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EC61-427 Altering Women's Ready-Made Dresses

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ALTERING

WOMEN'S
READY-MADE DRESSES

Extension Service

University of Nebraska College of Agriculture and Home Economics
and U. S. Department of Agriculture Cooperating

E. F. Frolik, Dean

J. L. Adams, Director

ALTERING

women's ready-made dresses. . . . Anna Marie Kreifels
Extension Clothing Specialist

INTRODUCTION

Your personal appearance will be enhanced by a smart-looking, becoming and carefully fitted dress. If fitted too closely, a garment tends to emphasize figure irregularities and may cause a dress to "ride up." A careless or bedraggled appearance results if the dress is fitted too loosely. Either extreme will detract from your personal appearance.

In recent years consumers are finding more variety in styles and sizes of ready-made dresses. Buying ready-made dresses which fit well has, therefore, become less of a problem, but for many women some alterations are still necessary. In an attempt to reduce the number of alterations needed, homemakers have learned:

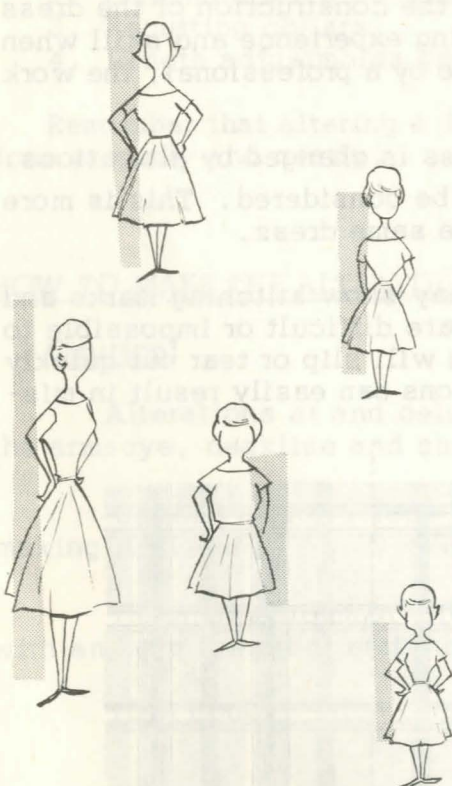
1. To try the dress over proper foundation garments before they buy.
2. To shop for styles with generous seam allowances in case some alteration is necessary.
3. To look for a suitable style proportioned to their figures if they are taller or shorter than average.

If you cannot find a dress that fits throughout, it is usually best to choose one that fits the upper part of the body. The skirt is easier to alter than the bodice.

If a dress must be altered, many factors must be considered before the alteration is attempted. The information in this circular will help you decide --

what is your fitting problem
whether or not to alter the dress
how to make the alteration

Only the alterations most usually required will be discussed in this circular. Individual figure irregularities and poor posture may cause fitting problems requiring alterations too complicated to be explained here.



JUNIOR (sizes 5 to 15) for those 5'2" to 5'6" tall, regardless of age.

MISSES (sizes 8 to 20) for those 5'5" to 5'9" tall with slim to medium full figure and normal waistline.

PETITE (sizes 8 to 18) also called "diminutive" for short, slim women under 5'5".

TALL (sizes 8 to 20) for those 5'9" or taller.

HALF-SIZE (sizes 12 1/2 to 26 1/2) for heavier, short-waisted figures.

WOMEN'S (sizes 18 to 44) OUT-SIZES (sizes 46 to 52) for those 5'5" to 5'9" with large proportions. More ease through shoulders, back and waist than in the large misses' sizes.

A "JUNIOR-PETITE" category is being added to the established classifications. These dresses are for the junior size girl or woman who is under 5'2" tall.

WHAT IS THE PROBLEM

Determining the problem -- where the dress does not fit and why -- is the first step in any alteration. The problems of judging fit in ready-made dresses is discussed at length in Extension Circular 60-421 "Guides to Buying Women's Ready-Made Dresses." Choose a dress which will not need much alteration.

These guide questions will help you determine the fit of the dress as you try it before a mirror:



1. Does the dress allow comfortable sitting, walking, stooping and reaching?
2. Does the dress have enough ease to prevent wrinkles, bulges or binding?
3. Are all pieces of the dress cut on the proper grain of the fabric?
4. Are the seams stitched straight for proper balance of the dress?
5. Are the lengths of waist, skirt and sleeves right for your figure?

