

A Thing to Wear

Making a Kimono – Part 1

Jenni Dobson



If you can assemble a quilt then sewing a kimono is no more difficult!

The word 'kimono' simply means 'a thing to wear'. It has been around for over 1,000 years and includes many different forms for both men and women. The following notes describe the full-length garment as given in the pattern below but you can vary it infinitely yourself, to suit the fabric you have available or the size you wish to make: more about decoration in the next issue.

Traditionally made of narrow Japanese fabric, 35cm (14in) wide, the main body panels were cut so that a single length runs from the back hem over the shoulder and down to the front hem, giving a centre back seam and no shoulder seams. To provide enough fabric for the front overlap, a strip of fabric, called an extension, is added at the centre front edge of each main front panel. In wear, the left front is always worn over the right for both men and women.

Sleeves are sewn to the outer edge of the body panels, usually with underarm openings, resulting from not sewing the sleeve completely to the body and not sewing the back to the front at the side seam immediately under the arm. The sleeve is cut from the standard width of fabric, meaning that it doesn't reach right to the wrist. When the length of the sleeve is discussed, this refers to the amount of fabric hanging towards the garment hem. This pattern has sleeves of moderate length because I found them to be practical; sleeves that are very cropped are too short to be kept out of the way!

The kimono has a long collar, attached with a sloping seam across the front extension and into the front panel. A kimono has no fastenings, no pockets and requires some kind of tie around the waist to keep it in place.

The traditional *obi* is beautiful but not very practical. It's an elaborate, highly formalised group of several parts including a long, broad, very stiff sash, usually requiring help in tying, and is very restricting. It's never worn by men. In earlier times, the kimono could just be secured with a simple sash of whatever colour happened to appeal to the wearer and this is what I'd recommend. Though historical replication isn't the purpose here, many women are delighted to hear that a tightly cinched waist wasn't the desirable appearance when wearing a kimono. Instead, aim for a neat cylindrical look, with the tie just firm enough to keep the wrap-over front in position. Most men's sashes are fairly narrow, 7.5cm (3in), but are long enough to wrap around the body twice before tying at the front with a bold knot, leaving just short tails. Experiment to find your sash length by tying either a tape measure or length of ribbon or string around the waist.

For practical purposes, for both men and women, finish the kimono to reach the feet or ankles so that when sashed, it's just enough above the ground for easy walking. Save fabric by measuring the intended wearer and reducing the panel lengths quoted if you wish. Alternatively, cut panels as directed and make a deeper hem. The pattern given makes a kimono approx. 132cm (52in) in girth. For a slimmer fit, simply make wider seam allowances on kimono fabric when assembling the side seams (and attaching the sleeves), just as the Japanese used to do, or save fabric and cut narrower panels of western fabric.

Among a fascinating box of vintage kimono scraps I found many with signs of their simple construction still visible. They came from a period when kimonos were hand sewn with running stitch instead of using a sewing machine. Nevertheless, first-time makers, particularly anyone not familiar with western dress-making techniques, should be encouraged by this simplicity of construction.

Pattern diagram for the kimono

This plan (right) shows the measurements for the panels. Adjust lengths to suit individual projects.

Materials and cutting notes

4.2m (4½ yd) of 114cm (44in) width fabric. If buying kimono fabric, 1 tan is a standard kimono length.

Some seams may be eliminated to suit best use of your fabric. Do NOT cut the collar until directed in the assembly instructions. The sash may be cut from what remains, or use a contrast fabric.

