

# BUILD YOUR SIGNATURE WARDROBE

How to look good and feel confident in four steps

ALEXANDRIA BLAELOCK

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# Introduction

AS YOU SIT HERE TODAY, you are in many ways very fortunate. You could be invited to a gala event at a moment's notice, and if you are, you can go into any store and buy a new outfit: head to toe, inner to outer layers. Frock, shoes, bag, jewellery, makeup and an exotic new fragrance. You can visit a hairdresser for a fabulous do, get a mani-pedi and have your makeup done too. With very little thought and effort, you are dressed in an outfit worthy of an elegant soiree within hours.

You do not even need to consider whether you can afford it - just pull out your credit card and purchase whatever you need regardless of the price. Many of us would think that looking perfect tonight would be more important than any other consideration.

Building a wardrobe that works over a longer term seems much more complicated than buying for a single event. At face value, buying a bunch of clothes seems like a very easy thing to do. You can easily buy enough clothes to get you through a

week without having to wash any of it, and they might even be fashionable.

However, it's more likely that you have bought random stuff; not one garment matches any other, they aren't made from similar fibres, don't have common care instructions, and you can't comfortably wear them to any of the places you usually go.

So you are going to be paying them off for many months and probably won't wear them for even longer. You won't be "dressed", you'll just not be naked.

The advice given by the Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences in 1925 is just as applicable today as then - don't cheat yourself or others by not dressing well. Be proud of yourself, dress to please yourself and enhance your confidence. "Make the time to learn what is appropriate, becoming and wholly lovely for you".

Just a few short decades ago, mass produced clothing wasn't readily obtainable, let alone affordable. It's hard to imagine, but up until the 1960s, people were generally reliant on clothes that were designed and manufactured in the country they were sold. Credit cards did not exist so shoppers were more careful, thought more deeply about what they needed, and shopped according to what they could afford.

I learnt to shop in the 80s, the early days of credit cards. Those days were so early that we didn't understand the limit, thinking it was like a monthly allowance. My limit was \$200, and that was about the amount I got paid each fortnight. Laughable now, but it seemed like a fortune to me. My employer supplied my uniform, so all I had to buy were what I like to call princess clothes - the ones I wore when I went out partying, looking for my Prince Charming.

Today's key wardrobe planning problem is building this year's wardrobe around last year's clothes (not lack of

money). I think this may be one of those universal truths that are so obvious you need someone to point it out. You need some sort of process to ensure that you buy clothes that work for the life that you currently live, at a price that you can afford.

While you would probably LOVE to throw out all your clothes and start again, you can (and really should) start where you are. You wouldn't knock your house down to renovate your kitchen, you would examine its current state, work out what is and isn't working, and then plan and undertake the renovation work.

In just the same way, examining your clothes to understand what's working, what's not and why you have nothing to wear gives you the information you need to make your plan. Then you can shop in the full and certain knowledge that you will require tremendous reserves of inner strength to stick with your plan.

This book comes in three parts.

1. Historical Context
2. Develop Your Wardrobe Plan
3. Build and Maintain Your Wardrobe

## I: HISTORICAL CONTEXT

We start with an overview of the social and fashion conditions for each decade of the early twentieth century. While I have grouped the information into nice easy to absorb eras, fashion like most facets of life follows an evolutionary path and is not that easily segmented.

I draw on statistical data relating to white working and middle class income and expenditure in the United States (US) and the United Kingdom (UK), simply because this information is easiest to find. So when I mention replacing a suit in

three to four years, it's a figure based on what real people actually spent averaged out across the population. It's not that they were only *allowed* one suit every three years, it's simply what they could afford to buy.

During the 59 years covered, there were changes in the statistical classification of people and purchases, as well as changes in the types of goods available for purchase *and* the way people shopped that are not captured by the data. This accounts for some of the variation in whether jewellery, makeup, personal and clothing care costs are included in the clothing budget or not.

There are also some inaccuracies due to different technological release dates between the US and the UK. This has resulted in some variations and inconsistencies within the information that I have been able to access and provide for each decade.

As such, this overview is full of wild generalisations - across age, ethnicity, class, urban/rural and country. But as this part isn't intended to be a dryly accurate academic account of what your life might have been like during this time, I think that's fine. This part forms an introduction to the ways that the prevailing economic conditions and standards of living at the time would impact your purchasing plan. Naturally some found it easier while others (non-whites in particular) were in a much more challenging position.

My purpose for providing this information is to show you that the way you dress is influenced more deeply by the larger world around you than you suspect. I hope this makes it easier to consider the place of appropriateness and style in your own wardrobe.

