



Dress Designing Essentials

Learning Outcomes

By the end of this unit the learner will be able to:

- ✓ Explain how to choose appropriate materials according to the design's requirement
- ❑ Explain how to choose appropriate colour for a design

Dress Designing Essentials

Successful dress designing involves the following:

- The study of the structural lines of the human figure.
- The understanding of individual types and suitability.
- The appropriate selection of materials regarding colour, texture, and weave.

Detail - This is any ornamentation or shaping and the evaluation of the laws of design embracing proportion, rhythm, harmony and the perfect balance of line, mass, and colour.

The design of a garment can be categorised into four areas:

1. Material
2. Colour
3. Design or Structure
4. Decoration

Choice of Material

The first thing that needs consideration when designing a garment is the occasion for which that garment is intended to be worn. This will determine the type of material to use when constructing the garment, choosing an appropriate colour, the form or design and the type and amount of ornamentation.

When choosing the fabric it is necessary to remember what type of fabrics sit well and which ones should be used for particular effects. For example, stiff fabrics do not drape well and are best used for achieving a more tailored effect. It is also very important to consider the type of individual a garment is being designed for and a good example would be designing a dress. In this case it would be wise to avoid stiff, wiry or rough surfaced fabrics for a larger frame as it tends to make a person look larger. Using soft or dull fabrics will reduce the appearance of size on a wearer and materials which do not cling will make a smaller person appear larger.

When choosing the materials for a dress it is important to ensure that they are all of similar quality. Using cheap cotton on a garment, which is mostly made of voile, will look tacky and in a way, unfinished. However, there are some materials that can be used together harmoniously such as certain wool fabrics matched with satin, linen, or pongee. In these cases, the appropriate combinations will add variety to a garment and ensure that it is not too severe or monotonous. Even though a smaller framed wearer will look good in such material it is better to make sure that the design or pattern is not too conspicuous.

Patterns that are large fitted become tiresome after a while. Fabrics or materials which are plainer can really be worn by everyone and in small figures will give a quiet effect.

Choice of Colour

The colour on a garment will attract or repel. If any garment is made of colours that do not harmonise, the effect will be unappealing every time. Combining the right colours when dress designing is an art form and when done properly will lead to a successful outcome in a garment.

When the goal is to achieve a cool combination, greys and blues are the way to go, the colours of an autumn sky. For a summery effect, grey and lavender, pink and blue or grey and rose are the colour combinations. For a more woodsy or forest feel there are the russet browns and dull yellows with a splash of green here or there.

It is important to assess the individual you are creating for carefully and choose colours that will enhance the person's desirable features while diminishing the less than desirable ones. Bright colours should be selected with care as only a few people are able to wear them well and it is also important to take into account a person's age because what's suitable for the young is not necessarily so for the older person and vice versa. Lastly, it is necessary to mention the first point again and that is to remember for which occasion you are creating the garment.

Choosing the Design or Structure

Choosing the design or structure of a dress will depend on what the dress will be worn for, ie what's the occasion? Is it a house dress, or a more formal evening gown? Is it an afternoon frock or a more casual occasion?

The silhouette should follow the lines of the wearer's figure but not necessarily too closely. Decorative designs and structural lines must be appropriately placed in order to avoid space divisions. A good example of this would be a dress divided into two unequal parts by a belt or sash. This unevenness will create a more interesting look.



Fig 1.1 This long jacket and short skirt combination is an example of uneven proportion. Had the jacket been created the same size as the skirt it would have a 'boxy' look.

As all lines of any human figure are at the least, slightly curved, the line is one of force and beauty. For this reason, dress planning must include some degree of curve.

A dress should be designed or structured in a way that displays a clear relationship to the human form. It should cover any features considered 'poor' by the wearer (be careful not to place your own opinions here except in a professional design manner) and it should bring out a person's good features.

Decoration

There are times when a dress which is well-designed and well-proportioned seems to be lacking in something. This may often be a decorative addition which would change the appearance. Something as small as a belt buckle or even a pin of contrasting colour will change the entire scheme of the garment. Over-decoration would be something to avoid, however, as it could easily spoil a beautiful gown. Balance is the key.