Assembling the unlined kimono

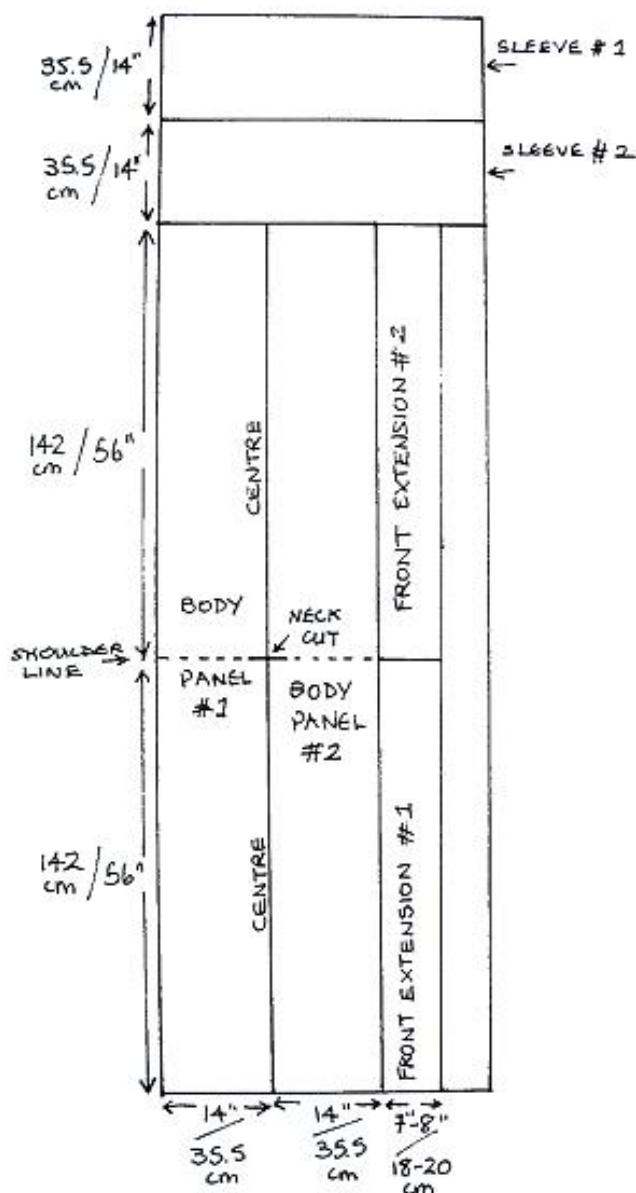
Seam allowance is 1cm (3/8in) unless stated otherwise.

RS = right side WS = wrong side.

The numbers below relate to the plan of the kimono, shown on page 7.

Remember that, depending on how you decided to cut the kimono, not all steps will apply every time.

