

Rachel Empire Bias Dress

Sewing instructions · gathered empire bodice, true-bias skirt, side zipper · task by task, with video links

About This Pattern

The **Rachel Empire Bias Dress** pairs a fitted empire bodice — your choice of the **Full V Plunge** (the signature V diving all the way to the empire seam) or the **Modest V** (stopping at the bust line) — with a skirt cut on the **true bias**, one seamless panel in front and one behind. The back is smooth and straight-backed, shaped by darts, with nothing interrupting the low scoop; the dress closes with an **invisible zipper hidden in the left side seam**, running from just below the underarm, across the empire seam, and into the skirt.

The bodice has a small secret worth knowing before you start: **one printed front piece is both your fabric and your liner**. The liner always sews its dart — that's the permanent fitted foundation — while the outer fabric chooses its look: **gather** between the notches for the soft signature, or **sew the same dart** for a sleek, quiet front. Same fit either way; both finishes are printed on the piece.

Note — *Your pattern is drafted to your measurements with your chosen seam allowance already included — cut on the heavy solid line and stitch at your chosen allowance throughout, except where the pattern prints otherwise (the side seams carry a generous 1.5 cm for the zipper and future adjustments). Every piece is labeled with its name and cut count; **the printed labels are the final word**.*

Note — *Bias behaves differently from straight grain: it stretches, it grows, and it rewards patience. Handle the skirt panels gently, support them fully on the table, and don't skip the hanging step before hemming.*

You will need

- **Fabric with drape:** silk or viscose crepe, crepe de chine, satin-back crepe, rayon challis, lightweight wool crepe. Lay out your printed pieces to measure yardage — bias layouts are hungrier than straight ones, and remember the bodice cuts twice (see below).
- **Bodice liner — recommended: the dress fabric itself.** The liner is cut from the same printed bodice pieces, and self-fabric gives the cleanest match of weight, color, and hand. (If your fabric is heavy or scratchy, a fine Bemberg or silk habotai works too.)
- One **invisible zipper**, about 10–11 in — the exact length for your size is printed on the pattern.
- 1 yd of lightweight stay tape or fusible straight-grain tape for the zipper opening; optional small hook-and-eye for above the pull.

- Matching thread, a fine machine needle (microtex 60/70 for silks), fine pins, an invisible zipper foot, chalk or marking pen, pattern weights, a rotary cutter if you have one — and tissue paper for the hem (you'll see).

Reading the pattern

- **Heavy solid line** — cutting line (seam allowance included); **dashed** — stitching; fine dash patterns mark folds and reference lines.
- **Grainline arrow** — on the bodice, parallel to the selvage; on the skirt panels the arrow places the piece on the **true bias**. Trust the arrow.
- **The bodice front prints both finishes**, labeled right on the piece: the dart (always sewn in the liner) and the gathering notches (the fabric's option). Nothing to decode — the labels say which is which.
- **Notches** — single ticks mark FRONT edges, double ticks BACK edges. The left side carries the **zipper notches**: top notch just below the underarm, stop notch in the skirt, span marked between.
- **Check box** — measure the printed box on the cover before cutting anything.

Task 1 — Cut & Mark, by the Bias Rules

Goal: the bodice cut twice — once in fabric, once as its liner — the back on the fold with its truly straight center back, and two seamless bias skirt panels cut flat. How you cut bias is half of how it hangs.

1. Pre-treat the fabric as you'll care for the dress, press, and true the grain. Clear the biggest table you have.
2. **Skirt panels: single layer, never on the fold.** Fabric flat, right side up, fully supported; bias grainline arrows placed exactly as drawn; weights, long smooth rotary strokes; move the cut panels by sliding a flat hand beneath.
3. **Bodice back: on the fold** — the center back is drafted truly vertical, so the fold is honest. Cut once in fabric and once in liner; mark the back dart in both.
4. **Bodice front — per your neckline: Full V Plunge** cuts a mirrored pair (fabric) plus a mirrored pair in liner; **Modest V** cuts on the fold at center front, once in fabric and once in liner. Either way, it's the same printed piece doing double duty: fabric and liner.
5. Mark on every bodice piece: the **dart legs and point**, the **gathering notches**, the strap points, the empire match notches — and the **zipper notches and span on the left side edges**.
6. Cut the straps, snip every notch, and put the skirt panels somewhere flat (or rolled on a tube) until their turn comes.

