



# Clone Yourself A Fitting Assistant

Every sewer needs a dress form.  
Here are four fast, cheap  
(and amusing!) ways to make your own.

by David Page Coffin

A few years ago I had a custom-fitted body form made for myself, which totally changed the way I fit clothes and alter patterns. Ever since, I've been telling anyone who'll listen how useful it is to have a full-scale duplicate of your body on hand when making clothes for yourself. But the process I used (making a surgical-plaster body mold, then filling it with an industrial foam) must have seemed a bit too costly and/or demanding, since not many people appear to have followed my advice. I've recently been investigating other form-making methods that are so simple, quick, and in-

expensive that I've returned to my original evangelical enthusiasm, and am ready to start shouting out the message once again: *every sewer needs a dress form!*

What's so earthshaking about having a clone in the sewing room? It's simple: fitting is the hardest thing about sewing, especially sewing for yourself, and having a form on which to solve your fitting problems transforms the challenge from a slow, abstract process of measuring and altering outlines on a flat piece of pattern paper into an immediate, hands-on process of playing with fabric (or paper) on a 3-D version of yourself. With a few pins, some muslin, and 20

**No more excuses—** Dress-form making is fun and fast, and will improve your fitting results like nothing else. Here are four foolproof, do-it-yourself approaches that'll get you under way in hours from (clockwise from top right, wearing street clothes) Joyce Perhac, Leah Crain, Gail Gosser, and Barbara Deckert.





## 1. DUCT-TAPE DOUBLE, PART 1

Joyce Perhac (at far left and at top right on p. 37), a teacher and sewing-show organizer from Monroeville, PA, has perfected a quick method of form making that uses ordinary duct tape as both the body-casting material and the final form. She's written a booklet describing the entire process (available for \$13.50 ppd. from Pure Whimsy, PO Box 941761, Maitland, FL 32794; 800-985-8852), but we'll cover the highlights here.



Start with your "victim" wearing well-fitted undergarments of her usual type under a long T-shirt, which needn't be too tight (1). Begin by wrapping the tape horizontally at the bottom, mid-thigh, ideally with a tape-cutting helper (use old scissors, as the tape gets gummy; a size-10 figure requires 1 to 1½ 60-yd. rolls of tape). Wrap snugly, but not so tight as to rearrange or compress the body. At the waist, wrap a little more loosely on the first layer, allowing folds to form as you follow the contour, if necessary (2). At the bust and underarm, cut the T-shirt sleeves if needed to allow the tape to follow the figure, and use shorter pieces arranged radially over the bust (3). Protect the neck area with plastic wrap (4), then wrap to form edges at the neckline and armholes similar to those you'd want on a fitted bodice.

When the first layer is complete, wrap twice more, first vertically, then again horizontally, further compressing the waistline to fit each layer more closely, and smoothing over wrinkles this causes with more tape. When finished, have the "wrappee" bend slightly to reveal her waistline, and mark it (and any other points you want identified) with marker or later with colored tape (5). Cut off the form and T-shirt layer at center back with your other hand between scissors and body (6) to avoid cutting undergarments (or the wrappee!). Then close the form with additional tape, stuff it with poly batting, and place it on a stand (read on for stand ideas). Joyce's finished form has a polished look, similar to an industrial dress form.



minutes, you can explore more pattern tweaks (and learn more about fitting) on a custom form than you could in hours of flat-pattern investigation on paper.

Minor adjustments become so easy and obvious when you're looking at the actual problem in fabric on "yourself" that you often don't even need a muslin or a corrected pattern. You can simply reposition the seamlines involved right on the

form, when you're ready to stitch them, without worrying that the weight or drape of your fabric might throw off your elaborate flat-pattern changes. This is the process I use on my form, for example, to correct all garments for my non-symmetrical shoulders. Of course, custom-made forms are just as useful as commercial ones for all the traditional dress-form functions—draping, visualizing, shaping col-





## 2. DUCT-TAPE DOUBLE, PART 2

Leah Crain (at left with her wrapped mother, and below), a dressmaker and costumer from Cincinnati, OH, has another take on the duct-tape version of form making. You can find her complete directions, including stand ideas, photos, plus comments and questions from other sewers, on the Internet (<http://pw2.netcom.com/~leahna/DuctTapeDouble.html>).