## 2: DEVELOP YOUR WARDROBE PLAN

Drawing against fashion and shopping advice from 1900 - 1959 (the same time frame as the statistics) I guide you through a four-step process that will give you the information and confidence you need to make a plan and stick with it. I'll help you:

1. decide how much you can spend. You'll be brave enough to face the unpleasant truth that you can't afford *all* the nice things you want, and confident enough to make the hard decisions you must.
2. determine what clothes are appropriate for you right now in the life you currently lead, regardless of your age, size, location and occupation(s). Not the imaginary one where you are 20lb (9kg) lighter, or the one where you are a princess with a house full of servants doing your bidding. But something that is comfortable for you no matter where you live or what you do.
3. work out what your style is, and how you can present your authentic self to the world in a deep and truly unique way. You will look good and feel confident while still fitting in with the expectations of others.
4. decide what clothes and accessories are necessary for you, and how many of them you require. You will understand how to put together the most practical, functional and cost effective wardrobe possible.

## 3: BUILD AND MAINTAIN YOUR WARDROBE

I will help you navigate the mysteries of putting your wardrobe plan into action. You will learn:

- what sorts of records to keep and why
- how to review your wardrobe
- what the different kinds of capsule wardrobes are, and which one is best for you

- that clothes don't fit when you try them because there is something wrong with them (not you!), and what you can do about it
- what the characteristics of quality are and how you can prioritise them
- what clothes to wear for a variety of dress code occasions; historic and contemporary
- how to shop efficiently and effectively
- how to take care of your clothes so that you can maximise their lifespans

There is a little repetition between the Develop Your Wardrobe Plan and Build and Maintain Your Wardrobe parts, but only so that you have the relevant information to hand and don't need to keep flicking backwards and forwards to find them.

In this book, I use the term wardrobe to refer to your clothes, and closet for the places you put them. I've also put a glossary at the end, so if you come across a word or abbreviation you don't understand (or forget) you can look it up.

The matrix shown on the next page provides examples of the different kinds of clothes I refer to through this book.

## Build Your Signature Wardrobe

**Table 1: Historical Clothing Styles**

	<b>Daywear</b> high necklines and long sleeves  plain wool and cotton	<b>Eveningwear</b> low necklines and short sleeves  luxurious and embellished fabrics
<b>House Clothes</b> (wear in private)	work (chores)	leisurewear (relaxing)
<b>Street Clothes</b> (wear in public)	career socialising church galleries, museums sportswear	dinner parties concerts, theatre gala functions

Are you ready? Then turn the page and let's get started!



# PART ONE: Historical Context

THIS PART GIVES AN IDEA of the constraints people worked within when they were planning their wardrobes. If you want to get straight to business, skip this section and go to Part Two (Develop Your Wardrobe Plan).

## CHAPTER 1



# 1900s

THE NEW CENTURY SEEMED FULL of promise, with new technologies offering better ways of doing things and never-ending advances in science.



## ON THE WORLD STAGE

### *Politics*

At the turn of the twentieth century, Queen Victoria died and the British throne passed to her son Edward (VII). He and his pals enjoyed European fashions and art which led to a distinctive design style generally referred to as Edwardian. Australia gained self-rule; Cuba, Norway and Bulgaria gained independence, and the Irish demanded home rule.

### *War*

The first decade of the twentieth century wasn't peaceful, with the Boer War (resulting in British annexation of the free republics), the Philippine-American War (of Independence) and the Russo-Japanese War for control of Manchuria and Korea. There was also the Russian Revolution and the Herero War genocide.

### *Disaster*

The planet was rocked by hurricanes in Galveston, typhoons in Hong Kong, earthquakes in Guatemala, San Francisco, Jamaica, and Italy as well as volcanic eruptions in Martinique and Italy. There were disastrous fires in Ottawa, the Hoboken docks, Jacksonville, the Paris Metro, the Iroquois Theatre Chicago, Baltimore and the steamboat General Slocum. Ocean liners SS Norge and SS Valencia sank, and there was an explosion at the Rolling Mill Mine.

### *Science and Technology*

Scientific and technological advancements included Einstein's theory of *special* relativity, and the development of the seismograph, air conditioner, Geiger counter, alkaline battery,

electric typewriter, dictation machine, radio receiver and broadcaster. Additionally, the neon lamp, lie detector, continuous tractor tracks, Photostat machine, Bakelite, the first Zeppelin and aeroplane flights and the tuberculosis vaccination.

### *Domestic Developments*

On the domestic front, petrol and diesel cars entered mass production. Phonographs and Gramophones became popular home entertainments, you could buy low-cost brownie cameras, clocks that made tea, and pianola devices that played recordings made by pianists.

### *The Arts*

“Popular” music was just beginning its separation from “Classical” with recordings of singers generally supported by orchestras. Popular songs included *Take Me Out to the Ballgame*, *Pomp and Circumstance* and *Anchors Aweigh*. In the literary world, publications included *The Wizard of Oz*, *The Call of the Wild*, *Anne of Green Gables*, and *The Secret Agent*. With the invention of cinema came *The Great Train Robbery* and the first feature film *The Story of the Kelly Gang*. Art movements included Post-Impressionism (Van Gogh), Symbolism (Gauguin) and Art Nouveau (Klimt).