Certain fabulous effects can be achieved through decorative tucks, ruffles, plaits or bands of the same material as a dress. Generally, decoration is more a question of how much to add (or not add) rather than the choice of material. The decoration(s) should be in keeping with the material. Usually fine textured materials do not allow much freedom when it comes to decoration as courser materials do.

THE PROPORTION OF THE FIGURE

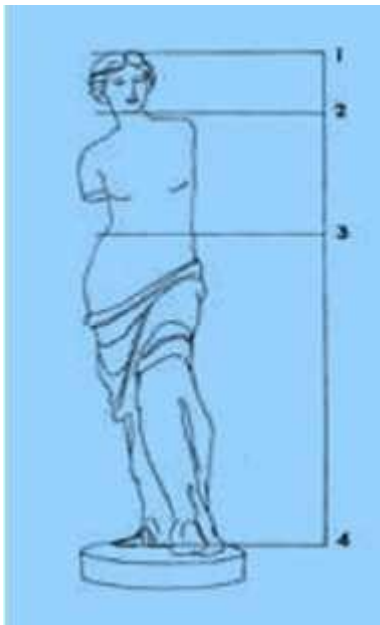


Fig 1.2 illustrates the structural lines and proportions of the human figure.

In the above picture, point 1 is the top of the head and point 2 is the chin. The area between points 2 and 3 is the most important structural part of the garment. Point 3 shows the correct structural waistline. Using the head as a unit of measurement is a way to work out the correct proportion of figure. The body, measured from the top of the head to the feet, is ordinarily 8 heads. From the chin to the waistline it is usually from 2 1/2 to 3 heads and across the shoulders it is 1 1/2 to 1 3/4 heads.

It is a good idea to study the proportions of the body and the structural points and experiment with the 'heads' as a unit of measurement. You can work with your own figure and find out whether your height is about 8 times the measurement of your head. It could be that you are 6 heads and not 8, which would mean you are shorter than the average person. Or, perhaps you are 10 heads which would mean you are taller than average.

Whatever the situation with the 'heads' measurement, find the best structural point to resolve the discrepancy in body measurements. The change may be in the line between 2 and 3 or a change in line at points 3 and 4. If a designer wants to add length to the body, it would be best to use a deep V line between points 2 and 3. If a wearer is quite tall, using lots of circles or ruffles between points 3 and 4 will lessen the appearance of the height.

Unusual Figures

There is only a very small group of people who have the 'perfect' figure, or face shape, or colouring and are able to wear almost any type of dress. Most people have certain individual characteristics, perhaps narrow shoulders, a large bust, or a squarish face, etc. and so choosing the correct design must be done with care.

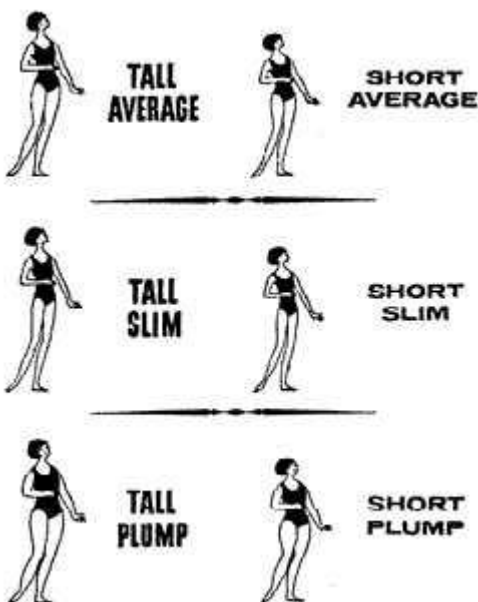


Fig 1.3

The Thin Figure

For thin figured people it is best to choose materials which do not cling to the body. Remember also that shiny materials increase the appearance of size. It is best if the lines of the silhouette are not continuous.

Use ruffles and tucks to achieve an effect of horizontal movement in the lines of a dress. Using a wide girdle will make the wearer appear with less height and light colours on a garment will make the wearer appear stouter.

