



## PERSONAL WARDROBE PLANNING

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Wardrobe wrangling takes some effort - but every step raises the spirits !

## YOUR PERSONAL BASIC WARDROBE PLAN

What are your most basic wardrobe needs ?

I've been reviewing what people suggest for wardrobe plans. The same items keep being mentioned as essential, many of which I never wear (Little Black Dress, blue jeans). And some of the things I always wear are never mentioned (lots of layers). Most of the plans aren't relevant to other people round here either. (I did see someone wearing a black blazer ten days ago, though it was silk and unstructured. Yesterday there was an edgy one lined with stripes and worn with leggings. Not, I suspect, what the people who say you must have a black blazer are thinking of.)

My reactions helped me recognise my priorities, so here they are in case they help you too.

Of course wardrobe planning is more effective when you know your most flattering colours and shapes. And your personal style. And the needs of your lifestyle. And after a closet clear-out, so you only have things you love, which are flattering and in good condition.

This is about how many clothes and other items you need, so you can fill in the gaps. I'm surprised to find how many things I wear all the time, yet never think of having more than one of.

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## Main wardrobe

Here's a list of basic types of garment :

outerwear - coat, raincoat, cape, poncho.

jackets.

casual jackets such as cardigans, knits, shirt jackets, hoodies.

shrugs, boleros, shawls.

sleeveless layers such as vests.

pullover layering tops, such as sweaters, tunics, or overblouses.

blouses, shirts.

short sleeved tops.

sleeveless tops and camisoles.

pants.

jeans.

crops, capris, shorts.

leggings, thick tights.

jumpsuits.

skirts.

jumper dresses.

dresses.

protective clothes, such as aprons, coveralls.

special requirements for hobbies, sports, work.

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## Suggestions for using the list :

Add notes on the list if there are items you want to expand to make more distinctions, or garments you want to add.

Cross off all the items which you never or very rarely wear.  
Cross them off thickly so you can't read the words.

Use the left margin to write in these numbers for the remaining items :  
do you wear them daily - mark with a 4  
do you wear them weekly - mark with a 2

Anything worn less often - mark with a 1 if it's essential even in a minimum wardrobe.  
Otherwise leave it out.

The 4, 2, 1 tell you how many of these you need, minimum.

Have you got a clothes 'signature' - something you always wear or would like to wear ? Do you usually wear one type of garment, or perhaps one colour, or a type of fabric, or a type of trim. Or your signature might be a style element, perhaps a type of collar or pocket.

Put a special star by your 'signature' 😊

If you like to wear a 'signature', this is the first item to pay extra attention to, and expand beyond the smallest practical number.

A separate part of the plan :

Make sure you have an outfit for any rare event that may happen without much warning.

For example I'm retired and only wear casual clothes. But I make sure I have one outfit for a very formal daytime event such as a funeral. Another possibility is an outfit for a wedding or a christening. And I need an outfit for a very formal evening event such as a black tie dinner or concert. (We do have those here, and they're in buildings with minimal heating.)

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And that's your own personal minimum wardrobe plan, the fewest clothes to cover your needs.

Have you got those numbers of items ?

Better than nothing.

Are they flattering and in your style, items that you love ?

Do they make outfits ?

Or co-ordinates - how many of your tops go with all or most bottoms, all or most layers ?

What does that tell you about your priorities for adding to your wardrobe ?

What colours, fabrics, styles would be best for adding outfits ?

Are they items you would enjoy sewing yourself ?

Are you going to buy or sew ?

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## Comments

For me it did make a difference to make a written version of the list.  
I'm surprised how quickly it focussed attention on what I need.  
But I am a 'seeing things written in front of me' person.

You might like to make separate lists for summer and winter.  
Or for work clothes separate from casual clothes.  
Or for special evenings. Or for pool/ beach.  
Or halve the numbers for a travel wardrobe.

Um, do you need separate lists for what you actually wear now, and what you would like to wear. . .

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I crossed out over half the things on the list.

Hmm, my favourite layering pullover tops and shirt jackets aren't even mentioned in most wardrobe plans. At work it was always a turtle-neck cashmere sweater, or unusual blouses and watches. They don't get much of a mention either.