## SOCIAL AND TECHNOLOGICAL DEVELOPMENTS IN FASHION

### *Social Expectations*

Upper class women embraced leisure activities which led to the development of less restrictive clothing though corsets and

long skirts were still worn every day. Bicycles had been available since the late 1880s, and women were using them to get around. Bloomer dresses (a very loose pant that looked like a skirt when standing) were losing popularity, but looser corsets and shorter skirts remained.

Changes in transport technologies led to changes in dress; cars in the 1900s were open and required protection for clothing, and as more women started driving, their skirts became a little shorter. In 1904, drivers were advised to wear leather for warmth and wind protection, punched for summer to promote air circulation and evaporation of perspiration. Headwear was essential, and women were advised to wear veils to secure their hats and protect their faces from dust. Duster coats were developed for rain protection.

Aeroplanes were also open to the elements, making goggles essential. Female fliers needed to have their skirts tied to their legs and many women aviators wore men's leather jackets, helmets, breeches and boots instead.

In the early 1900s, swimwear for women was pantaloons and dress, an outfit that effectively prevented swimming even had it been socially acceptable. In 1905 Annette Kellerman (aged 18), at that time a well-known Australian swimmer and diver was invited to perform in London for the Royal Family. She was accustomed to competing in a man's one piece tank suit that exposed her thighs, but as this was forbidden by the venue she sewed black stockings onto her suit for the performance. She was arrested for indecency in Boston in 1907 for swimming in her man's suit but was permitted by the judge to swim for health benefits providing she wore a robe when not in the water. This outfit became the "Annette Kellermanns" swimsuit for women, basically a man's suit with a knee length skirt.

The first permanent hair wave was developed around 1906, it was a process that involved chemicals *and* electrically produced heat and took about 10 hours in the beauty salon.

### *Fabric Developments*

Favoured fabrics were crepe de chine, chiffon, mousseline and tulle in pink, blue and mauve pastels. Some satin dresses were embroidered or painted in tiny floral patterns.

The first manufactured fibre of the twentieth century was viscose. It was marketed as artificial silk because its drapes, stretches and shrinks like silk (renamed rayon in 1924) and is still used as a silk substitute today.

It is manufactured from very short cotton fibres and/or wood chips, which are dissolved, mixed with chemicals and the resulting solution filtered and forced into a sulphuric acid bath that triggers the production of long cellulose fibres. It comes in several variants variously called viscose rayon, rayon or viscose. Cuprammonium rayon is another form of rayon; as its manufacture is an environmentally harmful process it is now difficult to obtain.

The second fibre is a relative of rayon; it is also made from cotton or wood, but has a different chemical processing that results in cellulose acetate. Acetate looks shiny and is often found in formal and bridal gowns and decorative fabrics. The fibre was called acetate silk until 1924, rayon until 1953 and it is now known as acetate.

### *Sewing Machines*

The sewing machine as we know it today was in general use in the home by 1900. Most working class women were sewing their family's clothes by hand in the nineteenth century. An experienced sewer could make an average shirt with 20,620

stitches in 10 - 14 hours at the rate of 35 stitches per minute. Using a machine that sewed 3,000 stitches a minute on average reduced the task to one hour.

At this time, you could order a drop head treadle machine for \$10 from a catalogue, or a Singer sewing machine from a travelling salesman for \$40 - \$75.

### *Manufacturing*

While menswear was almost exclusively ready-to-wear, most middle class women's clothing was still made to measure. The orders were generally taken by a catalogue, salon, or at one of the new-fangled department stores and made up in a sweatshop or as piecework by a dressmaker working from home.

The working conditions some seamstresses worked in were so bad that trade boards were set up in the UK to regulate them. Should you be wealthy enough to travel to Paris, the same circumstances would apply, though your day dresses may have been made by a dressmaker who came to the house to measure you up.

Working class women generally made their own, with their own sewing machines if they could afford it.

## MEANWHILE AT HOME

If you were alive in the early twentieth century, you would not have had mains running water, gas or electricity.

### *Housing*

Rental shortages meant tenants couldn't be too fussy - few homes had toilets, even less running water. Indoor toilets and kitchens with sinks were the minimum standards for the middle class, but the height of luxury for working class - only

20% of New York families had a bathroom though 31% had a toilet in their apartment.

### *Water Supply*

You may have had a rainwater tank connected to a tap inside the house, but most likely would have had to take eight or ten trips each day to a dam, creek or spring, well or town pump to fill the tank up.

### *Doing the Laundry*

Doing the laundry would have been gruelling hard work, and one load of washing (washed, boiled and rinsed) would use about 50 gallons (190L) of water.

To start, you and your family would change clothes on Sunday - you would sort by colour, fabric and level of soil before soaking your fine (delicate) whites overnight in warm water with a little soap grated or scraped from the bar before any stains could set.

Your Monday process looked like this:

1. Lay out all your tubs - a second washing tub, one for boiling, one for rinsing with plain water, one for bluing rinse, and one for starch.
2. Put some water on to heat up, and grate some soap while you wait. You might have had a wood or coal stove, but many working class families still relied on open fires.
3. Drain your fine whites.
4. Pour hot suds over them before rubbing them on your washboard.
5. Wring them out and apply soap directly to stubborn stains.

