

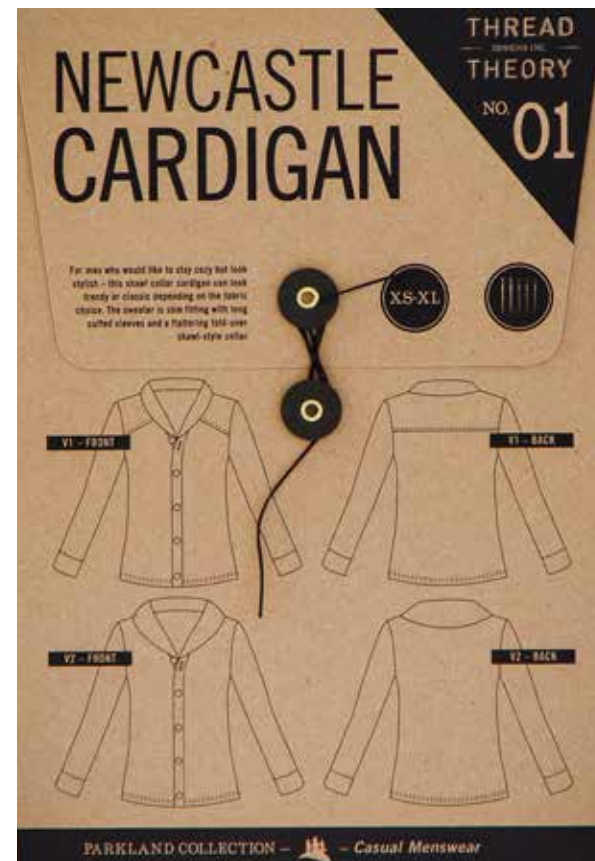
# Morgan Meredith: Styling Menswear Using Line, Color, and Texture



I think it is uncommon to find stylish and current menswear sewing patterns because of the common misconception that menswear is too boring to waste valuable sewing time on. I firmly believe that menswear is just as interesting if not more interesting than dresses and skirts as a sewing project. Sewers designing and constructing menswear projects are more confined to convention than if they were to sew a women's garment if they are hoping to create something that is easily (and willingly!) worn in public. While some may see this as a limitation of sewing menswear, I see it as an advantage because working within convention more thoroughly emphasizes challenging aspects such as sewing precision, knowledge of fabric properties, and creativity when faced with creating an original garment while meeting established criteria.

When sewing menswear it is very important to remember the three elements of garment design: **Line**, **Colour**, and **Texture**. These three elements operate as percentages that must always result in a full 100%. For instance, if a sewer decides to emphasize colour by choosing a neon green fabric, it is important to choose a fabric that does not also highlight an unusual texture and a common pattern that results in a common silhouette. Of course, these three elements are just guidelines to help create a conventional and wearable menswear garment and they can easily be broken if the goal is to create something exciting, shocking and fashion forward!

To explain how these concepts can be used to create a modern and fashionable menswear garment, here is how I approach sewing a Newcastle Cardigan:



**Line:** Line is the silhouette and fit of a garment. When using a sewing pattern, such as our Newcastle Cardigan pattern, a lot of the choices necessary when designing the line of a garment have already been made for the sewer by the pattern designer. By choosing to sew the Newcastle Cardigan, I have decided I want to create a slim-fitting knit garment suited to a fairly slim and tall wearer. I have decided the garment's focus will be the cozy shawl collar and that the cardigan will have youthful extra-long sleeves and a short body reminiscent of a motorcycle jacket. Of course, if any of these features don't fit the line that I, as the sewer, want to achieve, the pattern can be altered to achieve a different fashion fit (more on this later!). The Newcastle Cardigan's shawl collar and close results in a garment that follows recent trends while the fact that it is a cardigan gives it classic appeal. Due to the trendiness of the collar I would decide the line of this garment is approximately 60%. This means I have 40% left on the scale to play with colour and texture.

**Colour:** Colour is the easiest and most creative element a sewer can experiment with. Sewers are not limited to the colours deemed 'in season' and have the freedom to choose from myriads of fabric retailers or even create their own using dyes or fabric embellishment techniques. When sewing the Newcastle, I could employ colour blocking by choosing different coloured knits for the cuffs, button placket and the collar or I could dye a

cotton knit in a shade perfectly suited to the wearer's eyes. I could decide to use buttons that create a colour statement by contrasting with the main fabric or I could choose a knit colour that is easily paired with the rest of the wearer's wardrobe. Assuming I choose a neutral brown and gray palette (as I am prone to doing!) I would award colour a measly 10%.