Everyone's needs will be individual and special. The numbers and types of clothes needed are very different for a person who is mainly at home and lives in tees and jeans, compared to someone who moves between gym, boardroom, opera. That's why most published wardrobe plans are disappointing. Of course it's marvelous if we find one that works for us. But I usually feel they're devised for someone who has a different lifestyle, different personal style, different shape, different colouring. . .

Some wardrobe proposals are specific about styles and colours. Others are more general. The ones closest to my needs are Eileen Fisher's capsules (many posts [here](#)), and the Sewing Workshop layering wardrobe (here's [my post](#) on that). Many people with more classic taste love [Tim Gunn's 10 essential elements](#). (I haven't seen his book.)

Here's an example of how to be flexible with other people's ideas. I can adapt Tim Gunn's list to my own needs quite easily :

Trench Coat [mine has a button-in warm lining]  
Jacket / blazer [something less structured, no black or tailoring for me]  
Bonus trendy item [for me a layering tunic or shirt jacket]  
Sweatsuit Alternative top - comfortable fabric [for me a thick sweater or fleece]

Dress Pants  
Jeans [chinos for me]  
Sweatsuit Alternative bottom - comfortable fabric [cords for me]  
Skirt

Classic Shirt [several]  
Any Occasion Top - cashmere sweater

plus not for me :  
Day Dress  
Basic Black Dress  
Instead I'd add an essential padded vest in winter.

Someone in a hot climate who loves dresses would make different changes to the basic list 😊  
Perhaps :

Trench Coat [light rainwear or a trench styled jacket]  
Jacket / blazer [light evening layer]  
Jeans [crops or shorts, in light fabric]  
Sweatsuit Alternative bottom - comfortable fabric [skirt]  
Skirt

Classic Shirt [blouse]  
Any Occasion Top  
Sweatsuit Alternative top - comfortable fabric [camisole or halter top]

Day Dress  
Basic Black Dress [black only if it makes you look your best]  
Bonus trendy item [dress]  
Dress pants [replace with workwear dress]

Expert's plans are aids, not set in stone !

## Accessories

hats, caps, head coverings  
scarves, snoods, neck rings  
gloves, mittens  
belts

pantyhose, tights, stockings  
socks

flat shoes  
heeled shoes  
boots

purses, handbags  
totes, baskets, backpacks, phone and laptop cases  
umbrella

eyeglasses, sunglasses  
watch  
necklaces  
earrings  
bracelets  
pins, brooches  
rings

special accessories for children, hobbies, sports, work

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Ask the same questions as you did about the main wardrobe list, see Page 4.

What do you absolutely have to carry with you ? What is the most effective way to carry them all ?  
(extra pockets in clothes ?)

Have you got a 'signature' accessory ?

Some of you may want to list many different types of shoes - bags - hats - earrings 😊

How well do your accessories co-ordinate with your clothes ? Can you make outfits including shoes, plus bags, scarves or whatever else you wear and carry ?

Do you ever go straight from work to a dressy evening out ? You might think out accessories (jewellery, bag, shoes) to achieve this, as part of your wardrobe plan.

## Underwear and nightwear

bras  
camisoles, tanks, shells  
full length slips/ petticoats  
waist length slips/petticoats/ pant linings  
briefs, panties, etc.  
teddies  
shapers  
'long john' tops and bottoms, thermals

night gowns  
pyjama/ sleepwear tops  
pyjama/ sleepwear bottoms  
robes  
bed jackets  
bed socks  
slippers

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Ask the same questions as you did about the main wardrobe list, see Page 4.

Make sure you've got everything you need to wear under your main outfits. Are any of your clothes transparent? Underwear needs to co-ordinate too, in shape and colour. What do you not mind showing?

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Of course when you're filling your wardrobe gaps, it's best if the new items go with at least two items you've already got. Make sure you end up with wearable outfits.

For many people, co-ordinates are better still, but often a goal to work towards rather than something achievable quickly.

When you start assessing your wardrobe it can be discouraging to realise how far you are from your best. It can be a slow transformation. So try things out and celebrate the discoveries. Every little step is a plus !

Best to start planning when you've got plenty of time, rather than just before a special occasion or vacation. . .

Have a happy time getting a clear idea of what you like and need.

What are your priorities ?

