

*By Alasdair Post-Quinn*

I imagine the unknown originator of double-knitting sitting in a snowed-in cottage in front of a roaring fire, holding a swatch of 1x1 ribbing and idly compressing and releasing it. As she looks at the compressed fabric and turns it over and over, an idea forms in her head. Doesn't it look like stockinette stitch on both sides? If she could keep it from relaxing, the compressed ribs would make a really warm fabric. What if ...?

She takes up her needles and two ends of yarn, casts on, and starts knitting in 1x1 rib, using one end to create the knit stitches and the other end to create the purls. After a few rows, she pulls on the fabric. Her eyes light up and a smile creeps across her face. Double-knitting is born!

Of course, we may never know the true origin of double-knitting. But the technique is really quite simple – if you can knit and purl, you can do it.

Double-Knitting: the moniker is used by different knitting cultures to mean different things. It can refer to a particular weight of yarn, or the practice of doubling your strands to create a thicker yarn, or is a blanket term for any two-color knitting. However, the technique I know as double-knitting is a singularly esoteric technique that, despite its age (there is a fleeting reference to it in Tolstoy's *War and Peace*, published in 1869), is still considered beyond many seasoned knitters.

Essentially, double-knitting is a technique by which one can create two fabrics at the same time. Normally, the “right side” of each faces outward, and the “wrong sides” face each other inside the work, creating the illusion of a fabric with no wrong side. At its most basic, double-knitting can be used to create a hollow space between the two fabrics, if each side is a solid color. But with a subtle change to each stitch, two-color motifs can be added, which lock the two sides together. Traditional double-knit colorwork is reversed on the opposite side in both color and orientation – an asymmetric motif in black-on-white will be a mirror image in white-on-black on the other side.



Reading charts in double-knitting requires some imagination. Any two-color chart will work – as a matter of fact, double-knitting is ideal for charts that would require awkwardly long floats in stranded knitting. There are no floats in double knitting – any time you’re not using a color on one side, you are using it on the other side. If you are reading a two-color chart, you have to keep in mind that you are only looking at one side of the work in double-knitting. However, double-knitting in the round is easier to imagine because you are continuously knitting the front of the work, rather than knitting the “imaginary” back side every other row.

For this reason, a hat is a great project for the double-knitting beginner. There are no edges, and your tension is even on each side. It can also be a great introduction to colorwork, since there are no floats or intarsia twists when changing colors. On the other hand, because you are essentially knitting two hats, it is a time-consuming technique.

I have been designing double-knit hats since 2006, and working to push the limits of the double-knitting technique. The hats I’ve been designing lately utilize more than two colors, different patterns on each side, cables, decorative increases and decreases, all while remaining true to the double-knitting technique. The hat I’m presenting to you today I designed in 2007, but even though it was an elegant finished piece, there were a number of problems I felt would be better corrected. When Twist Collective approached me for the pattern, I welcomed the opportunity to do some

much-needed overhauling.

The Four Winds hat was my second foray into two-pattern double-knitting – where two patterns are interlaced and worked simultaneously, one on the front and one on the back of the work. Letters are one of the most problematic double-knitting issues. If you put letters in your double-knitting, the opposite side will have mirror-image letters. It would clearly be preferable to have your work readable from both sides, so I figured out two-pattern notation for double knitting. Now I can not only create letters that don't become mirror images on the opposite side, but I can make a chart for one letter on one side and a completely different letter on the other. The Four Winds hat makes good use of both – the N and S are readable from both sides, but when you turn the hat inside out, the E and the W switch places to keep the compass accurate.

Now there's no reason you can't just take the charts and do a single-sided hat – although the floats will be very long – and I encourage you to try it if you'd rather skip the double-knitting for now. But if you're going to knit the Four Winds hat as I've designed it, here are some guidelines and instructional videos to help you along.

I was unsatisfied with other documented double-knit cast-ons, so I designed my own. Unlike many others, this one allows you to start double-knitting immediately, rather than relying on several rows of foundation stitches. It also looks quite elegant, and has a uniformly firm but flexible edge. It borrows the technique familiar to many as the long-tail cast-on, but there is no long tail, and every other stitch is reversed. View the video for more details on this cast-on.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GQpsC1FKGrU>

As you will notice from the cast-on, your stitches alternate in color – MC, then CC, etc. They will also alternate in type of stitch – knit, then purl, etc. Each pair is worked as one – for every knit, a purl must be made directly afterward. For the most part, whenever the MC is used as the first stitch in a pair, the CC must be the second stitch – and vice versa. View the video for a more visual explanation.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZsF5ju7sWBE>

Two-pattern double knitting is done in exactly the same way, except that every stitch is notated rather than the first color of every pair – because not every pair is done in opposite colors. The notation leaves nothing to the imagination, and if you follow the chart and pay attention to the key, even a beginner can create this effect.

Decreases, like double-knit stitches, are done in pairs. This means that a small amount of setup is required before doing a pair of decreases. For a single (2-into-1) decrease, you need to take your next two pairs and reorder them from K-P-K-P to K-K-P-P, then decrease the knits and purls in the

same direction – either left or right slanting. For double (3-into-1) decreases, three pairs are reordered from K-P-K-P-K-P to K-K-K-P-P-P before decreasing. View the video to watch me do this.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9JxWPQilBxQ>

Once the decreases are done and the hat's final round is tied off, you have to weave in ends. A pair of 100-g skeins of DK-weight yarn is easily adequate to make a single double-knit hat, even with a fold-up brim, so you should only have 2 pairs of ends – one at the cast-on edge and one at the top. The nice thing about weaving in ends in double knitting – at least with wool that felts well – is that you can simply feed the end between the layers, then out one of the sides. Snip it near the surface, give the fabric a little tug, and the end disappears inside. I generally like to run the end through as many color-changes as I can, because the places where the two sides cross grip the yarn better.

...And voila! Your hat is done!