Brown Newcastle with leather detail

**Texture:** Texture not only includes the three dimensional nature of the fabric but is also the category that prints fall into. Stripes or florals, for example, are included in the category of texture rather than colour. The contrast yokes on the shoulders and back of Variation 1 of the Newcastle Cardigan give the perfect opportunity to use texture. If I choose a solid knit for the main body, I could choose striped stretch suiting, fair-isle fleece, or even a



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luxuriously piled stretch velvet. If I leave off the back yoke (which requires stretch) I am free to use any woven for the shoulder details making my choice for texture almost limitless. I could add rough denim shoulder details to a soft bamboo cardigan base or rustic plaid paired with a wine coloured sweater knit. To suit the percentages given to Line and Texture, I love to fill my remaining 30% by choosing a rich brown leather to use as shoulder details and matching buttons for the perfect finishing touch to a gentlemanly Newcastle Cardigan.



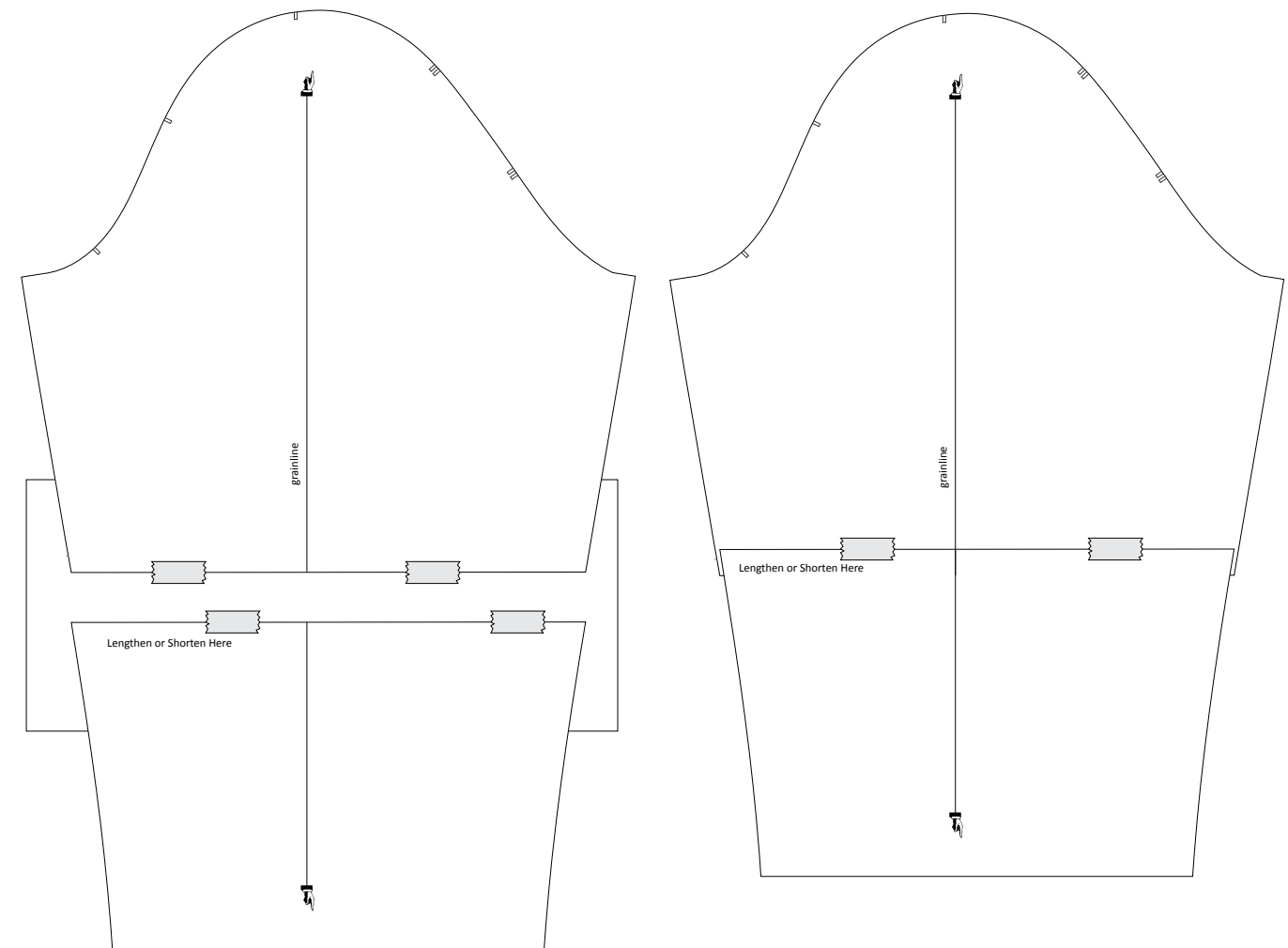
## Tutorial on Fashion Fitting the Newcastle Cardigan (and other tops)

