

Making a toile

In 2016 some of my MA cohorts and I created toiles from archival V&A Balenciaga pieces as part of a forthcoming exhibition. It was so exciting to see my cape ensemble become part of the collection with its very own museum number, and travel the world on tour with the exhibition!



But what exactly is a toile?

The word toile (pronounced “tua:l”) means either a transparent linen or cotton fabric or a test garment made up in cheap cloth so that alterations and experiments can be made. In recent years the word muslin has become interchangeable with toile as sometimes a toile is made from muslin fabric, and the word is easier to say!

The recent Dior exhibition at the V&A had a room entirely devoted to toiles. They are an essential step in the process of assessing and fine tuning a pattern, and assessing fit at the customer stage.



Process

When making a **toile** you are testing a new pattern, either as a pattern maker or a home sewer. Pattern makers are testing the pattern itself for shape or errors. Home sewers are testing the fit for themselves and sometimes practising the construction.

STEP 1

Read the suggested fabric choices for the pattern you're using. If, for example, the pattern is designed for knit fabrics then using calico will be a complete waste of time. A cheap version of the final fabric choice is ideal such as an inexpensive jersey with the same stretch percentage as your final fabric for a t-shirt pattern. If the pattern calls for a drapery cloth like viscose then calico will give you a false fit as it won't fall in the same way, so use a cheap viscose to make your toile. I often use lightweight calico for woven projects, muslin for anything that needs to be more drapery, and stash fabrics I don't love for other projects.

Image- Toile for an MA project of a drapery dress, made from cupro lining in my stash that had appropriate hand and drape.



STEP 2

Cut out all the pieces needed to sew the main body of the garment, except for the finishing details like facings. Your toile is a fitting tool so you don't need to finish all the seam edges as you would in the final garment. I do add interfacing to necklines however, and this is particularly important for outerwear when you cannot assess the fit if the structure isn't there. I made this cardinal error on a coat pattern for my MA. You can see it looks very limp and not coat-like. It was very tricky to assess the collar and lapel shape without the stiffening provided by interfacing. It is also important to make sure that you staystitch all the edges that require it. If you don't you may stretch edges when fitting and then take in the seams too much to compensate, only for the garment to be too small when it's later made up. To save time and materials you can make up an interfaced 'fitting waistband' that can be tacked in place if required and reused multiple times.



STEP 3

Sew the garment according to the instructions but use a slightly longer stitch that's easier to unpick. Press and tack up hems – they don't need to be fully finished. Use a contrast thread colour on the machine to stitch along the seamlines of areas like the armholes or neck. This allows you to visualise where the finished edge will be without having to attach the facings. Clip into curved edges so they sit comfortably on the body. You can also use dressmakers carbon to mark lines.



STEP 4

You may wish to insert an open-ended zip before trying on since it is difficult to pin a garment closed accurately when you are wearing it yourself. Alternatively, if the opening is at the centre back you can sew that seam closed and leave a side seam open instead. It's much easier to pin yourself into a side seam than struggle with the centre back. Thanks to my student Patricia for this handy tip! If you have a friend to help you who doesn't sew, mark the sewing lines on the opening to be pinned so that they can pin you into the garment accurately.

STEP 5

Try on your **toile** to assess the fit. I usually try on right side out to get an overall view of how the garment looks. If you need to do multiple alterations you can turn the **toile** wrong side out so you can easily mark the new stitching lines. If fitting yourself, pin the seams to be taken in and then drop your arms and relax so you can see if the adjustments are correct. Keeping your arms raised when looking at fit means the garment rides up and isn't in its correct position. If you can, use a self timer, prop up your phone, and take a front, side, and back photo. These are really useful to see where you may need adjustments. Another great thing about a toile is that you can draw on it.



STEP 6

Mark up all your fitting adjustments onto the toile ready for a second fitting. I always like to transfer my marks symmetrically unless the body I'm fitting is particularly asymmetrical. It is difficult to pin exactly the same shape on both the left and right side of the body because you are dealing with a 3D shape. Even with 30 years of fit experience I don't assume I've pinned exactly the same amount either side. So, for example, if I've pinned the bust area to make it smaller, I measure the amount from both the right and left side and then divide that by two to find an average. I then mark this onto one half of the garment and use dressmakers carbon paper and a tracing wheel to mirror this adjustment directly over to the opposite side. I prefer to work on adjusting the seam or stitch line, and then add seam allowance back in.

STEP 7

Re-fit your adjusted toile if possible, or a second toile if major alterations were required. You may think this is unnecessary as you've already decided what needs to be altered, but alterations to a garment often create knock-on issues so always double check any adjustments with a second fitting.

STEP 8

Once happy, transfer all your adjustments back to your pattern. The beauty of toiling as a pattern maker is that I can dismantle a toile and use the pieces to cut my final pattern. I will usually cut along all stitch lines to strip pattern pieces back to the seamlines. I trace, then smooth off any inconsistencies and check that all seamlines match where they need to. Finally, I add the seam allowances back on to complete the adjusted pattern. If the adjustments are minor you can transfer all your new stitching lines to the original pattern by carefully measuring the changes and marking them onto the pattern. I also sometimes pin paper pattern pieces to the deconstructed toile and trace off with carbon paper and a wheel. This process is yours to develop and find what method works best for you.

What are the advantages of making a toile?

Sometimes even after comparing body measurements and checking the finished measurements the garment is just not the right size for you. You may have armhole gaping, the bustline may not fit over your bust, or you may just not like the finished piece. Making a toile means that you won't have wasted precious fabric finding all this out. Width can be added, seamlines can be moved, and projects can be put aside, all after seeing your toile or test version. As a costumier I always make a toile. As a home seamstress I don't always toile, but I do tissue-fit and fit as I sew, making adjustments as I go along. In addition, my 30 years of experience as a pattern maker means I can take some shortcuts. Making a toile also means that you can make major adjustments to a pattern which can't be done once the actual fabric has been cut (see below).



Here are some garments I would suggest you always need to toile:

Trousers

Many of the fitting adjustments require changing the angles of pieces and cannot be made effectively once fabric is cut.

A wedding or special occasion outfit

The emotional element to these kind of clothes can make life stressful. Toiling allows you a practice run at construction, hopefully leading to less unpicking of special fabrics that do not like being unpicked.

A project for someone else

While it is easy to keep trying on as you fit when sewing for yourself it's unlikely you'll have that luxury when sewing for others. A toile allows all the mistakes to happen in the test fabric. It will reduce anxiety about cutting into someone else's precious fabric when you know everything has been tested.

A coat or jacket

Since the key areas of fit really show up in tailored pieces and the cost of the fabrics tends to be higher, it's always worth testing the fit in a toile. I do often toile coats in a calico just to see the overall fit, despite calico not being the same as wool.

In the home sewing community there's been a shift towards what's known as a wearable muslin. Essentially this is a toile that you complete in a cheaper fabric and may be able to wear, rather than investing time in something that you will never wear. This is a great way to test out construction processes and fine tune fit on less complicated garments like simple dresses, loose fitting trousers, and sleeveless tops. Using this method will result in some garments being discarded when size or fit can't be rectified without a re-cut.