What's suitable for the thinner figure?

- Lustrous materials, except if the person is too angular
- Loose clothing
- The silhouette of the dress shown as broken, rather than a long beginning line
- Materials that stand out somewhat from the figure
- Short collars
- Sleeves gathered in too tight
- Horizontal movement in the lines of the dress
- Broken lines and curved lines
- A soft, full line of drapery in the waist
- Patch pockets
- Wearing a cap
- Hats with low crowns

Unsuitable for the thinner figure:

- Severe straight lines
- Angle in the lines of the dress
- Long, narrow skirts
- Flat, tight waists
- Sleeves so short that the bones of the arm are conspicuous
- High hats
- Stiff trimmings like wings or standing out from the hat

The Stout Figure

The person with a stouter figure has a different set of designs to use or avoid. The use of soft materials with a duller colouring and not a shiny surface are better suited to stouter figures.

Dresses or other garments that are too tight should be avoided by those with a stout figure as these would only emphasise the figure. Creating a vertical movement through the use of certain devices will result in the eye travelling up and down rather than across from side to side.

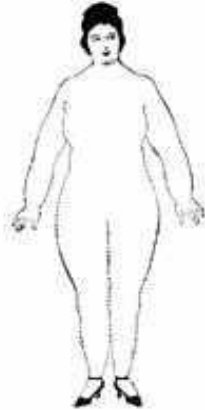


Fig 1.4

A person with a stouter figure as in 4.4 above should avoid extremes in dress. These would include very long or very short skirts, very tight sleeves, or the flowing variety. What is desirable is a long V line to the neck.

What is suitable for the stouter figure?

- Choosing one material or colour throughout the garment and do not break it up into separate parts
- Vertical movement in the lines of the dress
- The use of transitional lines in the dress rather than extreme curves or angles
- Dull surfaced fabrics
- Soft yet not clinging fabrics
- Dull colours in large areas
- Black, or very dark colours if the silhouette is good. If the outline of the figure is poor, it's best to use dark colours to reduce size, but not so dark that they will call attention to the silhouette
- If the figure is 'normal' then the use of an unbroken silhouette is desirable
- The use of a long diagonal line at the waist is the idea for a stout figure, as long as the diagonal is not directed too far out toward the hips as this will widen the waist and hips
- Semi-fitted, not tight effects, in the dress as a whole, and moulded to the hips with some fullness below
- Ensuring emphasis is on the dress up and down the centre front, with the principle highlight at the throat and, if possible, a secondary one at the bottom of the skirt

- Panels of moderate width such as pleats, panels, etc. that begin above or below a point where the figure is large.
- Reasonably long skirts
- Skirts that flare a little in the centre front with a straight silhouette.
- A normal waist line or slightly above or below it.
- A narrow belt or no belt at all
- Slim, long set-in sleeves
- Normal armhole, or a bit higher if the shoulders are broad
- Sleeves that are slit vertically to show the length of the arm and only a portion of the width
- Simple neck lines, preferably long lines and long collars
- Short jackets the same colour as the skirt
- Moderate sized hats or hats that imply an upward movement
- Hats with irregular lines in the brim and a rather high crown
- Hats with transitional lines rather than extreme curves or angles
- Hair dressed high.

Unsuitable for the stouter figure

- Any stiff or lustrous fabrics or taffetas
- Large or conspicuous surface patterns or plaids
- Heavy, bulky fabrics
- Fabrics that take round lines
- Bright colours in large areas
- Unnecessarily full, long garments
- Foundation garments that produce bulges above and below the garment
- Very full or very tight garments
- Ruffles
- Horizontal movement in the lines of the dress
- Exaggerated curves or angles (the curves repeat the lines of the figure and the angles contradict them, therefore both call attention to the size)
- Very wide or extremely narrow panels
- Panels, pleats or overskirts that spread or flutter as one walks
- Pleats, panels, or any trimming ending or starting at a point where the figure is large
- Very narrow lines of trimming
- Flarey skirts all around
- Thin piping
- Fluffy fichus

