

Let's Make Circle Skirts!



As a young teen obsessed with vintage clothing, I dearly wanted a circle skirt. I'd seen them in old magazines and thought the felt ones with appliqués like poodles or the Eiffel Tower were just too cute for words. When my [grandmother](#) realized how much I loved vintage fashion, she gave me a beautiful ruffled petticoat she had made in the mid-1950s and two felted wool circle skirts she was still wearing as late as the 1970s (she kept her 23" waist until her death by swimming and doing nightly sit-ups on a slant board!). I was 14 at the time, and the clothes were a perfect fit. I was on cloud nine. That lovely petticoat with its elastic waistline still fits, and I've kept it in good repair and still wear it. However, the fitted circle skirts were relegated to storage by my 16th birthday, when my waistline reached 26", and there was no way I could suck in enough to get the zippers all the way

up! At that point, I was well into my "Edwardian phase" and was wearing an early version of my [Edwardian Apron pattern](#) over white lawn dresses or blouses and long skirts with granny boots. It would be quite a long time before I got back to the 1950s silhouette, but when I found it again a few years ago, I went a little bonkers, and I now have a wardrobe full of fit-and-flare dresses.



But those skirts.... Ah, those flattering circle skirts! This year they came back on my radar screen in a big way, and I decided it was high time to make a few myself. I'm going to show you two options--a simple one with just a back seam, waistband and zipper, then one with side seams and in-seam pockets for those who just can't live without pockets!

A circle skirt is exactly what it sounds like--a full fabric circle with a hole in the center for your waist. The simplest tutorials (and there are many available online) will show you how to cut a circle with a hole, then sew on a wide elastic waistband and hem the edge. That makes a cute, functional skirt that you can pull on and off with minimal fuss. But if you want a more tailored look and prefer a waistband with zipper closure, I'll take you through it step by step. Now, one very important note before we start: the length of your circle skirt is limited by the width of your fabric. If you want a skirt more than three inches below knee length, you'll need to look for a gored skirt pattern like this one at right:



That vintage pattern allows you to lengthen each gore, which means the skirt can be as long as you like. A true circle skirt, however, does not have gores and is cut in one piece, so your fabric has to be wide enough to allow for the waist and the hem length desired. This is one reason to take a look in your upholstery/home fabrics section when you shop, as curtain fabrics and lightweight upholstery materials are often 54-60" wide--ideal for circle skirts that hit about three inches below the knee (depending on your height). Now, if you plan to make a skirt that hits above the knee, then you can use 44"-wide fabric without any problems.



Left: Classic circle skirt pattern, and check out that wonderful petticoat! Note the horse appliqué on the second skirt. Right: Circle skirt with high waistband, but this skirt is cut in four pieces and has four seams.

Let's Talk About Measurements

Take out your measuring tape, paper and pencil, and let's get started. The first thing you need to do is measure your waist. It's the most important measurement for this project. The hips are free, so no need to measure them at all. For the sake of example, let's say your waist measures 30 inches, and you want a skirt that has a finished hem length of 26 1/2 inches (perfect below-the-knee length that will fit over a fluffy 26" petticoat). First, you need to calculate your *waist radius*. The formula is simple: Your waist measurement divided by 6.28. So, for a 30-inch waist, that's 4.77" (just a scant bit under 5", but that scant bit does matter, so don't fudge upwards). Now, if you want a final hem length of 26.5", you need to add half an inch--enough to turn up a narrow 1/4" hem twice. (If you have a rolled hem foot, you can just add 1/4", because the foot will make a much tighter hem). So that's a total length of 27". If you buy 60"-wide material, it will just fit. If you get 54"-wide, you'll have to cut shorter, but, as you'll see later on, the fabric is going to stretch a bit when you hang it up prior to hemming, so you'll end up with a longer amount anyway (up to two inches, depending on how tight the fabric weave is and how heavy the fabric itself).