Choose beautiful flattering patterns and fabrics and start sewing.

Make Sewing and Wearing A Pleasure 😊

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## **BUILD YOUR WARDROBE IN SMALL GROUPS - CAPSULES, OUTFITS**

Perhaps it's part of your personal style that you don't like to plan, prefer a free-flow approach to choosing your clothes, and just use general guidelines on colour and shape so you haven't got a closet full of orphans.

If instead you want the simplest possible scheme for wardrobe building - add small groups, rather than a whole wardrobe all at once.

What are the garment types you wear all the time : dresses or jeans ? shirts or tees ? jackets or sweaters ? If you're not sure, look at my personal wardrobe plan post (starting here on page 2).

What clothes grouping do these items make ? Would it suit you to build your wardrobe in coordinated capsules of 4/ 5/ 6 items, or individual outfits of 1/ 2/ 3 items ?

Here are the common possibilities.

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## CAPSULES

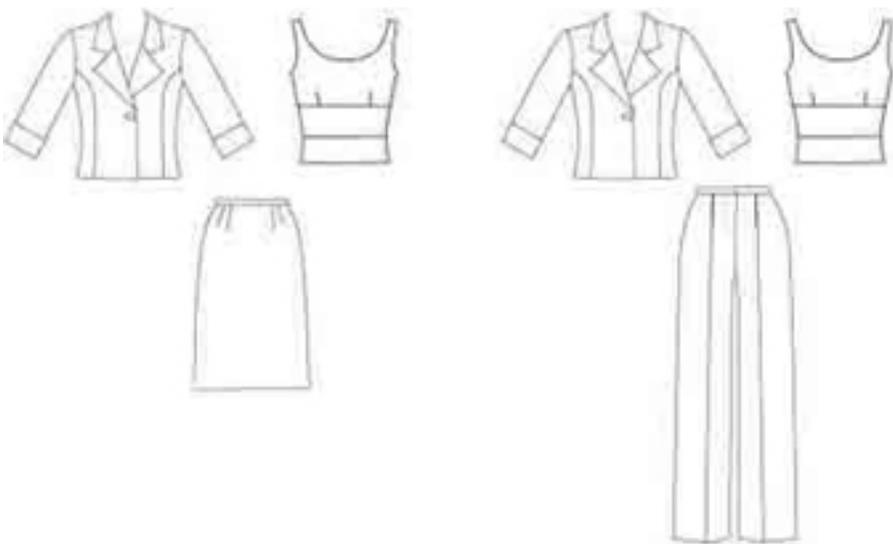
Small groups which include enough clothes for you to make several outfits.  
See [Index page 5](#) for posts with tips about co-ordination of items so they're interchangeable.

### Core 4

Often 2 tops, 2 bottoms. For example, Butterick 5333. Easy to make four different outfits.



If one top can layer over the other, that adds two more outfits.



Core 4 basis for wardrobe building :

Janice of The Vivienne Files builds a basic wardrobe of 12 items by adding 4 items at a time.

Here's her [original post](#).

- Core Four – sleeveless and sleeved tops, skirt, pants, in interesting colour.
- Expansion Four – 2 more tops and bottoms, in neutral colour.
- Mileage Four – more tops, in fabrics which combine accent and neutral colours.

She calls her approach 'Four by Four', and adds 4 accessories to the 12 clothes.

I've written posts on [patterns for her original scheme](#), and on [adding layers](#).

Janice has several other posts suggesting four-by-four wardrobes, with good illustrations of outfit combinations. See her Archive for May 2012, and [here](#). (In that post the Core 4 is 3 tops, 1 bottom – sweater knit, shirt, tee, pants).

Janice also has a post on [building up to a Project 333 wardrobe](#) in groups of 4 items, each group in one colour. To me her later [mixed version](#) is more interesting but also more difficult to achieve.

Janice's 4×4 clothes are rather similar to Nancy Nix-Rice's 12 item basic wardrobe. Nancy makes nearly 100 different outfits from her 12 clothes.

Start with one of each item needed (Nancy's Core 4 is jacket, top, skirt, pants), in a dark neutral.

Repeat in a light neutral, using the same or more relaxed styles.

Add another 4 with fabric interest to add variety : Nancy adds a top and layer in an accent colour, and a 2-piece dress in a mixed colour print.

