

Gauging Skirts

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Gauged skirts in all textiles are common in the 1840s; in the 1850s, gauging is predominantly seen in cotton everyday dresses, some wools, some silks, and some fine cottons; in the 1860s, gauging is primarily limited to everyday “wash” cottons and some fine cotton sheers.

Gauging has the appearance of tight gathering; it is a type of controlled pleating. It has the advantage of being very simple to work, needing little measurement, and may also be adjustable during future re-making.

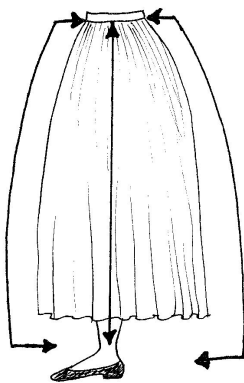
My favorite advantage, however, is the lack of bulk in the waistband. The gauged skirt is whipped to the bottom of a waistband, which leaves no additional fabric in the band to widen the waist. Rather, the skirt “hinges” off the band, flaring out over the hips. (*Pleated skirts are attached to the waistband using the same “whipping” method as for gauging.*)

To gauge your skirt, you will need:

- Thread to match the ground color of your dress fabric. Quilting and regular sewing cotton work well. The gauging threads will not be removed from the skirt, so a good match is important, though the threads will not be seen in good, dense gauging.
- Beeswax. Run along your threads to strengthen and prevent tangling.
- Two needles of the same size (try a #9 sharp or #10 crewel)
- A thimble
- Your prepared skirt. (see below)

Prepare Your Skirts

Skirts of the mid-century are adjusted for length at the waist, rather than at the hem as we do today. This makes a lot of sense when working with linear designs in the fabric; the distortions at the waist are less noticeable than they would be at the hem. It also makes construction a little simpler!



To measure the correct finished length for your skirt, you will need to enlist a willing assistant. Wearing your corset and your choice of cage, hoop, or corded petticoats, measure from the waist to within 1” to 3” of the floor at the center front. Repeat at the side seams and center back.

You should note that the back measurement is between 1 and

4 inches longer than the front. This is correct, and needed to balance the drape of a skirt over a cage or petticoats, and to prevent your skirts from working upward during movement.

These small differences in length will allow the hem to hang even, and takes into account full bottoms and hips, which might otherwise hike the skirt hem upwards in unwanted ways. Note your measurements on paper.

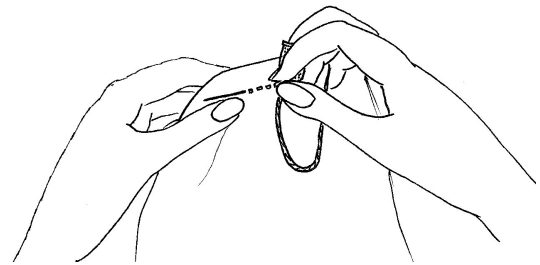
Select the longest of the measures. Add ½” for a seam allowance at the floor, where you will join the skirt to a hem facing. Add a 2”-3” turn amount at the top. Cut skirt panels equal to this total measurement, and seam the skirt together. Attach your hem facing and finish the inside. Locate the center front, side marks, and center back; mark. (For detailed construction notes, see *The Dressmaker’s Guide*.)

Measure from the hem and mark at the finished lengths you noted in step one. With chalk or a pencil, lightly mark an angled line to join the center, side, and back marks. Fold the excess skirt fabric to the inside along this angle. Press the fold, and pin-baste to secure.

Gauging

Measure out two double strands of thread, equal to your finished waist measurement plus 10”; this prevents thread waste, as your gauged skirt will need only minimal “drawing up” to fit your waist measurement. Thread each needle, knot, and wax.

