

Working with Plaid Fabrics

Many years ago, a plaid was a long piece of cloth draped across the shoulder of the Scottish Highlanders to identify the family or clan. A plaid was the family emblem. Even today, many of these designs continue to carry the clan name.

Throughout history, plaids have remained popular and are an important part of some cultures. These distinctive fabrics have become an artful piece of cloth used in clothing and many home furnishings items.

A plaid fabric makes a fashion statement. There are plaids for every taste, age, and color scheme. What is a plaid? *It is a design composed of a planned series of vertical and horizontal stripes or bars that intersect at right angles.*

Sewing with plaids can be fun. However, the activity must be requires careful planning and fabric handling. Each plaid is a challenge to work with, but the end product is well worth the extra time and effort that must go into the project. The extra time, energy and attention to details will give professional-looking results you can be proud of.

This publication is designed to help you achieve those results, even if this is your first attempt.

General Rules

Keep the following rules in mind when selecting and working with plaid fabrics:

- Choose a design suited to the way you plan to use it. Some designs are more casual; others more formal. Shop until you find a plaid you like and for clothing

items, one that is suited to your body type and your personality.

- Hold the fabric up to you or drape it over the object it will be used on. This will give you a better visual idea of how the fabric will look.
- As you shop, and before purchasing, be sure to identify the type of plaid (even or uneven).
- Select fabric from the bolt, if possible, or from a large fabric swatch or sample. A small swatch may not give you a true picture of the complete plaid composition—its size, color, and/or proportion. (Figure 1)

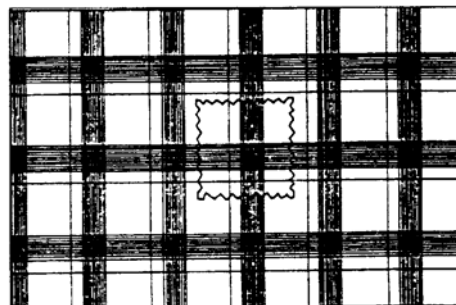


Figure 1. Too small a fabric swatch may not give a true picture of the plaid.

- Plaids should be matched for a professional appearance. This means lining up the bars or stripes so there is no break in the design as the bars cross from one fabric piece or design element to another. Selecting a simple pattern design with few pieces is extremely *helpful, especially for a beginner.*
- Items made from plaid fabric frequently require extra yardage to allow for matching the design.

Types of Plaids

Plaid fabrics come in different types of designs. The characteristic bars or stripes may be evenly spaced and repeated or unevenly spaced and randomly repeated. These designs can be created by printing, weaving, or knitting.

Printed – designs are stamped, rolled, or imprinted on the surface of either a woven, knitted, or other structured fabric.

Woven – different-colored threads (yarns) are interlaced in the lengthwise and crosswise directions to create the design. Both sides of the fabric are identical.

Knitted – different-colored threads (yarns) are looped together to create a design. Both sides may be identical.

Is it even or uneven?

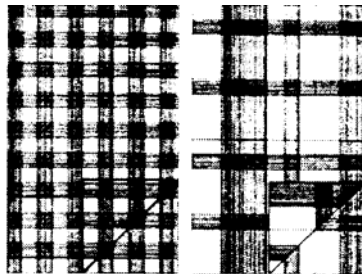


Figure 2.

An *uneven (unbalanced) plaid* can be one of four types:

- ✓ Different from left to right of a dominant line.
- ✓ Different above and below a dominant line.
- ✓ Different from left to right *and* above and below a dominant line.
- ✓ Different from crosswise to lengthwise whereby the plaid is even right to left and/or up and down.

An easy way to identify the type of plaid you are looking at is to fold the fabric lengthwise with right sides together. Turn back one corner to

form a right angle, as illustrated in Figure 2. Pay particular attention to the outside edges of the folded corner. *Do the lines, spaces, and colors match in lengthwise **and** crosswise directions?* If not, the plaid is uneven.

An *even (balanced) plaid* has the same lines, spaces, and colors on the left and right and the same lines, spaces, and colors above and below a center or dominant line. Even plaids will match in both the lengthwise and crosswise directions.

NOTE: For the beginner, an even plaid is the easiest to work with and will build one's confidence.

Pattern Selection

Selecting the pattern style before shopping and purchasing fabric is *strongly* recommended. This guideline is extremely important when working with plaid fabric.

It is a good idea to choose a pattern recommended for plaid fabric. An actual photograph of the garment in a plaid fabric is a good indication. However, there are other clues to help determine a suitable pattern design.