Even if a sewing pattern's body measurement closely match the wearer's, it is important to consider the design's fashion fit. The body measurements given for a button-up shirt pattern may perfectly match those of the wearer but this does not mean it will result in a garment that fits the way a wearer prefers. The fit of menswear garments is largely dictated by current fashion trends or (perhaps more importantly) individual preference. Currently, acceptable cuff length for fashionable suit jackets is much shorter than it has been in the past while the width and ease in the body of a shirt or suit jacket is much less resulting narrow, slim-fitting garments. Individual men have a preference for tighter or looser fitting shirt necks or longer or shorter t-shirt hems based on where and why they intend to wear a certain garment.

Understanding the fashion fit of a sewing pattern and the desired fashion fit of the wearer is especially important when sewing menswear because there are so few patterns to choose from. It will likely be necessary to adjust certain elements of a pattern to suit the wearer when there is no other pattern available.

For example, if a sewer wanted to create a shawl collar knit cardigan, they would find themselves with only our Newcastle Cardigan pattern to choose from. Here are some of the features of the Newcastle Cardigan that could be adjusted to better suit a desired fashion fit:

**Extra-long sleeves:** If the wearer prefers shorter sleeves which end at the wrist rather than the base of the thumb, it is necessary to adjust the Newcastle Cardigan sleeve length by slashing along the "Lengthen or shorten here" line on the paper pattern piece, overlapping the pattern by the desired amount and taping it together again before using it to cut into the fashion fabric, as shown at right.