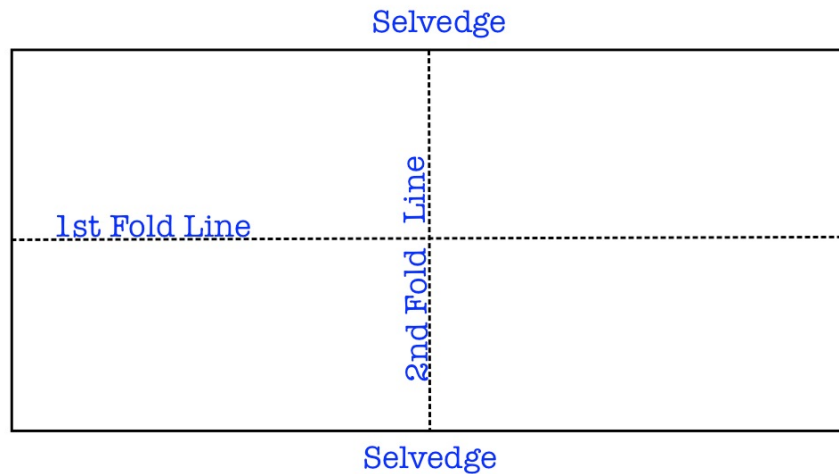
Buying Fabric

When you buy your material, you need to have enough left over to cut out a waistband across the grain of the fabric. Buying two yards will leave plenty for your skirt, waistband, and for the optional pockets I'll show in the chevron circle skirt demonstrated below. Be sure to choose fabric that has a good weight that lends itself to draping beautifully. Quilting cottons work nicely, as do linen-cotton

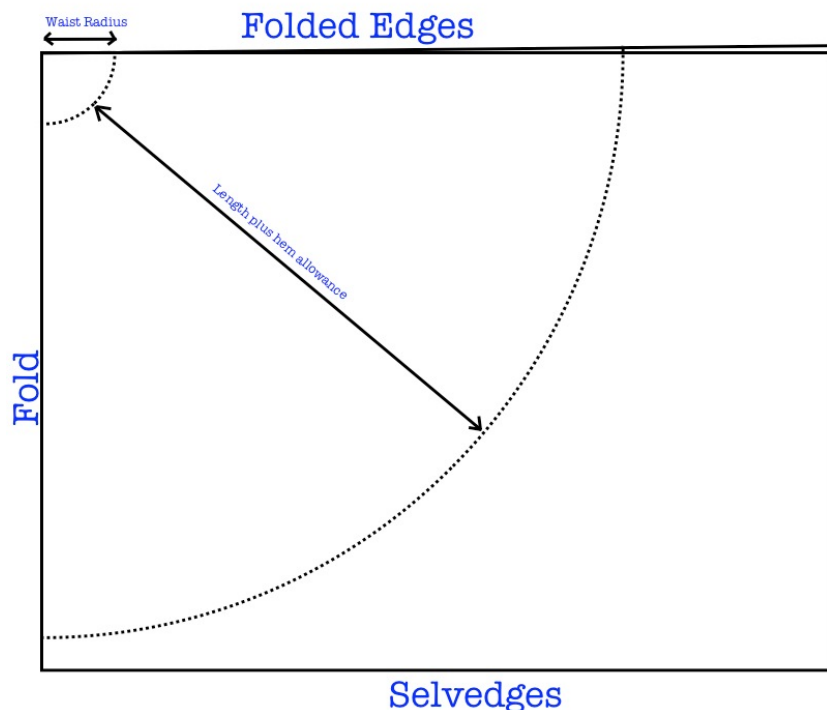
blends. Rayon can also work, but if it's very lightweight, you'll have to deal with the wind blowing your skirt straight up around your face! Don't hesitate to dive into the upholstery section, as you can often find hidden gems that work beautifully. Remember, if you choose a washable fabric like cotton or linen, be sure to pre-wash and iron your material so that it shrinks before you cut out your skirt rather than later in the laundry!

Let's Get Cutting!

To cut a perfect circle, you are going to fold your fabric twice--once to bring the selvages together and once to fold the fabric in half again the other way. Here's a diagram to help you visualize this:



Once you've folded your material (basically into a square except for the leftover bit that will be used for waistband and optional pockets), it will look like this, and you'll be ready to mark your cutting lines, as I'll demonstrate below:



Marking Your Cutting Lines

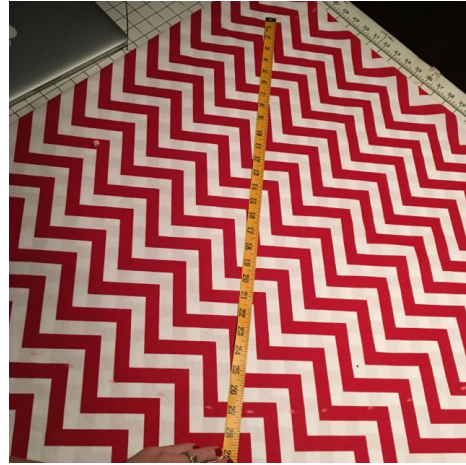
Now take your measuring tape and position the end at the folded corner of your fabric like this:



