

The Gathered, Elasticated Skirt. Sometimes known as a Dirndl.

This is quite possibly the simplest skirt you'll ever make. It'll probably take you longer to read these instructions than it will to make the skirt. Please don't let that put you off!

You will need:

Some elastic (See below to work out how much.)

Some fabric (See above.)

Some interfacing, the same size as your waistband (optional)

Tape measure

Dressmaking pins

Fabric scissors

Smaller scissors (sharp, pointy embroidery scissors are good)

Long ruler (a T-square would be nice, but it's not essential)

Chalk pencil, or a disappearing fabric marker

Sewing machine

Needle and thread

Two safety pins

Stitch unpicker (just in case!)



Fabric

This skirt is going to be gathered, so you'll want your fabric to be thin enough that it doesn't go bunched around your waist. Nobody wants a bunched waist. It also needs to be thick enough that you can't see through it. We're not going to make a lining, and you don't want everyone to be looking at your underwear instead of your fabulous new skirt. Printed cottons or polyester/cotton blends are good - this fabric should not be stretchy.

To figure out how much fabric you'll need, first you need to know how long your skirt is going to be. Mine is going to be below the knee, so about 65cm long, not including the waistband. You need to double this measurement, so you have enough fabric for both the front and the back. For seam and hem allowances (the amount which will disappear inside your skirt once it's sewn together), add 7cm. You'll also need a bit extra, for your waistband. Measure the depth of your elastic (mine is 2.5cm), double that measurement, add 3cm for seam allowances, and an extra centimetre for wiggle room.

My own measurements work out as follows:

Skirt length 65cm x 2 = 130cm

Seam allowances = 7cm

Elastic measures 2.5cm x 2 = 5cm

Seam allowances = 3cm + 1cm = 4cm

Total amount of fabric required: 146cm.

There you go - for a 65cm long skirt, a metre and a half of fabric will be perfect. You can make this skirt as long or as short as you like - just measure the length you want the finished skirt to be, and then double it.

Most fabric comes in two widths - 115cm, or 150cm.

You'll be using two pieces of fabric, so the total circumference of your skirt will be either 230cm or 300cm. Unless you're planning to smuggle small children into a party underneath your skirt, this should be plenty.

Elastic

You'll need enough elastic to fit comfortably around your waist. Don't choose elastic that's too thin, otherwise it'll dig into you and be uncomfortable. Anywhere between three quarters of an inch and two inches is fine - whatever you feel comfortable wearing.

Measure your waist (or the place where you want your skirt to sit, if that's lower than your natural waist), and cut the elastic to exactly the right length, *without stretching it*. You're going to overlap the ends of the elastic to sew them together, so your finished waistband will be an inch or so smaller than your actual waist size. (Don't make it so tight that you can't breathe, or so loose that your skirt's going to fall down. I've done both.)

Preparing the fabric

First of all, you need to wash and dry your chosen fabric. Yes, really. I know this is time consuming and dull, and you want to make your skirt now! But you need to know how your fabric's going to behave in the wash, particularly if it's going to shrink. You don't want your fabulous new skirt to end up three inches shorter, or with wonky seams, the first time it goes through the washing machine!



Okay, so the next thing you need to do is iron your fabric. I know this is boring too, and everybody hates ironing, but I can't emphasise enough what a difference ironing can make to your finished product. It's the difference between a really nice skirt, and something that looks as though you made it yourself. The horror!

Making the waistband

The first thing you need to do is measure your hips. Make absolutely sure that you are measuring the absolute widest part, otherwise your beautifully made skirt won't fit over your bottom. My hips measure 105cm. I need to add seam allowances of 3 cm to this, so my waistband should be 108cm wide.

The second thing you need to do is measure your elastic. To make the waistband, your piece of fabric needs to be twice the depth of the elastic, plus 3 cm for seam allowances, plus that extra centimetre for good luck. My elastic measures 2.5cm deep, so the height of my waistband piece will be 9cm.

So, my waistband piece needs to measure 108cm x 9cm. My fabric is 115cm wide, so my waistband will fit neatly onto one width of fabric. If your waistband piece is wider than your fabric, you can make a join. Don't forget to add an extra 3cm of seam allowances to the length though, for that extra seam.