- Hats or dresses with large circles
- Short skirts
- Yokes on skirts
- A high waist line, since it makes the waist appear broader
- A very long waistline which makes the upper part of the figure too heavy for the lower part
- Belts or sashes which are noticeable in width or in colour
- Tight-fitted or flowing sleeves
- Transparent sleeves
- Kimono sleeves which give an effect of breadth and looseness under the arm
- Ribbons or trimming extending or hanging from the sleeves
- Sleeves ending at an unusual width on the figure
- Wide, light cuffs on a dark dress which will make the eye travel across the figure and add width
- Tight or short collars
- Short jackets that contrast with the skirt
- Strange or very conspicuous shoes
- Slender, high-heeled shoes
- Small, big, round or flat hats
- Round hats
- Hats with long lines or brims drooping on both sides
- Contrasting colours and values in hats, hose, and shoes
- A low or broad style in hair dressing
- Tight, small waves or “bushy” hair
- Thin or small pieces of jewellery
- Tiny trimmings on hats and dresses
- Very small accessories

Long Waists, Slender Figure

Suitable

- The use of a slight blouse at the underarm seam
- Long lines in the skirt



Unsuitable

- A long, diagonal line at the waist
- A tight bodice

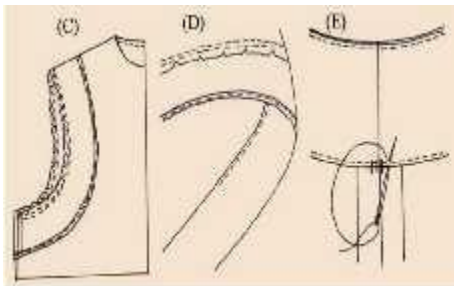
Narrow Shoulders

Suitable

- Padded or broadened shoulders
- Broad lines in collars, lapels, or yokes
- Placement of armhole seams slightly out or lower than usual

Unsuitable

- A panel or vest effect which starts wide at the waist or hips and becomes narrower closer to the neck. This will have the effect of a triangle with the point at the neck and the base at the waist and hips. This will appear to narrow the shoulders and broadening the waists and hips.
- Placement of armhole seams higher or further in than usual.



Broad Shoulders

Suitable

- Pleats that are lengthways, tucks, or folds which extend from shoulder to waist, placed toward the centre line in order that narrow rather than broaden the figure
- Hats with somewhat high crowns and wide brims

Unsuitable

- Collars, yokes or lapels with wide or horizontal structural lines
- Very small hats

Round Shoulders

Suitable

- Set-in sleeves
- Shoulder seams should be about one- half inch back of the normal shoulder line
- Collars that seem to straighten the curve of the back. Have the collar long enough to hang loose from the neck to below the highest point of the curve, or have it short enough to fill in the space between the neck and the beginning of the curve. Build out the waistline by allowing the waist to be full and loose in order to fill in below the prominent curve. This can be done using a panel which hangs from the neck to the waist, turning back under a loose belt, or by the use of a bolero jacket.

Unsuitable

- Collars ending at the curve of the back
- Collarless dresses that come in tight at the waistline
- Raglan or kimono sleeves
- A hat with a long, dropping brim in the back that forms a continuous line between the crown and the curve of the shoulders

Large Bust

Suitable

- Panels or vests
- Silhouette built out at waist and hips
- A yoke line, a piece of jewellery, or another type of conspicuous line that stops above or below

the bust line

- Long flat collars and jabots

Unsuitable

- A drawn in waist line
- High fitted waist
- Wide belts
- Trimming at, or near, the bust line

Flat Chests

Suitable

- Soft, full collars
- Jabots and fichus (small triangular shawls)
- Tucking or shirring the material into the shoulder seam and creating fullness over the chest

Unsuitable

- Tight waist

Large Hips

Suitable

- Emphasise the centre front of the dress
- Slanted lines from hem to waist ending a little to one side of the centre front
- Thin belts placed slightly below natural waistline
- Average amount of fullness in the skirt
- The skirt flaring slightly from the hips
- The skirt blouse at the waistline

Unsuitable

- A one-piece, beltless dress hanging straight from the shoulders
- Pockets placed at the hip line
- Horizontal lines on a skirt placed near the hips
- Short, tight or very full skirts
- Skirts that are narrowest at the hem
- Tight, closely fitted waist

Large Abdomens

Suitable

- Slightly loosened clothes at the waist
- Coats that fill out the sides of the figure

Unsuitable

- Upper part of skirts including the waist fitted tightly.
- Belts or sashes used at the centre front.