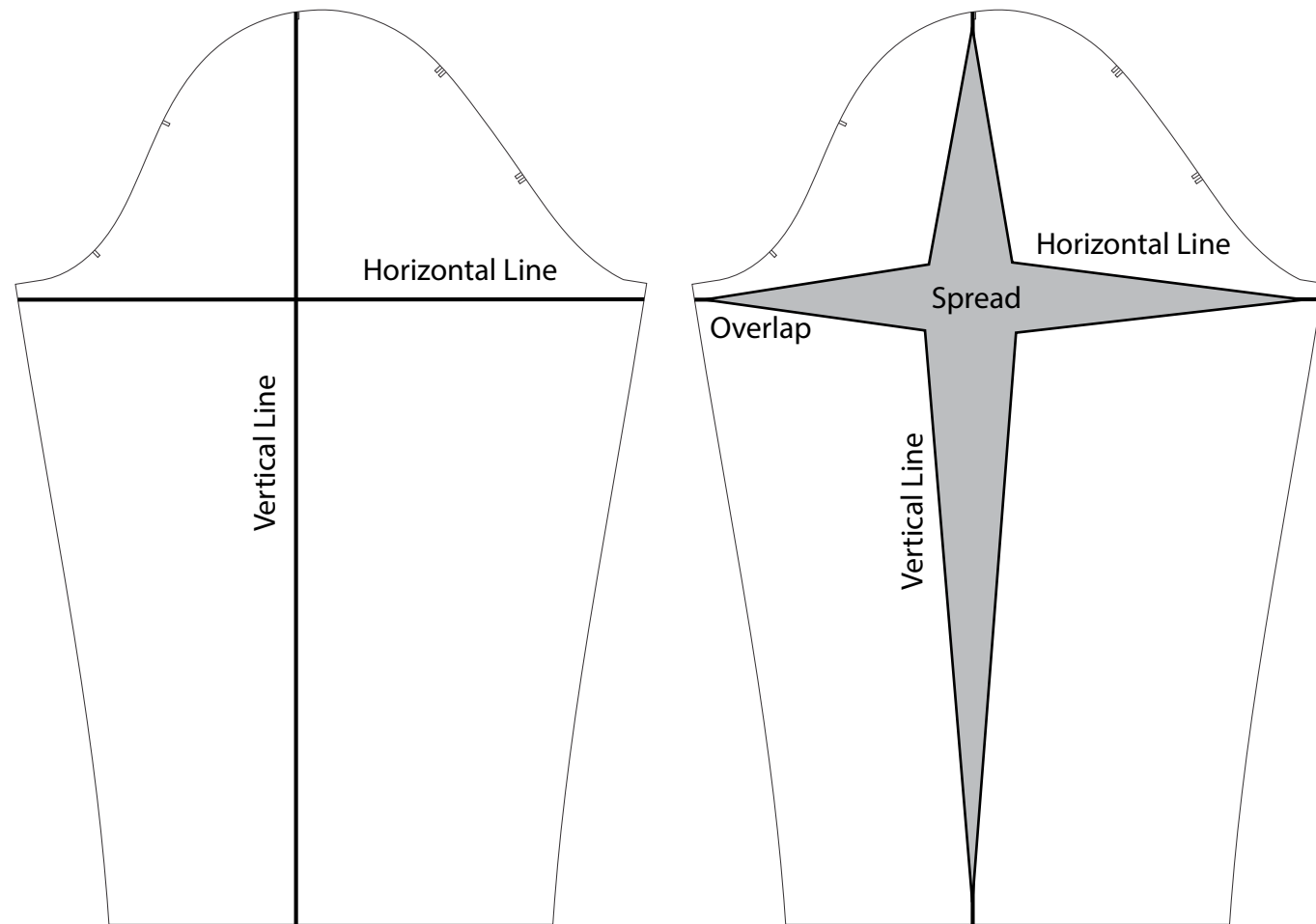


**Short Hem:** If the wearer would prefer a longer (less jacket-like) cardigan, the sewer can adjust the fit by lengthening the body in a similar manner to the sleeves: Slash along the "Lengthen or Shorten Here" line and insert a strip of paper rather than overlapping the pattern pieces. They would need to do this to all pieces that extend the length of the body (don't forget the facings and button placket!). Alternatively, the sewer could add a hem band by creating a rectangular piece (similar to the sleeve cuffs) that is sewn to the bottom of the cardigan to replace the hem.

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**Slim fitting sleeves:** If the wearer prefers more room in the sleeves (for instance, if they like to wear long-sleeve shirts under their sweaters), the sewer could adjust the fit of the slim fitting sleeves. They would need to adjust the sleeve by making a cross-shaped slash in the pattern and spreading the sleeve out, as shown below. When doing this, it is important to leave the paper pattern joined at all four edges of the slash in order to keep the sleeve head and sleeve them the same size (so they correspond with the armsyce and cuffs).

**Slim fitting body:** If the wearer prefers more room in the body (which results in a more relaxed and boxy looking cardigan), the sewer could choose to pick a larger size than required or perform some simple fit adjustments. Choosing a larger size will result in more room everywhere in the garment which is desirable if the wearer wants to pair the cardigan with bulky button-up shirts or thick long sleeve shirts. Since the pattern's design is intended to be very close fitting, going up a size will not likely result in a garment that simply looks too big. If any one area does look a little too big, this can be slightly adjusted while sewing (for instance, the extra width at the shoulders could be trimmed off of the armsyce) since knits are so



forgiving and can be stretched or eased slightly if needed for pieces to line up.

If the sewer chooses to stay at the size recommended by the body and garment measurement charts, they can create a boxier garment using these guidelines to make some simple adjustments:

**Remove waist curve:** Simply tape extra paper behind the cardigan front and back pieces along the side seam (large sheets of newspaper are useful or simply tape together a couple pieces of printer paper) and draw a new straight waistline by connecting both the edge of the armsyce to the hem. By doing this to both the front and back pieces, you will gain an extra 2" (5cm) in the waist ( $\frac{1}{2}$ " or 13mm X 4).