Sadly Nancy's list of newsletters is no longer on her site, but they are still available :

- [21. Core 4](#)
- [22. Second top and layer](#)
- [23. 2 more bottoms](#)
- [24. accent colour twinset](#)
- [25. 2-piece print dress.](#)

For my posts on Nancy's wardrobe plan see my [Index page 4](#).

Also [Eileen Fisher's](#) 'system' of wardrobe basics. Her 'system' changes from season to season. (For the current version, see the [Eileen Fisher Video](#) on "What if it were this easy".) She makes co-ordination especially easy by having nearly everything in black ! perhaps with one cream top and one grey one. In summer 2010 the 'system' consisted of 3 Core 4s : 3 layers, 3 tops, 3 skirts, 3 pants. Here's my post on [patterns for that](#).

## Vital 5

Judith Rasband recommends a basic wardrobe 'cluster' of 5 items. Such as : jacket/ layer, 2 tops, skirt, pants. See her [Wardrobe strategies for Women](#) book, and [5 Easy Pieces DVD](#).



Simplicity 1945

This is just one possible example from the many ways of picking 5 different items. These particular 5 items make 10 different outfits (including layering the wrap top over the cowl one.) Add some scarves or statement jewellery, dressy and casual bag and shoes – and there's your wardrobe for a week's trip !

Wardrobe building from a Vital 5 :

To build on your basic group of 5, Judith Rasband adds one item at a time. So long as each new item co-ordinates with all the items you already have, it can double the number of different outfits possible. See my post on the power of the boring, here on page 21.

My personal Vital 5 is rather different, as in winter I need 5 garments to make one outfit. I don't own any fitted jackets or dresses, and only wear skirts on formal occasions. But I can't get my wardrobe needs down to less than 5 different types of item : shirt, pullover layer, shirt-jacket layer, vest, pants. Simplifying, that's shirt, pants, and 3 added layer options. In winter I wear all 3 added layers at the same time !

I could repeat this group two or three times, to make a wardrobe of 10 - 15 items.

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## Seasonal 6

ejvc's 6 item 6PACs are another capsule-to-wardrobe building idea. Make a 6 item capsule each season, following the colour suggestions (3 neutrals, accent), and you have a marvellous 24 item co-ordinated wardrobe by the end of the year !

Here's a [list of relevant posts](#) from ejvc, who started the idea.

There's always a sewalong for the current season at [Stitcher's Guild](#). This inspiration has been running successfully for several years.

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For an extreme example of making many outfits from few garments, see Janice of The Vivienne Files make [208 outfits from 33 garments](#).

If you'd like to look at more capsules for inspiration, see my post on [Some sources suggesting basic capsules](#)

Also [Index page 5](#) lists my posts on co-ordination, capsules and outfits.

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## OUTFITS

Do all those possibilities make you feel overwhelmed and confused ?

If so - start with outfits rather than trying to achieve interchangeable items.

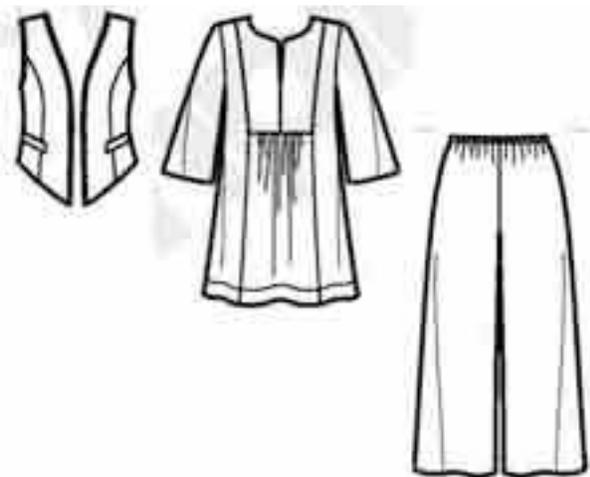
Perhaps you feel you can make good individual outfits, but not co-ordinates. Not to worry, the goal is good clothes you enjoy wearing. A wardrobe plan or capsules aren't essential for that, they just help some people.

