METHODS TO MASTER:
Sewing with Plaid
PART TWO

{ by Amy Alan }

Taking extra care when sewing plaid fabric produces professional results and perfectly matched seams. Discover a new love for this timeless fabric by learning handy tips and tricks for laying out and sewing plaid garments.
Pattern Selection

Before choosing plaid fabric, select a pattern. If you’ve never sewn plaid before, look for a simple style with few seams. If the pattern has curved seams, they might not look visually appealing once sewn. Avoid curved style lines, such as princess seams, and patterns with asymmetrical piecing or slanted hems.

If you want to use a larger-scale plaid, avoid patterns with a very structured fit or deep darts, as these elements often detract from the finished garment.

Carefully read the pattern envelope before buying it. Patterns that don’t work well for plaids are often marked as “not suitable for plaids.” This indicates that the pattern may have design lines that make it very difficult to align stripes.

If the pattern has a photograph or illustration of the garment sewn in plaid on the cover, that’s a good sign that it’s an acceptable pattern to use with plaid. If possible, look at the pattern instructions and note if any pieces, such as the skirt, are cut on the bias. The bias cut could affect the desired visual effect for the fabric, but some pattern pieces, such as button bands and cuffs, can add visual interest when cut on the bias.

Plan to keep a plaid garment simple, eliminating any extra trims or overly decorative buttons, to allow the fabric to shine. For a first-time plaid project, a simple shift dress, such as the Colette Patterns Laurel dress or Butterick 4386, is a great choice. These simple designs allow for easy matching along seams with any plaid type. For a more challenging project, a shirt dress, such as the dress at left, is a fun choice. The many pattern pieces allow for unique details to highlight the plaid fabric, such as cutting the button placket or skirt on the bias.

Always adjust the pattern and stitch a muslin fit sample before cutting into plaid fabric to perfect the fit. Making adjustments after a plaid fabric is cut may create problems with stripe matching, especially along curved seams.

Fabric Factors

To choose a plaid fabric for your garment, consider how the plaid will look when worn. Determine whether the colors, scale or pattern will overwhelm your features. If possible, drape the fabric over a dress form that’s a similar size to your body, or drape the fabric over your body and look at it in a mirror. Step back to evaluate whether the plaid creates the desired visual effect.

If you’re ordering plaid from a swatch, try to get a swatch large enough that you can see the plaid repeat.

Small-scale plaids work well for children and smaller sizes, and are also more slimming than large-scale plaids. Larger plaids make bold statements, but can give the illusion of extra curves if heavy colors run horizontally across your bust or hips. Long and dark vertical stripes within the plaid make you appear taller. A plaid with a dark background has a slimming effect, but a brighter plaid is also lovely when matched with bright accessories.

Note whether the pattern envelope states to “allow extra fabric to match plaids or stripes.” Patterns usually don’t list the exact amount of yardage needed for plaid fabric. This is because the pattern company doesn’t know how wide your chosen plaid repeat is, so there’s no way to provide specific information. Buy extra plaid yardage to ensure that you have enough to correctly match each stripe.

For each large pattern piece, such as the bodice front and back, skirt front and back, and sleeve, plan on buying one extra repeat of plaid. Measure one repeat, and then multiply it by the number of main pattern pieces your garment has. For example, if your repeat is 8” wide, and you have five...
large main pattern pieces, you need 40” of extra plaid fabric. It’s usually safe to assume that you’ll need an additional ½ yard of fabric for small plaids and one additional yard of fabric for large plaids. If your plaid fabric is unbalanced, add this extra fabric to the “with nap” yardage suggestion (1).

Planning for Plaid
When planning how to lay out the fabric for the garment, remember that the placement of the strongest colored lines in the plaid will greatly affect the appearance. Usually, a dominant line should run down the garment center front. The dominant line should also go down the center back and sleeve center, and be centered on smaller pieces, such as collars, cuffs and pockets.

If the garment has a collar, the vertical lines should match up with the center-back lines (as long as the garment doesn’t have a back yoke that’s cut on the bias).

If the plaid colors are evenly proportioned, try moving the placement of the most dominant lines to run on either side of the center front, center back and sleeve center. The placement can change the way that the colors in the fabric appear.

When planning the cutting layout, examine the horizontal stripes as well. The bodice, skirt or pants plaid lines should match at the center front, center back and side seams. The plaid lines at the bodice front armscye notch and front sleeve-cap notch should also match. Position these areas along the same plaid stripe to ensure that the plaid creates a continuous line around the body.

Any pattern elements cut in multiples, such as two pockets and two cuffs, should be cut from identical plaid sections.

When laying out a garment with a bodice, one horizontal plaid line should fall just below the shoulders. For a dress, jacket or two pieces of a suit, make sure that two heavy horizontal bars don’t meet at the waist.

TIP: Highlight the waistband of a plaid dress or skirt by cutting it on the bias.

It’s not possible to match the plaid along every garment area. Shoulder seams often don’t match, and darts above the bustline may make matching impossible. It’s more important for the front bodice and armscye to match than the bodice side seam. The sleeve back armscye likely won’t align with the back bodice, as well as any area with pleating or gathering. If the pattern pieces don’t have the same angle, such as a skirt side seam, they won’t correctly pair up. To eliminate the need to match plaid stripes, consider cutting small pattern pieces, such as pockets or a yoke, on the bias.

Make the Cut
To be as precise as possible, cut plaid pattern pieces on a single fabric layer (2). This makes it much easier to see every line and ensure that the pieces will match well. Don’t forget to flip pattern pieces to cut pairs when cutting a single fabric layer.

