

Alterations: The Original Nip and Tuck

By Bernie Burson, AICI, CDI

“Please don’t change. I love you just the way you are.” Nice to hear from your sweetie, but does it apply to the fit of your clothes? Whether you’ve gained or lost weight, are buying something new, or have an old favorite that’s not quite in style anymore, you may be considering alterations. Style is just not stylish without impeccable fit. If your clothing bags, droops, pulls, puckers, gapes, bunches, doesn’t hang properly, or is too big or too tight, either get rid of it or rescue it with suitable alterations.

Unfortunately, rescue is not always possible. If tops are too small in the bust, or bottoms are too small through the hips, the chance of a good outcome is near zero. It’s easy to take something in, but there’s usually not enough fabric in the seams to let it out. If you’re buying something that you know will need to be altered, be sure it fits your larger bits; the rest can be taken in. However, leave the tags on until you’ve consulted with your tailor!

When is it a good idea to alter a garment? If the alterations are simple and inexpensive (like lengthening or shortening a plain hem or sleeve, taking in a side seam, or shortening straps), go for it. If the garment has complex details like welt pockets, pleats, lots of darts, layers, etc., or if it’s in a sheer fabric or leather, alterations may be either too expensive or too difficult to do. And the fit of the garment has to be in the ballpark. It’s seldom a good idea for a petite person to shorten the torso and sleeves of a missy jacket – the waist area will not fit properly. Also, if pants are too long in the rise, the fix involves removing the waistband. If it’s an elastic waistband, no problem; if there are pockets and a zipper and buttons, it becomes complex.

For alterations of moderate complexity, you have to weigh the cost of the alterations against the expected cost per wearing of the garment. If the color and fabric are perfect for you and the style is a basic that you’ll be able to wear often in a variety of ways, spending up to half the cost of the garment for alterations may be a good investment, especially if you have difficulty finding clothes that fit. If it’s a garment that you’ll wear only occasionally, or one that will soon go out of style, alterations won’t be worth the money.

When having something altered, you must wear the undergarments and shoes that you plan to wear with the garment. There’s no such thing as a pant length that can be worn with both flats and heels, and different bras or spandex shapewear can change the way a garment hangs.

How to find an alterations person? Ask for referrals from colleagues, or ask an upscale boutique for a recommendation. Your dry cleaner may be fine for a simple hem or taking in a seam, but for anything more complex, a tailor (someone who can make a garment from start to finish) would be the better choice. Higher-end stores like Nordstrom and Saks Fifth Avenue offer in-house alterations services for a moderate fee (some minor alterations are free).

Now for a rant. We all like to think of ourselves as individuals, unique in so many ways. And despite being told to love our bodies, we can all immediately provide a list of our various figure faults, or to be more politically correct, “challenges.” However, many of us will walk into a store and expect to find a garment that fits perfectly. If it doesn’t, we blame ourselves. (Although I must admit that I’m not one of those who ends a day of shopping by celebrating my uniqueness.) True, you’ll do better with a designer or manufacturer who uses a fit model that corresponds to your body type—high-hip, low-hip, petite, missy, full-figure, etc. Add a bit of tailoring and enjoy the feeling of confidence that comes with the perfect fit.

For an excellent overview of alterations and fit, get *The Pocket Stylist* by Kendall Farr. Chapter Five, called “Your Tailor is Your New Best Friend,” has 14 pages of helpful information and resources.

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