Here are the highlights: You'll start with a similarly underclad wrappee, but Leah suggests cutting off one sleeve from a second T-shirt and basting it onto the first to form a neck cover. Start wrapping under the



bust, snugly, then proceed to a "cross-your-heart" taping that goes from one shoulder under the opposite breast then around to the back, to define the bust area (1,2). You'll use three layers of tape, with the second arranged vertically, but wrap more snugly than for Joyce's method on p. 38, and extend the wrapping around the upper arms and onto the neck (3), always keeping the bust contours well defined. Mark the final layer carefully with plumb lines at center front and center back, around the waist, and carefully establish the proper height and posture by marking the same distance from the floor to the hip level on four sides, then cut the tape shell up the back as usual.

A strong wooden hanger placed inside before stuffing is the start of either a hanging form or a simple stand (4). For a stand, use a piece of PVC piping or a cardboard tube long enough that you can cut it to your height when the form is ready to set onto its base (you can use a Christmas-tree stand on the outside of the tube, or a microphone stand inside the tube). Tape the hanger to the tube and put it inside the form before stuffing it (5), then start stuffing by supporting each breast with a glued-in foam raglan shoulder pad if the bust contour needs the additional support (larger bust shapes may tend to cave in over time). Tape the opening at center back closed as you complete the stuffing, then use the hip markings to help arrange the form on the tube to match the wrapper's posture.

Cut a cardboard base using dimensions from the wrappee, and cut a hole in it so it can slip up the tube, then tape it in place (6). Stuff and tape over the ends

of the sleeves and neck where you want them to end, then compare measurements from wrappee to form. You can adjust the form by cutting slits to form darts, squeezing the form to the new dimension, and retaping. Leah's forms (7) look remarkably like their prior "inmates."



lars, holding garments during sleeve insertion and hemming, and so on.

### How accurate, and where?

None of these fitting benefits is possible if the form you're using doesn't mirror with reasonable accuracy your posture, the shapes that make up your shoulders, the position and angle of your neck, and the unique distribution of your

body weight. These issues are typically much more important than questions of circumference, since most clothes hang from the shoulders or the waist, and don't fit snugly. And this is precisely what the custom forms presented on the following pages provide (as did my poured-foam form): an accurate recreation of your posture and your shape, while keeping within an inch or so of your current cir-



### 3. MOLDED PAPIER-MÂCHÉ FORM

The best thing about the poured-foam form that you make from a surgical-plaster cast or mold is that the mold makes a very accurate copy of your body contours, complete with distinct collarbones and shoulder blades. It's more accurate in this regard than the other methods described here. Plaster is also better at molding to and preserving concavities, so this is

a good approach if your body has distinct hollows that tape might simply fill over. But the downside of the poured-foam process is the foam itself, which is expensive, somewhat toxic, and hard to find.

Gail Gosser (at right below and with her finished form at bottom on p. 37), an artist and art teacher from Schwenksville, PA, likes the accuracy of the plaster mold (you can get the plaster and directions for making the mold from CSZ Enterprises, 1288 W. 11th St., Suite 200, Tracy, CA 95376; 209-832-4324). Her method solves the foam problem by replacing it with ordinary papier-mâché. Use paper-pulp insulation mixed with wallpaper paste (both from a building-supply store) to make the mâché (1), and cut the plaster mold from the body along the sides instead of in front and back as is usual when pouring in foam. Line each half of the mold with paper towels to keep the papier-mâché from sticking to the plaster (2), then build up a ½-in. layer of mâché, forming a smooth, wider edge along the mold's edge where the two mâché halves will be glued together (3).