Lay your fabric out nice and flat. I have a nice big table for this purpose - you might be using your dining table, the floor, or the bed. In that case, you might want to get hold of a big piece of cardboard, to give you a firm surface to work on. It also prevents you from accidentally cutting holes in your duvet cover. (Don't ask me how I know this.)

Use your ruler or t-square, and your chalk pencil or erasable marker, to draw a straight line across the width of your fabric. It's important that this line runs at exactly 90° to the edge of the fabric, otherwise your waistband will twist. Measure the depth of your waistband, and mark a second line parallel to the first. Now measure out the width of your waistband, and mark a vertical line at the end of it.

Double-check that your measurements are correct, and cut out your waistband piece.

If your fabric is quite floppy, you might want to interface it. This means adding an extra layer, for strength. You don't want to make your waistband too thick though, otherwise it will be too stiff to gather nicely when you add the elastic. You'll need to use your own judgement for this one. Fusible interfacing is great, as it simply sticks to your fabric and the whole thing becomes one piece. Beware the glue though - you don't want to get it all over your iron, or your skirt will end up grubby and sticky.

If you are using interfacing, you'll need a piece the same size as your waistband.

Now it's back to the ironing board.

If you're using interfacing, now is the time to iron it to the back of your waistband, following the manufacturer's instructions. (These are usually printed along the edge.) If you're not using interfacing, you can pretend I never mentioned it.

Next, you need to fold your waistband in half along its length, right sides outwards, and iron a crease into it. Use as hot an iron as your fabric will stand - you want this crease to stay put.



Look at your folded waistband. On the back, you now need to press a 1.5cm hem towards the inside. Take care not to iron out your first crease.



Which is the back? If your fabric can go either way up (if it's plain, or the print is something abstract like spots or swirls), then it doesn't matter. If the design on your fabric only goes one way, then the back is the side where the print is upside down, when the folded edge is at the top. This side will be inside the skirt, when it's finished.

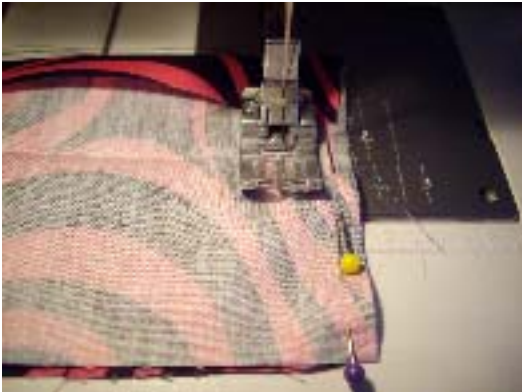
Now do a quick double-check, and lay your elastic over the top of your waistband. It should fit neatly within the folds you've just made, with a few millimetres to spare.



Once you've made certain that your elastic will fit, you need to sew the two ends of the waistband together. Bring the two ends together, and make sure that the waistband isn't twisted. You probably don't want a moebius strip for a waistband. Pin the two ends together.



You need to sew only half of the waistband together - the half which will be on the outside of the skirt, so that's the side without that extra hem. Line up the edge of the fabric with the 1.5cm marker on your sewing machine, and the needle with the centre crease. Then sew!



Once your little half-waistband seam is sewn, it's back to the ironing board to press the seam allowances open.



That's it for now - you can put the waistband to one side, and have a celebratory biscuit. Don't get crumbs on your fabric!

Making the skirt

Fold your fabric in half along its width, making sure that both of the selvages line up neatly. (The selvages, aka selvages, are the machine-finished sides of the fabric.) You may notice that the two ends of your fabric are not so neat. However, you know that the edge which you cut to make your waistband is perfectly straight (because you used your ruler or t-square, of course), so you can trim any excess fabric to match your cut edge.



Go back to the ironing board, and press the fold into place. Next, open up the fabric, and cut along the fold, as neatly as you can. You should now have two pieces of fabric the same size as one another.

Take these two pieces of fabric, and place them right sides together. Don't forget to double-check that the print is the same way up on both sides! Pin the fabric together down each side.