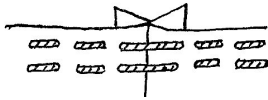
Beginning at one opening edge, bring the thread to the right side (leaving the sturdy knot on the inside) and make an even running stitch about ¼” from the fold. These stitches should be small, about 1/8” each. You can vary the amount of fabric controlled by changing the length and spacing of gauging stitches; to accommodate a very small waist, take larger stitches; for larger waists, use smaller stitches.



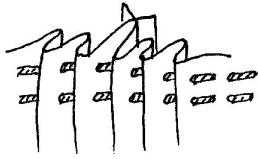
(When constructing sheer dresses, you may find the pleats condense too far; correct this with a period solution: lay a strip of white cotton between the outer dress and the turned excess, and gauge through all three layers. The regular-weight cotton “beefs up” the sheer for the gauging, without needing to add a tremendous yardage of sheer fabric.)



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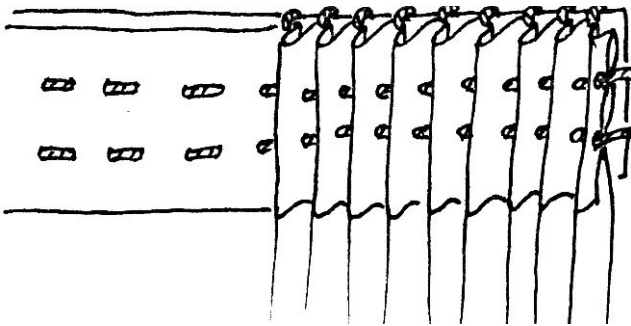


When you come to a seam, take a longer stitch on the right side of the skirt to jump it.



When drawn up, the seam allowances will sit at the back of a gauging pleat, unrestricted and concealed. (The seam allowances are shown here for clarity; in reality, you will always be gauging along a folded edge.)

When you reach the end of the thread, repeat the process with the second needle about 1/4" from the first line, making sure to bring the needle in and out of the fabric at the same intervals as the first line of stitching. When you reach the end of the thread, gently pull up both needles to draw in the gauging. The pleats will gather up accordion-fashion.



Continue stitching and drawing until you reach the end of your skirts. Knot the ends securely.

Whip It!

To attach the skirts to your bodice, lay right sides together; align the placket edges with your bodice edges; match the center backs, and align the side/quarter marks of the skirt with the slightly-set-back side seams of the bodice. Adjust the gauging to fit each section.

Positioning the exact quarter marks of the skirt to the slightly off-set seamlines in the bodice ensures you'll have just a bit more fullness at the back of your skirts, which makes them lay very well, and is generally attractive on any figure.

Anchor a doubled, waxed thread on the inside of the dress. Whip stitch the valley of each and every pleat center to the waist edge.

If you have a piped waist edge, "roll" the piping down between the gauging and bodice just a tad, so you're taking whip stitches through the seam allowances of the piping/bodice. This lets the piping itself "hide" your stitches entirely when the dress is worn.

Backstitch or double-whip every few inches to secure. Your thread tension should be firm, but not so tight as to cause puck-

ering. (For attaching knife and box-pleated skirts, pin or baste in the pleats, then whip the edges as for gauging, keeping the stitches small and even.)

One of the most difficult things you may ever do is learn to trust the security of period techniques! While it seems counter-intuitive that two tiny threads in a whip stitch could securely hold your skirt to your bodice, remember that it's not one set of threads: it's really hundreds and hundreds of whip stitches, each supporting a tiny segment of the weight, so the entire burden is distributed evenly around the garment, and no one set takes a majority of the weight.

In the event you or someone else does tread upon your skirts, creating an unbearable tug, chances are good some of your whip stitches attaching the gauging will give way, without shredding and destroying the entire waist edge of the dress. It's much easier to re-whip a section than to start over with a new dress!

Finally, allow me to share my best gauging tip: if you're working at home, pop in a BBC costume drama! It's pleasant to listen to a good movie while you sew, and the occasional eye-candy peeks reminds you of why you're working! I highly recommend the Colin Firth *Pride & Prejudice* if you have a big stack of handwork to finish.



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