

# How-To



## Making Men's and Women's 1920's Felt Hats Without a Block *Rosemary Greene\**

It is encouraging for those of us who love to wear hats that their popularity seems to be increasing after many years of languishing – unworn – in drawers and closets. Of course, this leads to the problem of acquiring a hat you love, which is no easy task if none of the shops have the right styles or colors to match your outfit. Even worse is the problem of finding a hat that fits without either being so tight that it gives you an immediate migraine or so loose that it flies off your head with every passing puff of wind.

One alternative is to find a professional milliner and have a hat made for you. (Blatant plug here – I do make custom hats as well as teach millinery classes!) Since this could be an inconvenient or expensive option for your needs, a more creative and potentially less expensive solution is to make your own hat. This is surprisingly easy as well as a lot of fun, and you don't need any special equipment.

Women of the 1920's and 1930's routinely made their own hats without the fancy equipment we have today, like microwaves and steam machines. Making their own enabled them to have a hat that would match their outfit, and by re-working a hat, they could extend the life of said hat longer than a single season.



Wood blocks that were used to mold a hat were very expensive back then - and still are today, even when you can find them! Most women would not have had access to, or the means to buy, a variety of blocks to suit the changing seasons and styles.

For all of these reasons and more, many women made and, season after season, re-made their own hats to great effect and satisfaction. And you can too!

The purpose of this article is to encourage you to join this creative group by giving you step-by-step directions on how to make two hat styles; a Fedora and a cloche. The cloche epitomizes the 'Flapper' look of the era. Fedoras were worn by both men and women; Greta Garbo famously wore one to sultry effect. Both of these hat styles were extremely popular in the 1920' and 1930's, and are classic styles that are still worn today.



Man's Fedora and Woman's cloche hat.

Unfortunately, the hat industry is no longer as robust as it was years ago, so the materials you will need are not generally available at your neighborhood fabric store. However, flowers, feathers, fashion ribbon and woven grosgrain can be found in many fabric and craft stores near you. You can buy the other items, such as wool felt hat bodies and petersham ribbon from specialty millinery stores (see link to resource list).

I hope you enjoy using these directions to make you own vintage hat as much as I have enjoyed writing them. I'd love to see pictures of your creations!

## Materials you will need

You can order the following materials from millinery supply companies (see link to resource list). Wool felt hat bodies, Petersham ribbon, brim wire and fasteners are sometimes available at local stores like [Lacis](#) in Berkeley, California and [Britex](#) in San Francisco, California.

- Round or oval form as close to the same measurement as head circumference and no more than ½ inch bigger than circumference; i.e. a bowl, hat or wig stand, specialty hat block or even a Styrofoam ball (this can be shaped to more closely match the oval head shape)
- Wool felt hat body – hood or flare (right)
- Thread matched to wool color
- Optional: Brim wire and joiner ('wire' can be nylon or specialty millinery wire)
- Embellishments including fashion ribbon (i.e. woven edged grosgrain for cockades), bias cut silk or other material for outer hat band, flowers, feathers, beads, buttons, fancy trims, etc.
- 1 – 2 yards of Petersham ribbon for inner hat band (optional for outer hat band)



Wool felt hat body.

(Note: When buying grosgrain ribbon, look closely at the edges of the ribbon. True Petersham will look 'scalloped' on both

edges. It must have a serpentine weave or it will not curve. Grosgrain with a woven edge will not work for hat bands but will work for cockades and other embellishing effects.)



True Petersham ribbon.

## Basic Directions

### Step 1. Take head measurements

1. Measure the circumference of the head to the nearest ¼ inch. Place the measuring tape around the fullest part of the skull in back and approximately 1 inch above eyebrows in front. Place one finger flat against the head and under the tape. Pull tape snug but not tight. Note: if your hair is very thick and you will wear the hat with your hair up, take another measurement with hair up to ensure that the finished hat will fit over hair without being too tight.
2. Measure from ear tip to ear tip over the top of the head.
3. Measure from hairline in front to hairline in back of head.