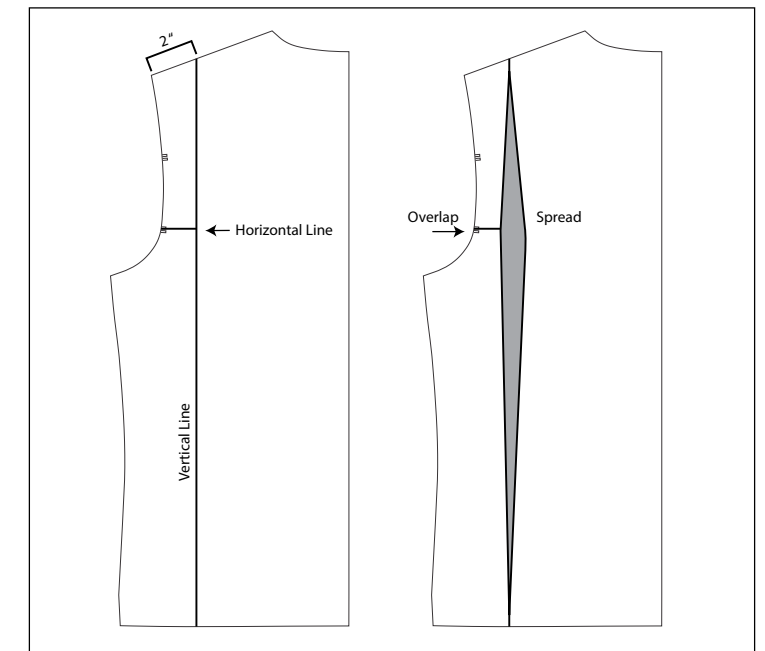
**Increase the upper back width:** If the wearer needs more room across the shoulders as well as in the waist, the next step is to perform what is called the "slash and spread" method on the back pattern piece, as shown at right. This is a good way to accommodate for extra wide shoulders or muscular/curved backs.

Using the Back paper pattern piece, measure 2" (5cm) in from the armhole along the shoulder seam. Draw a vertical line (parallel with the grainline) from this point all the way to the hem. At the lower armhole notch, draw a horizontal line that intersects with the vertical line.

Using scissors, cut from the hem upwards along the vertical line. Stop cutting  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (19mm) from the edge of the paper. Next, cut along the horizontal line and stop cutting  $\frac{3}{4}$ " (19mm) from the edge of the paper.

Using scissors to make small clips, cut inwards from the paper edge along the vertical line so only  $\frac{1}{8}$ " (4mm) of paper is still joined. Repeat this small clip for the horizontal line.

Now that the paper is cut and there are two small, joined hinge points, spread the vertical slash apart until the gap near the horizontal slash measures one half the total extra width needed across the back (this measurement will be doubled when the pattern is cut out in your fashion fabric because this piece is cut on the fold). A good starting point if you plan to give the wearer a decent amount of extra room is  $\frac{1}{2}$ " or 13mm (for a total of 1" or 26mm extra width).



Adding Width to the Upper Back of the Newcastle Cardigan

Lay newspaper or tissue paper underneath the slashed pattern piece and tape the piece to it so that the slash remains the desired width near the horizontal line and then overlaps as little as possible at the shoulder seam and the hem. Now cut the pattern piece out of the fashion fabric (or, more prudently, a mock up fabric!) to make a Newcastle Cardigan with a slightly more relaxed and roomy fit across the back!

## Choosing Knit Fabrics

Sewers are often intimidated by the prospect of choosing the right knit fabric for their knit menswear pattern. The best way to gain confidence when choosing knits is to look in your closet or in a menswear store that sells comparable garments to the one you plan to sew and examine the care labels for each garment. What types of shirts contain spandex? What types of sweaters are comprised of mostly acrylic fibres? Which ones are mostly cotton? When you are wearing a shirt or sweater, what properties annoy you? What properties do you like? If you avoid wearing a certain shirt in your closet because you tend to sweat more when wearing it, you will likely find it contains a majority of man-made fibres. If you enjoy wearing a certain sweater because you don't need to press it when it comes out of the wash and it doesn't stretch out throughout the day, you will likely find it contains at least a small percentage of man-made fibres. When choosing knits for a shirt or sweater it is important to keep the following questions in mind:

### How closely will the shirt or sweater fit?

If you are sewing a close fitting t-shirt or undershirt, you will not want to choose a loosely knit fabric that is likely to stretch out when sewn and worn. It might be advisable to choose a fabric with a small spandex or acrylic content because the elasticity and structure provided by these man-made fibres will help the garment retain its shape. At the same time, for a close fitting garment it is often more comfortable to use a fabric with a majority of natural fibres (such as cotton or bamboo) that will breathe well and will not irritate the skin. If a garment will be close fitting it is also important to pick a knit fabric that is strong enough to stretch each time the wearer takes it on or off. A tissue knit, for example, is not a hard-wearing choice for a slim men's t-shirt and will likely develop holes after only a few wears.

### When/why will the shirt or sweater be worn?

When choosing a knit for menswear, it is not just the style of the garment, but how and when it will be worn that dictates which fabric should be used. It is smart to think about what the wearer will likely be doing while wearing the garment. For example, if you are picking a knit fabric for a v-neck sweater that will be worn for business (paired with a blazer and worn layered over a button up shirt), you will likely want to pick a fabric that include luxurious wool fibres that look beautiful and classic. If the v-neck pull over were more likely to be worn casually while on a winter hike or just around the home, it might be more comfortable (and easier to care for) if you chose a cozy but informal fleece or maybe a hard wearing acrylic and cotton blend.