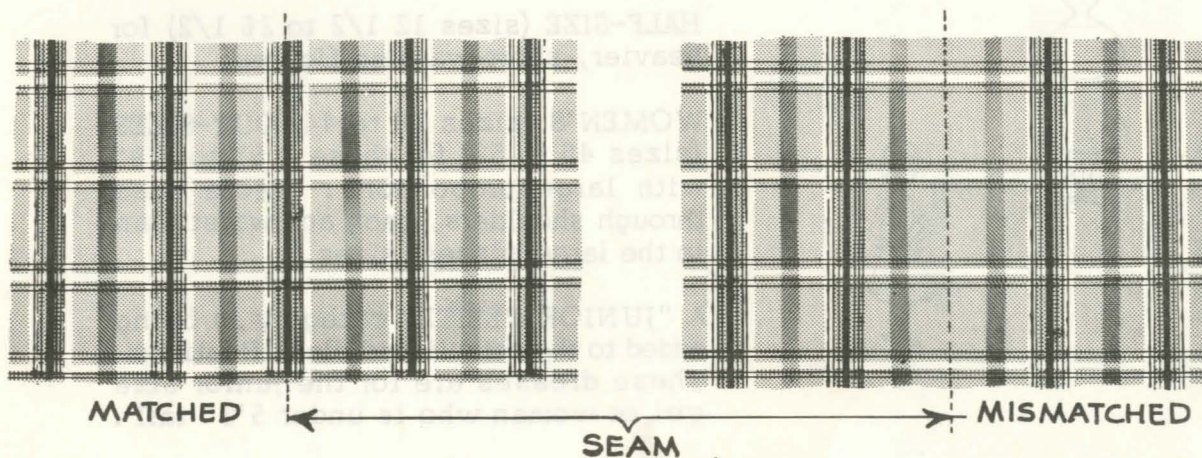
If you can answer each of these questions with a firm "yes" as you try on the dress, there probably will be little need for alterations of any kind.

WHETHER OR NOT TO ALTER

After finding why the dress doesn't fit, the next step is deciding whether or not to alter. Careful consideration of the design, the fabric and the construction of the dress will help you make a wise decision. Also question your sewing experience and skill when deciding if you can do the alterations. If the job is to be done by a professional, the work will increase the cost of the dress.

The Design -- Occasionally the original design of a dress is changed by alterations. This may or may not be desirable, but the possibility must be considered. This is more likely to happen if several alterations are to be made on the same dress.

The Fabric -- The fabric of which the dress is made may show stitching marks and creases when seams are ripped. Sometimes these marks are difficult or impossible to remove. If the fabric frays or ravels easily, narrow seams will slip or tear out quickly under strain. If the dress fabric is a plaid or stripe, alterations can easily result in mismatched designs.



The Construction -- The way a dress is constructed may limit alteration processes. Seam allowances and hems may be too narrow, seams may be slashed in places, or parts of the garment might require recutting. Alterations can seldom remedy the fitting problem if parts of the dress have been cut off-grain.

Minor alterations such as seams, darts, skirt lengths and some sleeve lengths can easily be made by the homemaker and in most cases results are satisfactory. Extensive alterations are time consuming and often too complicated for the average homemaker. If done by a professional, these extensive alterations will be costly and the finished jobs are sometimes not satisfactory.

If the design of the dress itself, the fabric and the workmanship allow alterations to be made, the homemaker with sewing experience will find that she has the skill to make minor changes which can result in better fit.

Here are listed some frequently needed alterations which are comparatively easy to do and are likely to be successful. Occasionally, some of these will require ripping and restitching a placket or closure.

1. Skirt length
2. Skirt side-seam adjustments to increase or decrease ease through the hips
3. Bodice length
4. Waistline
5. Underarm seam adjustments to increase or decrease ease through the bust
6. Shortening the shoulder seams
7. Sleeve length
8. Back neckline too wide

More difficult alterations might include:

1. Recutting the armhole if the sleeve seam falls down on the arm
2. Cutting down a neckline that is too high
3. Recutting collars
4. Length adjustments on cuffed sleeves

Remember that altering a dress will improve fit, appearance and comfort only if it is done properly and neatly.

HOW TO MAKE THE ALTERATIONS

Caution!