6. Cover them with fresh water and bring to the boil. While you are waiting, put your coarse whites to soak in the water leftover from the fine whites if it doesn't look too dirty.
7. Stir your fine whites while they are boiling so they don't go yellow.
8. When your clothes are done, remove, rub any remaining stains with soap.
9. Rinse in plain water and wring out.
10. Rinse in a bluing agent and wring again.
11. Dip in starch if necessary for stiffness or body, and wring out.
12. Carry washing outside to hang on the line to dry.
13. When dry, take down and fold ready for ironing.
14. Replenish the water heating on the stove and exchange any water too dirty to reuse.
15. If necessary pop back to the well for more fresh water.
16. Then repeat the above with your coarse whites.
17. Start your colours.
18. Finish with your woollen underwear.

And in between, tend your livestock and vegetable garden, mind the kids and prepare food.

On Tuesday morning, you'd do your ironing:

1. Put a clean sheet of iron on the fire to heat.

## Build Your Signature Wardrobe

2. Set at least two, but perhaps three to six irons of varying weights on the iron to heat.
3. Dampen your dry clothes, roll them in a cloth and leave them until the irons are hot enough.
4. Cover your table, shirt and skirt ironing boards with a woollen ironing cloth so they are ready when you need them.
5. When hot, rub the irons with beeswax to prevent sticking, wipe clean and test on paper or rags to make sure it's not too hot.
6. Iron like mad while it's still hot before putting it back on the sheet to reheat.
7. Wax, clean and test the second one.
8. Swap for heavier irons when you need more weight for thicker fabric and lighter irons for thinner.
9. Continue ironing every single item you have washed because all your clothes are cotton or wool (that's just how they come) and they all need ironing. And because you are a proud woman and don't want anyone thinking you aren't taking proper care of your family.

Many urban poor families had no choice but to send out their laundry because they did not have space or the equipment to wash their own clothes, particularly when it came to men's shirts and collars.

## INCOME AND CLOTHING EXPENDITURE

### *Income*

At this time husbands, wives and children all worked for pay. Some households also took in boarders or lodgers, and some

had income from other sources including home grown produce. The average annual wage in 1905 was:

- Working Class: \$497
- Middle Class: \$720

### *Clothing Expenditure*

The first survey of retail prices was published in 1903, and this showed that households spent 14% of their income on clothing. However, this data group also includes carpets, horse blankets, leather hides and wool fleeces so it is probable that the actual clothing spend was less than this. As prices increased by 12% over the course of the decade, the proportional cost of income may have increased. The family spend was split 32% on the husband, 27% for the wife and 41% towards children's clothing.

## WOMENSWEAR

### *Key Looks*

The decade started with stiff S shape corsets and high collars though this still permitted different outfits for different kinds of activities. Within this silhouette were two basic stereotypes:

- John Singer Sargent's idealised portraits of upper class women with their open necks, tiny waists and up-dos.
- Charles Dana Gibson's pen and ink sketches of ordinary young women with pigeon bosoms, nipped in waists and hobble skirts.

The decade became a debate about what a beautiful woman was; the painted ideal or the real woman captured in a moment of time by a photograph. It was the start of the realisation that

beauty was more elusive than having the right clothes and jewels, it was a different kind of quality.

Middle class women new to the workforce in respectable roles as governesses and typists wore “professional” tailored dresses whereas non-working women wore skirts with floppy lacy blouses.

### *Key Figures*

While some actors and dancers were becoming more socially acceptable, without radio, television or the internet, they had little influence. Newspapers were available, and then as now scandal sheets were popular, but entertainers were not “celebrities” and not generally thought newsworthy. In any case, ordinary people had little money for discretionary purposes and tended to dress for practicality.

### *Key Designers*

Conservative wealthy women had their clothes made-to-measure at the House of Worth (the first couturier to offer bespoke clothing in Paris) famous for their beautiful and finely detailed design and execution. More adventurous women went to Callot Soeurs for traditional silhouettes enhanced with exotic Eastern influences like harem pants and kimono sleeves in metallic fabrics encrusted with jewels.

Later in the decade, designers started relaxing the corset’s S shape. Jeanne Paquin designed more functional, yet beautifully delicate dresses with empire lines, hidden pleats and fur or lace trimmings.

Paul Poiret developed a more comfortable and beautiful free-flowing silhouette created by draping rather than tailoring. He is best known for the kimono coat, hobble skirts, harem

pants and the straight silhouette. He was among the first designers to add a perfume line and set up their own fabric house to develop fabrics and decorative arts in support of their clothing lines. Some of these employed designers and/or artists who were inspired by events such as the discovery of Tutankhamen's tomb or Indonesian batik patterns.

Stores like Liberty of London commissioned fabrics and designs that challenged the French dominance.

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## PART TWO: Develop Your Wardrobe Plan

IF YOU WORK THROUGH THIS part step by step you will develop a wardrobe plan consisting of a set of purchasing principles to guide your shopping, and the start of your basic annual shopping list.