When both halves are filled (4), let them dry (helping with fans and hair dryers if the weather is damp), then smooth the surface texture by spreading more thin mâché over the cracks (5). Join the mâché halves with white glue spread thickly along the widened edges, and tie them together firmly (6), inserting shims to tighten the cords (7) as the glue dries. When the glue is dry (and at any point in the future, if needed), reinforce the join and edges with more mâché in pulp or traditional strip form. Finally, cover the form with knit fabric (the mâché is too hard to pin into directly) and mount it on the clever stand shown at left.

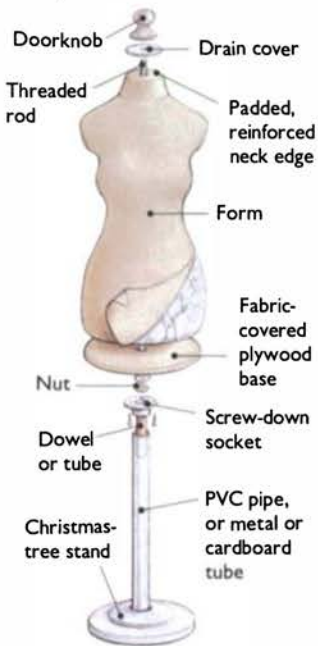
This method is time-consuming (drying time can add days) but very accurate, and it suits Gail's training as a sculptor. One further advantage: you can make neck-and-shoulder-only molds to create anatomically correct coat hangers for finished tailored jackets and works in progress.



Illustration by Robert LaPointe

### STURDY DRESS-FORM STAND

Here's a swiveling stand you can make for any dress form from easily purchased materials.





## 4. THE OLD PAPER-TAPE TRICK

Barbara Deckert (at near right and below), a dressmaker and author from Elkridge, MD, uses a form-making method that I've seen in sewing texts from the 1930s: brown-paper tape from an office-supply store forms a body mold as well as duct tape does, then hardens into "papier-mâché" to become a pinnable form, which you don't even have to stuff. The bathroom or kitchen makes a good wrapping zone, since a wet sponge is the best aid to getting the tape properly moistened (1).

Start wrapping the snugly T-shirted, undergarment-clad wrappee horizontally below the bust, then above the bust

(2). Next, form the neckline and armholes, as for Joyce's method, in the shape of a traditional fitting bodice.

The "cross-your-heart" method works well in paper, too, as does shortening the tape in the bust area (3). After three or four layers (alternating horizontal/vertical), you can use a hair dryer to speed the drying process (4). Then (when the tape is hard enough to keep its shape but still soft enough to get out of) cut it up the back through the T-shirt, tape as with the other forms, and reclose by taping over the cut on the quite-stiff form (5).

Once it hardens completely, the tape double is ultra-light, easily moved and stored, can be pinned into, covered with fabric or a tight T-shirt, marked with narrow ribbon or marker, used on a table or stand, or hung from a hanger. It's probably the easiest and cheapest method of all...so what are you waiting for?



cumference measurements. Commercial forms of all kinds, even if customized, inevitably put the emphasis the other way around; that is, they can be quite accurate about overall circumference but can't as easily mimic posture or weight distribution, so that their usefulness as personal fitting and draping aids is limited.

### Speed and convenience

The best feature of all but one of the do-it-yourself forms described

here is that they're quick to make, using materials that are very easy to find. With either the duct-tape or paper-tape versions, you can have a working form ready in less than two hours, having spent no more than \$15. This essentially eliminates the anticipated-weight-fluctuations objection I've heard so often concerning more time- or money-consuming methods, since you can so easily repeat the process, if you think it necessary, later on.

So, let's look at the form-making methods I've observed over the past few months as I visited folks who'll make a dress form at a moment's notice. Each finds her process the one that makes the most sense for her temperament and gives her results that are more than adequately accurate and durable. Take your pick, and take charge of your fitting problems once and for all! ♦

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