- ✓ If you are using a plaid for the first time, choose a style with a minimum number of seams and design lines—a “simple” pattern. Patterns with simple design lines and a looser fit are easier to adjust and construct.
- ✓ As you look at the pattern design, visualize the plaid within the structural lines. Avoid a pattern with slanted darts, circular yokes, and curved seams.
- ✓ If the pattern envelope is marked “not suitable for plaids,” select another pattern style. Otherwise, it may be impossible to match plaids in one or more important areas.

Fabric Decisions

When constructing a garment, select a plaid that is in scale with your body so that it will be flattering. Generally speaking, the size of the

plaid should relate to your body size (small for small, large for large). However, sometimes we vary from this recommendation for emphasis, particularly in “fun clothing” and costumes. During the selection process, study the plaid up close and at a distance. Stand away from the plaid to see what effect it may have on others. Hold the fabric up to your body and stand in front of a full-length mirror. How does it look? Is the plaid flattering to your body shape and color, or does the plaid overwhelm you? It may be helpful to ask a friend whose clothing advice you respect to shop with you and give you an unbiased opinion.

Check to see if the fabric is printed, woven, or knitted. If printed, be sure it has been printed on grain. The print should be lined up with the crosswise and lengthwise directions of the fabric. Next, determine the type of plaid, even or uneven. Even plaids are the easiest to match and to sew. Be aware that many plaids may look even at first glance, but upon closer examination are actually uneven. Refer to Figure 2.

One should give consideration to both color blocks as well as lines/stripes. The most dominant vertical line should be placed at the center front, center back, and the center of sleeves at the shoulder tip if the pattern features set-in sleeves. The back of the collar should also match the center back unless the collar is cut on the bias.

If possible, the most dominant horizontal line should be placed at the most flattering part of the body. Avoid placing it at areas you do not want to call attention to, such as the hipline if you have a pear-shaped figure or at the bust line if you have a very full bust or chest area.

How much fabric to buy?

There are many sizes and types of plaid designs on the market. Even if the pattern recommends plaid fabric, it is difficult for the pattern company to give an exact amount to purchase. Plaids, like other fabrics that require matching, need extra yardage. To be safe, estimate the amount of fabric you will need by the following.

Locate and measure the design repeat of the particular plaid. To do this, find the dominant horizontal bar/line (the line that is most noticeable) and follow the sequence of the plaid until you reach the next exact dominant line. This is referred to as a *repeat*.

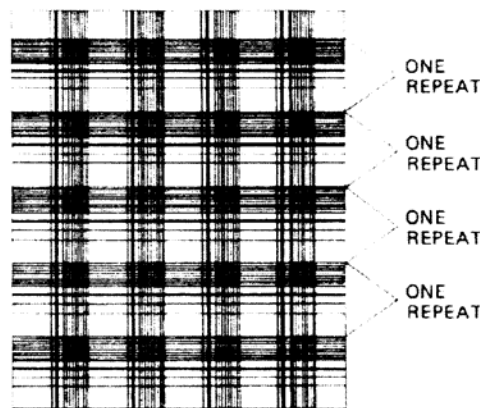


Figure 3. Locate and measure one repeat.

Count the number of major pattern pieces, such as front, back, and sleeves. (In figuring yardage, you do not need to worry about smaller pieces such as pockets, facings, collars, and cuffs.)

For each major pattern piece, count on one extra repeat. For example, if the *repeat is 6-inches* and there are three major pattern pieces, you *will need three extra repeats*.

6-inches x 3 repeats = 18-inches

According to this example, one should purchase *18 inches* (a half yard more fabric) than what is listed on the pattern envelope. As a general rule, $\frac{1}{4}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ yard of additional fabric is recommended for small to medium sized plaids, and $\frac{1}{2}$ to 1 yard extra fabric is needed for medium to large plaids.

Getting Ready to Sew

As with all other types of fabric, plaids should be made *thread perfect*. (Refer to publication on *Fabric & Grain CT-MMB.180*) Fabric should also be preshrunk according to fiber content (washable fabrics can be laundered; dry cleanable fabrics should be dry cleaned).

Make the necessary alteration adjustments to each pattern piece before layout and cutting. Making adjustments after the pattern has been cut from the fabric can present matching problems.