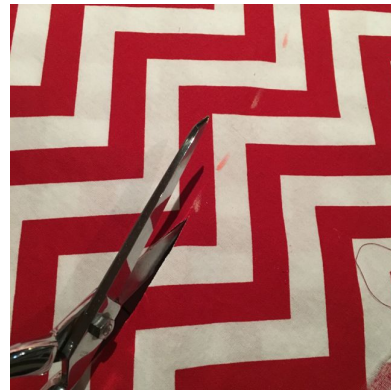
Next, take chalk or a fabric marking pen and mark a quarter circle, using the radius you came up with in the calculation (4.77" in this example). Start at one folded edge and make a mark at the 4.77" mark, then pivot the tape and mark again, repeating until you reach the other folded edge, making sure the tip of the measuring tape stays on that corner:



Now your waist is correctly marked, and it's time to mark the length. This time, position the measuring tape at the chalk line you've just drawn and mark at your desired length (27" in this example), moving the tape along the chalk line so you have an accurate length at each point (think of the tape acting like the "rays" of the sun):



Now you're ready to cut, and it's just as easy as cutting along the dotted lines:

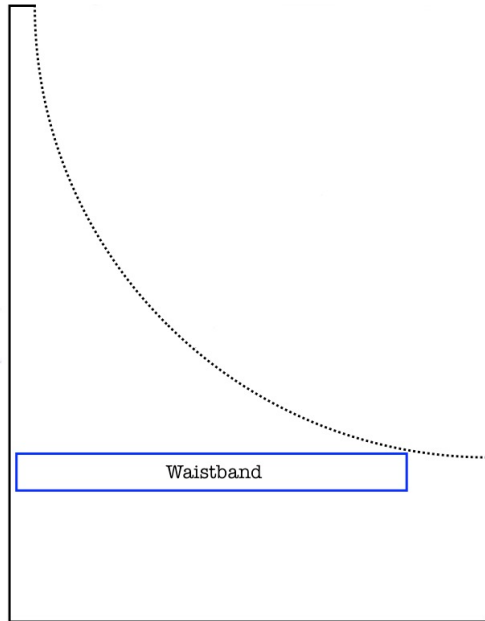


In order to show you the simplest skirt first, I'm going to jump over to my photos of the skirt without pockets or side seams. Once I had cut out that skirt, I cut up the center back fold to make a seam opening. Some folks advocate cutting a slit, but I find it extremely difficult and frustrating to sew a zipper into a slit, so I strongly recommend cutting the entire center back open:

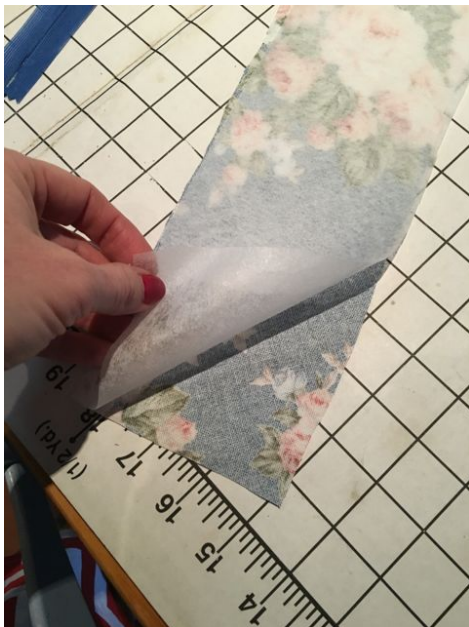


Making the Waistband

Set aside your skirt and take your remaining material to cut a waistband. The length will be your waist measurement plus 1 1/4" for a 5/8" seam allowance on each end, so 31 1/4" in this example. The width is up to personal preference. I like my waistband to have a finished width of 1.5", so I doubled that and added 1.25" for the seam allowance and enough to turn under on the inside and whipstitch over the seam allowance to enclose it. That made for a final waistband width of 4.25".