► **Watch it done:** [Cutting Fabric on the Bias — Beginner's Guide](#) · [How to Cut and Sew on the Bias](#)

Task 2 — Prep & Stabilize

1. Staystitch a scant seam allowance from the edge: the neckline (each side from strap toward the point), the back scoop, the **underarm curves**, and the empire-seam edges of both skirt panels.
2. Stabilize the zipper opening: press lightweight stay tape onto the seam allowance of the **left side seam's zipper span** — bodice and skirt, both edges — so the zipper goes into a stable seam even where the skirt is bias.
3. If your fabric is whisper-soft, the lightest fusible strip on the strap pieces keeps them crisp; otherwise skip it. And decide your seam finish **now** — the next section lays out the choices — because the most professional option, the French seam, starts wrong sides together and can't be retrofitted.

► **Watch it done:** [Fusible Interfacing Step-by-Step](#) · [How to Apply Fusible Interfacing](#)

A Clean Inside — Choosing Your Seam Finish

Here's a quiet fact about the Rachel: her inside is almost entirely enclosed already. The whole top edge is lined, the empire seam disappears under the ditch-stitched liner, and the hem folds itself away. The **side seams are the only raw edges the inside will ever show** — which makes this one choice decide how the dress looks on the hanger inside-out. Pick by your comfort and your fabric; every road below is legitimate. Test on scraps of your actual fabric first.

- **Classic seam, zigzag finish** — the beginner's honest default with no serger: sew right sides together as drafted, press open, zigzag (or machine-overcast) each allowance. Quick, sturdy, done.
- **Classic seam, pinked** — even quicker on tightly woven fabric: press open and trim each allowance with pinking shears. Best for crisp weaves; loose weaves and slippery silks will still creep, so test.
- **Serged** — if you own an overlocker: press open and serge each allowance separately (flatter), or serge together and press to one side (faster). The ready-to-wear look.
- **French seam — the Rachel's natural finish, and our recommendation** for fine, sheer, and bias-loving fabrics: every raw edge ends up sealed inside a tiny clean fold, and the inside looks as intentional as the outside. Steps below.
- **Hong Kong / bound finish** — the couture flourish for the heavier end of the fabric list (wool crepe, satin-back crepe): each allowance wrapped in bias strips or rayon seam binding. Slower, gorgeous.

Note — One exception, always: the **left seam's zipper span sews as a classic seam** whatever you choose elsewhere — an invisible zipper cannot live inside a French seam. Finish that span's allowances with a zigzag, serge, or binding, and let the French seams have the right side (and the left seam below the stop notch, if you're feeling thorough).

The French seam, step by step

1. Pin the pieces **wrong sides together** — it feels backwards; it isn't — and sew at 6 mm (1/4 in) from the edge with a slightly shortened stitch, easing the bias gently as ever.
2. Trim the allowance to a scant 3 mm (1/8 in) and press the seam flat, then to one side. This trim is the secret to no whiskers showing later — don't skip it.
3. Fold **right sides together** exactly on the stitched line, press the fold sharp, and sew again at 9 mm (3/8 in), enclosing the trimmed edge inside. The two passes add up to the drafted 1.5 cm side allowance, so the fit doesn't move.
4. Press the finished seam toward the back. Run a fingertip down the inside: one smooth fold, no raw thread anywhere. That's the indie-clean interior.

► **Watch it done:** [6 Professional Seam Finishes, No Serger](#) · [7 Seam Finishes Without an Overlocker](#) · [How to Sew a French Seam](#) · [French Seam — Simple Step-by-Step](#) · [Bias-Bound \(Hong Kong\) Seam Finish](#)

Task 3 — The Bodice: Darts & the Gathering Option

Goal: the liner darts (always), the fabric finished your way (dart or gathers), backs shaped, and the right side closed — the left stays wide open for the zipper.

- 1. Liner front — always the dart.** Sew the printed dart in the liner front(s): fold on the center line, stitch from the wide end to the point, taper to nothing, tie off. Press toward the side. This is the dress's permanent fitted foundation — whatever the outside does, the inside is darts and smooth.
- 2. Fabric front — your look.** Either run two gathering rows between the printed notches (just inside the seam line and 6 mm into the allowance, long tails, don't draw up yet) for the soft gathered signature — **or** sew the very same dart in the fabric for the sleek version. The dart equals the gathers; the fit doesn't change, only the texture.
- 3. Back darts** — sew them in both fabric and liner backs; press toward center back. With the zipper in the side, the straight center back stays beautifully plain — the darts do all the shaping.
- 4. Sew the right side seam only** — fabric front to fabric back; then liner front to liner back — in your chosen finish (a French seam here is lovely and takes two minutes more). Press. The left side stays entirely open on both layers.

