FREE TRAINING BOOK

Knowing Dresses

Fabrics, cuts, sizes — and describing every dress honestly

Standing on the Training Centre of Isabella Ngum

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About this book

Knowing Dresses is a **free training book** — free to download, free to read, free to share. No charge stands on it, today or later.

A free training book from **48-Hour RFP Rescue** — standing on **Isabella Ngum's Training Centre**. It was written by the house as free teaching for everyone learning the dress trade; it is **not Isabella's own work**, and nothing in it claims to be. Where her boutique grows, her own lessons may one day stand beside these.

The teaching is general dress-trade knowledge, written plainly so a beginner can start and a working seller can check herself. Work through it in order, keep a notebook beside you, and do the small exercises at the end of each chapter — the trade is learned by the hands as much as by the eyes.

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Chapter 1 — Why knowing comes before selling

A dress seller who knows her dresses sells with a quiet confidence that customers can feel. She can say what a cloth is, how it will behave in the wash, whether a cut will suit the woman standing before her, and what a size number truly means on the body. A seller who does not know these things is left guessing — and customers can feel that too. This book builds the knowledge underneath the selling: the fabrics dresses are made from, the cuts they are made in, the sizes they are made for, and the honest words to describe all three.

You do not need a fashion school to learn this. You need your eyes, your hands, a measuring tape, and the habit of looking closely at every dress that passes through your hands. Every dress you handle is a lesson. By the end of this book you will have a way of examining any dress — in a market stall, in a bale, in a tailor's shop — and knowing within a minute what it is, what it is worth, and how to speak of it truthfully.

The one-minute examination

Hold the dress up to the light. Feel the cloth between finger and thumb — is it smooth, rough, slippery, crisp? Stretch it gently across the width: does it give, and does it spring back? Look at the seams: are the stitches even and close, or wide and loose? Turn it inside out: a well-made dress is nearly as tidy inside as outside. Check the hem, the zip, the buttons, the lining. Then read any label the dress carries. This one-minute habit, practised on fifty dresses, will teach you more than a month of guessing.

- **Look** — colour, print, finish, how the cloth falls.

- **Feel** — weight, smoothness, warmth, stretch.
- **Check** — seams, hems, zips, buttons, lining.
- **Read** — the label: fibre, size, care. Labels can be wrong, but they are a start.

Chapter 2 — The fabrics dresses are made from

Every fabric begins as a fibre. Fibres are either **natural** — grown, like cotton and silk — or **man-made** — produced, like polyester and nylon. Most dress fabrics you will meet are one of these, or a blend of two. The fibre decides how the dress breathes, washes, wrinkles, shines and lasts, so the fibre is the first thing to know.

Cotton

Cotton is the friendly cloth of everyday dresses. It breathes, so it is kind in hot weather; it takes colour well; it washes easily. Its weaknesses: it wrinkles, it can shrink in hot water, and strong sun fades it over time. A cotton dress is an honest, hard-working dress. In the market you will meet cotton in many weights — light voile for airy dresses, firm poplin for structured ones.

Linen

Linen, made from the flax plant, is cooler even than cotton and grows softer with every wash. It wrinkles famously — that soft creasing is part of its character, and a customer should be told so before she buys, not after. Linen dresses suit women who love a natural, relaxed look.

Silk

Silk is the queen of dress fabrics: smooth, light, with a soft shine that no factory has fully copied. It is strong for its weight but fears sun, sweat left standing, and rough washing. A silk dress is an occasion dress and must be handled and described as one. Much of what is sold as 'silk' in markets is in fact polyester satin — pretty, useful, but not silk. Chapter 5 teaches you to tell the difference and why you must never confuse the two in your words.

Wool and wool blends

Wool is warm, springs back from creasing, and makes tailored dresses that hold their shape. Pure wool dresses are less common in hot climates, but wool blends appear in office and ceremony dresses. Wool fears moths in storage and felting in hot, rough washing — care teaching is in the third book of this shelf, *Fabric Care*.

Polyester

Polyester is the most common man-made dress fibre in the world, and there is no shame in it when it is honestly named. It is strong, keeps its colour, resists wrinkles, dries fast and costs less than natural fibres. Its weaknesses: it breathes poorly, so it can feel hot; it can hold odours; and cheap polyester can look shiny in a way that cheapens a dress. Good polyester, well cut, makes a perfectly respectable dress.

Nylon, rayon (viscose) and acetate

Nylon is light and very strong, more often met in linings, laces and hosiery than in dress bodies. Rayon — also called viscose — is made from plant fibre processed by people; it falls beautifully, breathes better than polyester, and makes flowing dresses, but it weakens when wet and must be washed gently. Acetate imitates

silk's shine in linings and evening fabrics and dislikes heat and acetone (nail-polish remover melts it — a useful warning to pass to customers).

The famous weaves: satin, chiffon, lace, Ankara and wax prints

Fibre is what a cloth is made of; **weave** is how it is built. **Satin** is a weave that floats threads over the surface to make shine — satin can be silk or polyester. **Chiffon** is a very light, sheer weave, usually polyester or silk, used for flowing and layered dresses. **Lace** is an open patterned work, machine- or hand-made, from cotton or synthetic thread. **Ankara and wax prints** are cotton cloths carrying bold printed patterns, central to West and Central African dress — know your prints by their quality: a true wax print carries the pattern clearly on both sides of the cloth, while a cheap imitation print sits on one side only. Turn the cloth over; the back tells the truth.