Alterations at and below the waistline are generally the easiest. Alterations at the armhole, neckline and shoulder areas require more sewing skill.

Usually, alterations to make a dress smaller are more successful than those making it bigger.

The answer to most alteration problems is learning to select the ready-made dress with an "eye toward alterations."

If in doubt -- don't buy!

General Tips

When making any alterations on a ready-made dress have a distinct plan in mind before starting. Study the situation and the possibilities of doing a successful job. If you feel you lack the necessary skill, let a skilled seamstress or professional do the job for you. Fussy designs, detailed construction and elaborate trim on a dress should warn you against making alterations.

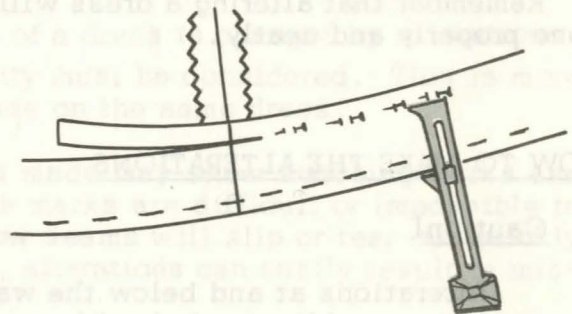
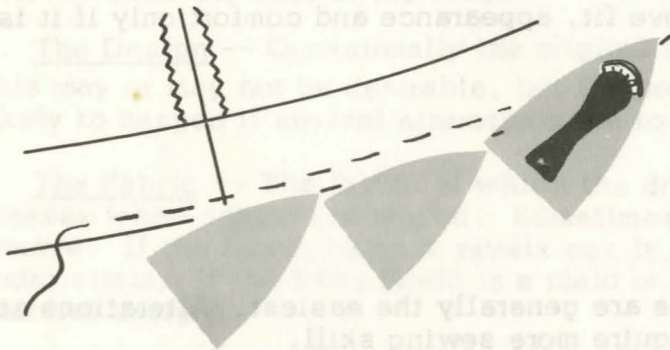
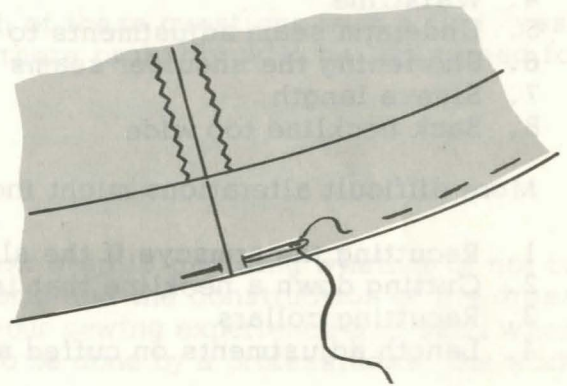
When altering a dress, rip carefully only as much as is absolutely necessary. Try not to stretch or mar the fabric in any way. Stay-stitch curved edges if you feel it is necessary. Remember to maintain the proper grainline of the dress. Try for pleasing proportion, balance, and good design in your altered garment.

After the necessary ripping has been done, steam press the seams to remove old crease lines and stitching marks. Press as you sew new seams and do a final pressing after alterations have been completed.



Skirt Length

To adjust the hem on a straight or slightly flared skirt, rip the original hem and press out the crease. Mark the correct length, turn, baste near the lower edge and press the crease. If necessary, trim the hem to a uniform width, hand stitch the new hem, and press. The seam binding need not be removed unless the hem is uneven or is over three inches wide in bulky fabric.



If the skirt is to be lengthened and sufficient hem is not available, remove the seam binding and face the lower edge of the skirt. Bias skirt facings can be bought at a notions counter, or cut from a piece of yard goods. Select for the facing a fabric of matching color and one which has similar wear and care qualities.

The hem width in very full circular skirts is kept narrow. In ready-mades these hems are sometimes stitched with several rows of machine stitching. If the dress is to be shortened, the old hem may be cut off instead of ripping it. The hem then may be put in by hand or by machine.

