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Beyond the Store-Bought T

by Anne Marie Soto

T-shirts are available everywhere, from mass merchandisers to specialty retailers, and in a whole range of price points. Given their overwhelming presence in the marketplace, why would anyone want to spend time sewing one? And why have ASG members around the country embraced chapter programs where T-shirts take center stage?

The Fit Factor

Fit is the number one attraction for making your own T-shirts. Common fitting problems include drooping shoulders, restrictive sleeve caps, sleeveless versions with gaping armholes, distortion across the bust, and shirts that ride up when you sit down.

So we asked some of our favorite T-shirt gurus to give us some insight as to what makes the fit of their T-shirt patterns special.

“As our bodies mature, it is increasingly difficult to purchase a ready-to-wear T-shirt that is flattering,” says Pamela Leggett of Pamela’s Patterns. “If you get one with enough room in the hip or bust area, they are usually too big in the neck and shoulders. Making one isn’t much easier from a commercial pattern either. They usually require at least five pattern changes in order to have them fit properly.” Pam’s 14 years of experience as a Palmer/Pletsch Fit Instructor inspired her to create patterns that have the most common fit issues built in. Her patterns are geared for a mature-ish figure and include forward shoulder, high round back, optional front with full bust, adjustment lines for shortening the armhole, and more room at the hip and tummy area.

“Almost everyone has at least one fitting challenge. It could be something simple like adjusting the length of the sleeves and hem or something more involved, like creating enough room for a full bust,” observes Jennifer Stern-Haseman of J. Stern Designs. She incorporates some of the fitting adjustments women need into her patterns. “For example, my women’s-sized pattern has been designed with a full bust adjustment, relaxed fit, and a short sleeve that is a more generous length.” Jennifer also incorporates an above-the-bust



J. STERN DESIGNS
THE TEE #0041



FASHION PATTERNS BY CONI
CS1207 PERFECT KNIT SLOPER
& STYLED T-SHIRT



SAF-T-POCKETS PATTERNS
PERFECT PAIR 2008



PAMELA'S PATTERNS
#104 THE PERFECT T-SHIRT
#105 THE PERFECT TANK TOP



SILHOUETTE PATTERNS
#113 SUNNY'S TOP

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seam detail to make it easy to customize the fit of the neckline and shoulders independently of the lower portion of the tee.

Peggy Sagers, whose Silhouette Patterns are known for their B-, C-, and D-cup sizing, uses the French dart as her secret T-shirt fitting weapon. She incorporates it into her T-shirt patterns because it combines the bust and waist dart, providing some shaping and giving a great look—which Peggy claims makes everyone look 10 pounds lighter! When it comes to refining the fit, “there’s no need to lower or raise the dart if it is in the wrong place,” says Peggy. “With a French dart you simply continue to stitch up a little higher if needed or stop stitching a little lower if the dart is too high.”

Connie Crawford of Fashion Patterns by Coni offers patterns with a special cup fit that allows room for the larger cup size figure. Her collection includes a master T-shirt pattern that comes in two size ranges—Misses’ 8 to 20 and Women’s 1X to 6X. It can be sewn as a simple knit T-shirt or used in developing patterns for other design variations. Connie draws on her years of experience in the garment industry to create patterns that are balanced front-to-back. In Connie’s words, this means that “when patterns are made, the front and back have to have a proportional difference (at least ½" larger in the front than the back) and the side seam has to have the same shape. If these two items are not correct, when the pattern is sewn and put on the body, the finished garment will pull or twist. This is very common in quite a few patterns. Also, if the armhole is not longer in the back by ½" (balanced armhole) the finished garment will pit out in the front and the shoulders will pull to the back.”

Judy Kessinger’s Fit Nice System revolves around two master patterns.

The Master Top pattern includes the basic T-shirt pattern pieces and instructional video, as well as directions and templates for three neckline variations. Her pattern fits bust sizes 32" to 42". Her system addresses the fact that some of us need one size in the front and another in the back. She also pays particular attention to those with a rounded back and those who are short from shoulder to bust point.

Emma Seabrooke’s SewkeysE pattern line, designed especially for knits, includes several T-shirt styles. Her patterns are created by the draping method rather than the flat pattern drafting method. Emma draped on a variety of figures to get her general sizes. The resulting patterns have smaller shoulders, a bigger bustline, and a lower bustline. “We’re not perky teenagers,” says Emma. “As we age, we go south. So do my patterns!”

Regardless of whose patterns you choose, in the words of Pamela Leggett, “The Internet has allowed many good sewing instructors and educators to develop and market much better-fitting patterns than the commercial offerings. Be sure to take advantage of these wonderful instructors! They know your issues because they have them, too!”

