactly nothing, unless I was the illustrator and thought those infinitesimally small variations were completely readable to someone who obviously was already familiar with what these slope issues look like. (Spoiler, I was, I drew this to illustrate my frustration with wiggly-line fit illustration guides).

And so—how to fix? You'll need to adjust the angle of the shoulder line, by either reducing the angle at the neckline (don't forget to drop your neckline accordingly, unless you like it to sit higher), or by dropping the angle of the shoulder line at the armhole (don't forget to drop the armhole at the side seam accordingly, unless you want it to sit higher). Links below for visuals:

**Katrina Kay has an excellent video showing how to make these adjustments.*

**And yet again, Threads to the rescue! I found this a little more complicated, but better if you like slashing and spreading, versus eyeballing and measuring.*

These correction are not complicated, and I would make sure you have accurate measurements to ensure your sleeve still fits into your armhole, if you don't have to make additional changes to your sleeve cap.

*And a quick note- it's extremely common for the right and left shoulder slope to differ, based on how muscular one or the other sides can be. Your dominant side will typically have less of a slope and more muscle mass. This is totally normal, everyone has asymmetries in their figure!

We've now covered the basics of shoulder slopes, and that's all I know about shoulders.

Just kidding! Be on the lookout for further posts about on this subject, and keep in mind that fixing shoulders on a pattern means you also have to consider the

neckline and the armholes. Yay!

Gabby is a technical designer, fit specialist, and prolific googler. She lives in Denver, raises tiny littles, reads, embroiders, makes, experiments, fails, learns, tries again. See her on instagram @ladygrift.

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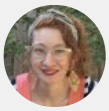
17 Comments

Jo

OCTOBER 12, 2020 AT 11:37 AM (EDIT)

Yay! Brilliant, thanks Gabby. I'm looking forward to hearing more of your insights on this topic. As a broad shouldered lady with ginormous shoulder blades I'm always struggling with shoulder fit.

Reply

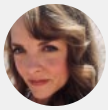


emcclure2010

OCTOBER 12, 2020 AT 11:44 AM (EDIT)

Also team broad shoulder and very much looking forward to your take on that! And now thinking I probably should look at slope, too…

Reply

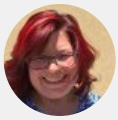


Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 12, 2020 AT 12:27 PM (EDIT)

Of course! Thanks for reading ☐ I'll get into broad/narrow shoulder adjustments in the next part!

Reply

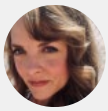


michelleinsea

OCTOBER 12, 2020 AT 2:40 PM (EDIT)

I've seen both versions of the square shoulder drag lines on my makes. What's the difference between the first square shoulder example and the second (coning released at armhole vs. coning released at hemline)? I'm having trouble figuring out the different causes from the text. Thanks!

Reply



Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 12, 2020 AT 2:55 PM (EDIT)

Great question! There's no difference in cause, but other factors like fabric weight and drape, construction, or silhouette may cause the dragline to release in a different area of the garment.

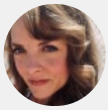
Reply

Tanya

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 8:27 AM (EDIT)

Thanks for sharing! I guess you's make the necessary adjustments to the back and front neck facings (if they apply), but how and of which parr of the collar and stand would you make the necessary adjustments, if you were making a blouse or shirtdress?

Reply



Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 12:24 PM (EDIT)

Great followup! So, you'll need to keep in mind the amount you've reduced/added at the neckline, total. Then you'll reduce the stand/band/collar accordingly the same amount. Additionally, you'll want either measure the seamline of the stand/band and collar to make sure they sew together, or walk the pieces to double check your adjustment. (You'll probably want to walk the pieces anyway, honestly The easiest place to reduce any of the band/stand/collar pieces is probably center back, but you can take it from the front edges if you are messing around with the shape of the collar points anyway. Hope this helps, and thanks for reading!

Reply

Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 12:25 PM (EDIT)

whoops- i mean you'll reduce or add the stand/band/collar accordingly!

Reply

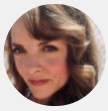
Lyn

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 9:31 AM (EDIT)

I am new to alterations and the math is fascinating. Wish I could have been taught through sewing. My biggest revelation when I made my first alteration at the shoulder (don't remember whose instructions I was following) was a simple algebra rule. If you take something out, you have to add it back in somewhere else…so when I narrowed my shoulder, I was told to add the same amount at the armscye.

Going to get through all this today! Thanks.

Reply

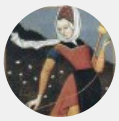


Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 12:27 PM (EDIT)

Yes, that's a great rule of thumb! Sometimes you may not need to add back, but that depends (of course! so many things in fiting are…. "well, that depends on xyz" thanks for reading!

Reply

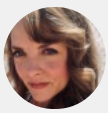


shoes15

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 4:50 PM (EDIT)

Thanks for this – need it so badly! Somtimes rather than fix the shoulder slope for my lower shoulder I use a shoulder pad on that side. Is that recommended, or is it better to fix the pattern?

Reply



Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 4:58 PM (EDIT)

That's absolutely ok! You might want to fix the pattern for like a tee or a blouse if the draglines are really noticeable on that side. Shoulder pads are used for this very thing frequently in suiting and eveningwear. It's to you when you want to, but is definitely a great fix!

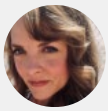
Reply

loracstada@Q.com

OCTOBER 13, 2020 AT 8:24 PM (EDIT)

Very clear illustrations; thank you. When I see photos of the English royal family, it is often striking how well fitted their clothes are: smooth shoulders, no drag lines anywhere. Clothes carefully, closely fitted, but not tight. High armholes. I sometimes wonder if the clothes are not over-fitted, especially for Kate, who must wrestle with kids, but she seems to do just fine.

Reply

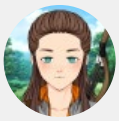


Gabby Brown

OCTOBER 19, 2020 AT 9:30 PM (EDIT)

Also probably plenty of nannies ☐ But, I love a good high armhole- when done correctly, the range of movement is excellent!

Reply



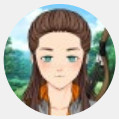
varveart

OCTOBER 24, 2020 AT 6:46 PM (EDIT)

Oh I am really looking forward to this series. I'm not sure if I have exceptionally broad shoulders or if it's something else as well – but if I size a (women's) pattern button-up shirt for my chest measurement, I feel like I'm going to pop some seams on the back when I try to tie my shoes. I recently tried a men's pattern shirt, again sized for my chest measurement, and the fit improved somewhat; now it merely digs into my armpits when I tie my shoes.

Going to check on shoulder slope as well now.

Reply



varveart

OCTOBER 31, 2020 AT 2:01 AM (EDIT)

Looking forward to the rest of this series!

Reply

Potimarron

MARCH 12, 2021 AT 2:43 AM (EDIT)

Thank you! This adjustment doesn't get covered very often (I found it in my 1970s McCall's sewing book, but none of my more recent books cover it). I recently discovered that increasing the gradient of my shoulder made my clothes fit a lot better. My other (slightly lazier) option is to go for a wide enough neckline to allow my trapezius to poke out of the top without distorting the line (I've always felt a bit constricted in high neck tops and I wonder whether this is the reason why).

Reply

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