Now, to the sewing machine! Line up the edge of the fabric with the 1.5cm marker, and sew neatly down each side seam. It's best to work from top to bottom, for neater results.



You don't need to worry about any seam finishing - as you're using the selvedge, the fabric isn't going to unravel. One word of caution though - some fabrics have one selvedge which is printed, and one white one! You'll need to double check that the white side isn't going to show on your skirt. If this white margin is greater than 1.5cm, you can move the fabric a little further out, and sew a larger seam allowance. Because this skirt is so full, the loss of a few millimetres on the side seams won't matter at all.

Don't worry if the bottom of the fabric doesn't match up absolutely perfectly, as you can fix this when making the hem. However, if you're miles out, you might want to double-check that your two fabric pieces are actually straight!

Over to the ironing board again, to press open those side seams. This is a really important step - pressing your seams helps to make your sewing look that much more professional.



Gathering the skirt

You might be wondering at this stage how on earth all of that fabric is going to fit into your carefully-constructed waistband. This is where the gathering comes in.

First of all, you'll need to set your sewing machine to its longest stitch length. This makes the stitching loose, and allows you to pull the threads up to make the gathers. Line up the edge of the fabric (the top of your skirt) with the right hand edge of the foot of your sewing machine. You want to be sewing about 5mm away from the edge of the fabric. Do check that you're gathering the top of the skirt, and not the bottom!

Leave the tail ends of the thread long, and sew from one side seam to the next. Now stop, and leave the threads long before you cut them. Start with nice long thread tails again, and sew from the second side seam back to the beginning.

Now you need to repeat the process, just a little further in to the fabric. Start at the first side seam again, with nice long thread tails. This time, line up your first row of stitching with the right hand edge of the foot. Sew from one side seam to the next. Now stop, and leave the threads long before you cut them. Start with nice long threads again, and sew from the second side seam back to the beginning.



If you run out of thread while you're sewing the gathering stitches, you'll need to unpick as far as the previous side seam, and start that row again. You can't make a join in the middle of your gathering stitches, otherwise they won't gather.



You should now have two parallel rows of nice loose gathering stitches. Work out which thread tails belong to which rows of stitching. Knot four thread tails together, from the front and back of two rows of stitching. At the opposite side seam, find the other ends of those four threads. Pull **gently** on the two threads on the top of the fabric, and it will gather towards the knotted threads at the other end. Ease the gathering along as you go, a little bit at a time.



It is **very important** to do this carefully! If you pull too hard and break the gathering threads, you'll have to start the gathering process all over again.

You'll need to have your waistband handy at this point. Lay it out, and measure its length. You need to gather up your skirt fabric to the same length, so that you can attach the two pieces together.



When you have gathered up the fabric to the correct length, tie several firm knots in the threads, to keep the gathering stitches from coming undone.

Repeat the gathering process on the other side of your skirt.

Now you can neaten the gathers along the length of the threads until they're nice and even. Do take your time to do this - it's fiddly, but it's worth making the gathers as neat as possible for the best results.

Please do not be tempted to hold up your skirt to admire your beautiful gathering work! The weight of the skirt can cause the gathering threads to snap, and you'll have to start all over again. Just leave it nicely on the table (/floor/bed) until the waistband is safely attached.

Now might be a good time to have a fortifying cup of tea, especially if the thought of your gathering threads snapping has sent you into a state of shock.

Attaching the waistband to the skirt

Lay out the waistband with the seam at one side. Mark the other side with a pin. The seam and the pin need to line up with the side seams on the skirt.

Turn the skirt right sides out.

Lay the waistband over the top of the skirt. The two pieces should have their right sides together.

Line up the raw edge of the waistband with the gathered edge of the skirt.

Line up the waistband seam and the pin with the side seams of the skirt.

Pin the raw edge of the waistband into place, along the gathered edge of the skirt.



Back at the sewing machine, don't forget to set your stitch length back to normal! Line up the raw edge of the fabric with the 1.5cm marker, and sew around the waistband. You might find it easier to unfold the waistband, so it doesn't get caught up in the stitching. As you're sewing along, keep your eyes open, and make sure that the gathered fabric doesn't get caught up in the seam.