Fabric Flexibility

The second advantage to sewing a T-shirt is the flexibility to choose the fabric you want, in the color you want. Natural fiber knits (or those with a high percentage of natural fibers) tend to be cooler to wear than synthetic fibers. For T-shirts, single knits or lightweight interlocks tend to be less forgiving to your body curves than knits with a bit more substance.

Stretch. It’s important to match the stretch of your knit to the pattern’s requirements. Generally, a pattern for knits will include a gauge—or tell you how much stretch your fabric should have. If it doesn’t, here’s a method to use, courtesy of Connie Crawford:

1. Measure your T-shirt pattern’s circumference at bust level.

2. Using pins, mark this measurement along a cross-grain fold of your knit.
3. Measure your body circumference at full bust. Draw a line on a piece of paper that is equal to that measurement.
4. Place the fabric along the drawn line, with one hand at each pin-mark. Gently stretch the fabric until there is some resistance.

If the fabric stretches the length of your body measurement, then you should be fine. If the amount of stretch doesn't match your body measurement, go up a pattern size. If the fabric stretches more than 3" past your body measurement, go down a pattern size.

Recovery. This is as crucial as the amount of stretch. Knits without good recovery aren't going to stand up to stretching, washing, and wearing. To test your knit's recovery, take a double layer of the knit, stretch it until it resists, and then release it to see if it goes back to its original shape. If the recovery is poor, save the fabric for a garment with a loose, flowing style. A little spandex (even as little as 3%) will add to the fabric's ability to stretch and recover.

If you are purchasing your knit online, you might want to have a chat with your fabric resource before buying. Let them know what you plan to do with it and they can guide you to suitable options. Some fabric resources list the weight of the knit. For example, Nancy's Notions offers some T-shirt-friendly knits: a 100% cotton interlock and a 51% cotton/49% polyester interlock (both with matching rib knit which you can use as yardage or to create custom ribbing), all in a 10.5 oz weight. Other online vendors may be able to tell you the weight if you ask. Once you know the weight of a fabric in your stash, mark and save a swatch. That way, you will have a weight reference for future purchases.

If your knit is washable, Pamela Leggett recommends prewashing and drying the fabric twice, as many fab-

rics will shrink more than once. To keep your T-shirt looking beautiful after it is made, she advocates washing the finished item on the gentle cycle and hanging it to dry. Then toss it in the dryer with a fabric softener sheet for no more than five minutes. Your T-shirts will look good for years if you give them this special care.

Finishing Details

Shoulders. Because the shoulder seams support the weight of the T-shirt, you want to be sure they won't stretch out of shape. Both sew-in and fusible stay tape will work. For lightweight knits, Saf-T-Pocket's Marsha McClintock recommends the bias version of fusible tape. She fuses it to the front shoulder seam so that the tape overlaps the seamline a scant $\frac{1}{8}$ " and then stitches or serges the seam, catching the tape in the stitching. Jennifer Stern-Haseman prefers to apply the tape to the back as she serges the shoulder seam together. She cuts the tape 2" longer than the shoulder seam measurement, so that it extends 1" beyond each end of the seam. This gives you a 1" "head start" of tape that will lead in under the presser foot so the feed dog teeth will grab it, making serging that short shoulder seam go more smoothly. Press the seam allowance toward the back, and topstitch it in place. If you have sensitive skin, this will encase the tape in fabric so it doesn't itch. Whichever method you choose, be sure to mark the length of the tape to match the length of the pattern's shoulder seam so you don't distort the seam as you apply the tape.

Necklines. For necklines that "hug" into your body, cut the neckline band or ribbing $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to $2\frac{1}{2}$ " smaller than the neckline opening. As you attach the band or ribbing, stretch it to fit the neckline opening.

On most commercial T-shirts, the neckline is finished with a band of self fabric. Home sewers may know

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this technique as French binding. The width of the band should be three times the finished width plus $\frac{1}{2}$ ". So for a $\frac{3}{8}$ "-wide finished band, cut a crossgrain strip of knit that is $1\frac{1}{4}$ " wide; for a $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide finished band, cut it 2" wide. Experiment by making a sample band on a scrap of your knit fabric before you decide on the final width. Although the narrower band is used on most r-t-w T-shirts, it's success will depend on the weight of your fabric. The length of the band should be at least $1\frac{1}{2}$ " to $2\frac{1}{2}$ " smaller than the neckline opening. Divide both the band and the neckline into eighths and mark. Pin the band to the neckline, right sides together and raw edges matching. Stitch slowly, gently stretching the band to fit between the markings. Press lightly to avoid distorting the band. Wrap the band to the inside of the neckline and press again. Serge-finish, zigzag finish, or pink the raw edge of the band. Pin or glue-baste so that the underside of the band is secure, then working on the right side of the T-shirt, topstitch close to the inner edge of the band through all the layers.