### Step 2. Prepare and mark the form

1. For ear tip to ear tip: put a piece of tape on each side of form at ear tip measurement (blue painters tape works well). This is to ensure that the hat crown will not sit too high on the head or fall below the top of the ear. In general, the line where the crown joins the brim of the hat should sit about ¼ inch above the top of the ear.
2. Front to back hairline: place tape on form at front and back hairline measurements. The hat should sit low enough on the head to feel secure, but not tight. This is also a design choice, i.e. throughout the 1920's, the amount of forehead showing under the brim of a cloche varied, starting in the early 20's with virtually no forehead showing and ending the decade with forehead showing up to the hairline.
3. If using a wood or cloth form, cover form with plastic or cling film before putting the wool body on it so no color will bleed through and mark either the form or the fabric of the body. Make sure tape can be seen through the plastic.

### Step 3. Prepare the wool hat body

1. Dampen the inside of the hat body by either spraying it with water or running it under a faucet. The body should be damp to the touch, but not dripping wet or it will take much longer to dry and may not hold the shape as the weight of the wool will tend to pull the brim down.

2. Microwave method: Wrap the dampened body in a damp towel and microwave for 30 – 45 seconds. Wool should be quite hot but still able to be touched without burning your fingers. Do not over heat or the wool will burn.
3. Steam method: Spray dampen the inside of the body with water so it feels wet to the touch but not dripping wet. Holding the body in one hand from the outside and direct steam to the inside of the body until the wool is almost too hot to hold. A steam machine is most efficient but a steam iron on highest steam setting will work. In the 1920's, a kitchen tea kettle was often used when making hats at home. The hat was held over the rising steam. Take care when using steam. It is very hot and can burn skin very easily. Note: the wool will cool as you are working on it so you will need to keep applying steam to the areas you are working on to keep it hot. The wool will not stretch if it is cold.



Steaming the hat body.

### Step 4a. Shaping a Fedora hat

1. The crown: While the hat body is still very warm, lay it on a table and fold it in half. Shape a curved fold at the top, creating a depression in the middle – like two hilltops with a valley in between. The fold should be 5 to 6 inches long and 1 inch deep in the center tapering to nothing at each end.



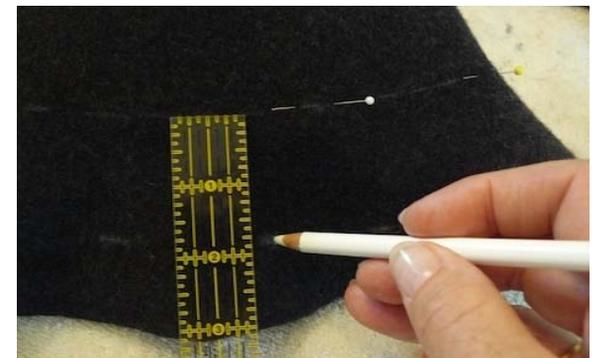
Folding the hat body.

With one hand on the two top folds, press down hard on the fold to keep it from moving and pull the edge of one side of the wool in a straight line away from the fold. Since the hat body is cone shaped, this stretching will create straight sides on the crown.

Do this on each side and across the edge from the front fold to the back fold. Measure down approximately 5 inches in the middle of each side and 4 inches in front and back. Mark with pins and place the body on an upturned bowl or hat stand. Tie a string around the hat at pin line to keep hat in place on stand.



Stretching the Fedora body.



Measuring the Fedora crown and brim.

2. The brim: While hat is on the form, steam the brim in 2-3 inch sections and stretch the outer edge of the wool so it stands away from the crown at about a 50 degree angle. You can turn up the back section of the brim at this time or after the hat is dry.



Stretching the Fedora brim.

Work all the way around the brim stretching evenly. You can place the hat brim side down on a flat surface if you want the brim to be flatter on the finished hat.

3. Allow to completely dry. This may take 2-3 days. After removing hat body, spray inside of crown with felt sizing if a stiffer hat is desired. Note: spray starch is not recommended; it flakes and may discolor the wool.

### Step 4b. Shaping a cloche hat

1. The crown: Steam the body as with the Fedora. While the hat body is still very warm, pull it down evenly over a bowl or other kind of hat block. The decorative fold in the crown is made by pinching the wool together while it is still very warm.