### Key 3

Simpler than a Core 4, if you only wear pants never skirts, or the other way round - a Key 3 : layer, top, bottom.



Butterick 4989, McCall's 5889



Simplicity 2635

### Key 3 wardrobe building :

The original and long oop wardrobe planning book, "Working Wardrobe" by Janet Wallach, was written when women rarely wore pants to work. Her 12 items consist of 4 Key 3s :

- 4 layers (jackets and sweater knits),
- 4 blouses,
- 3 skirts plus either pants or dress.

A coat gives 13 items.

She uses 2-3 basic colours plus one item in an accent colour. Four pages of suggestions for colour pairs – not only used as solids but also as mixed weaves or prints.

Even easier :

Choose your Tried 'N True patterns, for top, jacket/ layer, pants/ skirt.

Choose 3 fabrics : perhaps dark neutral, light neutral, accent print or solid.

Make your 3 patterns in each fabric.

Hey presto, 9 basic co-ordinates.

Nice and easy – except many of us don't like to wear the same fabric for both tops and pants !  
Perhaps just make each Key 3 in the same colour.

One Key 3 group needn't only make a single outfit – if they co-ordinate with other items.

Make a Key 3 all from the same fabric/ colour.

This gives you an 'inner column' of top and bottom the same. To which you can add other layers.  
And an 'outer column' of layer and bottom the same. Add other tops.

All 3 items the same gives infinite options for combining with other clothes 😊

This 'column of colour' idea started in the 80s, as a good way of 'dressing slim'. I heard it first from Nancy Nix-Rice, [Lesson 22](#). Imogen Lamport of Inside-Out Style has several posts with good illustrations – links [here](#).

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## You 2

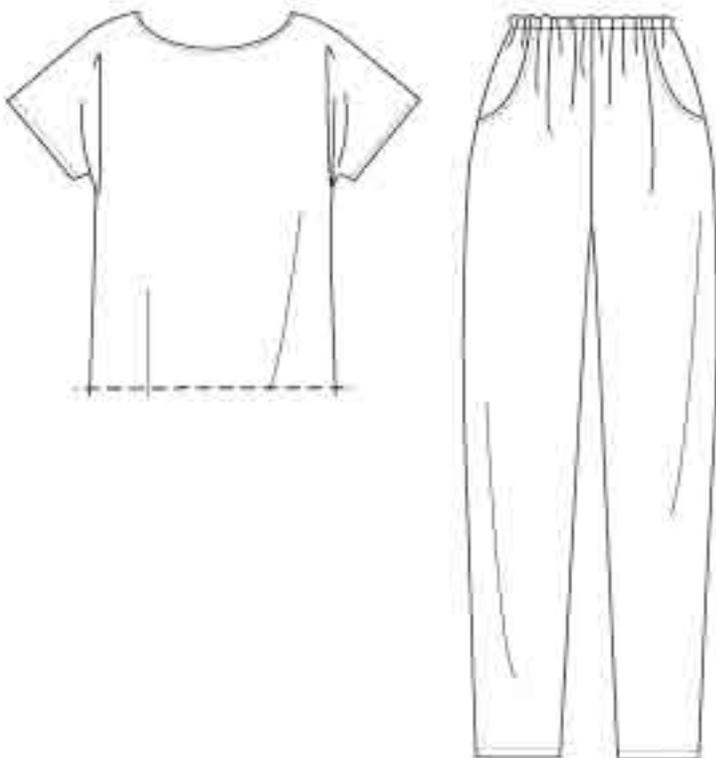
Or do you always and only wear two item outfits, and have a favourite pairing, such as :

- dress and layer :



Butterick 5247

- top and bottom. Many possibilities - blouse and skirt, shirt and shorts, tee and jeans, etc. :



Butterick 5651

## Simple 1

Your wardrobe plan could be much simpler : [10 dresses](#) and have done with it 😊

No co-ordination needed !

Though I voice my usual objection to “every woman should have. . .” as I’m a happy zero dresses person.

The Vivienne Files has many posts on [styling a dress](#) for different looks. They are usually sleeveless sheaths, but you can apply the same ideas to other dress shapes too.

If you prefer pants, jumpsuits are a current ‘one-item outfit’ option.