Pattern Layout

If the pattern guide sheet has a layout suggestion for plaid fabric, study it carefully. Placing the pattern on the fabric correctly is one of the most important steps in the success of a plaid fabric project. This is the stage where *time* and *patience* count the most. Some general rules to follow:

- ✓ Extend the *lengthwise grainline* arrow on all major pattern pieces. Extend a *crosswise grainline* (a line perpendicular to the lengthwise grainline) at seamline notches on all major pattern pieces (skirt, bodice, and sleeve). This will make it easier to match and measure pieces.
- ✓ Using a single layer rather than folded fabric layout will prevent shifting of the fabric and will help in planning and matching the plaid. Also refer to the section, *Working with Uneven Plaids*.
- ✓ If using a folded fabric layout (double thickness), position the top layer and bottom layer of the fabric so the design matches *exactly* throughout the piece. Pin the two layers frequently throughout, making sure the design matches and will not shift when cutting. Also refer to the section, *Working with Even Plaids*.
- ✓ Determine the dominant vertical bar/line of the plaid. Use this as the center front, center back, and center sleeve area whenever possible. This strategy will balance the design on the body. Remember, avoid placing a dominant horizontal bar in any area you do not want to emphasize, as the eye will be attracted to this area.

- ✓ *Match at seamline*, not at the cutting line. See Figure 4.

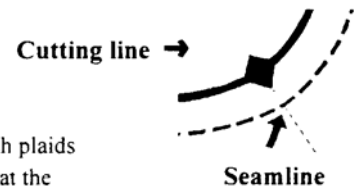


Figure 4. Match plaids at seamline, not at the cutting line.

Use construction markings, such as notches, to aid in matching. The same markings should coincide on any two pieces to be matched.

- ✓ Try several layouts by moving the pieces around on the fabric. Take your time. Consider all the alternatives before choosing the best one for the situation.
- ✓ When cutting a single layer at a time, do not forget to reverse the pattern (flip it over) when laying out and cutting the second piece. Otherwise, there will be two pieces for the same side of the body (two left back pieces, etc.).
- ✓ The same design lines of the plaid should continue both horizontally and vertically whenever possible, extending from the neckline to the hemline and around the body. This applies to both one-piece and two-piece outfits. When planning the layout for a suit, be sure that the plaid of the skirt or slacks matches along with the jacket hemline. (Figure 5)

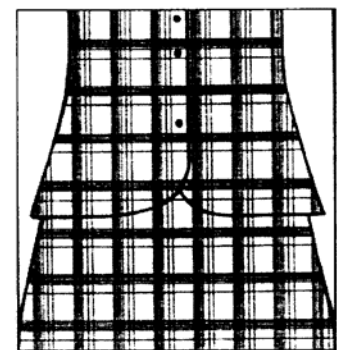


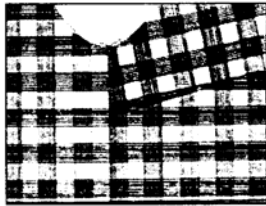
Figure 5. Try to match plaids in the jacket with skirt or slacks.

- ✓ It may be impossible to match plaids in all areas. All lines and bars may not match at shoulder seams, darts, above the bustline

dart, at the back armhole seamline, or in a gathered area. However, match as many dominate lines as possible. (Figure 6)

- ✓ Raglan seams will never match, since the angle is different where they join the body of the garment.
- ✓ Match at the most noticeable places. It is important to match at the center front and center back seams; at side seams, from the bustline dart down; and on the set-in sleeve where it joins the front bodice at the notches.

Figure 6. Match plaids in the most-noticeable areas. Above the dart is not as noticeable as below the dart. Match from bustline dart down the garment.



- ✓ Pockets, cuffs, and collars should match the plaid area they cover unless you decide to cut them on the bias.

Working with Even Plaids

- ✓ If the fabric layers are pinned together very carefully with the one design exactly on top of the other, the pattern can be placed on double fabric thickness (using a folded layout view).
- ✓ Knit fabric should be handled as if it is a napped fabric. Place all pattern pieces in the same direction to avoid undesirable or different shading effects.
- ✓ The lines of the plaid should be continuous from shoulder to hemline and around the body. (Figures 7 and 8)

Working with Uneven Plaids

- ✓ Lay patterns pieces on single layer/single thickness of fabric.

- ✓ Use only the “with nap” pattern layout view.
- ✓ Lay the pattern pieces so the dominant lines of the plaid will be continuous in one direction around the body and in one direction from the shoulder to the hem (Figure 7). Be sure the sequence of the plaid (the order of the lines) is not reversed.



Figure 7. Plaids should be continuous around the body and from the shoulder to the hemline.