Forming cloche crown fold.

To mark the depth of the crown, measure across the top of the crown and place pins on each side corresponding to ear tip to ear tip measurements. Repeat this for the front to back hairline measurement. Note: this is a design choice as you might want to have the crown come to the back hairline and almost to the top of the eyebrows in front. Tie a string around the hat at pin line to keep hat in place on stand.

2. The brim: While hat is on the form, steam the brim in 2-3 inch sections. The outer brim of the pictured finished cloche is turned up along  $\frac{3}{4}$  of the brim

and sweeps down on one side to a straight edge. A classic cloche of the period typically has a downturned brim all around but the shape of the brim is a design choice.

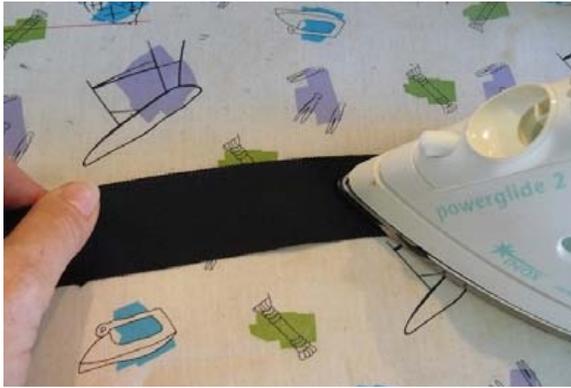
3. Let body dry on the block as above. Spray inside of the crown with felt sizing if desired.



Drying cloche.

### Step 5. Sewing on inner hat band

1. Measure a length of petersham ribbon about  $2\frac{1}{2}$  inches longer than the head circumference.
2. Place a hot iron (dry or with steam) on one end of the petersham, and pull on one edge of the ribbon as you iron over it. This will put a curve into the ribbon with one edge longer than the other. This curve will allow it to lay flat against the inside curve of the crown. The longer curve will lie next to the brim and the shorter curve will lie toward the top of the crown (next page).



Curving the inner hat band.

3. Pin mark the petersham ribbon on the longer curve in quarters (front, back, right and left sides).
4. Pin mark the inside of the dry blocked hat in quarters (front, back, right and left sides).



Pinning the inner hat band.

5. Starting at the back of the hat, pin the petersham to the corresponding pins inside the crown of the hat about 1/8 inch above the place where the crown joins the brim.
6. From the inside of the hat, sew the petersham to the crown about 1/8 inch above the edge of the petersham (10-12 stitches/in).
7. When you get to the back of the hat, fold the raw edge under and sew down.

### Step 6. Finishing the brim edge

1. Cut edge method: Felt does not ravel so the brim can be finished by making a clean, even cut all around the brim. Measuring out from the sides of the crown, mark the depth of the brim with chalk or pins. Cut evenly all around the brim. Note: a rotary cutter is recommended for this.



Cutting the brim.

2. Folded edge: Measuring out from the sides of the crown, mark the depth of the brim with chalk or pins, making sure to

leave at least 1/2 inch to the outer edge. Turn under and sew approximately 3/8 inch from the folded edge.

3. Turn the hat over and evenly trim excess material from under the brim, approximately 1/8 inch from sewing line. A snub nosed scissors is recommended so you don't accidentally poke through the brim material.
4. Brim wire edge: Cut brim wire approximately 1 inch longer than outside circumference of brim (at folded edge).
5. Clamp one joiner onto end of brim wire with pliers.
6. Place brim wire into folded edge of brim and sew about 1/8 inch from folded edge.
7. Stop sewing about 2 inches from joiner. Cut wire to fit, insert into joiner and clamp.
8. Complete sewing folded edge. Trim raw edge of brim about 1/8 inch from sewing line (step 3).