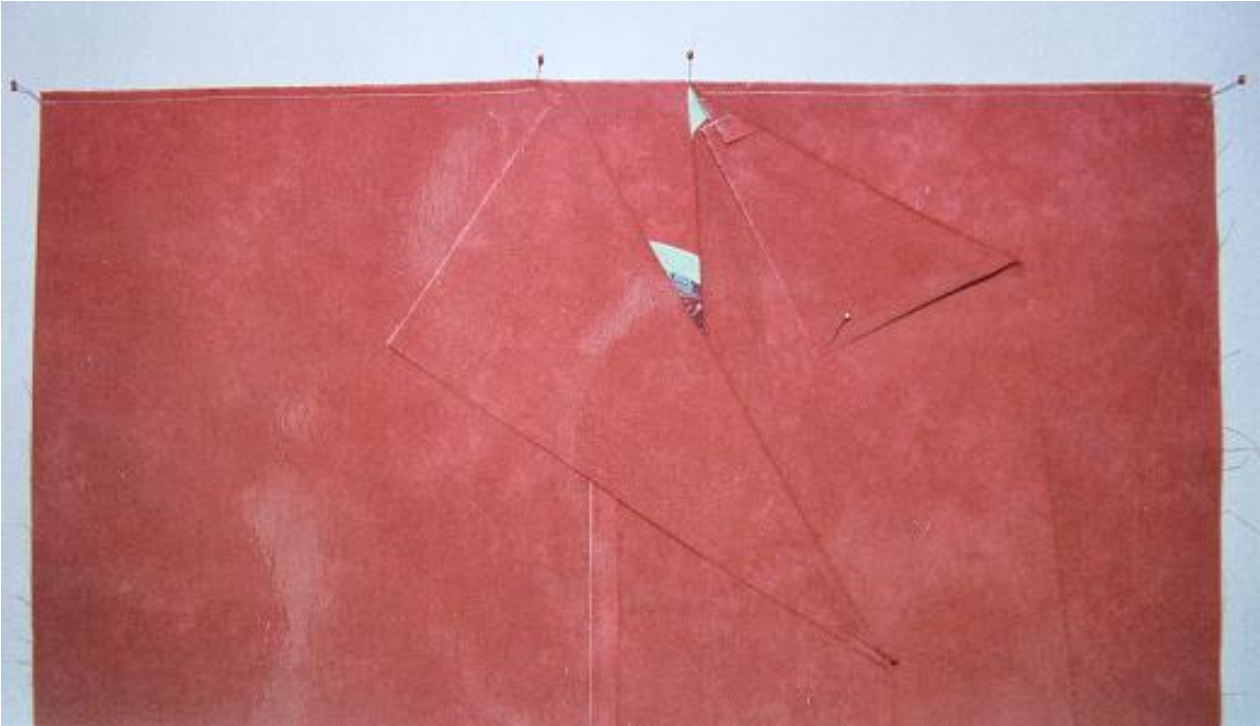
1. The following instructions assume that the separate panels have already been decorated. Sometimes, motifs may be added after a specific construction step, for example, a motif intended to sit over the centre back seam can't be applied until the seam is sewn. If so, make notes to remind you to complete the task at the right time.



2. With RS together, join centre back seam up to the shoulder-line, halfway along the full length, sewing as straight as you can.

3. Remembering to make both a left and a right front, press a narrow double hem to the WS on the front edges of both extensions and baste in place. Attach the extensions to their respective fronts, at seams 3a and 3b on the plan of the kimono (page 7). Press seams towards the sides, away from the centre. Mark the start of the front angles for the neckband on the RS of each front. For practical wear, this is best placed somewhere between one third and one half of the length of the front panel down from the shoulder. Make both the same.

4. If necessary, join fronts to backs at the shoulder-line (see below), having the outer (side) edges level. On each side of the centre back seam, leave unstitched a distance of 4.5cm (1 $\frac{3}{4}$ in) for a woman; up to 6.5cm (2 $\frac{1}{2}$ in) for a man. Alternatively, cut this size of neck opening level with the shoulder-line.



5. With a long straight edge and a non-permanent marker such as tailor's chalk, connect the start of the front angle to the cut or the neckline end of the shoulder seam on each front, see right. **DO NOT CUT OFF EXCESS FABRIC.** Now measure the length of strip to cut for the collar, starting at one front edge up to the shoulder, continuing across the back neck and down the second front to the edge. Then add 5-10cm (2-4in) more to neaten the ends. After cutting, fold the piece in half and mark the position of the collar ends, to show where to begin attaching to the fronts.



Now press 1cm (3/8in) turning to the WS on one long edge of the collar to prepare it for finishing. Sew the collar to the body in three steps, having its long raw edge overlapping your drawn line by 1cm (3/8in) as you pin into place, see right.

Begin sewing at front edge up to the shoulder, leaving the shoulder seam allowance (if there is one) free. Remove from the machine and press. Then (folding any shoulder seam clear), bring the collar around to the back neck and pin into place as far as the second shoulder seam only. Stitch, keeping to an even 1cm (3/8in), turning and leaving the shoulder seam free. Remove from the machine and press. Bring the collar round to the second front and pin, continuing to follow the drawn line to the front edge with the 1cm (3/8in) seam allowance; then sew and press. Finish the collar later (see page 5).

6. Fold one sleeve in half, match this midpoint to the shoulder seam on one side of the body, raw edges level, pin and sew the seam, leaving about 15cm (6in) at each end not stitched, see right and below. Repeat with the second sleeve. Reinforce with a small bar tack, by hand or machine, at each end of the seams.