NOTE: If you plan to serge-finish the raw edge of the band, it may be easier to cut the band an extra $\frac{1}{2}$ " wide and then serge one long edge, trimming off the extra $\frac{1}{2}$ ", before you apply it to your neckline. And if you are working with a lightweight knit, you may want to double the width of the band and then fold it in half lengthwise. Apply it to the garment so the folded edge is on the inside of the T-shirt.

Some T-shirt gurus prefer to complete the shirt before applying the band. In this case, the ends of the band are stitched together diagonally (to reduce bulk) and then the band is applied with the joining seams offset at the center back. However, on many ready-to-wear T-shirts, the neck band is applied with one shoulder seam

open. Then, after the band is applied, stitch the remaining shoulder seam closed and press it toward the back of the garment. To secure the bit of seam allowance at the neck edge, catch it to the inside of the neckline with a few tiny hand stitches. On a r-t-w T-shirt, the "catch stitching" is actually a short row of topstitching that runs parallel to the shoulder seam through the band and shoulder seam allowances. However, without a customized commercial sewing machine, it's way too easy to make a mess as you try to machine stitch through so many layers in this restricted area.

A second finishing option is to use fold over elastic. It is available in a wide variety of colors—and even some prints. It comes $\frac{5}{8}$ " wide with a crease down the center, so you get a narrow band without a lot of bulk. Simply fold the elastic lengthwise in half, sandwich the raw edge of the neckline between the layers of elastic, and edgestitch in place. So your knit doesn't slip and slide, either hand-baste the elastic in place or glue-baste it securely before stitching.

The third option is a traditional neckline facing. If you use a facing, trim $\frac{1}{4}$ "– $\frac{3}{8}$ " off the facing's shoulder seams. As you attach the facing, stretch it to fit the neckline opening. Understitch with a three-step zigzag stitch. Your facings will turn to the inside effortlessly! Block or steam the neckline when you are done.

Hemline Options

A rippled hem can ruin an otherwise beautifully crafted T-shirt. Fortunately, there are several ways to avoid the ripple effect. Do a test-run on some fabric scraps to determine your preferred technique.

Cover stitch. If your serger has this capability, here's where it shines.

Twin needle stitching. The zigzag stitch that occurs on the underside adds flexibility to your hem, which means no popped stitches. Choose a twin needle designed for stretch fabrics. If your hem sample has skipped

stitches, try using a different size needle and/or lengthening your stitch.

Topstitching. Choose either a single row or two parallel rows. Stabilize before stitching. Options include a permanent stabilizer, such as fusible knit stay tape or a strip of lightweight fusible knit interfacing, or a temporary stabilizer, including tear-away, heat-sensitive, and water-soluble versions. If the stitches break when you gently stretch your sample hem, try stitching with woolly nylon thread in the bobbin.

NOTE: Don't overlook the value of a walking foot. This handy accessory will help eliminate the ripples for hems done on your conventional sewing machine. No walking foot? Experiment by slightly reducing the presser foot pressure.

Beyond the Basic

Once you've made that first great fitting "T," there's no reason to stop. And our T-shirt gurus have seen to it that you have plenty of options. Pamela Leggett offers a companion DVD that takes you through the steps of constructing her basic pattern and then goes on to give variations. Jennifer Stern-Haseman's basic T offers multiple opportunities for color blocking. Peggy Sagers' Silhouette Patterns line includes more than a dozen different T-shirts. Connie Crawford's basic pattern block (CS1207) is designed as a stepping-off point for you to become your own designer. Judy Kessinger offers a large selection of variations to her basic pattern in your choice of CD or downloadable formats. Emma Seabrooke offers seven different Neckline Variations, laminated instructions for design adjustments that can be made to all her T-shirt patterns.

Finally, Marsha McClintock shares an idea that will change the look of any T-shirt design: take your favorite T-shirt pattern and serge the seams to the outside using a contrasting thread for a colorful accent.

Bet you can't sew just one!!!

Anne Marie Soto is the editorial director of Notions. She has written articles for many publications and has authored a variety of sewing books, including "Simplicity's Simply the Best Sewing Book" (1988 and 2001 editions), "Simplicity's Simply the Best Home Decorating Book" (1993 edition), and "Good Housekeeping Stain Rescue." She was present at the birth of the American Sewing Guild, serving as its national administrator during the start-up years of the first nine ASG chapters.



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T-SHIRT CONTRIBUTORS

All of these savvy sewing gurus will be teaching at ASG Conference 2013 in Arlington, Va. in August.



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