### Step 7. Embellishing the hat

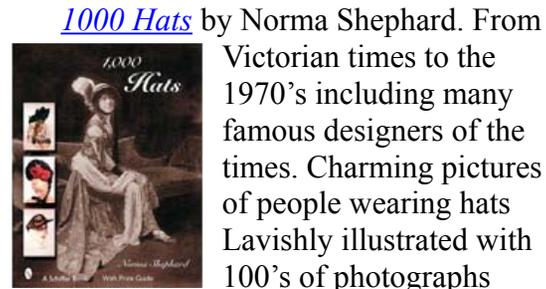
1. The outside hatband: In order to lay flat against the crown, the outside hat band needs to curve around the crown. Use a bias cut of fabric, a ribbon that will curve (i.e. petersham) or narrow trims that can circle the hat without gapping. Hats do not need to have a hatband – this is a personal, design choice.

- Many embellishments such as flowers, feathers, leather, buttons, can be used effectively. Embellishments can be attached with decorative hat pins, pin-backed fastenings, or loose thread tacks such that they are easily removed. This can extend the versatility and life of the hat. I do not recommend gluing any embellishment to the hat as this can also discolor the fabric.
- Embellishments are a design choice and your imagination is your only limit. However, if your goal is to create a hat that would be worn during a particular period, such as the 1920's or 30's, it's best to find photographs and books of the period as guidelines.

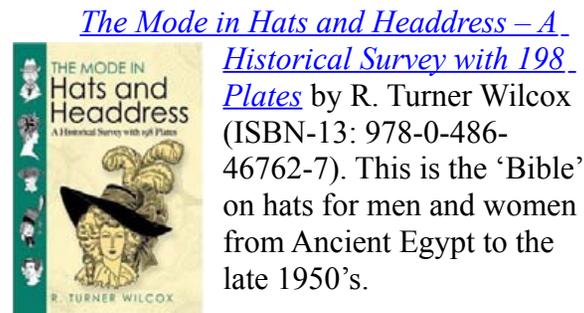


Vintage hat embellishments can include flowers, feathers, pins, and buttons.

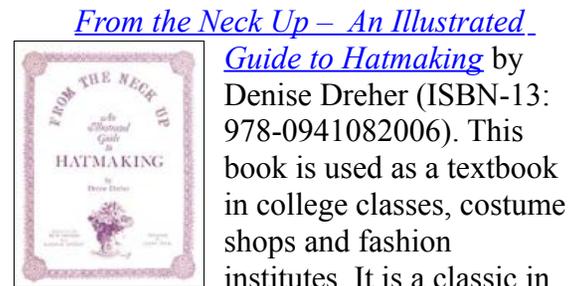
## Resources



[1000 Hats](#) by Norma Shephard. From Victorian times to the 1970's including many famous designers of the times. Charming pictures of people wearing hats Lavishly illustrated with 100's of photographs including charming shots of people wearing hats for all kinds of functions.



[The Mode in Hats and Headdress - A Historical Survey with 198 Plates](#) by R. Turner Wilcox (ISBN-13: 978-0-486-46762-7). This is the 'Bible' on hats for men and women from Ancient Egypt to the late 1950's.



[From the Neck Up - An Illustrated Guide to Hatmaking](#) by Denise Dreher (ISBN-13: 978-0941082006). This book is used as a textbook in college classes, costume shops and fashion institutes. It is a classic in the field of period and modern millinery.

Denise's web site includes a very comprehensive [list of millinery resources](#), with names and contact information for almost 100 suppliers, offering everything from hat bodies to exotic feathers. I have bought from many of these suppliers and can personally recommend Hats by Leko, Judith M (my favorite for great Customer service!), Lacis (in Berkeley, California), Charles Lubin, and Zucker Feathers.

*Rosemary Greene's love of hats has its roots in her childhood, when every Easter her talented mother made her a new outfit and matching hat. Although her mother taught Rosemary to sew, she did not teach her millinery skills. Rosemary never lost her love of wearing hats, and wore one even when no one else did. Several years ago, she began studying costume design at a local college, took a millinery class, and found her true passion! She loves passing on her hat making skills. She teaches Millinery classes through the Los Gatos Saratoga Community Education, and also by arrangement in her home studio. Her hats are sold at Black Cat Hats in Los Gatos CA, Hats on Post in San Francisco CA, or by custom order. She holds a Ed.D from the University of Southern California. Contact her at [rgreene@grdi.com](mailto:rgreene@grdi.com) or visit her [web site](#) for more information.*