To reinforce the waistband, cut a second one out of fusible webbing (interfacing), then iron the interfacing to the wrong side of the waistband to fuse it in place:



Now you're ready to pin the waistband to the skirt's waistline. At this point, some of you might be wondering why I didn't add an extra 1 1/4" to my skirt's waist measurement to allow for the center back seam. The answer is that, because the waistline is a circle, it has a huge tendency to stretch (thanks to the bias). Even when we add two side seams and a center back seam to the next skirt, we do not need to pad the waistline measurement, because it will stretch to fit the waistband even after three seams have been stitched up. Take my word on this, because I learned through trial and error that you do not need to add to the skirt's waistline or you'll end up having to take pleats or cut down the center back! Cut your waistline to exactly your waist measurement's radius--no fudging!



Left: Fold the waistband in half to find and mark the center front. Right: Mark the skirt's center front with a pin.

Match up the center front of the skirt to the center of the waistband, right sides together, and pin. Match each edge of the skirt back to the ends of the waistband on each side and pin. Evenly pin the rest of the waistline to the waistband, being careful not to stretch as you go:



Now stitch the skirt to the waistband, making sure the skirt's material doesn't fold or buckle as you go:



Now iron the waistband seam up toward the waistband itself:



Next, turn down 5/8" of the raw edge of the waistband toward the wrong side:



Now fold the waistband down in half, completely covering the seam allowance. Iron it neatly to make a crease at the top (you'll need this in the zipper step):



For good measure while you're at it, mark the crease with a pin.



This crease line is to mark where the upper "stop" of your zipper should hit. Then, when you fold the waistband down, the top raw edge of the zipper will be neatly folded in and covered, as you'll see below. I prefer invisible zippers, but you need a special foot to sew them in correctly. A plastic foot with many shank adapters is available from all major fabric shops for about \$3.50, and it's well worth the investment, as it makes zipper insertion so easy! There are always instructions for sewing invisible zippers, but if you are new to this, I'd recommend watching a video on YouTube or checking out the fantastic step-by-step tutorial at [this link](#).

Inserting the Zipper

In the photo below, you see that I've lined up the point where the zipper stops with the pin at the crease of the waistband. This will mean the zipper stops very close to the top of the waistband, making a neater closure.



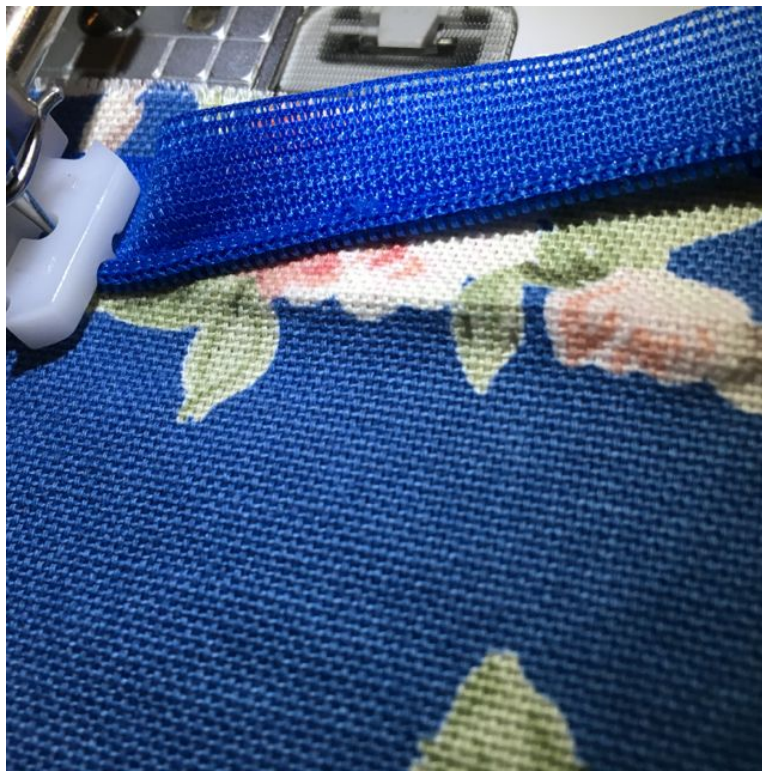
In the next photo, I've zipped the zipper so you can see that the pull ends at the marked crease.