### How will the shirt or sweater be cared for?

Regardless of how the garment will be worn, there simply isn't much point splurging on a cashmere knit or using a delicate tissue knit if the wearer will not dry clean or hand wash their garments! To create a lasting garment it is necessary to be realistic about how the fabric will be cared for. When preparing your fabric to sew, wash and dry the fabric as you or the wearer will be doing when it is a finished garments because knits have a tendency to shrink substantially during the first wash. Of course, an important consideration when sewing menswear garments is whether or not they will ever be ironed. If the answer is "No", test the hand of a fabric on the bolt in the store by scrunching it up in your hand for a moment until your body heat is transferred to the fabric and letting go. Some stiffer t-shirt knits will remain creased while others will fall smooth and flat quickly. If your garment will never see an iron after it has been sewn, you will not want to choose the fabric that remains crinkled! Likewise, if a garment will be cared for harshly (washed and dried in a machine often), you will not want to choose a fabric the pills easily. Test for pilling by rubbing the fabric against your jeans while in the store. If you see short fibres beginning to pull loose and become fuzzy after a few moments of rubbing then avoid this fabric, as these fuzzy

sections will eventually become pilling!

### What level of detail do the design's elements need?

If you have chosen a pattern that includes more complicated elements such as a button placket or collar (think a button up cardigan, a henley t-shirt, or a polo shirt) you will want to choose a fabric with enough body and structure for these details. A fine jersey with little body, for instance will likely create a floppy button placket, regardless of how you interface it. A rib knit, on the other hand will be difficult to use if you need to make a crisp looking garment – a polo shirt in a rib knit would look floppy and messy rather than smart and sporty as intended.

### What types of material can my machine and I sew?

The last thing to keep in mind when choosing a fabric for your garment (especially when choosing knits), is how your machine or you as a sewer will be able to handle the material. If your machine is small and light-weight for instance, you may have trouble working with multiple layers of heavy fleece fabric. On the other hand, fleece is often easy for beginner sewers to use (if your machine can handle the thickness) because it has directionless stretch but is also quite structured – you will find it easy to sew long seams without one layer stretching more than the other. If your machine tends to 'eat' fabric (where the fabric gets pushed by the needle and sucked into the bobbin chamber), you may want to avoid very thin knits, especially tissue-weight knits. On the other hand, tissue weights often iron very nicely (compared to fleece or many other knits) and, if you have a serger, are quite forgiving and quick to sew.

*Thread Theory Designs, Inc.* is a sewing pattern company that focuses on menswear. We strive to provide sewers with menswear patterns that are modern in fit and style and consist of items that the wearer would likely choose to buy in a fashionable menswear store. On top of the designs themselves, we provide patterns that include everything the modern sewer has come to expect: comprehensive illustrated instructions, attractive packaging, fitting aids and of course, an online community full of extras such as photo galleries, sew-alongs and a very active blog.

Our company is operated by the two of us, a husband and wife team, each with a wide range of interests and skills that, we have happily found out, mesh quite perfectly when it comes to operating a business. A day of Thread Theory work, for me (Morgan), includes designing and sewing samples, writing and illustrating the instruction booklets, working with our pattern maker and graphic designer, and writing our blog. Matt, on the other hand, does the accounting, develops and maintains our website, oversees sales and wholesale accounts, and is the artistic eye behind our photography (and often the model as well!). While the tasks can be divided in such a tidy list on paper, in reality there is no such simple separation. Matt is often contributing to the design or styling of a garment, while I have been enjoying taking on the role of photographer or salesperson quite often of late.

The idea of beginning an independent menswear sewing pattern company took hold on a summer road trip across Canada during which Matt and I had lots of driving time perfect for dreaming and brainstorming. I was, at that point, an avid sewer and was enamoured by the supportive and constantly growing online sewing community. Matt, on the other hand, was the recipient of several home-sewn menswear garments and loved that he could now request custom fitted shirts to suit his lanky frame and love of a slim fit. We were well aware that there was a void in the sewing pattern industry when it came to menswear and decided that if no one else seemed ready to fill it, what was stopping us? Nothing! After making this decision I gained technical knowledge through a fashion design program and Matt began developing his business skills. The following spring, we launched our first pattern and we have been busily learning how to run a business and developing our patterns and online presence ever since!

<http://threadtheory.ca>