

Draft Your Own Chemise

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Your chemise is the ideal place to learn a few helpful sewing techniques, as no one will ever see any mistakes you might make. It is, with a corset, the foundation of all mid-Nineteenth century female impressions. You'll be most comfortable if you stitch one to get the hang of things, then make at least three more "railroad style", all at once. This really does save time, as you do all like-tasks at the same time: all the cutting, all the long seams, etc.

Most of us can use 36" wide cotton for chemises. Finished, this allows over 70" in the bust and hips. You may of course cut your chemise more narrowly, using your hip or bust measurement (whichever is largest) plus a generous amount of ease (about 15" minimum). Too much extra fabric adds bulk beneath the corset; too little will be uncomfortable to move in. (A period technique for removing extra fabric in the rear will be given at the end of the article.)

This chemise is made without underarm gussets; these are replaced by a bias-seam which allows generous ease under the arm. Gussets are extremely common for chemises of our era, but are not an absolute. The customized neckline band allows the chemise to pull over the head without an opening; this is not the only chemise style, however! See *The Dressmaker's Guide, Second Edition*, for additional chemise options, including decorative trims.

Record these measures to use in drafting:

“ **Chemise Length:** from the top of the shoulder to the desired hem (between mid-thigh and just below the knee – it's up to you!)

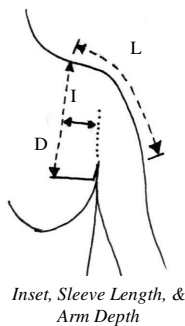
“ **Neckline:** lay a string around the shoulders, at the position you want the chemise to sit, out on the shoulder, though not necessarily off the shoulder.

“ **Bicep:** measure around the upper arm; add 1½" for wearing ease.

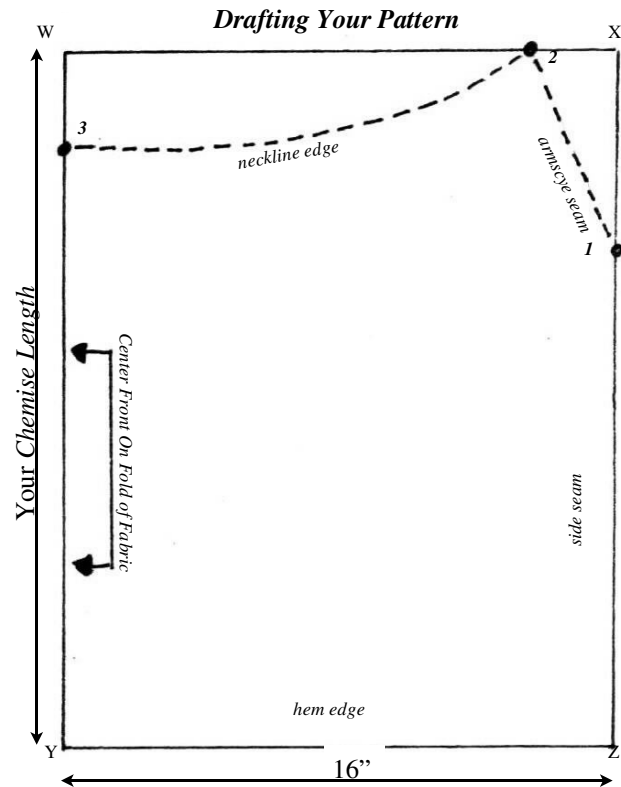
“ **Sleeve length (L):** from the neckline point to the upper arm, taken with arm at the side

“ **Arm depth (D):** from the top of the shoulder, down the front of the body to the level of the armpit, usually just above the full bust point.

“ **Inset (I):** this is a measurement from the crease of your armpit to the midline of the bust



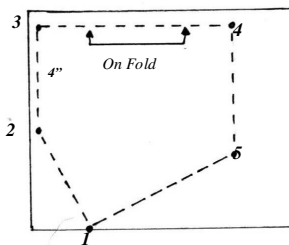
Inset, Sleeve Length, & Arm Depth



X to 1 equals the **arm depth (D)** amount.

X to 2 equals the **inset (I)** amount. Connect 1 & 2 for the **armscye seam**.

W to 3 equals 4". Connect 2 & 3 with a gently curved line for the **neckline edge** of the chemise.



Sleeve

(Note: your sleeve shape will be similar, but not identical, to the diagram.)

Lay a piece of paper over your chemise body pattern; copy points 1 and 2, and draw the **armscye seam** line.

2 to 3 equals 4". Connect with a straight line for the **neckline edge**.

3 to 4 equals the **sleeve length (L)**. Connect for the outer arm of the sleeve, to be cut on a fold of fabric.

4 to 5 equals **one-half** the **bicep amount**. Line 4-5 is the **sleeve opening**.

Connect 1 and 5 with a straight line for the **underarm seam**.

Add seam allowances: ½" for **neckline edges & sleeve opening**; 1" for **armscye edges, underarm, side seam, & hem edge**.