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Make 5 to 7 outfits, without worrying about choosing items that are interchangeable. If any of the items combine into other outfits that’s just a bonus 😊

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Did any of these ideas make you think – “ah, that’s right for me” or “no, not for me, I need. . .”

For more thoughts on wardrobe plans, see my [Index page 4](#).

If you decide to make a personal wardrobe plan, rather than ‘winging it’, the process can be daunting. There’s not only the basic group of clothes to pick out, but also your personal style and colours – see my post on [so many choices](#). With all these individual variations, probably few people follow any of these schemes exactly. They can be a good guide for first thoughts. But getting flattering enjoyable outfits is the key goal.

Don’t try to do everything at once. Every little step can help. I learned a lot about what’s best for me by trying to fit myself to other people’s plans.

I’m most in tune with Judith Rasband’s ideas. Which is your preference 😊

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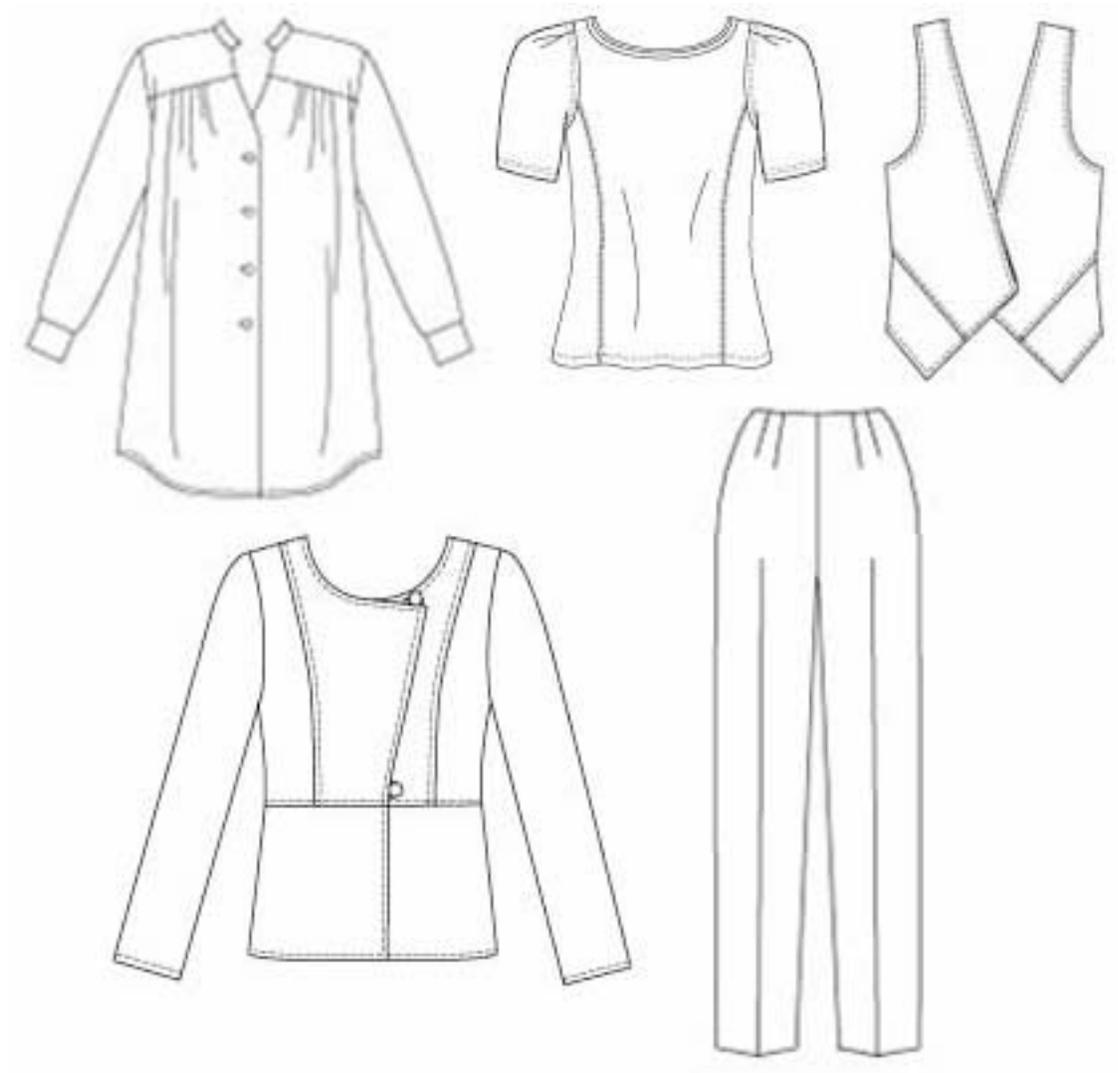
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## THE POWER OF THE BORING