In order to prevent changing the design of some dresses it is best to shorten the skirts from the waistline. Examples of such dresses would be those made of border prints

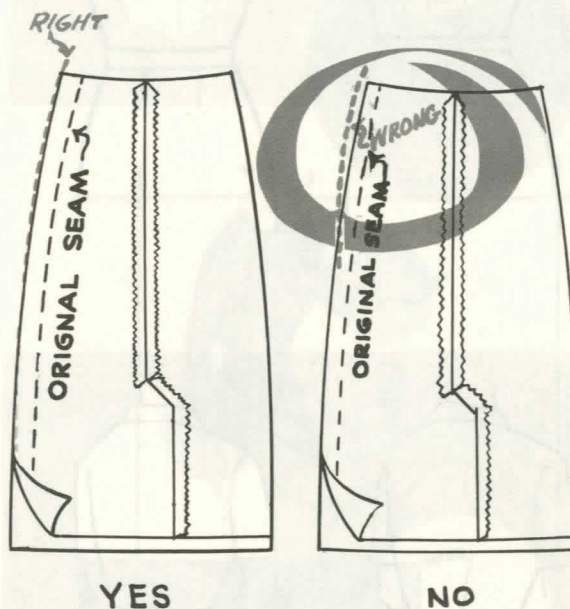
or those with permanently pleated skirts or with kick pleats at the lower edge of the skirt. This type of skirt alteration is more difficult.

Remove the skirt from the bodice at the waistline. The placket or other type of closure at the waistline will have to be ripped and refitted. Lift the skirt the required amount. The side seams and waistline of the skirt might require refitting. Baste the skirt to the bodice. Fit the dress to be sure the hem is the proper length and hangs evenly. Finish the waistline seam and restitch the placket or waistline closure.

Skirt Too Large or Too Small Through The Hips

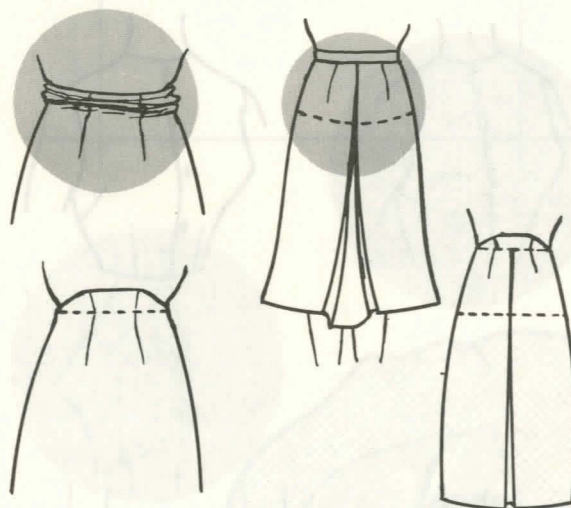
Fullness at the hipline can be taken in or let out at side seams, at gore seams or at center front and back seams if no pleats are involved. Occasionally this type of alteration will require refitting the side placket. To make the alteration, remove the original stitching at the most appropriate seams. Refit, stitch and press the new seams open. If seams have been let out, be sure the remaining seam allowances are wide enough and strong enough to withstand the normal strain of wearing. Remember to keep side seams straight from the hipline to the hem.

Occasionally, ease through the hips can be gained by lifting the skirt at the waistline. This might involve refitting the placket and the darts at the waistline. An adjustment in skirt length might also become necessary.



Crosswise Wrinkles in Skirt Just Below Waist

A slightly sway-back posture will cause crosswise wrinkles in the skirt directly below the waistline in the back. To correct this, rip the back waistline seam and raise the skirt back, tapering the amount from center back to side seams to remove the wrinkles. Fit and restitch the waistline seam. This alteration also can prevent a skirt back from "cupping-in" and a back pleat from hanging open. The one-piece, or princess style, dress should be avoided by the sway back person. Wrinkles will form at the back waistline and there is no seam in which to fit out the excess fullness.



Waistline Too Loose

Minor adjustments in the size of the waistline can be made without ripping the placket. Make the adjustments at darts, tucks or seams other than the placket seam. If an adjustment is more than two inches, the placket will have to be ripped and restitched in order to keep the proper balance of the dress on the figure.

Rip the waistline seam. Refit the waistline of the bodice by making necessary adjustments in the darts, tucks, gathers or seams. Refit the waistline of the skirt. Restitch the waistline seam and press the dress. If the placket is in the center back, alterations may be made at the side seams without ripping the entire waistline.

