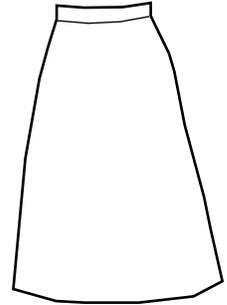
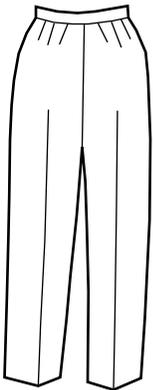
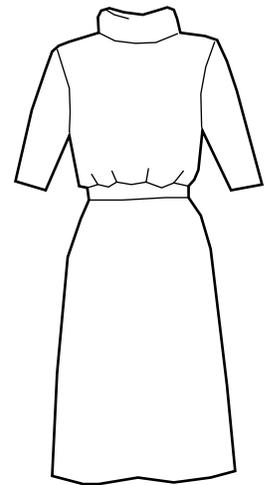
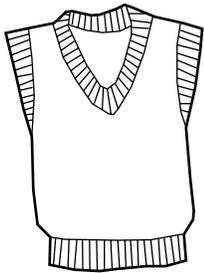


Building a Basic Wardrobe by *Clusters*

Patty Rai Smith



One of the simplest and best organized techniques for building a wardrobe is to develop a series of “clusters,” or small groups of clothing, that are coordinated in color, fabric, and shape, all with interchangeable parts. Each cluster is a set of five to 20 mix-and-match items. You may have as many different clusters in your wardrobe as you wish, but the purpose of this type of planning is to allow for versatility and flexibility with a minimum number of clothes. If each cluster consists of truly companionable pieces, you can always depend on having a well-coordinated wardrobe that is ready for all occasions.

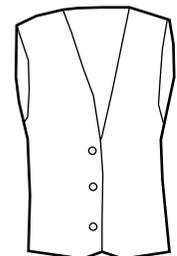
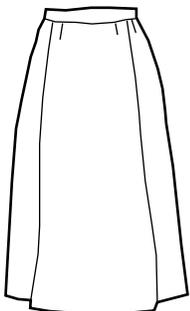


Basic cluster items are skirts, pants, jackets, blouses, and sweaters. A dress may be included.

A cluster is limited to two principal colors that are attractive individually or together.

The shapes of the individual pieces must all work well together so that a jacket can be worn with not just one skirt but with two or three skirts or pants and perhaps with a dress as well. Each piece should be a part of at least three looks.

The best fabrics to choose are natural fibers—wool, cotton, linen, and silk—or blends with manufactured fibers that have the natural fiber look.



Steps in Developing a Wardrobe Cluster

Consider your lifestyle. How do you spend most of your time? What are your most important activities? A cluster can be built around a career wardrobe, an evening wardrobe, a travel wardrobe, and so on. These clusters can be interchangeable, but plan your wardrobe to fit your major activities. Make your largest investments for where you spend the most time and where your needs are greatest.

Take an inventory of your current wardrobe. Retain those items that work for you now and either repair, remodel, or give away those pieces you do not use. Those that work can be included later in your cluster plans.

Decide on a color scheme. A cluster will have only two major colors. They may both be neutrals or you may want to combine bright colors or neutrals with brights. These choices will influence your coat and accessories.

The Cluster with Separates

2 jackets + 3 skirts + 4 blouses + 2 sweaters = 48 different looks.

- **Jacket #1** should be dark. Although this jacket must match a skirt for a suit look, it should go well with all skirts in the cluster.
- **Jacket #2** could be a patterned fabric such as tweed, herringbone, or houndstooth or a solid, lighter color. This jacket should also match a skirt so the cluster will have two suit looks. Although both jacket shapes can be similar, you might like the diversity of different styles.
- **Skirts #1** and **#2** should match the jackets to achieve a suit look, but they should also be compatible with sweaters and blouses.
- **Skirt #3** can be softer in look and texture. Teaming this skirt with a blouse in a soft printed fabric will give a dress look. If you wear pants a lot, you could replace one skirt with pants.
- **Blouse #1** should be your best white or off-white. It should be in a silky fabric and long sleeved with a notched collar, bow or stock tie, or a jewel neckline.
- **Blouse #2** can be in another solid color, preferably a light shade such as beige, gray, pale blue, or pink. You might choose another white or cream top in a style different from the first.
- **Blouse #3** can be another solid color or a pattern to match your third skirt. If you choose a pattern, however, be sure it will work with your other skirts and jackets.
- **Blouse #4** is a great way to introduce an accent color. A soft shirt style or T-shirt is a good choice. **Skirt #3** and **Blouse #4** in the same fabric would provide a dress look.
- **Sweater #1** should be a cardigan in a solid color that will work with your skirts and your blouses. If you don't like to wear sweaters, you can use another jacket.
- **Sweater #2** should be a pullover, preferably with a V or jewel neckline, that can be worn alone or over a blouse. The color and shape of this sweater should work well under your cardigan and under your jackets as well as on its own. For example, a black pullover can be worn with a black skirt to make a one-piece dress look.

Dress or pants choices in the cluster should be compatible in color and style with the other pieces.

The Dress Option

5 dresses + 2 jackets = 15 different looks.

If you prefer dresses to separates, the components are dresses and jackets in a cluster of seven pieces. The dresses should be simple in style and have long sleeves if possible. Tailored styles such as a shirtdress are more flexible and adapt to many looks more easily than those with ruffles and multiple details. The two-color scheme is important for the dress option, also.