You don't want all those gathers sitting inside your waistband, so once the waistband seam is sewn, you'll need to trim away some of the excess fabric. Turn the skirt inside out, and very carefully trim away only the gathered layer. Don't get too close to the seam - you don't want to accidentally snip all of your hard work apart! Try to cut neatly in between the two rows of gathering stitches. Your smaller pair of scissors is ideal for this.



Next you'll need to turn down your waistband to the inside, covering that gathered edge. The folded hem of the waistband should line up with the stitching of the waistband seam. Pin the waistband into place.



This next part you'll need to sew by hand. If you sew the waistband into place by machine, you'll have an extra layer of stitching showing on the outside. Unless you can be sure to stitch extremely close to the edge of the waistband, you also run the risk that your elastic might not fit through.

Thread your needle, and bring the two ends of the thread together so that you're using the thread double. This makes the waistband nice and strong.

Slip stitch your way around the waist.

Slip stitch: Make a teeny-tiny stitch in the skirt fabric, as small as you can possibly make it. Ideally it should catch only a couple of threads, so the stitching is invisible on the right side of the fabric. Now make a larger stitch in the fold of the waistband. Repeat teensy stitch on skirt/larger stitch in fold until you've made it all the way around.



Hint: Do feel free to make joins in your stitching as you work your way around the waistband. Please don't try and do this with one enormous great length of thread, you'll only get into a dreadful tangly mess and make yourself cross.

I quite enjoy doing my hand sewing whilst sitting on the sofa, watching the television. If you decide to follow my example, please take care not to become so engrossed that you accidentally sew your skirt to your lap.

Don't pull your stitching so tight that you create more gathers in the waistband. The gathering you've done is perfect already, and if you gather the waistband at this stage, your skirt will be too small!

Once you've stitched the waistband into place, it's back to the ironing board to press it neatly before you insert the elastic. Take care not to press those gathers!



Now is a good time to look carefully at the right side of your skirt, and see whether any of the gathering stitches are visible underneath the waistband. If you see any, take your seam ripper, and carefully unpick them. Don't worry - your gathers are all safely sewn into the waistband now, so your skirt won't fall to bits.

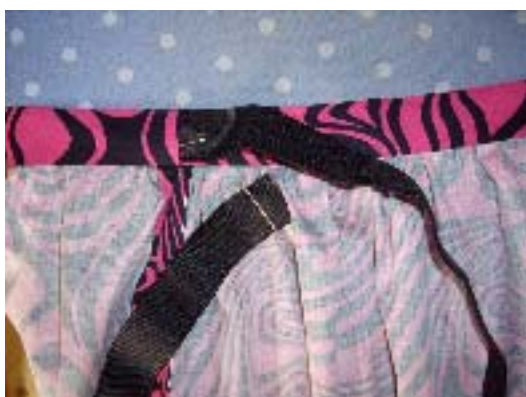


We're almost there! All we need to do to finish the skirt is to insert the elastic, and tidy up the hem.

Inserting the elastic

First of all, turn your skirt inside out. Take your elastic, which should be exactly the same length as your waist measurement (check this now!), and fasten a safety pin into one end. Poke this end of the elastic into the gap in the seam of your waistband. Make sure that the elastic is not twisted.

Take your second safety pin, and fasten the other end of the elastic securely to the skirt, close to the gap in the waistband. This will prevent this end of the elastic from disappearing inside the waistband. (If this happens, pull the elastic out and start again.)



Feed the elastic through inside the waistband, using the safety pin to hold on to. Don't pull the elastic too hard, otherwise it will lose its stretch, and your skirt will fall down. If you've measured your waistband correctly, the elastic should slip through nice and easily.

Beware - the safety pin you are using to pull the elastic through might pop open. If this happens, you have two options. The first is to pull the elastic out backwards,

fasten the safety pin, and start again. The second is to fiddle with the safety pin while it's inside the waistband, make sure the point isn't caught in the fabric, poke yourself in the finger a few times, and maybe mutter a rude word of your choice. It's up to you.