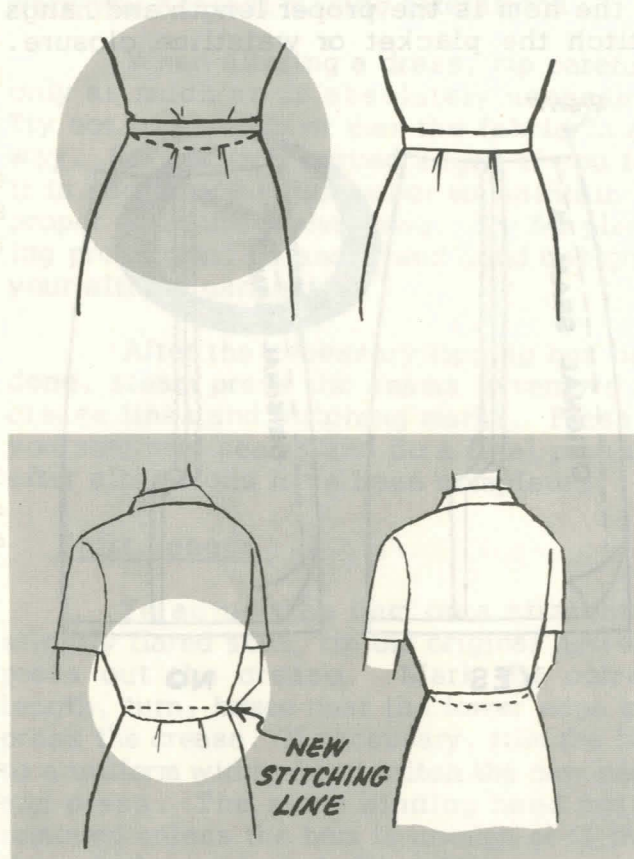
Bodice Too Long or Too Short at the Waist

The belt should cover the waistline seam. If the seam shows below the belt, the bodice of the dress is probably too long at the waist. This happens most often at the back of the dress.

To make this alteration the waistline seam must be ripped from the skirt at the points where the bodice is too long. Fit the bodice and mark a new stitching line at the waistline position for the individual figure being fitted. Raise the skirt and stitch it to the bodice at the new stitching line.

A stay tape at the waistline seam will help to maintain proper fit in this area. If the ready-made dress does not have a stay tape one can easily be stitched to the waistline seam allowance.

If, when trying a ready-made dress for fit, it seems to be too short in the bodice, it would be best to avoid purchasing the dress. This can seldom be remedied successfully.



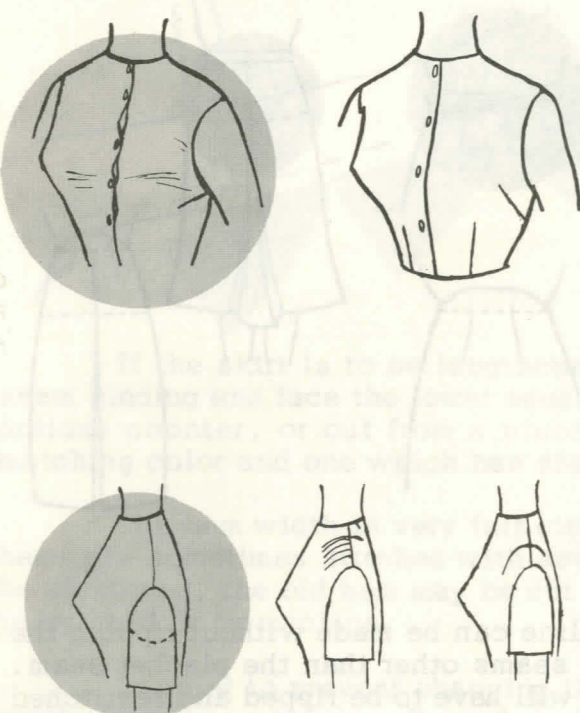
Bodice Too Large or Too Small Through the Bust

These alterations can usually be made by letting out or taking in the underarm seams of the bodice.