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## Step 3: Establish Your Style

**S**tyle, similar to appropriateness, is all about YOU. It is your distinctive presentation of your authentic self. It has a component of grooming, behaviour and deportment (the way that you move and speak). It does not specifically mean elegant or fashionable. It is not a fixed thing, it is fluid because your knowledge and tastes are always changing.

In 1925, you were advised that you had the right to be beautiful, but that to do this you needed to eat well, exercise and take fresh air to encourage a good complexion and healthy hair. You could further enhance your general appearance with makeup and the right hairstyle. Your individual expression of your beauty was considered an asset. Oddly, this is the thing that most modern women have a lot of trouble with.

It's worth pointing out that if you don't make the effort to define your style, someone else will define it for you. Which is probably why modern women have a lot of trouble understanding they are beautiful.

Not to mention that the period in which you are young and beautiful enough to be thoughtlessly fashionable is so much shorter than the rest of your life. The sooner that you can define your style, the more heartache you will save yourself when you find you have passed your fashion use by date.

## WHAT IS STYLE ANYWAY?

Style blends your opinions about what is beautiful with what is appropriate. It's not just what you wear, but how you wear it too - your posture and carriage. It is improving fashion by expressing yourself through it; without style you aren't "dressed", you're just not naked, you have no style or influence.

You already know this is not something you are born with (unless you are very lucky). You have to learn it, perhaps you have been lucky enough to have a good teacher, but it's more likely you haven't had anyone to guide you through this.

The foundation of style is your pride in yourself and your appearance. It's wearing correctly fitting underwear that supports your posture and lies neatly under your clothes. It's walking lightly and gracefully, perhaps carrying something to keep your hands busy, as well as standing comfortably and neatly in a manner that is in keeping with your clothing.

Discovering your style requires effort. You need to analyse what others are wearing, training your eye to understand how the lines, accessories and appropriateness of stylish clothes differ from mediocre ones.

## BODY SHAPE

Expressing your style began as a way to emphasise your "good" points and suppress your "bad". Of course to do this you have

to spend some time in front of the mirror being quite honest with yourself.

I used to find it quite hard to see the whole of me in the mirror rather than focussing on what I thought of as my chunky calves or flabby belly. I changed my perspective by trying on a lot of different clothes in stores and taking photos of them. Then I printed them (several to a page) and looked at them as if they were a magazine spread, and I was quite surprised to find that among other things, my calves weren't that chunky nor my belly that flabby. I think this is a valuable exercise you really should consider because other people do not look at you the same way you look at yourself.

Moving forward, I use a full-length mirror in a very ornate frame. I find it helps to stand back from it and look at myself as if I am a painting hanging in an art gallery; it's easier to see and critique a painting's lines and colours than your own body. And when you think about it, this is *exactly* how your friends see you when they stand on the street waiting for you to catch up with them.

Understanding your body shape helps you to dress it well, and “correct” irregularities, for example, not further shortening yourself if you are petite or lengthening yourself if you are tall.

At this point, you may be expecting a long list of things to correct and advice on how to do that, but not in this book! That's because you are a unique individual, the sum of your parts, not a bunch of problems that require correction. If I was going to concede that there are problems to be corrected, it is the clothes that need correcting not you. And by the way, almost all of that correcting advice is contradictory.

For example, I am 4' 11”, I am too short for “petite”... “Conventional” wisdom suggests that I should wear tiny skirts, tiny patterns and tiny pieces of jewellery. Or as I think of it, dolls

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And this comes in handy when you put together an outfit for working out nice proportions.

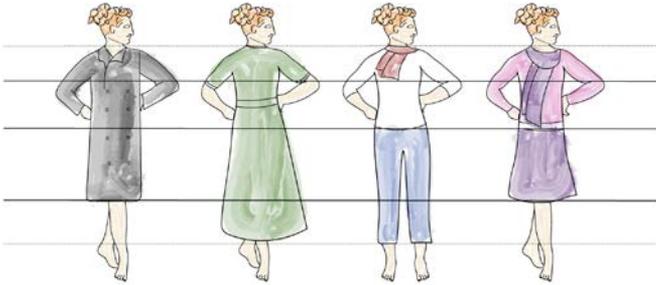


Figure 3: Outfit Divisions

Some say you can use this to change your apparent size and shape - vertical or horizontal stripes, big or small patterns. But as with the other figure correction advice, there are as many pattern variations as there are people so just try clothes on, take a picture and see what you think. You might like it.

Similarly, knowing how proportions work for you is useful for bringing cohesion to your overall look, by ensuring that accessories are correctly placed.

The easiest way for you to work this out is more or less what I have done here. Take a photo of yourself and measure your height. Then calculate your half, thirds and strangely interesting dimensions. Print your photo and draw lines where your measurements are, similar to Figure 2. These lines can help you decide where your necklaces, waists and hems should be, but remember that these dimensions can be for individual items of clothing as well as your body.