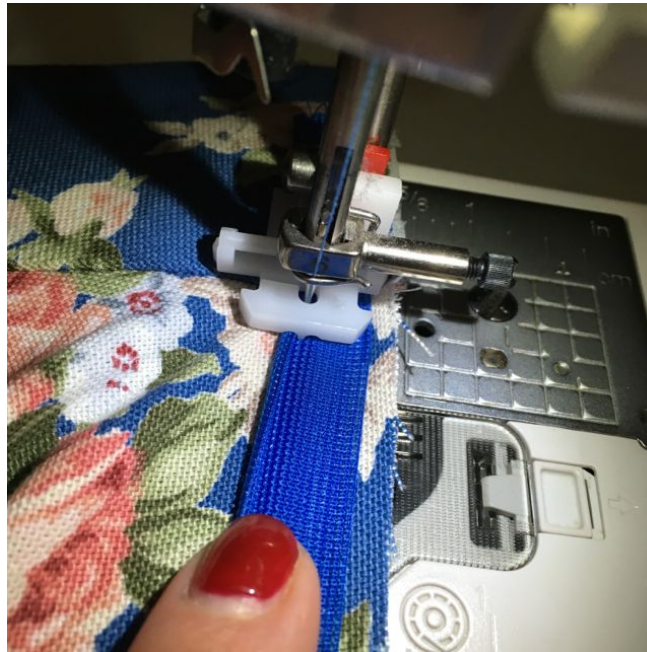
Before inserting the zipper, turn under and iron $\frac{5}{8}$ " of each side of the skirt back where the seam will go. This will make a nice crease that you can use to line up the zipper's teeth when you insert the zipper:



So now it's time to sew in the first side of the zipper. After unzipping it, I line up the edge so that the teeth sit right on that crease, $\frac{5}{8}$ " away from the edge of the center back opening:



As you see, I find it much easier to insert an invisible zipper without first stitching up the center back seam, but this isn't required. You can do whatever suits you best (though you'll see I didn't follow my own rule on the chevron skirt later for another reason). So let's stitch that zipper in place!



Using the invisible zipper foot to stitch down the first side of the zipper.



In this photo, I've closed the zipper to show how the teeth "disappear" into the center back seam and to mark where the waistband seam hits the zipper tape.

The most important thing to match up when inserting a zipper into a skirt with a waistband is the seam line between waistband and skirt. You don't want to end up with a mismatched seam, so the best "ounce of prevention" is to close the zipper after you've sewn one side and mark with a pin where the seam line meets the zipper tape:



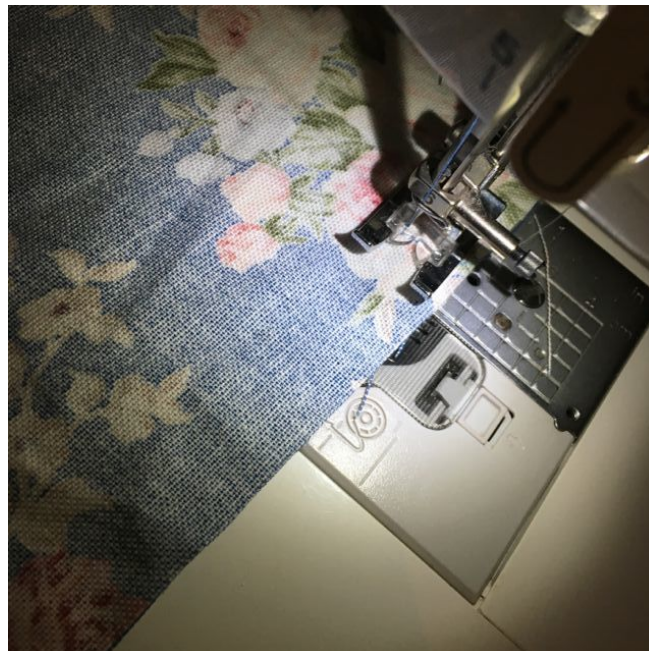
Pin through the opposite zipper tape, marking where the tape needs to meet the waistline seam.

Now unzip the zipper once again and line up the free side to the opposite side of the skirt back, matching the pin to the waistband seam and making sure you have the right side of the zipper tape matched to the right side of the skirt fabric. Stitch the other half of the zipper in place the same way, from top to bottom and stopping before the end of the zipper. Now zip it up and check to see that the waistband seam matches up:



Sewing up the Center Back Seam

Now you can close up the center back seam of the skirt, starting just above the lower stop of the zipper and going down from that point:





Iron the back seam open to make everything nice and neat.