► **Watch it done:** [How to Sew Darts](#) · [Darts for Garment Sewing & Contour](#) · [How to Gather Fabric — 3 Ways](#) · [Gathering the Easy Way](#)

Task 4 — Straps & the Sleeveless Edge

Goal: the liner joined to the bodice along the entire top edge — neckline, straps, underarm curves, back scoop — understitched and turned so nothing ever peeks. This is the trickiest press of the dress: sleeveless armholes are famously fussy, which is exactly why there are extra tutorials below. Go slowly here and the whole dress looks professional.

1. Fold each strap right sides together, stitch the long edge, turn, and press with the seam rolled to one edge — finished width 3 cm.
2. Baste the straps to the **fabric** bodice at the printed points, raw ends matching the upper edge, straps hanging down against the right side. Check twice that they aren't twisted.
3. Pin the liner to the bodice, right sides together, sandwiching the straps. Sew the entire upper edge in one journey: up the neckline, one stitch across the V point (Full V) or along the Modest V's line, over the strap ends, **around each underarm curve**, and across the back scoop.
4. Trim and grade; clip the V point once, and clip the **underarm curves generously** — those concave curves cannot turn smooth without their little snips.
5. **Understitch** the liner close to the seam everywhere the machine can reach — make a special effort through the underarm curves; understitching is what makes a sleeveless edge roll under and stay under.
6. Turn right side out — draw the backs gently through the shoulder straps — and press with the liner rolled a whisper to the inside, working the underarm curves over a ham or your fingertips until they lie like they grew there.
7. Smooth the layers and baste fabric and liner together along the lower (empire) edge and both left side edges. From here the bodice handles as one.

► **Watch it done:** [The Professional Sleeveless Armhole Finish](#) · [Finish a Lined Sleeveless Dress \(roll method\)](#) · [Lining a Sleeveless Top — Armhole & Neckline](#) · [Armholes on a Sleeveless Dress](#)

Task 5 — The Skirt

1. Sew the **right side seam** from hem to empire edge with a slightly shortened stitch, letting the bias feed without pulling (or stretching very gently and evenly so the seam keeps its give). Going French? Start wrong sides together per the Clean Inside section. Press flat, then open (or toward the back, if Frenched).
2. Sew the **left side seam from the hem up to the zipper stop notch only**; backstitch there. Press open below the notch, and press the opening's allowances back along the seam line above it.
3. Do not hem anything yet — the bias hasn't finished deciding how long it is.

► **Watch it done:** [Bias Cut Sewing Tips](#) · [Sew a Bias Cut Dress, Step by Step](#)

Task 6 — The Empire Seam

Goal: bodice married to skirt — gathers distributed (or darts matched), the seam pressed up, the liner's lower edge kept free for its tack-down two tasks from now.

1. Pin the **fabric** bodice to the skirt, right sides together, matching center front, center back, the right side seam, and the empire notches — keep the **liner's lower edge free**, folded up out of the seam. At the left opening the edges simply align, not joined across the gap.
2. **Gathered front:** draw the gathering threads until the front fits its span; distribute evenly, densest under the bust; pin closely. **Darted front:** nothing to draw — just match the notches.
3. Sew with the gathered side up so you can steer the folds; sew a second row just inside the first. Check from the right side that the gathers hang straight down, then trim the seam.
4. Press the seam **up** into the bodice. The liner hangs free inside, waiting for the zipper to go in before it's tacked down.

► **Watch it done:** [How to Gather Fabric — 3 Ways](#) · [Gathering the Easy Way](#)

Task 7 — The Side Zipper

Goal: the invisible zipper set into the **left side seam as worn** — from the top notch just below the underarm, across the empire seam, down to the stop notch in the skirt. The one non-negotiable: the empire seam must meet itself perfectly across the closed zipper. Baste, check, then commit.