Here's the power of simple items to add flexibility to your wardrobe. By instantly adding many more different outfits. Of course this is classic wardrobing advice. But I find it helpful to be reminded.

People who like 'statement pieces' won't be happy with this idea 😊 Nor is it much use to people who live in such warm climates you never wear added layers.

Here's an example Vital 5 group of quiet soft casuals. This is my favourite capsule from the [new Vogue](#) January 2011 patterns :



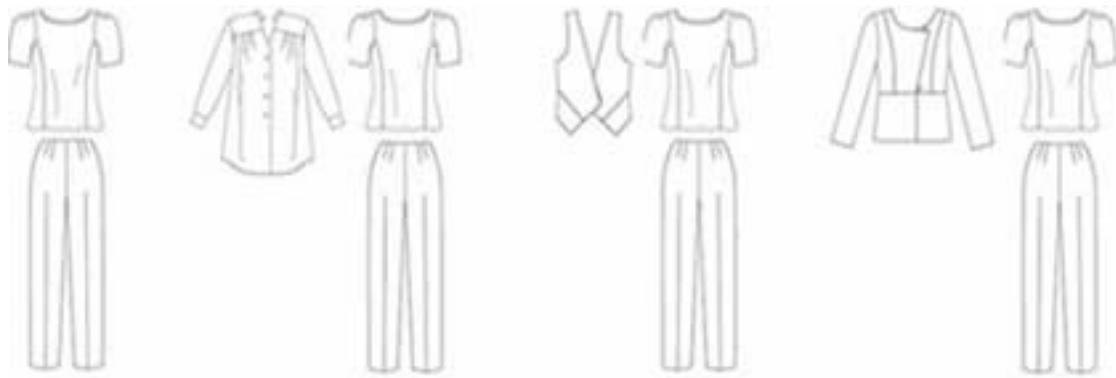
shirt [Vogue 8716](#).  
top [Vogue 8710](#).  
vest [Vogue 8713](#).  
jacket [Vogue 8714](#).  
pants [Vogue 8715](#).

From these I could make 3 outfits of 2 pieces :

top with pants  
shirt with pants  
jacket with pants.

(If you use a vest style with front closure so you can wear it without a top under, that would add another look.)

A choice of pieces to layer over the top – big shirt, vest, or jacket, which give very different looks. So that adds 3 more outfits. 6 different ones in all. Layer vest over shirt, 2 more outfits.



I've only shown the basic looks which include the top and no third layer vest, or the drawings get a bit big !