Small Faces

Usually, having a small face can seem out of proportion to the rest of the body. When this is the case, it is best for that person to wear a rather small hat. Large or "showy" trimmings on the hat will make the face seem even smaller by contrast. Principles learnt in the study of proportion will be of value here.

Suitable

- Smaller sized hats
- Fine textured trimmings and in scale
- A relatively small hair dress

Unsuitable

- Large or heavy hats
- A large hair dress, because it will make the face seem too small

Large Faces

Suitable

- A large enough hat to form an adequate frame for the face
- A moderate sized hair dress

Unsuitable

- Hats that are smaller than the widest part of the face
- Trimmings that are too small
- A large hair dress that makes the head look too heavy for the body
- A hair dress that is too small and will emphasize the size of the face

Squares or Broad Face

Suitable

- A hat with an irregular line
- Hair dressed high and with a soft, irregular line
- Rouge toward the centre of the face and blended up and down

Unsuitable

- Lines in the hat or at the neck that repeat the lines of the face
- Lines that oppose the lines of the face
- Hair dressed wide over the ears
- Hair parted in the middle

Round Face

Suitable

- Collar or scarf worn close to the neck in back and with a long line in front
- Necklines with an oval effect
- Hats with effects that are slightly irregular
- Hats with lines which attract the eye upward
- Rouge placed rather high on the cheeks toward the nose and blended down
- Hair worn in an irregular line
- Ears covered (unless neck is short), in that case leave the lower part of the ear exposed
- Hair parted toward the side and arranged in an irregular line
- Hair dressed high

Unsuitable

- Hats with round shapes and lines that repeat the curves of the face
- Hair parted in the centre and drawn tightly back
- Hair dressed wide over the ears
- Hair dressed in rounded shapes and lines

Narrow Pointer Face

Suitable

- Hats with medium-sized brims

- Hats with slightly drooping brims
- Short necklaces
- Moderate size in hair dress
- Hair worn back from the cheeks
- Hair worn low on the forehead and in soft irregular lines
- Rouge high out on the cheek bones and blended toward the nose, quite close to the hair

Unsuitable

- Hair worn up high, pointer knot at the top of the head
- High hats
- Tall, angular trimmings
- Hair worn so as to cover some of the cheeks

Prominent Chin and Jaw

Suitable

- Hair worn in a large mass at the top of the head and wide at the sides, above the ears
- Rouge high on the cheeks and toward the nose
- Rather large hats
- Hats with soft, irregular lines

Unsuitable

- Small hats
- Hats which have a 'severe' tailoring
- Hair puffed out below the ears

Receding Chin and Small Jaw

Suitable

- Average-sized hats
- Hats with a brim
- A small amount of rouge on each side of the chin
- Small hair dress
- Hair worn low at the neck

Unsuitable

- Large hats
- Hats that turn sharply away from the face
- Hair dressed to widen the upper part of the head and face

Prominent Foreheads

Suitable

- Hats with brims
- Hats worn low on the head
- Hair dressed low over the forehead to conceal some of it
- A broken irregular line in the hair dress

Unsuitable

- Hair pulled straight back off the forehead
- Hair dressed wide over the ears and temples

Low Foreheads

Suitable

- Hair pulled back from the forehead
- Hair dressed quite high

Unsuitable

- Parting hair in the middle

Large Waist and Hips

When a person has a large waist and/or hips that are out of proportion to the rest of the figure, then he/she should dress in a way that moves the interest away from that area. The head should be made a centre of interest and therefore the dress/garment should be designed so it moves the eyes towards the head.