- ✓ A special and interesting effect can be achieved when using an uneven plaid that creates a “mirror image” effect. This happens when the vertical bars of the plaid on half of the garment, for example the left side, follow the opposite sequence on the other half, the right side of the body. This effect is planned around to the center front and/or center back of a garment. (Figure 8)
- ✓ Another example might be the lapels of a jacket to “reflect” each other in the color and sequence of the plaid. (Figure 8) To do this, a reversible fabric *must be used* (a woven or knitted plaid design) so that the fabric will look the same on both the right and wrong sides. You will need a pattern with at least four major pattern pieces, an open or seamed front, and an open or seamed back section. Use both the right and wrong sides of the fabric in the layout stage and match the plaid in the usual

manner. In this situation, bars *do not* continue around the body, but *match in reverse*.



Figure 8. To create a “mirror” image, use a pattern with a center back and center front seamline.

Bias Plaids for Special Effects

If skillfully handled, plaids that are cut on the bias can give an interesting effect. Small areas of the garment such as collars, cuffs, pockets, or the “lips” of bound buttonholes can be cut on the bias for accent. This eliminates some of the matching that otherwise would be required while adding design interest. (Figure 9)



Figure 9. Use a bias layout for interesting effects.

For another great look, cut an entire garment on the bias. Cut matching plaids whenever possible, concentrating on the most noticeable areas.

If the pattern calls for pieces to be cut on the bias, the markings for the correct layout will already be there. If not, here is how to do it:

Step 1: Fold the pattern piece so the grainline arrow is at right angle to itself. (Figure 10)

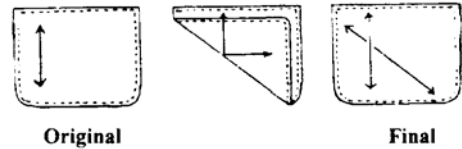


Figure 10. Fold to establish a new, bias grainline.

Step 2: Unfold pattern and draw in a new grainline arrow on the fold line. This is the new “bias” grainline.

Step 3: Place the pattern on the fabric, follow the new grainlines.

NOTE: The above idea and suggestions for plaids that create a mirror image and bias plaids for special effects *are not recommended* for the beginner or the inexperienced sewer. As you gain experience and skill working with plaid fabrics, these techniques can be fun and exciting to try.

Construction Techniques

After the pattern has been successfully cut out, construction begins, following the pattern guidelines and techniques suited to the fabric. For perfect matching, a technique known as *slip-basting* is strongly recommended.

Slip-basting is done with the right sides of both fabric pieces facing you. Begin by marking the seamline on each major piece that requires matching.

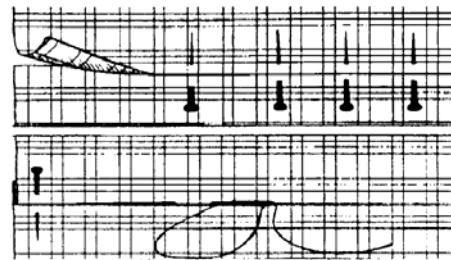


Figure 11. Slip baste for a perfect match at seamline.

Step 1: Turn the seam allowance under along the marking. Position folded edge to the

adjoining fabric piece, overlapping to the seam allowance line.

Step 2: Using a hand needle and thread, secure thread and begin stitching at one end of seamline. Run needle through the fold (approximately $\frac{3}{8}$ to $\frac{1}{2}$ inch) of the upper section. Bring needle out at the folded edge. Take a small stitch into the lower fabric section directly on its seamline, making sure lines and bars of the plaid design are perfectly matched. Pull threads securely. (Figure 11) Repeat the length of the seamline, securing threads at the end.

Step 3: To machine stitch, turn garment to the wrong side. Seam allowances and plaid design should be matched perfectly and be held securely in place. Stitch seams as usual on the wrong side of the fabric on or very close to the slip-basting line. Slip-basting will prevent fabric from shifting and will help attain a perfect match. Using an even-feed machine foot will reduce fabric tension, moving multiple fabric pieces smoothly and evenly over the feed dog to maintain the matched lines.

Summary

Plaids can be a fun and exciting experience. The most difficult part is planning the design and layout. Begin with a small, uncomplicated project. Be sure to take the time needed to accomplish the task using the guidelines given above. Then, you will be ready to move on to more complicated and challenging experiences with plaids.

References

Dedic, Bette Jo. *Fabric Tips – Plaids*, H.E. 2-811, University of Kentucky Cooperative Extension Service, December 1978.
Hackler, Nadine. *Plaids*, FCS 4215, University of Florida Cooperative Extension Service, May 1997.

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