## COLOUR SELECTION

With your body proportioned, you can move onto colour selection, and this relies on some knowledge of colour theory. It's important to get this right because colour enhances or detracts from a garment's fabric and line (as well as your skin and hair). I'm sure you've had the experience of buying the same thing in two or more colours but finding you prefer one over the other(s).

You could take the easy way out and use a personalised colour service that will categorise you into a season and give you examples of approved colours. However, exact colours will not always be available and if you don't understand what makes them your colours you may not be able to confidently substitute.

The colour spectrum is a continuum, not the seven distinct colours we see in the rainbow (red, orange, yellow, green, blue, indigo, violet). In between each of these colours are others generally labelled by those that make them up, for example, blue-green. It is actually a circle joined at the red and violet ends to form what we know as the colour wheel.

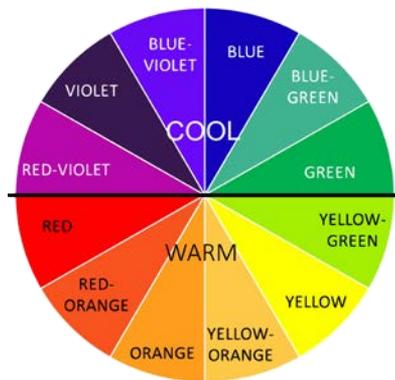


Figure 4: The Colour Wheel

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One suggestion from 1925 is to dress for your eyes during the day and your hair at night. For example, delft blue will look crisp during the day and unremarkable at night, whereas scarlet may be too striking for daytime but enhance dark hair at night. Of course, if you are a striking woman, you may be comfortable wearing red during the day, so by all means do.

The best choice of colour are those that enhances your skin and hair as well as your eyes. You can often identify them by looking at old photos of yourself (or making another magazine spread), but you might prefer to have a colour consultation or buy an app to help. Your natural colouration may change over time, and this can be managed with makeup but it is better to work at making sure the correct hues, tints and tones are purchased in your main clothes, their trimmings and your accessories. The wrong hair colour can also skew results.

Commonly the wardrobe building advice was to pick a colour palette and stick with it; a dark base colour supplemented by one or two harmonising colours in your accessories. You might prefer dark for winter, with a lighter shade for summer. If you find that you need to start from the beginning, this is a good approach to take to ensure you get the best value.

## PERSONALITY

Your clothing shapes and colours combine with your personality to convey who you are. And there cannot be any compromise here, because compromising is not being true to yourself, and this deceives others.

Just like colours, there are many services that you can use to type yourself, again usually into one of four types. There are also services that will translate your Myers-Briggs (and the like) results into a system for getting dressed. In 1925, the

## Build Your Signature Wardrobe

Woman's Institute of Domestic Arts and Sciences used four types:

1. **Youthful:** a person that retains their youthful outlook and manner their whole life and consequently chooses simple clothing in bright colours, busy patterns and fluffy designs.
2. **Feminine:** soft flowing fabrics, pastel shades in loose full styles.
3. **Dignified:** draped clothes in dark subdued colours, and richly textured fabrics.
4. **Tailored:** actively participates in business and sport, and may appear to have severely tailored features. They are best in plain clothes made from stiff fabrics with severe lines.

A more recent version of this gives us:

1. **Sporty Natural:** the "girl next door" easy going and comfort driven dresser.
2. **Feminine Romantic:** has a delicate soft appearance and prefers soft colours, flowing silhouettes.
3. **Tailored Classic:** understated and elegant, prefers balance and symmetry.
4. **High-Fashion Dramatic:** the clotheshorse who prefers a striking, head-turning look.

Other descriptions I have seen include:

- Eclectic, Bohemian, Maverick and Bombshell
- Creative, Romantic, Casual and Elegant
- Expressive, Romantic, Relaxed, Dramatic

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## PART THREE: Build and Maintain Your Wardrobe

HAVING WORKED THROUGH PART TWO, you now have an annual wardrobe plan. It is a living document that will grow and change as you and your circumstances do. This part helps you to extend it for three, five or as many years as is appropriate for you by tracking your purchases, reviewing what you own and deciding your future wardrobe direction.

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## What Good Fit Looks Like

**S**tyle is a reflection of who you are, and to an extent that is based on your physical size and shape. When you wear clothes that fit correctly you will feel more comfortable and more confident. And when your clothes fit your body in the right places, you will look good because your clothes are not hinting at figure flaws that aren't there.

Like everything else about you, your shape is not fixed but changes according to your lifestyle and stage of life. That doesn't just relate to your age, but to your menstrual cycle as well. On average, women gain and lose between one and six pounds (450g - 2.7kg), and some as many as ten (4.5kg) over the course of their cycle. (You might want to mention this when you get fitted for a bra - and the best time to get fitted is the week after your period). Not to mention other conditions that may prevent a stable weight and body shape/size.

And just to make things even more difficult, despite what we have come to think of as “standard sizes” they are not actually standard at all. Each brand has its own version of the size, and very often its own numbering system as well. And just when you get comfortable with that brand, you are squeezed out of its target demographic and can’t find anything to fit anymore.