Blends — the honest middle

Most modern dresses are blends: polyester-cotton for easy care, cotton with a little elastane for stretch, silk with viscose for a lower price. A blend is not a cheat — it is often the wisest cloth. Your duty is only to name what is there, as the label gives it, and never to upgrade a blend into a pure fibre with your words.

Chapter 3 — Cuts: how a dress is shaped

The **cut** of a dress is its architecture — where it holds the body, where it lets go, and how it moves. Two dresses in the same cloth, differently cut, are different dresses. Learn these main families and you can speak about any dress you meet.

- **Shift** — hangs straight from the shoulders, loose at waist and hip. Forgiving, comfortable, easy to wear.
- **Sheath** — follows the body's line closely without stretch. A confident, tailored dress.
- **A-line** — fitted at the top, flaring gently from the waist or hip like the letter A. Suits almost everyone; the seller's best friend.
- **Fit-and-flare** — a close bodice and a full, swinging skirt. Joyful, made for turning and dancing.
- **Wrap** — crosses over the front and ties at the side. Adjusts itself to the body; kind to changing figures.
- **Empire** — the waist seam sits high, just under the bust, and the skirt falls from there. Graceful and comfortable.
- **Bodycon** — stretch cloth holding the figure closely. Sizing and honesty matter most here.
- **Kaba and traditional cuts** — the loose, dignified traditional dress of Cameroon and the region, with its rich sleeves and embroidery; a cut with its own rules of cloth, occasion and respect, treated fully on Pretty Lucy's shelf in this same training wave — the houses teach together.

Necklines, sleeves and lengths — the vocabulary of detail

Learn the small words and your descriptions become precise: necklines — round, V, square, sweetheart, boat, off-shoulder, halter. Sleeves — sleeveless, cap, short, three-quarter, long, puff, bell. Lengths — mini, knee, midi (mid-calf), maxi (ankle), floor. A customer reading 'midi A-line dress, V-neck, three-quarter sleeves' can already see the dress in her mind. That is the power of exact words, and exact words are free.

Chapter 4 — Sizes, and the tape measure's truth

A size label is a promise, and like all promises it varies with who made it. A 'medium' from one maker is a 'large' from another; European, American and Asian size runs differ; a vintage dress may carry an old sizing that fits a size smaller today. This is why the honest seller trusts the tape, not the tag.

The three measures that matter

- **Bust** — around the fullest part of the chest, tape level, not tight.
- **Waist** — around the natural waist, where the body creases when bending sideways.
- **Hip** — around the fullest part of the seat.

Measure the **dress itself** the same way: lay it flat, measure across the bust seam-to-seam and double it; do the same at waist and hip; note the length from shoulder to hem. Write these numbers in your stock book beside each dress. When a customer asks 'will it fit me?', you answer from numbers, not from hope — and a customer answered from numbers comes back, because you saved her from a mistake.

A word on stretch

A dress with elastane (stretch fibre) forgives a centimetre or two; a dress in firm woven cloth forgives nothing. Say which it is. And when you sell at a distance — a photograph, a message — measurements matter even more, because the customer cannot try the dress on. Give bust, waist, hip and length in every serious description. It costs you one minute and saves you a returned dress and a disappointed woman.

Chapter 5 — Honest descriptions

Everything in this book leads here. To describe a dress honestly is to say what it is — fibre, cut, size by tape, condition — in words a customer can rely on. Honesty in description is not only good morals; it is good business. The seller known for true words can sell at a distance, can sell to strangers, can sell again to the same woman for years.

The honest description, in order

- **What it is:** 'A-line midi dress' — cut and length first.
- **What it is made of:** the fibre as the label gives it — 'cotton', 'polyester satin', 'silk-blend'. Never upgrade.
- **How it measures:** bust, waist, hip, length, in centimetres.
- **Its condition:** new, or worn — and if worn, say where: 'a small mend at the side seam', 'colour fresh, one button replaced'. A fault named by you is a small thing; a fault discovered by her is a broken trust.
- **How to care for it:** one line — 'wash cold, dry in shade' — saves the dress and thanks you silently for years.

Words that must never bend

Never call polyester 'silk'. Never call an imitation print a wax print. Never call a worn dress new. Never shrink a fault. These are the four bends that break a dress business. The market is wide and memory is long; one woman deceived tells ten. And the reverse is also true: one woman told 'this one will not suit your shoulders — try this cut instead' becomes your ambassador for life.

Telling silk from polyester satin

Silk feels cool and then warms to the hand; polyester feels smooth but stays neutral and can feel clammy. Silk's shine is soft and uneven in the light; polyester's is harder and more uniform. If a label exists, trust but verify; if none exists and you are not sure, say 'satin — fibre unlabelled'. Uncertainty admitted is honesty; certainty invented is a lie wearing a tie.

Chapter 6 — Your stock book and your exercises

Keep a stock book — a plain exercise book is enough. One line per dress: date it came, fibre, cut, tape measures, condition, where it stands. The stock book is your memory, your honesty written down, and one day, if your boutique grows, the seed of your whole business system.

Exercises

- Examine ten dresses with the one-minute examination. Write what you find before you read any label; then compare.
- Take one cloth and turn it over: is the print as strong on the back? Decide — wax print or imitation — and say why.
- Measure three dresses flat and write their numbers. Then measure a friend and match her to the right dress by numbers alone.
- Write an honest description of one dress you own, following the order in Chapter 5. Read it aloud: would you trust the seller who wrote it?

When these exercises feel easy, you are ready for the second book on this shelf, *Selling Dresses Well* — how to present, photograph and price the dresses you now know. And keep the third, *Fabric*

Care, beside your washing basin forever.