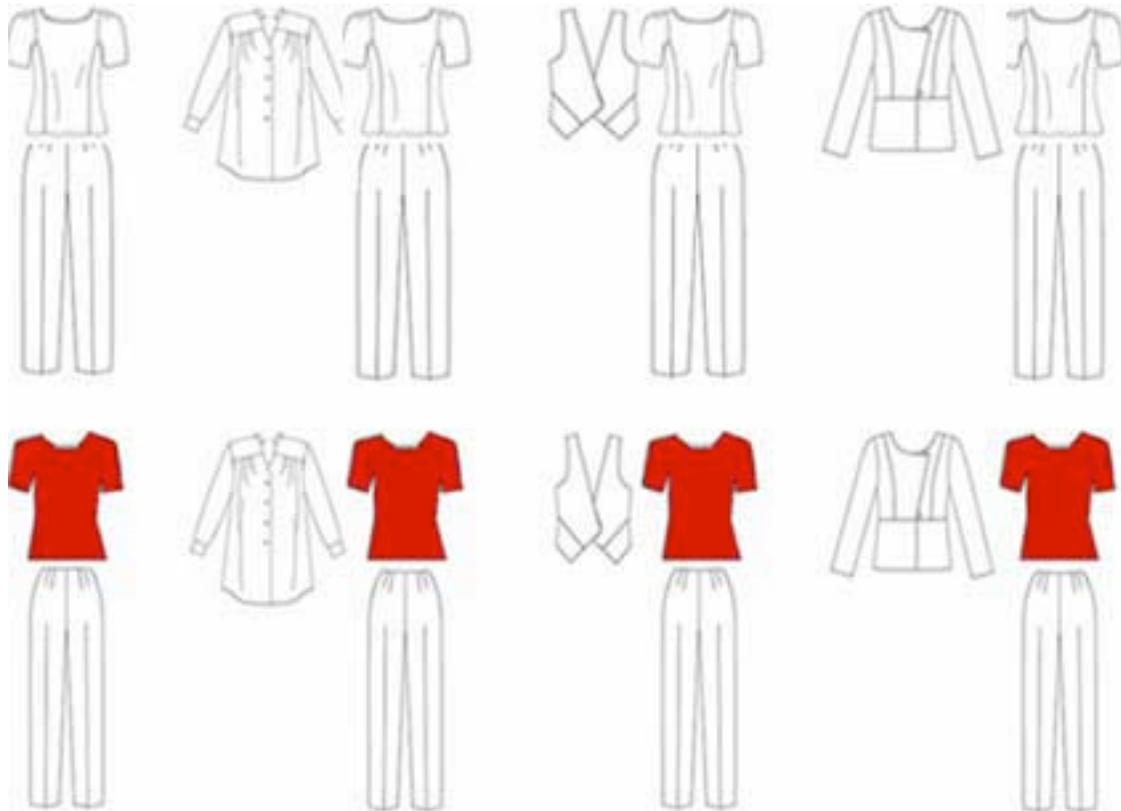
In an ideal layering wardrobe (see my take on the [Sewing Workshop](#) version) the jacket layers over the vest layers over the shirt layers over the top. To give the maximum number of different combinations and levels of warmth. But that isn't possible with this particular pattern group.

If you made a second version of any of these layering pieces, the jacket, shirt, vest, their style elements are so distinctive it might be obvious you were wearing something similar, even though the colour or fabric had changed.

But if you add another basic tee and pants, the number of different outfits increases dramatically without being obvious.

This shows the power of the boring.

Add a second top in a clearly different colour/ print/ texture. That adds 5 more looks, so the number of outfits goes up from 8 to 13. The diagram only shows the 8 outfits which use the tops. There are also the 2 made from the shirt or jacket with the pants. And the ones with vest over shirt.



Add another pair of pants. There are 16 basic combinations in the diagram (next page), plus 4 from the shirt or jacket worn with a choice of pants, and more from vest layered over shirt.

(The added top and bottom can of course both be the same colour/ print/ texture.)



You've added 2 simple garments, making 7 items in all. And the number of possible combinations has gone up from 5 items making 8 outfits to 7 items making at least 25.

A powerful example of the effectiveness of supplying yourself with basic co-ordinates.

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Even for very simple items with almost no added style elements, you choose your own best colours, and the silhouette/ neckline/ sleeve and body lengths, etc. that are right for you.

And this approach to increasing the effectiveness of your wardrobe needn't fill you with gloomy despair at its lack of creativity.

Look at Marcy Tilton's gallery of what she has done with her [Vogue tee patterns](#) (many pages of them). And her CD on [fitting, making and decorating tees](#).

Or Shirley Adams' [Alternatives 500 pattern](#) with many different versions of the same shell.

There's an almost infinite number of ways you can embellish and add interest to a simple top 😊

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General principle : notice that most of these outfits are a simple unobtrusive top and bottom, with all the character of the outfit made by the added layer.

That means a useful extra point - add an appropriate layer and accessories, and you can wear the same simple top and bottom (if they're of good quality) in a wide range of situations, from 'at home' to 'special occasion'.

Or, do the opposite if you want to take off your layer - wear a quiet layer and bottom with an interesting top. Change the top and accessories according to the situation. Another good way of going direct from work to 'dressy'.

Any simple ideas here for you to use your clothes in a wider variety of ways ?

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First published February 2011

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See my [Index page 4](#) for more posts on wardrobe planning.