If that is not complicated enough for you, add in “generous”, “relaxed”, “classic” and “trim” fits. As well as “boyfriend”, “skinny” and “super skinny” fits. Throw in some “high”, “mid” and “low” rises. Or “loose” and “slouchy”. I could go on and on.

While good fit rises from your body shape and Greek Proportions, what you think is a good fit also depends on your fashion personality’s toleration for the tightness or looseness of your clothes. For example, the type 1 wants clothes that feel light and fresh, the 2 soft and loose, the 3 dynamic and sexy, and the 4 structured and fitted.

But there are some practical requirements for ease of movement that determine what makes a good fit as well. Some fashion seasons are going to be more difficult than others for you to stay true to your ideas of stylishness.

## **BREASTS**

Ideally, your breasts will appear to sit equidistant between your waist and shoulders. They have very little in the way of built in support structure and will droop over time. If you would like to keep them perky as long as possible, you need a bra that offers good support and minimises bounce. A fitting at a lingerie store will help you choose a good supportive bra that does this. They can also help you select bras that minimise or maximise your assets if that’s what you want.

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and the garment hip should sit at the same place; too high and the garment pouches around your waist and/or lower back, too low and it will restrict the movement of your legs and hang weirdly.

## GENERAL FIT ISSUES

It doesn't matter what size you are, you will always look shapelier and better dressed in clothes that have some shape. Clothes that skim your body do not make you an attention whore, or a tease, they merely demonstrate that you care enough about yourself and others to dress well. Embrace your curves!

Conversely, you will always look lumpy and lazy in clothes that are too big or too small. As I mentioned, the number on the label bears no relevance to whether a garment fits or not. It is unlikely that there is even one single ready-to-wear garment out there that is a perfect fit for you - they have been manufactured to fit the maximum number of bodies possible. You will only get a perfect fit by having individual items tailored to fit.

When you try clothes on, take three sequential sizes of each garment so that you can gauge the fit and pick the ones that fit your hips or breasts the best for each garment time.

The way to do this is to try moving in the way that you would expect to when you wear the garment. For example, if it's a business suit, sit, walk, reach for a file on a shelf, bend to pick something up and so on. Or if it's for a gala event, sit, dance, visit the bathroom, and so on. (It's quite tricky mimicking all that in some small fitting rooms...).

If the garment gives you the freedom of movement you require it's a very good start. And if you can get dressed without someone else's help, then that's even better.

You should have plenty of room for arm and shoulder movement, skirts should not pull up when you sit. The seams at shoulder, neck, underarm and waist should correspond with their body parts.

Clothes that are too tight will restrict your movement, reduce your efficiency and will make you feel uncomfortable:

- They should be uniformly snug, including an allowance of looseness to allow for comfort when standing and sitting. They should balance on the body and suggest its contours.
- As the main fit problem is shaping flat fabric to fit a rounded surface, garment design lines should be placed on the body contour lines related to the joint articulation to reduce interference, e.g. shoulder seams should sit at the shoulder.
- The fabric's weave must be parallel to the weft yarns at chest, bust, hip and arm hole while the warp is perpendicular to them and parallel to the centre front.

Almost every single fit flaw can be corrected with a tiny seam lift or drop to gather in or release a little fabric. Even older clothes that are still in good condition can be altered to fit your changing shape. The lesson here is to make your clothes fit your body, not to make your body fit your clothes. If you can't quite get your head around this concept, put a t-shirt on back to front to give yourself an idea about the difference in the shape of each side and how the shirt has been constructed to fit.

Most of these tweaks are unachievable for someone who doesn't understand dressmaking or tailoring, so while I have mentioned that clothing can be adjusted it's best to start your new relationship with a dressmaker/tailor with some simple

adjustments like hems before progressing to more difficult ones. An expensive garment rendered unwearable by poor alterations is a double loss (been there too).

## LEARN MORE

You can learn about fit in general by looking at photos from times gone by, and seeing how the shapes, lines and trims divide the body. Kind of like a geometry problem or colouring book. Clothes from the 1930s to the 1950s were generally very flattering for women's bodies, and vintage images are more likely to accurately represent the shape of the woman wearing them. As you look, also notice how the changes in fashion and manufacture have affected the closeness of fit.

You can get a better idea of what good fit might look like on your body by looking at what similarly sized women are wearing and analysing the fit. You have to do this in real life - Photoshop was invented in 1987, and has become so prevalent that it is unlikely that you will see a still or moving image that hasn't been altered in some way - even the one in the back of this book (any image can be converted into a digital format for manipulation). There are also old school tricks like pinning excess fabric at the back of a garment to produce a closer fit; you should be suspicious of almost every single modern image you are exposed to.

As you observe live women, bearing in mind the different fashion types, ask yourself whether you think her clothes look too tight (does it look like she is about to split her clothing skin)? Or are they too loose (would she benefit from a little more shape in the clothes)? How do you think the shape and fit could be improved?

