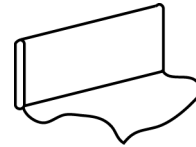


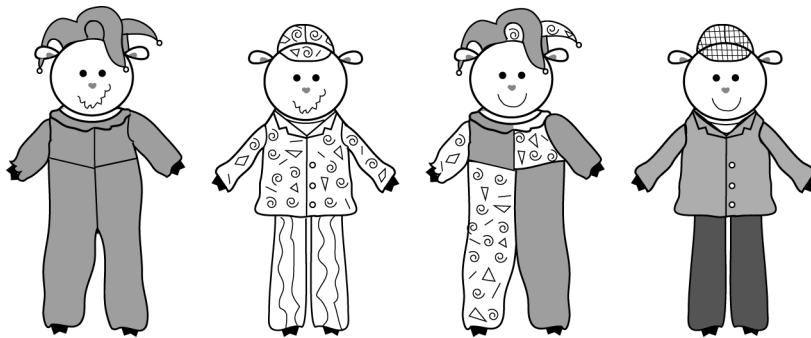
## Choosing fabric



### The most important choice

Take a closer look at the costumes on the covers of this book and you can see that many of them are pretty much the same except for the fabric. In the Wizard of Oz scene on the back cover, for instance, the Scarecrow, Tin Woodsman, and Cowardly Lion outfits all came from the same basic pattern (except for the hats), yet their overall appearance is strikingly different. You really don't need a lot of pattern styles to achieve variety since fabrics can do that for you.

Even more importantly, the kind of fabric you choose helps bring out the character you want to create. Imagine a jester dressed in all plain brown fabric, or a detective coat in wild, dazzling colors. Would anybody recognize them? Matching characters and fabric is undeniably one of the most important costuming tasks.



### Can you guess?

What material is the white ruffled skirt of the Bo Peep, Ginger Rogers, bridal, and princess costumes made out of? Dryer sheets! That's right, over 150 used dryer sheets sewn together. (And that's not even counting the sleeves and hats.)

Even though used dryer sheets aren't usually considered fabric, they are surprisingly easy to work with and *very* light weight. (Always a consideration when your arm has to hold that costume up!) How's that for getting something out of nothing?



## What to look for

To help you pick out the right fabrics for your costumes, I've boiled down what I consider to be the key factors when choosing fabric.

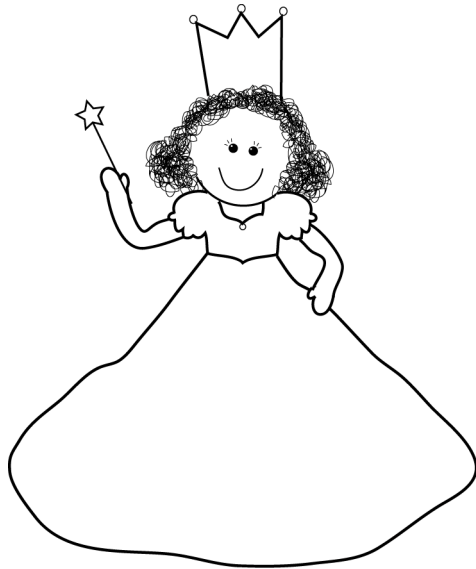
1. **Color & pattern** — look for colors that complement your puppet's skin and hair tones, yet contrast enough to be seen from a distance. (You can even take your puppets to the fabric store to help you pick out!) The colors you use should also complement your puppet's personality and character. Soft pastels work well for milder characters (like the Bo Peep and Dutch girl outfits on the front cover), while flashy or vivid colors work better for others.



You can also decide whether you want fabric with a preprinted pattern (like the tiger stripes and disco print on the inside front cover). Watch out for patterns that have to be carefully lined up (such as pronounced stripes) or are so large they look odd when cut into puppet-sized clothes (see page 46). A small, random pattern is usually the easiest kind to work with.

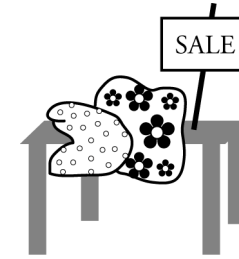
2. **Thickness** — if your hand shows through the fabric when you hold it up to the light, it may be too thin for a costume, particularly if it's light colored and your puppet has dark skin. (This is often a problem with very cheap cottons and with sheer, fancy fabrics.) At the same time, try to avoid fabric that's exceptionally bulky (like sweatshirt material or polar fleece) unless bulk is what the costume calls for, since these can be difficult to work with and often add unnecessary weight to the costume.
3. **Readiness to ravel & wrinkle** — few fabrics are more frustrating to work with than those that fall apart or wad themselves up before you even try to sew them. Look carefully at the cut edge of the fabric to check for signs of raveling and loose strings. Almost all fabrics ravel a bit, but if a fabric looks as if it's rapidly growing its own hair, steer clear. To test for wrinkling problems, try squeezing a fistful of fabric in your hand and then letting go.
4. **Shine** — many costumes, from princess robes and ball gowns to Tin Woodsman outfits and suits of armor, depend on catching the light during a performance. If you can, try to consider what kind of lighting your costume might be subjected to when choosing shiny fabric.