Suitable

- Built-out shoulders
- The interest kept at the face and away from the waist and hips

- Long skirts which add height
- Hats of average size or even slightly larger

Unsuitable

- Broad panel effects
- Sashes or wide girdles
- Small hats

Short Waists

When the proportion of the figure from waist to neck is shorter than average, then the design will need to be lower than the waistline below the normal position. This will improve the proportions of the figure. In this way a person who is short-waisted will not seem clumsy, awkward or bulky.

Yoke lines or cross trimming lines that tend to cut the figure in two should be avoided as well as tight belts at the waistline. Instead, the silhouette should be draped in long, slightly pointed lines that move the eye down instead of around the figure. Remember that long, vertical lines give the appearance of more height and slimness. The straight up-and-down silhouette is definitely the best for this type of figure.

Suitable

- Waistline dropped below the normal line, especially for people whose hips are low

Unsuitable

- Built-up waist lines

Low Waists

When the measurement from the waist to the neckline is longer than average, raise the waistline in the design and there will be a great improvement in the way the dress looks.

Long Necks

It is better for those with already long necks to avoid wearing a very flat collar or a dress with a V neckline because these will emphasise the neck and bring attention to it. A fluffy collar or one that has a soft roll will detract from this effect and it is very likely it won't even be noticed.

Suitable

- Collars with high or medium rolls

- Round necklines, especially those which fit closely to the base of the neck
- Fluffy collars, fichus, or furs
- High close collars
- Scarves
- Short necklaces, bulky ones in particular
- Hair worn low at the neck or worn over the ears

Unsuitable

- Collarless, without a necklace
- V-necks
- Hats with upturned brims
- Hats with high trimming
- Hair worn high

High-Hipped

When designing for the high hip type figure it is best to avoid the short-yoke effect as this will emphasise the hip area. The waistline should be in a position to show a well-balanced figure. Wearing a belt around three inches below the usual waistline is often the correct place for the belt in this case. Using a straight vertical silhouette from shoulder to lower waistline ending in a full pleat or perhaps a shirred skirt is the most suitable design for this figure type.

Sway Back

Suitable

- Blouse at back of waist
- Creating a sense of fullness between waist line and hips
- Belts swinging from loops at the side which do not hug the waistline too closely
- Devices which build out the waistline in the back, such as bows
- Thick jackets

Unsuitable

- Garments fitted tightly in the back, including tightly belted dresses

Short or Thick Neck

Suitable

- Flat collars
- Collarless dresses
- V-necks
- Flat furs
- Narrow-brimmed hats
- Hair dressed high
- Hair worn to show the ears, or at least the base of the ears

Unsuitable

- Collars with high rolls
- Broad necklines
- Necklaces worn quite close around the throat
- Drooping hats
- Broad brimmed hats

Retrouse (turned up at the end) Noses

Suitable

- Hats with brims
- Lines of the hair that do not repeat the line of the nose

Unsuitable

- A hat that turns up and away from the face

Prominent Noses

Suitable

- Hats with brims - brims may be somewhat wider in the front
- Trimming in the front of the hat
- Hair built out in a soft, largish mass
- Hair built out over the forehead (to balance out the nose)
- Parting hair on the side

Unsuitable

- Turbans
- Severe, tailored hats
- Middle part in hair
- Hair drawn straight back from the forehead
- Hair dressed high on the head
- The large mass of the hair directly above the nose as this will move the eye across that line when the profile is seen

Sharp Angular Features

Suitable

- Medium sized hats
- Hats with irregular lines
- Hats with brims that droop very slightly
- Hair worn in a soft, irregular line or soft large waves in the hair

Unsuitable

- Severely tailored hats
- Sharp, angular trimmings, as wings, quills, and sharp bows
- Stiff fabrics
- Harsh textures
- Hair drawn severely back
- Hair in tight waves, because it emphasises by contrast

Large Features

Suitable

- Hair worn in a broken line around the face
- Hair worn smooth in large, loose waves
- Larger coiffure

Unsuitable

- Small, close waved curls in hair
- Hair pulled back tightly
- Extremely large coiffure

Further Reading:

- 📖 *Fashion Design Essentials: 100 Principles of Fashion Design (By Jay Calderin)*
- 📖 *Introduction to Fashion Design (By Patrick John)*