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Layout & Cut

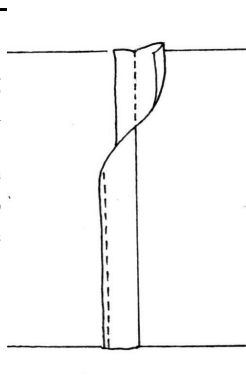
Cut two chemise bodies (front and back) on a fold, two sleeves on a fold, and enough 2" wide bands to equal your neckline measurement plus 1".

Construction

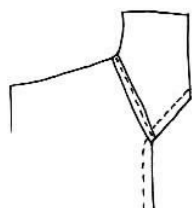
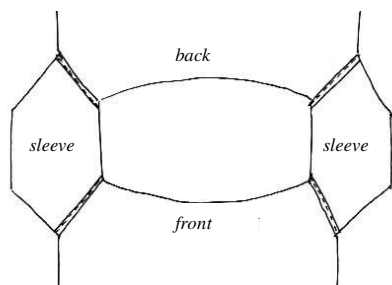
Basic construction calls for a chemise with run-and-fell seams that is gathered or (less commonly) pleated to a set-diameter neckline binding. This garment pulls on over the head, and does not open or adjust.

Run & Fell Seams

Stitch seam wrong sides together. Trim one seam allowance to a scant $\frac{1}{4}$ ". Press the larger allowance to cover, and tuck the raw edge under. Topstitch along the fold to secure.



Stitch sleeves to chemise body front and back, using a flat felled seam or plain running seam. (Trim excess seam allowance if using a running seam.) Your garment will look like the diagram.



Stitch the side and underarm seams with a flat-felled seam, starting at the sleeve opening. Turn a narrow hem at the sleeve, and either stitch by machine or hand to secure.

Run two rows of gathering stitches along the neckline edge, starting and stopping at each seam line. Running gathering stitches over seams may cause the threads to break as it adds a great deal of bulk. For the best results, work the gathering stitches by hand.

Join 2" strips to form the neckline band, seaming the short ends with right sides together. Pin the neckline band right sides together with the chemise. Draw up the neckline gathering to fit the band and stitch with a $\frac{1}{2}$ " seam allowance. Press seam and trim to reduce bulk. Press seam allowances toward the band.

Fold under $\frac{1}{4}$ " on the free edge of the band and press. Fold the band to cover all seam allowances. Secure by hand or machine. Your finished band will be about 1" wide.

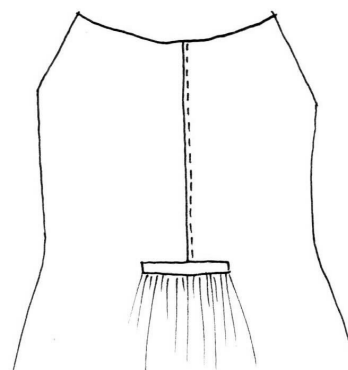
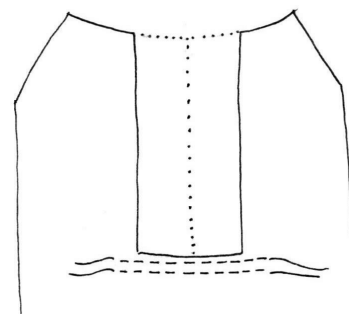
At the lower hem edge of the chemise, press $\frac{1}{2}$ " under, then $\frac{1}{2}$ " under again, enclosing the raw edge. Machine or hand stitch the hem to secure.

Add laundry markings or decorative embroidery as desired. Laundry markings are especially helpful if more than one woman's things will be washed at once. Please refer to the *Dressmaker's Guide, Second Edition*, for ideas on neckline & sleeve embellishments.

Reducing Bulk

The most often-heard complaint about chemises is that they feel bulky in the back under a corset. The difficulty comes in that a chemise that is comfortably narrow in the shoulders will not be wide enough in the seat.

This is solved by advice offered in Godey's *Lady's Book* (June 1859). During construction, the chemise is slit down the center back to just below the waist. Then the chemise is slashed horizontally, out about five inches to either side seam.



Finished Bulk Alteration

Stitch a seam to join the backs, leaving only enough fullness to fit smoothly into the band across the back. (A flat felled seam works well here, too.)

Run gathering stitches into the excess fabric of the chemise, and pull up the gathers to fit the narrowed back waist. Lap the gathered material over the narrowed material and baste in place. Secure with a covering band topstitched into place. To make a covering band, cut a rectangle 1" x 3"; fold in all edges (mitering the corners cuts down on bulk), and topstitch or slipstitch in place, covering the base of the placket. (See diagram above.)

Proceed with chemise construction.

This technique gives a smooth fitting back with plenty of room in the hip area for ease of movement and comfort.

Remember: you will want 1 chemise for each day of your longest planned living history activity, plus 1 for spare. If you dress every day of the work week, plan 7 chemises for a functional wardrobe!