5. **Swooshiness** — if you are making a long, full robe or skirt, try unrolling a bit of fabric and holding it up to see how it hangs. Some fabrics are naturally stiffer than others and insist on making awkward points rather than soft folds. Others drape down beautifully. This isn't a concern for many costume parts (like close-fitting shirts), but can make or break the dramatic effect of a wide ballroom gown.



6. **Stretchiness** — a useful quality for making pullover shirts and human-hands sleeves. Very stretchy fabrics usually require some kind of interfacing along the seams (see page 23).

7. **Price** — even if most of your fabric comes from sale tables or neighbor's scraps (as mine does to this day), you can still pick the right fabric for the costume if you consider the other factors. At the same time, I strongly caution against making a decision based solely on price, since I have (on several occasions) ended up making the same costume *twice* when the first fabric didn't hold out.



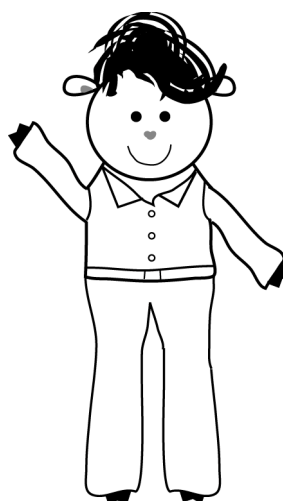
### Types to choose from

Since fabrics masquerade under many different labels, it's always a good idea to look at the end of the bolt to see exactly what kind of fiber a fabric comes from.

Many of the most familiar fabrics (including calico, corduroy, gingham, felt, fleece, seersucker, muslin, denim, velvet, and velour) come from cotton, while many others (satin, jacquard, taffeta, and chiffon) are usually made from polyester. Understanding the available materials can help you predict how the fabric will work for your costume.

✂ **Cotton** — cotton fabrics are generally easy to work with, come in a wide variety of colors and patterns (calicos often work well), are readily available, and usually not too expensive. On the down side, some cotton fabrics wrinkle or ravel too much, or are simply too thin. To avoid this, you can try cotton-polyester blends, which often provide the best of both fabrics.

✂ **Polyester** — if you immediately think leisure suits, take a look in your local fabric store and think again. Polyester comes in an incredible variety of styles, colors, textures, and brilliance. Some costumers despise synthetics as second-class, but for those who want fabulous results on budget, polyester can't be beat. Because polyester fiber creates a lot of different kinds of fabric, each behaves in its own special way. Most are exceptionally easy to work with (since they tend to lie flat and don't ravel much), but be sure to apply the fabric tests described earlier in this chapter before picking one out.



✂ **Nylon** — notorious for its role in stockings and panty hose, nylon also works for capes, raincoats, and other slick clothing. Since nylon that's not "rip-stop" tends to ravel horrendously, polyester-nylon blends can make good substitutes.

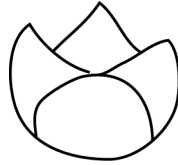


✂ **Rayon** — I have been quite wary of using rayon ever since the day I wore a knee-length rayon skirt to an interview and it wrinkled so badly I had to wear a coat all day to keep my underwear from showing. At any rate, I highly recommend squeezing a fistful or two to examine for wrinkling before buying.

✂ **Muslin** — a coarse, whitish cotton cloth used mainly for making patterns, trial runs, dolls, and quilt backings, muslin has a reputation for being cheap (and that's why people use it). But don't ignore the regular cottons and cotton-poly blends—you can often find something of finer quality (and in more color choices) that's just as inexpensive.

✂ **Stretch-knits** — can be made of many fabrics but usually come from cotton. You can easily identify them by seeing how much they stretch. For tips on working with stretchy fabrics, see page 23.

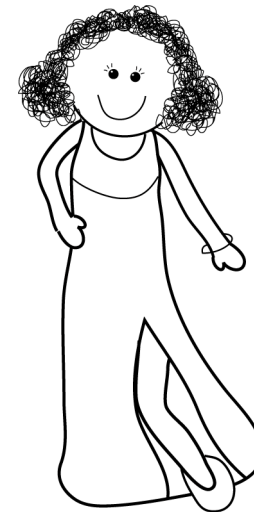
- ✂ **Felt & flannel** — if you need a fabric that never ravel, felt or flannel may be a good choice. Flannel works better for clothing (because of its softness), while felt's stiffness makes it excellent for hats.