- **Dress #1.** You can achieve a suit look by choosing one dress with a dark skirt and light bodice and combining it with a dark matching jacket. (This combination may be found in a dress department, or you can select your jacket from separates.)
- **Dress #2** should be another neutral in a lighter color.
- **Dress #3** could be a small pattern that combines the basic cluster colors.
- **Dress #4** could be in another neutral shade and in a different style from the previous three.
- **Dress #5** might be in another pattern or an accent color that will combine with your jackets and both of your basic colors.
- **Jacket #1** and **Jacket #2** should be in the two colors of your cluster. They will work over all the dresses, giving you suited looks as well as contrasting outfits. The jacket shapes may be similar or different, either blazers or cardigans, since both styles work well with tailored dresses. The dresses also will be fine on their own.

Accessories

Each clothing cluster should have its own set of essential accessories. You will be able to interchange accessories as well as clothes among clusters in your wardrobe, but you should establish which accessories are assigned to a cluster. Essential accessories for a basic cluster are: shoes, one handbag, one briefcase (if needed), belts, scarves, a watch, earrings, simple necklaces, and a bracelet.

Shoes

A simple tailored shoe, preferably a pump, should be number one. The second pair can be slightly dressier; perhaps a slingback or a closed heel with a slightly open toe. (A good rule about open or bare shoes vs. covered-up ones is that if your clothing is covered up, your shoes should be, too.)

Generally, shoes should be the same color as your clothing or darker. Stockings that are a sheer tint of your skirt will help pull your look together, too. Black or colored opaques or textured hose look best with heavy, textured clothing like tweed skirts, thick knits, and low-heeled shoes, because they give a balanced feeling.

Handbags

The color of your handbag should conform to your cluster. You can ruin your total appearance with a handbag that does not coordinate with the rest of your outfit. Don't make a suitcase out of your handbag. If you feel the need to carry too much, reevaluate the contents and make changes.

If you think you need a large shoulder bag crammed full, consider carrying your "take to work" things in a briefcase or a nice-looking totebag. You can then include a nice-looking smaller handbag in its contents.

Scarves

An attractive scarf can add zip and fashion to your wardrobe. Shapes may vary, but generally a medium-sized square or oblong works best. Scarves can be made into mufflers, ascots, bows, belts, and ties. While the colors should complement your cluster clothing, scarves are an excellent way to use accent colors and vary your color scheme.

Belts

Belts give your waist a finished look. Use them either to complete a skirt and blouse and make it look as if they were meant for each other or to replace an inexpensive waist tie that comes with a dress you buy.

Basic belts are 1 to 2 inches wide and of good quality leather, and they should last a long time. As with scarves, don't discard them. They can remain a staple item in your wardrobe.

Available now are beautiful buckles that can be interchanged with belts in different colors and textures.

Jewelry

A watch is a necessity. It should be accurate, of course, and of a simple design so that it works with all your clothes. A leather or plain gold band is adaptable to all looks.

Earrings. Two pairs, one in gold and one in pearls, will give you enough flexibility for almost any cluster. A button, ball, or shell design, a simple twist; or a small hoop will go with a working wardrobe.

Necklaces. Open collars and plain necklines sometimes need a filler. Always suitable is a simple gold chain or pearls.

Bracelets. One classic design, like a bangle or link style, is a good choice. Stay away from multiple bangles or multiple bracelets of any style for work. Save those for casual and dressy occasions.

Ideas for Personalizing Your Cluster

- Use a piece of wearable art—a special blouse or sweater, a lovely stole.
- Be creative with your jewelry. Use your basic chains and pearls together. Hang different pendants from them or make a pendant from a pin.
- Experiment with different ties for your scarves. Large squares can become blouses or evening wraps.
- Recharge your cluster with small amounts of accent color.
- Organize your closet by color. This is a great way to see what you have and which shades and tints work together. It even helps to keep your pantyhose sorted by color.

One-Piece vs. Two-Piece Dressing

Although a wardrobe built with separates usually offers more versatility for your clothing dollar, if you feel more comfortable in dresses than a blazer and skirt, plan your wardrobe around dresses. Keep in mind the major activities in your life and select one-piece designs that can be topped with soft jackets when needed. Classic styles, colors, and fabrics will make this plan a lasting one. Tailored or casual clothes usually wear longer than extremely frilly designs.

The advantages of one-piece dressing are:

- less initial cost;
- easier to conceal figure problems;
- dresses may be more acceptable for some social occasions;
- outfits may be worn most of the year;
- the more basic the dress style, the greater the versatility.

The advantages of two-piece dressing are:

- longer wearing life. One piece may wear out but the other piece may remain usable;
- more versatile. Pieces can be interchanged for different looks;
- color combinations can be varied;
- pieces can be purchased in different sizes, assuring a better fit;
- expensive and inexpensive pieces can be mixed to stretch the clothing dollar;
- wardrobe components can be purchased as you can afford them;
- more easily updated;
- may be considered more professional.

References

- Rasband, Judith. "‘Cluster’ Clothes To Make Most Of Your Wardrobe," *Conselle Institute of Image Management*, 1989.
- Wallach, Janet. *Working Wardrobe*. Washington, D.C.: Acropolis Books, 1981.
- Weiland, Barbara and Leslie Wood. *Clothes Sense*. Portland: Palmer/Pletsch Associates, 1984.