

Designing and Following a Pattern

So now you know the basics, but the patterns are undecipherable. You not only are learning a new language, but you're executing it in sign language. You're reading, processing, counting, and trying to make your hands move the way you want. That's a lot to absorb.

I always do a little experiment at the beginning of each new class. We go around the table and announce our heights. No matter what the age or racial mix of the group, in just about every class there will be one third under 5'4", a third between 5'4" and 5'6", and a third above 5'6". When I first tell them that this seemingly arbitrary height distribution seems to be universal in our society, they are very surprised. I use this as an introduction to design and how to fit a sweater.

The most common reason that women get discouraged and stop knitting is because the sweaters don't fit. Patterns, like clothes, are designed to fit the average woman. Therefore, you need to know something about the shape of your body before choosing a pattern.

One of my favorite students, Pennie, is 5'7" and very slim. I am 5'1 1/2". Since we have the same bust size and both need a "small," we would make the same size. Without making adjustments, the sweater would not fit either one of us. Some patterns are flexible and others are not. Another way to get the correct size is to measure a sweater that fits you perfectly, and compare the measurements on the diagram. There are also many software programs and workbooks that allow you to make a custom pattern.

Sizes on patterns come in both actual bust, and finished bust sizes. You do need to distinguish between them so you get an accurate fit.

Most standard patterns tell you to start with smaller needles and do a ribbing on the bottom. They then change to larger needles and increase the amount of stitches. For the majority of us who are bottom heavy, this style is less than flattering. There are a few ways to correct that. One is to eliminate the smaller needles, cast on the amount of stitches designated after the increases, and then just do a border of all knit or seed stitch. Another is to do the stockinette stitch for one inch, knit one row on the purl side, and then continue in your desired pattern. The ridge is later folded up and tacked down just like a hem. These won't be as clingy, and your eye will not go directly to your hips.

The next thing I always hear is "Do I have to make a gauge?" I tell my students that I'm going to put them in the "whine cellar." A gauge (also known as the tension) is so important for so many reasons. It gives you a familiarity with the needles, yarn and stitch. It's like a practice run. It also determines the size and fit of the sweater. If you knit too tightly, and have more stitches than the gauge calls for, the item will be too small. If you knit too loosely, and have fewer stitches, then the item will be too small. You can get the correct gauge by going up or down a needle size. If you need fewer stitches, go up a needle size, and conversely, if you need more stitches, go down a size. Most patterns call for four inch swatches.

Bette, a prolific knitter, goes crazy with gauge. She measures every which way to make sure hers is correct. One only has to rip out a sweater once to understand the value of taking the time to do this most worthwhile exercise.