1. Open the zipper and press the coils gently flat from the wrong side with a cool-to-medium iron.
2. Mark the empire seam's position on both zipper tapes: pin the closed zipper along the opening, top stop at the top notch, and tick each tape where it crosses the empire seam. Those two ticks are your insurance.
3. Place the open zipper face down on the **front** edge of the opening (bodice fabric and skirt — keep the liner clear), coils on the seam line, top stop at the top notch. Hand-baste, then stitch with the invisible zipper foot from the top down to the stop notch, crossing your empire tick exactly as you pass it.
4. Repeat on the back edge: coils on the seam line, empire tick meeting the empire seam. Baste, then stitch top to notch.
5. Close the zipper and inspect: the empire seam should run straight through as if the zipper weren't there, and the top edges should meet level. If the seam steps, unpick the offending side to the tick and true it — five minutes now, invisible forever.
6. Finish below: move the zipper tail aside and sew the remaining gap to meet the seam sewn from the hem. Stitch each tape's free edge to the seam allowances only.
7. At the opening, turn the liner's left edges under and slipstitch them to the zipper tapes, clear of the coils — the liner closes over the tapes for a clean inside. Add the small hook-and-eye above the pull if you like.

► **Watch it done:** [Invisible Zipper Step by Step \(Angela Wolf\)](#) · [Sew an Invisible Zipper Perfectly \(Closet Core\)](#)

Task 8 — Tack Down the Liner: Ditch-Stitch the Empire Waist

Goal: the liner's lower edge anchored for life — by machine, invisibly — with one line of stitching hidden in the empire seam. This is the step that makes the inside of the Rachel as finished as the outside.

1. Inside the dress, turn the liner's lower edge under so its fold just covers the empire seam allowance, and press the fold lightly. The liner should lie smooth against the bodice with no slack and no pull.
2. From the **outside**, pin along the empire seam, catching the liner's fold beneath — pin in the seam line itself so the pins mark exactly where the needle will travel.

3. Stitch **in the ditch** of the empire seam from the right side, all the way around, in thread that matches: the needle rides the groove of the seam, and the stitching disappears into it while catching the liner's fold inside. Start and stop cleanly at the zipper tapes.
4. Press. Outside: nothing. Inside: the liner is tacked down in a clean continuous line around the waist, the seam fully enclosed. That's the finish.

► **Watch it done:** [How to Stitch in the Ditch](#) · [Stitch in the Ditch with Brittany J. Jones](#) · [Stitch in the Ditch, Two Ways](#)

Task 9 — Hang & Hem: Pick Your Technique

Goal: the bias allowed to settle, the hem trued, and a narrow hem sewn by whichever road suits your fabric and your machine. There are many good ways to hem a bias dress — here are four; the videos show them all. Test on a scrap of your fabric first and use the one that behaves.

- 1. First, always: hang.** Zipper closed, on a form or good hanger, **24 hours minimum — 48 for loose weaves.** The hem will drop unevenly; that's the bias settling, and you want it settled before you hem, not after. Then, wearing the dress with its shoes, have a helper or hem marker re-mark the hem parallel to the floor, and trim to an even small allowance.
- 2. Road one — the eased baby hem.** Stitch a guide row 6 mm (1/4 in) from the raw edge and **draw it up a whisper so the flared edge eases in before you fold** — the row does the gathering-in for you. Press up along the row, stitch close to the fold, trim to the stitching, turn once more, edgestitch. Flat, fine, and the flare behaves.
- 3. Road two — the rolled hem foot.** The special foot rolls and stitches the tiny double fold in one pass. Start on a pressed lead-in of a few centimeters, feed the fabric into the scroll without pulling, and let the foot do the rolling. Fastest of all once you and the foot are friends — practice on scraps first.
- 4. Road three — the paper trick.** Fine bias edges love to get eaten by the feed dogs or ripple under the foot. Ride the hem over strips of **tissue paper** — start the seam on paper, keep a strip under (or over) the edge as you sew, and tear it away after. Works with either road above, and it's the difference on the very lightest silks.
- 5. Road four — the hand-rolled hem.** The couture indulgence: roll the edge between your fingers and slipstitch as you go. Slow, meditative, and the most beautiful finish silk knows.
- 6. Final press:** seams flat, gathers steamed lightly from above (never crushed), the zipper pressed closed under a cloth, the underarm curves rolled once more — and hang her up. The Rachel photographs best in motion anyway.

► **Watch it done:** [Baby Hem a Dress — Narrow Roll](#) · [Curved Hem with an Ease Row](#) · [How to Use a Rolled Hem Foot](#) · [Rolled Hem Foot — Second Opinion](#) · [Rolled / Pin Hem Without a Special Foot](#)