Finishing the Waistband

With the back seam sewn, it's all over but the finishing! First you're going to neatly turn your waistband to the inside and whipstitch it in place over the seam allowance. Turn under the waistband to catch the top edge of the zipper and enclose it:





Left: Closeup of the waistband pinned. Right: Slipstitching to enclose the top of the zipper in the waistband.



Waistband whipstitched in place, enclosing the seam allowance.

I like to finish off the raw seam allowance of the skirt back with a zigzag stitch to prevent unraveling in the wash:



Let's Hem This Skirt!

Well, it would be exciting if we could go right ahead and hem this baby now, but that would not be wise. Circle skirts, like anything cut on the bias, need to hang at least 24 hours by the waistband to allow the material to stretch along the bias as far as it is going to stretch. Once that is accomplished, you can remeasure from the waistband to the skirt's lower edge and see if you need to trim to even out the hemline. You can also try it on and have a friend eyeball it. I rarely find I have to trim away any "anomalies," but I do sometimes find that the skirt is now longer than I originally measured! If that's the case, you can either trim away the extra length or take up a deeper hem. Be warned, though: it is much harder to take up a deep hem on a circle skirt!

On this skirt, I just turned up the lower edge 1/4" twice and stitched by machine:



Now iron that hem neatly, and you're ready to try on your skirt!



In my opinion, a circle skirt just isn't a circle skirt without a full, fluffy petticoat underneath! In these pictures, I'm wearing the "Jennifer" petticoat from [Malco Modes](#), which is comfortable and fun to wear. I also have petticoats from [Banned Apparel](#), which you can buy on Amazon.com. For an excellent review of the different petticoats currently on the market, I highly recommend [Miss Hero Holiday's review](#), which covers all the major brands. It's a bit of an investment to buy a really high quality petticoat (about \$60 unless you happen to hit a sale), but they are far more expensive and time-consuming to make, so it's a worthwhile purchase if you plan to wear a lot of circle skirts or full-skirted dresses.

For contrast, here's a photo of me in the skirt without my petticoat on. It's still a nice skirt, but it doesn't have that iconic 1950s look....



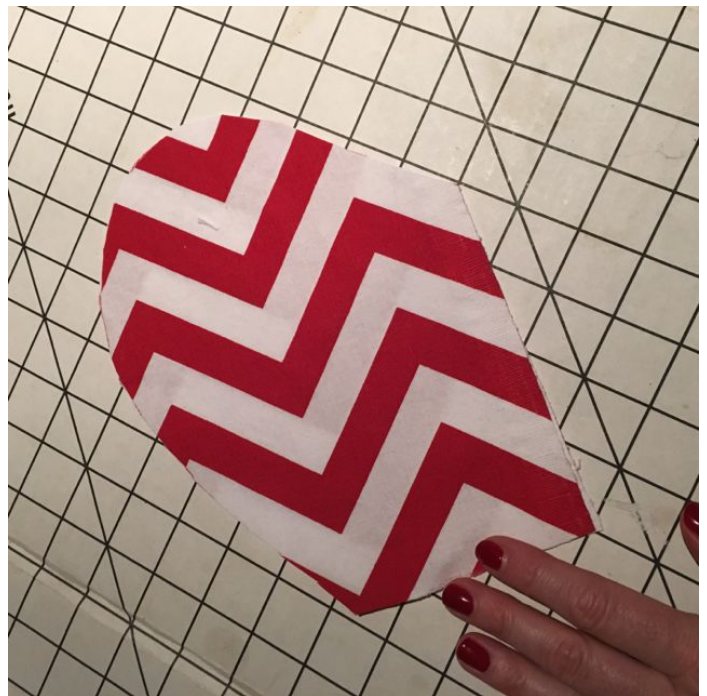
This skirt went together from start to finish in about 1.5 hours (not counting hanging before hemming) and was such fun to make that I decided on the spot that I needed half a dozen more! ;-)
Now let's have a look at a circle skirt with side seam pockets--making this even more versatile and fun to wear. Like the simpler skirt, you'll follow the same cutting directions, including cutting up the center back to make a seam for the zipper to go into:



Now you will also cut open the side seams along their fold lines:



Because I wanted pockets, I cut myself four pocket shapes (you don't need a pattern--just put your hand down comfortably and mark a pocket shape around it, then cut!):