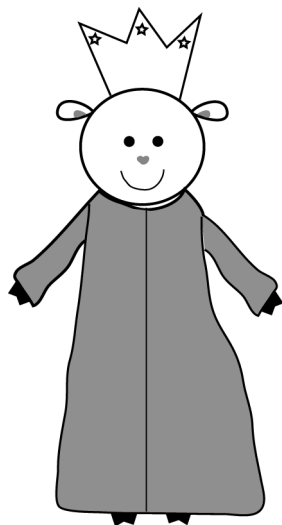
- ✂ **Fleece & polar fleece** — non-raveling but often bulky, these work well for soft, fuzzy costumes.
- ✂ **Fake fur** — when using fake fur, try to cut only the backing, not the fur. Some people do this with a razor blade; others work carefully with a scissors. Fake fur can be great for trimming muffs and winter coats, but may be too thick for an entire costume.
- ✂ **Satin** — if you ever see two fabrics you like, one marked satin and one marked polyester, don't be fooled. Most satin is made from polyester. (The really fine stuff comes from silk.) The word "satin," like many fabric terms, refers to the weaving method, not the type of material.
- ✂ **Acetate** — okay, not all satins come from polyester. Acetate ones don't usually iron quite as nicely, but they sew together just fine. Make sure to use a press cloth when ironing them (see page 20) since they tend to water-stain easily.

- ✂ **Jacquard** — a fancy term for satin (usually polyester) with a pattern woven into it.
- ✂ **Tissue lamé** — temptingly glitzy, fabulously shiny, dazzlingly colorful, and (to top it off) inexpensive. The downside? About half of it may ravel away to nothing before you get a chance to use it. (I even had one costume ravel apart right through the seams!) If you use lamé, buy a lot more than you'll think you need and leave extra seam allowance. There are creative ways to alleviate raveling (see "Special techniques for raveling fabrics" on page 23), but for your first few projects, you should definitely try something less troublesome.

- ✂ **Silk** — I don't think I've ever actually used silk, but you might try it if you have a special project in mind. Just be sure to use an extra fine needle in your sewing machine—some silks are so fine they must be sewn by hand. (You might also need extra delicate silk pins.) If silk's not in your budget, look for a good polyester satin. They can be just as shiny and smooth, but with a significantly smaller price tag!

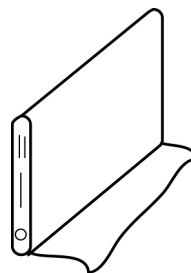


- ✂ **Velvet & velour** — thick and luxurious looking, these cotton fabrics work great for royal robes, dresses, and even stage curtains. Velour is often cheaper and easier to work with than velvet, and a close cousin, panaleur, outshines them both.



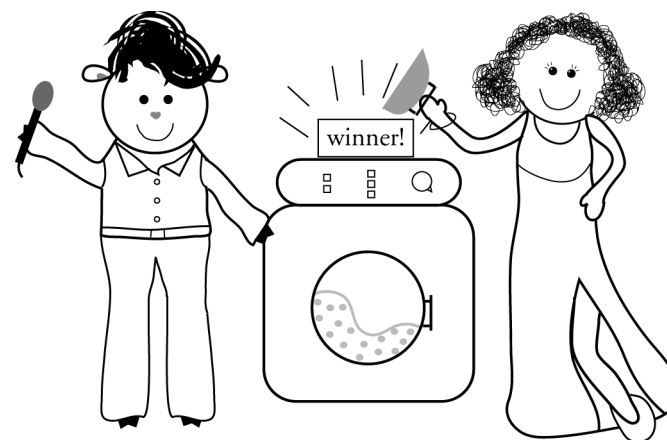
### More on buying fabric

Most fabric is sold by the yard (or eighths of a yard) from large cardboard bolts 44-45” or 60” wide. Check the end of the bolt for important information like the fabric type, price, and any special washing instructions. (You probably want to avoid the “dry clean only” ones.)



Make sure to check out the remnant or discount tables too. Since most puppets are smaller than people, you don’t usually need a lot of fabric to costume them. When fabric stores have leftover pieces of fabric that aren’t much use for human clothes, they usually sell them at very decent markdowns. Make sure to ask for a further discount if the fabric is damaged. You can usually cut around small holes and imperfections, but major defects are never a bargain.

Once you get your fabric home, it’s a good idea to wash and dry it before you start using it, since fabrics may shrink or bleed the first time. If necessary, trim off any raveling threads and iron the fabric using the guidelines on page 20.



For tips on using your fabric, see the “Cutting out fabric” section on page 45.