

How to Size Vintage Clothing the Right Way: Mastering the Art of the Perfect Fit

Maria Cattini | 06/08/2025 | BLOG

Why vintage sizing is a riddle worth solving

Forget what you know about modern sizes! Shopping vintage is like treasure hunting in a world where labels lie, numbers have changed, and every era rewrites the rules. The '50s "size 12" might fit like today's 6, and some vintage finds have no tag at all. But the reward—a fit that flatters and a piece nobody else has—is worth every ounce of detective work.

Fast answer box

Measure yourself, compare flat garment measurements, allow ease for movement, and use your largest body measurement as your guide. Ignore the tag—your tape measure never lies.

Why vintage clothing sizes are different—and why the tag is (almost) useless

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No Standardization

Brands and eras had wildly different standards. A size 12 from the '60s is often smaller than a size 6 today.



Vanity Sizing

Modern brands use bigger numbers for smaller fits; vintage was honest (and smaller) about measurements.



Individual Tailoring

Many garments were handmade or custom-altered, ignoring factory conventions altogether.



Changing Silhouettes

Each decade favored a different shape—tiny waists in the 1950s, looser fits in the 1970s, oversized blazers in the 1980s.

The golden rule: measure, don't guess

Take Your Own Measurements

Use a soft tape and measure over undergarments:

Bust: Fullest part of chest, wearing a bra

Waist: Smallest part, above the belly button

Hips: Fullest point, ~7" below waist

Shoulders: Tip-to-tip for jackets/coats

Inseam: Groin to trouser hem

Length: Collar/shoulder to hem

☐☐ **Compare with Flat Measurements**

Most sellers list garments measured flat:

- Double flat widths to get full circumference (e.g., 19cm = 38cm)
- Always rely on listed measurements, not the size tag
- Compare with a similar piece that fits you well

☐☐ **Allow for Ease & Fit**

Vintage fits vary—especially tailored pieces like 1940s suits:

- Add 1-2" (2-4cm) to body measurements for comfort
- Prioritize your largest measurement when choosing size

✂ **Don't Be Afraid to Alter**

Too big is better than too tight—tailoring is your friend.

- Go up a size and adjust for a custom fit
- Vintage garments often deserve a second life with the right tailoring

Understanding size conversions & era codes

☐☐ **Era Differences**

A 1950s UK size 16 equals today's 10-12. US vintage sizes tend to run smaller. Always check real garment measurements—not just tags.

☐☐ **Vintage Size Codes**

Old tags use codes like W (waist) or B (bust). Modern S/M/L sizing only came post-70s. Sellers often convert vintage to modern fits.

☐☐ Conversion Charts

Look for sizing charts on seller sites. These guides translate vintage tags to modern equivalents—essential when buying online.

Vintage Era Tag	Modern Equivalent	Notes
UK 12 (1960s)	UK 8 or even 6	Always check cm/inch measures
USA 14 (1950s)	Modern 8 or 10	May fit very petite!
“W28”	28 inch waist	Flat measurement x2
S/M/L	Check measurement	“M” can vary wildly

Real tips from vintage pros

- Always ask: If a listing lacks measurements (or a key area, like arm or rise), contact the seller before buying.
- Don't trust only one type: Try the garment on, if possible—or buy from shops with clear return/exchange policies.
- Fabric matters: No stretch means you need more room. Silk or rigid cotton needs a little more ease. Elastic? You can go closer to your actual size.
- Check the intended fit: Many eras were made to be worn with certain undergarments (longline bras, slips, girdles)—think about how you want to wear yours.

FAQ: vintage sizing made simple

Why are size tags so unreliable?

Every era and region had its own guide. Body ideals fluctuated. Modern “vanity” sizing doesn’t help either—flat measures are the only certain guide.

What if I’m between sizes—or nothing seems perfect?

Choose the larger size. A tailor is your best friend for minor tweaks that keep the garment’s soul.

Are vintage men’s sizes also different?

Yes. A 1960s men’s 42 suit may feel smaller than today’s 42. Always check shoulder, chest, sleeve and length in cm/inches.

Table: how to size vintage clothing at a glance

1. 1

Measure yourself

Bust, waist, hips, length—you decide the fit

2. 2

Compare to flat measurements

Find actual garment sizes via seller info

3. 3

Allow ease

Add 2–4cm or 1–2in for comfort

4. 4

Prefer your largest measurement

Better too large than too small

5. 5

Use conversion guides

Find era-to-modern size help online

Fashion tip: “try before you buy”—offline or online!

If you can visit a shop, bring a tape and measure your favorites on the spot. Online, have a measurement list ready and never hesitate to ask for more details—or additional photos. The best vintage finds come to those who measure twice, buy once.

Unlock vintage confidence

Still unsure? Subscribe to *Fashion Pills* and get weekly vintage sizing guides, print-at-home measurement charts and expert advice—so every vintage find fits like your new favorite.