7. Fold the kimono in half across the shoulder-line, bringing the front and back hems level. Starting about 15cm (6in) below where the sleeve seam ends, sew front and back together at side seams. Reinforce seams with a bar tack at the underarm end.

8. Beginning at the sleeve underarm corner, sew the horizontal sleeve seam. If you wish, continue around the corner and part way up the 'wrist' edge. (This corner may be curved.) Be sure to leave at least 20cm (8in) unstitched below the shoulder line fold for the wrist opening, right. This makes the sleeve like a bag or pocket.

9. Hem the lower edge, either by hand or machine.

10. Press in narrow turnings at openings, such as underarms on body and sleeve (wrist) openings. Stitch as necessary by hand or machine.

Finishing the collar

11. Fold the collar in half along its length, RS together, bringing the ends level at the two tails. On each front, sew the short seam to secure the ends of the collar, see below. Turn RS out and tuck the extending tails back inside themselves until they are even with the front edge. Press the collar in what will be its finished size and position.



Working on one front at a time, place the garment RS down on a large flat surface and fold the excess front fabric above the collar stitching line in a concertina fashion parallel to the stitching, to fit within the depth of the pressed collar. See right and below.



This provides the equivalent of interfacing, giving the front collar some additional body. Make sure each fold is very slightly within the previous one so that it will not be in the way when you stitch the prepared edge of the collar in place to finish. When you are satisfied with the arrangement of folds, press and, if necessary, baste in place. Repeat on the second front, then slipstitch the prepared long edge of the collar to the stitching, attaching it. Lastly slipstitch the collar ends closed.

Making a lined kimono

Start by cutting the lining the same as the outer fabric, although no sash or collar will be needed.

The main difference is that attaching the collar becomes the last step.

Assemble the outer fabric as above, up to and including step 8, but with the following differences:

- at step 3, do not neaten the front edges
- at step 5, mark the collar positioning line and establish collar length only but do not attach collar.

Next, make up the lining body (no collar) as above as far as step 8 but do not attach the sleeve linings at step 6. Instead, simply sew on each sleeve (step 8) separately, ensuring the wrist openings are the same size on both the outer layer and the lining.

Slide the lining over the outer garment with RS together, having the raw edges level. Pin and then sew the layers together from the marked collar attachment point down one front edge, turn the corner and continue along the hem to the second front, turning again to proceed up to the second collar attachment point. Slip one sleeve lining over one outer sleeve, RS together, and sew together around the wrist opening only.

Turn the sleeve lining to the inside of the sleeve through the wrist opening. Repeat with the second sleeve. Now turn the body lining to the inside of the garment and smooth into place, matching the shoulder and side seams and pressing the stitched outer edges. Neaten at the sleeves by lapping the body lining over the sleeve lining with a small turning and slipstitch into place. Also slipstitch the lining to the outer fabric around the underarm openings.

With the lining fully settled in place, baste along the marked collar attachment line through both layers. Attach the collar, following the basic instructions at step 5 and proceeding straight to the 'Finishing the collar' instructions to complete.

An alternative sleeve method on a lined garment leaves the whole wrist edge open. Sew only the short horizontal seam on both outer fabric and lining. With RS together, slip lining over the outer and sew together for the whole length of the long wrist edge seam. Turn and press.

The diagram below shows the working sequence for making the kimono.

In the next issue of WoW, I will give some ideas for the decoration of your kimono – or 'thing to wear'.

Jenni Dobson is a quilt maker, teacher and writer based in the East Midlands of England.

She runs workshops on making your own kimono (1 day or 2 days) and also offers a lecture with demonstration of how a kimono is worn, including some insights into Japanese culture.

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For more info, including other garments, please see Jenni's book: *Making Kimono and Japanese Clothes*, Batsford, ISBN 978-1-906388-15-7.