It’s possible to cut two plaid layers at once if they’re carefully aligned. Using a needle and thread, carefully run a basting stitch through both fabric layers, aligning the stitches at each plaid intersection. Pins can also be used to align layers, but basting or sewing tailor’s tacks is a wiser choice, as you can cut through the stitching while cutting.
out the pattern pieces. Pins need to be removed prior to cutting, which may cause the layers to shift.

**Draw the seamlines** on your pattern pieces before cutting (3). This allows you to focus on matching the plaid stripes at the seamlines, and not the cut edges. On each pattern piece, use a pencil to draw the seamline and extend the grainline to run through the entire piece.

**After placing one pattern** on the fabric, trace the plaid pattern along the pattern-piece seamline (4). On a pattern piece that will be matched along that seamline, trace the drawn lines from the first pattern piece as a guide for placing that pattern on the fabric (5). This makes it easy to ensure the stripes will align after cutting.

**Another cutting option** is to cut out only one of the pieces from a pair, for example, the left bodice. After the left side has been cut out, flip the cut fabric piece over and align it exactly with the duplicate lines on the uncut fabric (6). Secure with pins or pattern weights, and then trace around the cut fabric piece, or simply cut around it for two perfectly paired bodices (7).

**Strike a Balance**
Sewing plaid requires careful planning because the cutting stage affects how the plaid pieces match. Each plaid variation has its own unique layout, so labeling your plaid as balanced or unbalanced is an important step when choosing fabric. The fabric may be balanced, or it may be unbalanced either lengthwise, crosswise, or in both directions. Identifying the plaid type makes laying out the pattern pieces much easier. (For more detailed information on identifying balanced or unbalanced plaids, refer to “Methods to Master: Plaid, Pt. 1” in the Oct/Nov '13 Sew News.)

The easiest plaid to cut and sew is balanced plaid. In balanced plaid, the pattern of lengthwise and crosswise stripes is the same. It reverses on all sides of the main color bar. Double-check either side of the dominant line to ensure that the pattern is a perfect repeat. If there’s no nap to the fabric, cut out a balanced plaid with the pattern pieces running in either direction. Be wary of rectangular plaids that appear balanced, as they should be treated as unbalanced lengthwise plaids.

For a balanced plaid, lay the bodice center front along the center of a dominant line. Adjust the pattern so that a plaid crosswise bar falls just below the shoulder line. Place the sleeve pattern so that a plaid bar falls along the sleeve lengthwise center, and
match the crosswise stripe at the front notch to correspond to the stripes at the bodice front armseye notch. Position the bodice center back along a dominant line as well, and cut so that the plaid bars will match the bodice front at the side seams (8). Lay out a skirt in the same manner, with a dominant line down both the center front and center back, matching the plaid stripes at the side seams.

If the stripes and colors in a plaid are placed unevenly either lengthwise, crosswise, or in both directions, the fabric is an unbalanced plaid. Cut unbalanced plaids as a single fabric layer to ensure they will correctly match up. If the plaid isn’t balanced crosswise, it has a left and a right direction. If it isn’t balanced lengthwise, it has an up and down direction. In either case, be sure to place all pattern pieces running the same direction.

One-way, one-directional plaids are unbalanced plaids that are either balanced lengthwise or crosswise, but not balanced in both directions. These plaids work best with patterns that have seams or openings along both the center front and center back.

If the plaid is balanced crosswise, plan to cut half of the pieces in one direction and then flip them to cut the remaining pairs so the two sides reflect each other (9). If the plaid is balanced lengthwise, treat it as you would a one-directional print fabric, keeping all of the pattern pieces running the same direction (10).

A two-way, one-directional plaid is unbalanced both crosswise and lengthwise. It’s best to use this fabric only if either fabric side can be used as the garment right side (11). Choose a pattern that doesn’t have pieces cut on the fold, or plan to add a seam to the center front and center back. This plaid looks best when reversed on either side of the body, creating a mirror image. It’s possible to cut so that the plaid continues unbroken around the body, but this should only be done with simple patterns that have few seams.

**Construction Considerations**
Once you’ve taken the time to cut out plaid pieces, it’s important to sew them together carefully so that the plaid stripes match up. Carefully pinning your garment along the seamline with the stripes matching works well, but an even better technique is slip-basting.

To begin slip-basting, choose two pieces that will be sewn together. Place both pieces right side up. Draw the seamline on the fabric with chalk or a removable fabric marker (12).
Fold the seam allowance of one pattern piece toward the wrong side along the seamline (13). Align the drawn seamlines, and then pin to secure (14).

Using a sharp needle and brightly colored thread, begin stitching from right to left, holding the folded fabric piece in your left hand. Bring the needle through the fabric fold (15). Take a small stitch of two or three threads from the piece directly under the fabric fold, exactly where the needle emerged (16).

Slip the needle back into the fold for about ½”, and continue working toward the left (17). After basting the seam, machine stitch the seamline using an even-feed or walking foot. If you don’t have an even-feed foot, adjust the presser foot pressure to lessen the chance of the fabric layers sliding under the foot. The plaid along the resulting seams will be perfectly matched.

SOURCE
McCall’s carries 6696: mccallpattern.mccall.com.

BEAUTY & THE BIAS
To create a cool chevron effect for a garment, cut plaid fabric on the bias (A).

- Plaid chevrons are most easily created with balanced plaids. Unbalanced plaids require cutting out one pattern piece from each pair, and then flipping the pattern piece before cutting the second piece from the pair.
- It’s very easy to cut and sew a plaid skirt on the bias. When cutting a garment for the upper body, the bodice may be placed on the bias, but cut the sleeve on the straight of grain to avoid twisting and shifting.