When the elastic is all the way through your waistband, overlap the two ends by about 2.5cm, and use a safety pin to hold them together. You can then adjust the waistband so that the gathers are nice and neat all the way along, and try on your skirt! How exciting!

If it fits, you need to sew the two ends of the elastic together, exactly as you've pinned them. If it doesn't fit, you can adjust the overlapped ends of the elastic before you sew them.

Now you need to prise the ends of the elastic back out of the hole in the waistband. This can be fiddly, but you should be able to feel where the safety pin is, and you can use this to help you. Again, don't pull too hard, as you don't want to overstretch the elastic or break your beautiful slip stitching.



Pop a couple of pins into your elastic to hold it in place, and then remove the safety pin. Gently (GENTLY!) pull out the elastic as far as you need to get it under the foot of your sewing machine.



Sew the elastic together. Gently feed the elastic back inside the waistband, and smooth out the gathers until they're even again.

Now take your needle and thread, and neatly sew up the gap in the waistband.

Take care not to catch the elastic in your stitches.

Ta-daa! Your waistband's all finished!

We're almost there. Now all we need to do is make the hem.

Making the hem

First of all, you'll need to iron your skirt. It's probably looking a bit wrinkled and sorry for itself by now, and a good ironing will make it look much better. Starting from the bottom of the skirt, iron towards the waistband, going as far up as you can without ironing over the gathers. If you lift the waistband slightly as you iron towards it, you'll be able to get in between the gathers without pressing over them and making lots of new creases.

With the skirt inside out, measure from below the waistband to the hem, and work out how much you need to turn up in order to make your skirt the right length. Unless you've changed your mind about the length of your skirt since you started, it should be about 2cm. Go ahead and press up a 2cm hem all the way around your skirt.



Now you need to get rid of that raw edge, so that your hem doesn't unravel. The simplest way to do this is to tuck it neatly inside the hem that you've just made.

Fold down the raw edge inside the hem, and iron all the way round again, to make sure it stays put.



All you need to do now is sew the hem into place! You can either do this by hand, using a slip stitch the same way that you did for the waistband. If the thought of sewing the entire hem by hand causes you to break out into a cold sweat, you can just as easily finish the hem on your sewing machine. You'll need to be extremely neat though, as your stitching will show on the right side of your skirt. If you decide to finish your hem on the machine, simply line up the folded edge with the right hand side of your foot, and sew as neatly as you can. You might want to double-check that your stitching is actually catching the hem into place!



Finishing Touches

Now it's back to the ironing board for the very last time. Make sure your hem is beautifully pressed, and the rest of your skirt is ironed flat, all the way up to the gathers.

And you're done!

All that's left is for you to try on your new skirt, and marvel at how gorgeous it is!



Hints and Tips

Test your fabric marker first!

Use a scrap of fabric to make sure that your erasable marker really can be erased from your fabric, or at the very least that it won't show through to the right side when you're finished! Only ever make your marks on the wrong side of the fabric. It's best not to iron over any markings that you've made, as the heat might set the lines.

Measure twice, cut once.

Dressmaking is like carpentry in that respect - you can't always fix things if you've made your cut in the wrong place.

Interfacing - use your common sense.

When you buy your interfacing, check that it can be adhered to the type of fabric that you're using. Some synthetic fabrics won't stick to fusible interfacing. This means you'll need to go for the sew-on kind instead. Simply sew the fabric and the interfacing together around the edges, within the seam allowance. You can do this by hand or machine. Think also about the thickness of your interfacing. Too thin and your waistband will be as floppy as if you hadn't bothered. Too thick and it won't gather up nicely when you run the elastic through.

Use your imagination!

If you want to make a more streamlined skirt, you might be able to get away with using only one piece of fabric, folded in half. Simply put the single seam at the back, rather than having two at the sides. As long as it's as wide as your hip measurement, with a little extra for breathing room, your skirt can be as narrow as you like.

If you want to make a dramatically full skirt, simply add more fabric pieces until you have something really spectacular! Don't forget to make sure that it will all gather down into your waistband.