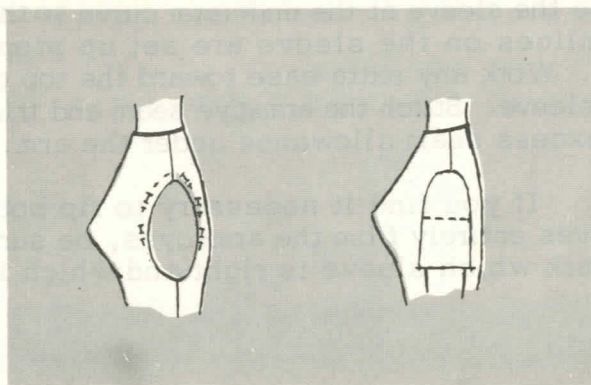
Underarm bustline darts and waistline darts in the front bodice are sometimes not the proper length or are not in the proper position for the bust of the individual figure. These darts should point toward the fullest part of the bust and end about one and one half inches from the fullest part of the bust. These alterations are simple to make and will improve fit and appearance considerably.

Shoulder Seams Too Long

If the front of the dress has tucks, darts or shirring at the shoulder, the seam may be ripped and the excess length can be added to the darts, tucks or gathers. The excess length of the back shoulder seam can be stitched into a back shoulder dart.



A slight excess length in the shoulder seams may be removed at the armhole. Rip the sleeve from the armhole across the sleeve cap. Mark a new armhole seam on the dress bodice. Baste the sleeve into the armhole and fit. Restitch the sleeve into the armhole using the original stitching line on the sleeve and the new stitching line across the shoulder seam. Trim excess from armhole seam allowance.

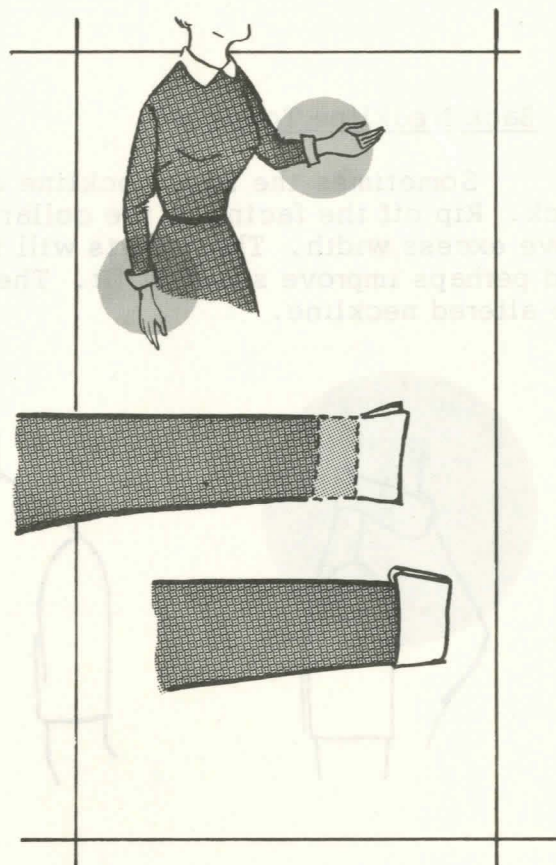


Sleeves Too Loose or Too Tight - Too Long, Too Short

The sleeves often are a distinct design feature of the entire dress. Give this fact some thought before you alter. Shopping for proportioned sizes will help you get better fit in the sleeves.

To alter the fullness of a long or three quarter length sleeve, make the adjustment at the underarm sleeve seam. Elbow ease or darts may also need some altering.

Long and three quarter length sleeves can be lengthened if the sleeves are hemmed and the depth of the hem allows the alteration. Sometimes a cuff can be removed and a piece stitched to the sleeve to lengthen it. The cuff is then restitched and folded to cover the inset. Sleeves with cuff bands, as those on men's shirts, can seldom be lengthened successfully.

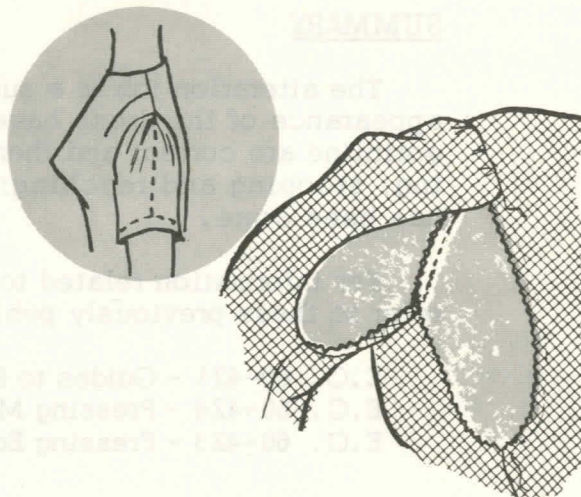


Sleeves can be shortened by ripping the hem, facing or cuff, removing the excess length and restitching the sleeve finish. Note, however, that when shortening a cuffed sleeve the sleeve placket opening also is shortened and this can result in difficulty in placing the cuff flat for pressing. To avoid this, it may be necessary to rip and restitch the sleeve placket.