Once you have developed this knowledge, you will be in a better position to accurately assess your own fit, by feel *and*

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## What Good Quality Looks Like

**T**he very first thing to mention is that price does not necessarily indicate good quality. Sometimes expensive things are poorer quality than inexpensive things. The next thing to note is that big brand or designer names do not necessarily indicate good quality either, sometimes no names or emerging designers provide better quality.

A good quality garment, let's say a sweater is one that fulfils the requirements of its form and function - it looks good and keeps you warm. It will almost always fit well, be made from durable materials that are appropriate for the garment's purpose, and well enough made that it will survive many washes without losing its shape.

Having said that, I have to acknowledge that good quality is not a fixed thing, it changes according to your circumstances. The key thing is that good quality in clothing relates to the extent that they meet *your* needs and are fit for *your* purposes.

Quality changes according to your budget, which is why you are often advised to buy the best quality you can afford. Perhaps right now you can only afford acrylic sweaters and aspire to wool blend, or maybe you have merino and aspire to a cashmere blend.

It also changes according to what's appropriate for you. If you live in a colder climate, acrylic sweaters are probably not going to work for you so you may have to start with wool. Or if you are allergic to wool you may have to work with one of the more recently developed synthetic fleeces.

And it also relates to your style. If you are a type 3 or 4, you probably prefer practical and durable clothing and think that a good quality garment should last for several years in which case you might prefer a densely woven single colour wool sweater (that you are prepared to take good care of). If you are type 1, you probably prefer constant variety and might think a good quality garment should be exhausted in six months and consequently choose something brightly patterned with a high synthetic content that can be thrown in the washing machine and worn the next day.

I think that a good quality garment has to have an amount of flexibility about it as well. Flexibility in the sense of multi-purpose; something you can dress up or down. Something that looks like a whole other thing depending on what else you wear it with, for example, necklace or scarf.

There is a vast difference between a well-made garment and one that is not. Do not ever buy a garment that is not well made because you will not feel comfortable or well dressed in it and probably won't wear it often, that is, it will be a waste of your budget. And why would you let someone cheat you like that anyway? Buy the best quality you can afford because YOU deserve it.

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sturdier suggests suitability for more physical activities.

- **Durability:** can withstand wear and tear and cleaning without losing shape or colour
- **Comfort:** smooth and soft, or light and cool, or warm and snugly.

These things are all characteristics of quality, but they are not all equally important. Comfort would be utmost in most people's underwear, maybe durability for the construction worker and appearance for the lawyer. Comfort may be the most important consideration for your winter clothes, but the comfort you value in your sweaters is not the same kind of comfort you value in your overcoat.

## READY-TO-WEAR CLOTHING

When reviewing the quality of ready-to-wear clothes, you should firstly consider the information already covered on fabric quality. Do not be afraid to touch the clothes, to assess the feel by gently rubbing, scrunching and pulling the fabric.

In general, the design of the fabric will be suitable for the garment, that is, the pattern does not conceal the lines of the garment or vice versa. For example, a plaid looks best in an unbroken expanse, a detailed garment line made of godets and yokes is best made from a plain fabric that suits tailoring. Pants should be made from a firm fabric that suits a tailored appearance. Tops should be in keeping with the outfits they go with - dressy with dressy, tailored with tailored, and so on.

If the fabric seems acceptable, try the garment on, hopefully in a good sized fitting room with "daylight" lighting and a triple mirror. Look for fabric defects that may not have been visible earlier, and take a look from all sides. Consider the adequacy of the fit; the height and width around the upper arm,

the length of the sleeve, the size of the shoulders, chest and hips. Move around to see if the pleats lie flat, that the gathers hold sufficient fabric to hang softly. If the neck or armhole puckers or pulls as you move, just put it back and don't consider it any further.

Another aspect to consider is general usefulness. Light trim on dark colours may not wash well together which will require special care to maintain.

Inspect the manufacture to ensure the following:

- The seam allowances are a minimum 5/8" (1.6cm) to permit alterations if necessary.
- If the garment is shorter than you like, that the hem allowance is large enough for you to lower it.
- The seams are straight and do not drift diagonally off course.
- The pieces are all assembled with the grain in the same up/down direction (when you look across the fabric there are no inconsistencies in the sheen or texture).
- Areas of wear such as the neck and sleeve edges are reinforced.
- Collar edges and corners are slim and flat.
- Zippers are sewn in with matching thread, the stitching is straight and not puckered, and that the zip opens and closes smoothly.
- The stripes and plaids match at major seams.
- The top stitching matches or contrasts with the garment and is even and not puckered.
- You can't see the hem stitching from the right side.

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# About the Author



Writer and philosopher Alexandria Blaelock advises embracing the things that matter like beauty, friendship and wisdom.

She lives in Melbourne (Australia) with her husband and two Labradors where she is currently trying to bring a little *Famous Five* adventure into her life. While she likes ginger beer and ham rolls you are more likely to find her drinking red wine with antipasto.

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