

Understanding Sheer Fabrics

LESSON 1: Introduction to sheer fabrics.

ARE ALL SHEER FABRICS A HEADACHE TO SEW WITH?

Lots of people who sew are partial toward – or against – certain fabrics. If I even mention the word “chiffon” to many of my students, they shudder and shy away from the project like it was the plague. Not because they object to the way chiffon garments look, but because they think the fabric is too difficult to work with.

I have to admit that when I think of using chiffon for a bias-cut shell (simple blouse), I shudder as well. But if I’m contemplating using georgette (which is slightly heavier and a little more opaque than chiffon) for a straight-of-grain skirt, I’m ready to jump right into the project.

So what’s the difference? Some fabrics are more difficult to handle than others, and

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some styles of garments are more difficult to handle than others. If you pair a difficult-to-control fabric with a difficult-to-control style, you have a double whammy of potential problems. But pair a less difficult fabric with a less troublesome style, and you've got a much more predictable set of variables. Part of what makes a project predictable is your level of experience. The more experience you have with different fabrics and different types of garments, the more knowledge you bring to the project. And this enables you to anticipate and troubleshoot the potential problems you might encounter.

So my answer to the question "Are all sheer fabrics a headache to sew with?" is that lots of sheer fabrics are easy to sew with; some will need extra attention and concentration; and a handful tend to be quite demanding.

I've worked with sheer fabrics for many years. The more I work with sheers, the better I like them. Plus, the more

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comfortable I am with sheers, the more I'm willing to experiment with them. And that's when working with sheer fabrics gets to be really fun.

A great deal of working successfully with sheers comes down to one word: *control*. That's what this class is really about: learning to assess sheer fabrics so that you know what aspect(s) of each different sheer fabric will need to be controlled. And then it is a matter of figuring out how to exert control so that you will get the results that you want.

SHEERS ALL TOO OFTEN GET CATEGORIZED AS A "SPECIAL OCCASION" FABRIC

Ready-to-wear clothing has a large impact on how we think about different kinds of garments.

Think about wedding dresses and evening gowns. Or cocktail, prom, and party clothes.

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Or even dinner-at-a-very-nice-restaurant ensemble.

Now think about office and career wear. Or day-to-day and soccer-mom clothes. Or weekend and casual garments.

Although we did begin to see more sheer fabrics used in “everyday” clothing starting a few years ago, the predominance of sheer fabrics is definitely found in the first group of garments mentioned above.

THE ALLURE OF SHEER FABRICS

There’s just a natural affinity between dressier clothes and sheer fabrics. This is because sheer fabrics are so light and airy; so delicate and feminine. You can pile layer on layer and not have to worry about bulkiness. You can almost be revealing without showing anything. You can create a sense of mystery with the double-play of colors, or combine outrageous colors for flirty fun. You can float away in a dream-

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world, or step into the sophisticated arena of chic.

But because the strictures of clothes have become so much more relaxed, you can have any of the above in daywear, too. You can blur the lines between “once-acceptable” and “unconventional” by developing your own sense of style.

This doesn't mean that you'll want to wear an evening gown to your child's soccer match. But it does mean that you can borrow many traditional sheer fabric usages and put them to work in your everyday clothes. It's all about borrowing small elements and combining them in non-traditional and unexpected ways.

When doing this, you can either show a lot of restraint, or you can go hog-wild. You can also create any type of look you want: classic, sophisticated, romantic, elegant, preppy, flirty, funky, or artsy. In other words, you can incorporate sheer fabrics into your own sense of style. And if you've

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never developed a style for yourself, maybe sheers will help you define and create one.

THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF SPECIAL OCCASION GARMENTS

As mentioned above, I think sheer fabrics and dressy garments are a natural combination. For floor-length gowns, sheer fabrics provide a graceful softness without a hint of heaviness. For street-length clothes, a casual design can be made to look dressy just by making it in a sheer fabric. As an example, take a classic sheath dress that would normally be made in daywear fabric like linen, light-weight wool, or cotton. Now think of the same dress silhouette made in a silk shantung fabric with a lace overlay, and you've instantly got a cocktail or dinner dress. (See photos on the next two pages.)

To me, there is a freedom inherent in special occasion clothing design. You can go over the top or into a fantasy world and still have the garment look appropriate for



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the event. This is because there is simply more latitude in terms of what looks suitable; there is a greater acceptance of the unusual and the creative.

And there are so many gorgeous special occasion fabrics available! The sky is the limit when it comes to fabric choices.

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A linen sheath dress.

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The same sheath dress
made in a beaded and embroidered silk chiffon,
underlined with a solid silk shantung.

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USING SHEERS IN DAYWEAR

As I've discussed above, I think using sheer fabrics in special occasion garments is "easy" in comparison to using sheers in daywear. That being said, I also think that there are endless possibilities for using sheers in daywear - you just have to have a different mindset.

With a little practice, you'll come up with your own "bag of tricks" of how to successfully use sheers in daywear that suits your lifestyle. Following are some of the tactics I frequently use:

- Use sheer fabric as an accent - for example, use the sheer for just the collar.
- Use sheer fabric as a detail - for example, use the sheer as a neckline edging.
- Use sheer fabric that is casual - for instance, stretch tulle is less dressy looking than silk chiffon.
- Use sheer fabric in a casual style of garment - for instance, a basic T-shirt, and wear a tank top under it.



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- Pair a sheer garment with other garments that are casual - for instance, wear a silk chiffon blouse (perhaps with a tank top under it) and a pair of jeans.

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A teal embroidered chiffon underlined with pink china silk.

This top looks fresh and relaxed

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with jeans, cropped pants, or capris.



Paired with its matching skirt, this is a classic
2-piece dress,



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which looks summery and “dressed,”
but still not formal.