Wrinkles in the Sleeve Cap

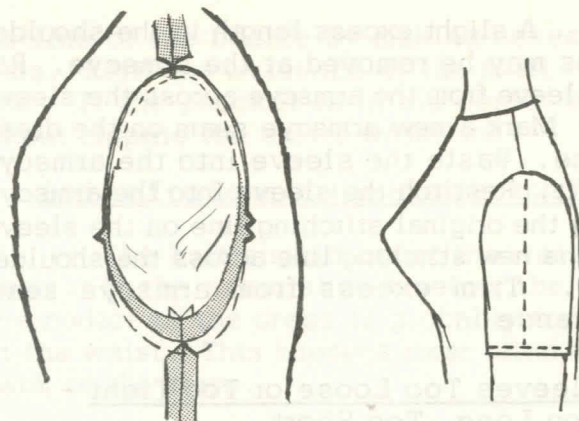
Diagonal wrinkles at the top of the sleeve result from a sleeve cap which is too short. The seam allowance at the sleeve cap is seldom wide enough to be released and add the needed length to the sleeve cap.

With a basting thread mark the lengthwise and crosswise grains of the fabric across the sleeve cap. Rip the armhole seam under the arm and about halfway up the front and the back. Do not rip across the sleeve cap.



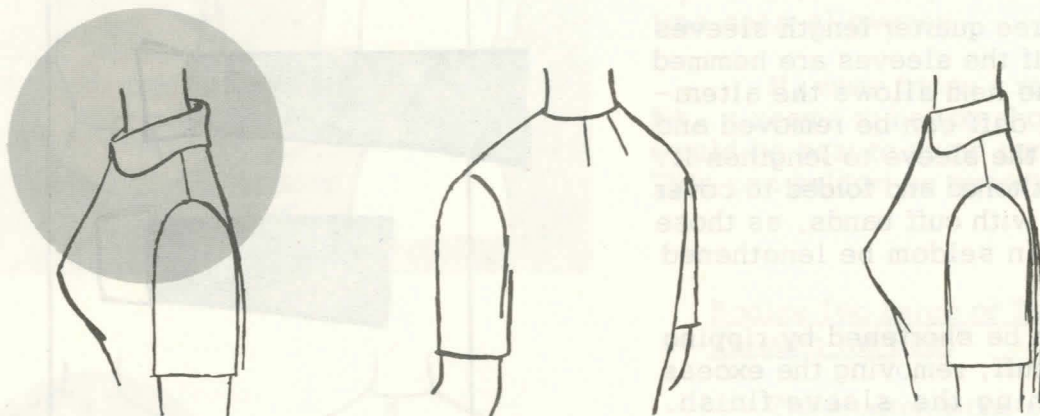
Raise the sleeve at the underarm curve so the grainlines on the sleeve are set up properly. Work any extra ease toward the top of the sleeve. Stitch the armscye seam and trim off excess seam allowance under the arm.

If you find it necessary to rip both sleeves entirely from the armscyees, be sure to mark which sleeve is right and which is left.



Back Neckline Too Wide

Sometimes the back neckline of a dress is too wide and stands away from the neck. Rip off the facing or the collar. Place small darts at the back neckline to remove excess width. These darts will tend to draw the shoulder seams toward the neck and perhaps improve shoulder fit. The collar or neck facing will need to be refitted to the altered neckline.



SUMMARY

The alteration job is a success if the fit, the comfort and the appearance of the dress have been improved; if the balance and grainline are correct and there is enough ease for sitting, walking, stooping and reaching; if accurate and neat construction has been done.

For information related to the subject matter in this circular, refer to these previously published extension circulars:

- E.C. 60-421 - Guides to Buying Women's Ready-Made Dresses
- E.C. 60-424 - Pressing Methods
- E.C. 60-423 - Pressing Equipment