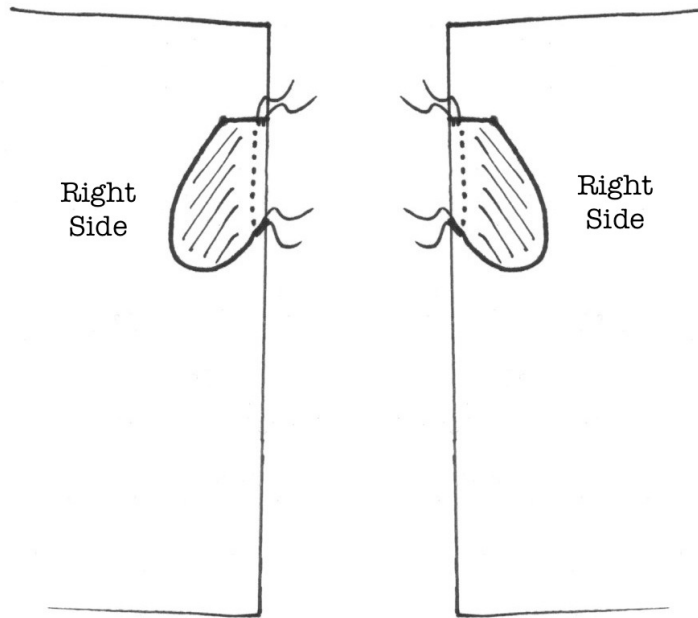
To add pockets, you'll measure down from the waistline of the skirt to the natural place on the hip where you would like to put your hands. In my case, it was six inches down:



Pin each pocket half to its corresponding skirt side seam, lining up the top of the pocket with this measurement, right sides together:



With the pockets pinned in place, you can stitch them to each skirt side seam (that's four seams total, as you have four pocket halves). Here's a line drawing of this step:



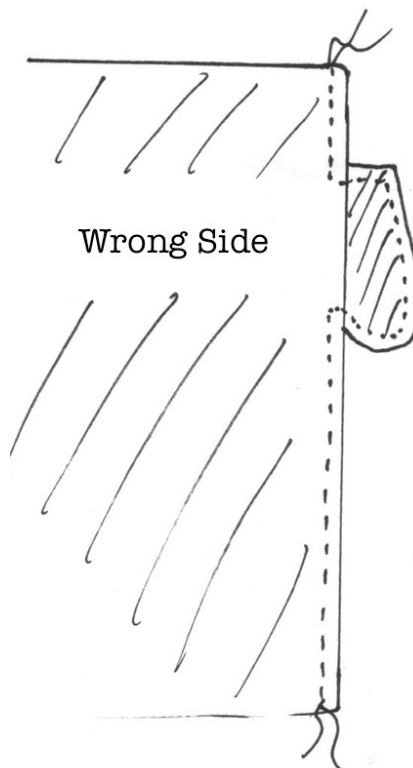
And here's a photo:



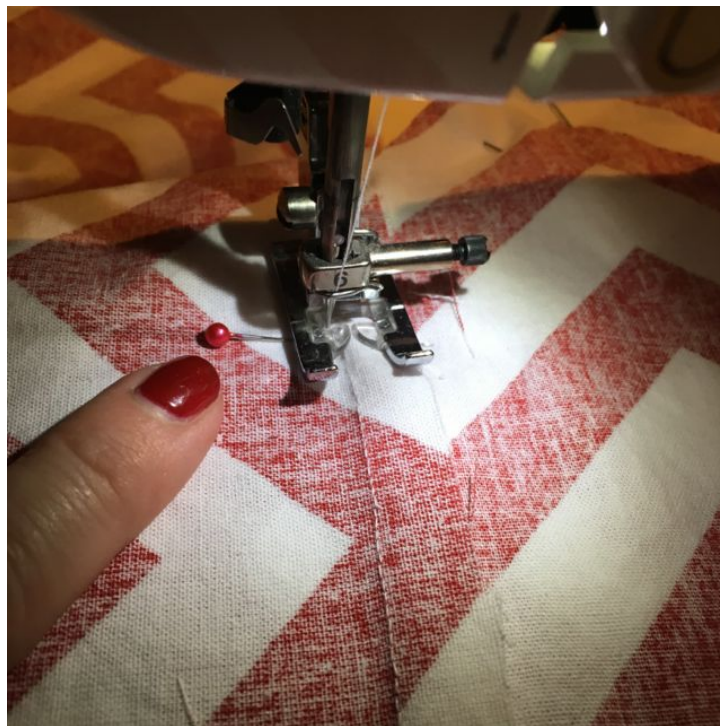
Now it's time to match up the side seams and the pocket halves and pin them together:



With everything nicely matched up, you'll stitch the skirt side seams/pockets together, starting at the top of the skirt. You're going to stop $5/8$ " into the top of the pocket, leave the needle in the fabric, then lift the presser foot and pivot to follow the outline of the pocket:



In the photo below, you can see between my thumb and first finger the part of the side seam that is left unstitched to provide an opening for your hand. This is why you pivot to go around the outer edge of each pocket. Note that you need to come up to the where my pointer finger is when you reach the skirt side seam. This makes the pocket deep enough that things don't fall out.

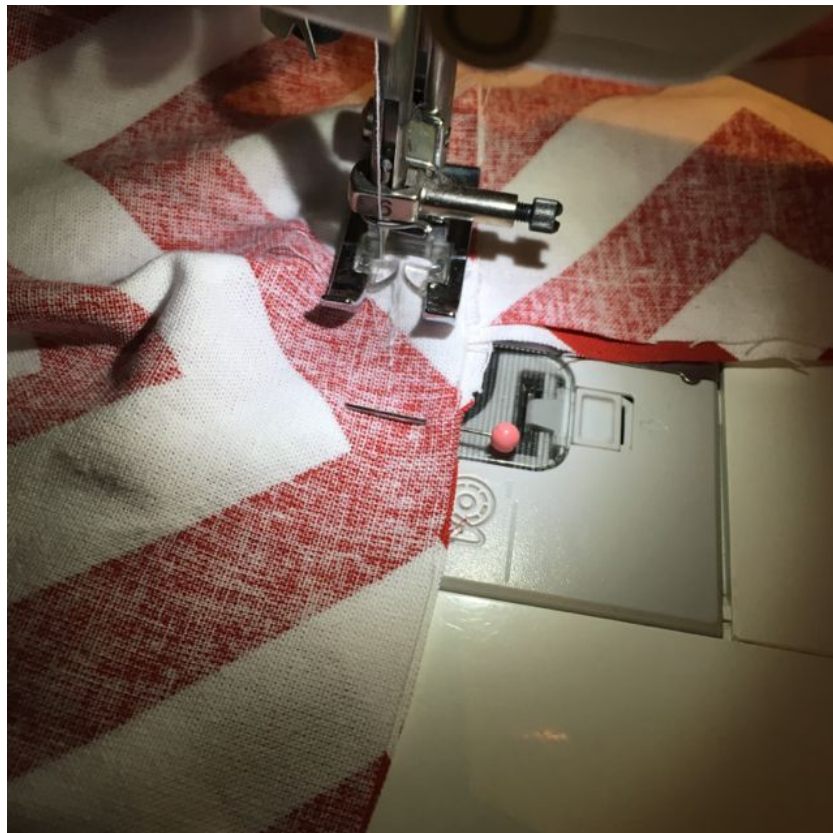


Here I've stopped the needle 5/8" into the top of the pocket so I can pivot and follow the outline of the pocket.



Stitching around the pocket.

Once you've gone around the outline of the pocket, you'll reach the skirt again and can pivot to follow the rest of the side edge down to the bottom of the skirt:



Repeat for the other side of the skirt, then cut out the waistband and follow the remaining directions to sew on the waistband, insert the zipper, and hem the skirt. The one difference is that I went ahead and stitched up the center back of this skirt to the zipper insertion point *before* inserting the zipper, since I wanted the stripes to match perfectly, as you see in the photo on the right.



I absolutely love this striking chevron pattern, and I paired it with my red petticoat from [Banned Apparel](#) and my Chelsea Crew T-straps from [Royal Vintage Shoes](#)!

This skirt took about 2.5 hours from start to finish, due to the pockets and side seams, but it was worth the extra time and effort. I do love pockets! If you're new to inserting zippers, it may take a few tries to get the zipper centered correctly on the waistband. True confessions: It took me three tries to get the zipper inserted in the chevron skirt, because it's harder to insert an invisible zipper when the center back seam has already been stitched. Don't despair if you have to rip out and restitch the zipper a few times. You'll get it in the end!

You can do this! No pattern required, and you'll have a lovely new addition to your wardrobe before you can believe it. Have fun sewing, and share pictures through my [submissions form](#) if you'd like to [Show and Tell](#)!