

Snow Fooling

Short row a chin,
unravel a mouth,
and double-
decrease
a nose

by Meg Swansen



it all began innocently enough with a request for a warm, knitted, woolen snowmobile helmet. One thing led to another, and I soon found myself enmeshed in my Knitted Mask Period—from which I have not yet emerged. After all, I have not even touched the possibilities of color-patterned faces. Think of it: ears, glasses, mustaches, wrinkles, and warts—all in glorious, living color.

If you feel somewhat taken aback upon initial confrontation with these masks, give them a chance. Just wait until you knit one and crawl inside; you will feel positively transformed.

There are at least two ways to approach your own design. With either, you need your gauge, basic measurements (head circumference, and length from chin to nose, nose to eyes, eye to eye, etc.), and construction techniques. You may then either carefully chart the whole mask on graph paper or simply cast on, begin knitting, and allow yourself to be inner directed. I think these masks knit up so quickly because there is nearly always something going on, not to mention the strange fascination of watching a *head* emerge from your needles.

I recommend that you loosely follow my instructions for the plain cream-colored, pointy-headed version, shown at far left on the facing page. Then peel off on your own, and knit subsequent helmets in a freeform mode. If you have no skiing or snowmobiling recipients, there is always Halloween to lurk for.

You start the circularly knit masks at the lower edge with a ribbed section. After the ribbing, “feel” your way up the face as you knit: Here comes the *chin*. I’ll work a series of short rows across the front. They’ll bulge out to accommodate a forceful chin. To shape the *back of the head* more or less anatomically, I’ll mark the center-back stitches, and work an increase each side every second round three or four times, as needed.

Now the *mouth*—I’ll leave that alone for the time being and work an “after-thought mouth” at the end. Or: I know I want the mouth right here, so I’ll perform the “thumb trick” over these stitches. (Knit the mouth stitches in a contrasting color; replace those stitches onto the left needle; and reknit them in the main

Meg Swansen's masks are perfect blank canvases for any weirdness you can imagine knitting. Try any technique that appeals but doesn't seem suitable for conventional projects. You'll find the basic pattern for "Pointy-Head" (lower left on facing page) at right. (Photo by S. Kahn)

color. Later, remove the contrasting color to reveal two neat little rows of stitches waiting to be finished off.)

Aha! I’m at the *nose*. I’ll cast off a few stitches for a breathing hole, and when I come back around to the hole, I’ll cast on 11 to 13 or even 15 stitches in their place (depending upon the size wanted—or needed—for the beak). Now, as I knit around, I’ll work a double decrease at the nose center every second or third round, until the stitches disappear. (Frequency of decrease greatly affects length and profile of the nose.) As for the *eyes*, they get the same treatment as the mouth. And suddenly I’m at the *crown*.

You are now faced with dozens of possibilities for head or hat shapes: tam-o’-shanter, watch cap, brimmed hat, turban, or ski cap; pointed, rounded, or flat-top. How about hair? Or a Medusa head with I-cord snakes? Let yourself go. As you’ll notice from my pattern and masks, I use I-cord (idiot cord) a lot; it’s easy to do and has so many applications. For I-cord hair, just pick up three stitches where you want a strand to begin, using a double-pointed needle. Knit the stitches; slide them to the other end of the needle; pull the yarn across behind, and knit them again—over and over—until the ropelike cord is long enough.

Step-by-step directions for the basic Pointy-Head

Yarn and needles: 4 oz. worsted-weight wool; a 16-in. circular needle of a size to produce 5 sts/in. (small), 4½ sts/in. (medium), or 4 sts/in. (large); set of same-size double-pointed needles (d.p.n.).

Lower ribbing: “Pointy-Head” has a deep, flaring ribbing that lies nicely around the shoulders. You may use a smaller size needle if you prefer.

With 16-in. circular needle, cast on 140 sts, join rnd. P5, k2 for 10 rnds.

Next rnd: *p1, p2tog, p2, k2*; rep ** around. Work 9 rnds p4, k2.

Next rnd: *p1, p2tog, p1, k2*; rep ** around. Work 9 rnds p3, k2.

Next rnd: *p1, p2tog, k2*; rep ** around. Work 10 rnds p2, k2—80 sts. Knit 1 rnd stockinette stitch.

Note: *Alternative short, straight lower edge:* Cast on 80 sts; k2, p2 for 3 to 4 in.

Chin: Mark center-front st for short rows. Knit 6 sts beyond marker. Wrap, turn (see *Basics*, which starts on p. 16), purl back 12 sts. Wrap, turn, k15. Wrap, turn, p18. Wrap, turn, k21. Wrap, turn, p24. Wrap, turn, k27. Wrap, turn, p30. Wrap, turn, and knit around.

Back-of-head shaping: Mark center-back 2 sts. Inc 1 st each side of marked sts every 2nd rnd, 4 times—88 sts.

Mouth: Ignore for now. Knit around until you are about 3 in. above back ribbing (approx. 4 in. above front ribbing). Try on for nose placement.

Nose: Bind off 4 sts at center front—84 sts.

Next rnd: With single cast-on (see *Basics*), make 13 sts over bind-off—97 sts. K1 rnd.

Next rnd: Work 5 of the cast-on sts; double dec next 3 sts into 1 as foll: SL2tog kwise-k1-p2sso (see *Basics*). Mark this st with safety pin for center of next double dec. K 1 rnd plain. Alternate dec and plain rnds 5 more times. (For hooked nose, make last 2 dec rnds consecutively.) Cast-on sts reduced to 1—85 sts.

Eyes: Ignore for now. Knit until you are about 1½ in. above bridge of nose.

Hat demarcation: “Horizontal Stitch,” from Mary Walker Phillips’ *Creative Knitting* (Dos Tejedoras Fiber Arts Publications, rev. ed. 1986) followed with a purl round makes an attractive braidlike band. Or simply work one or two purl rounds, change color, or whatever. Dec 1 st in last demarcation rnd for a total divisible by 3—84 sts.

Pointy-head crown: Divide 84 stitches into 3 groups of 28; work a single dec at each marker every 2nd rnd. If you use SSK, the decs will swirl to the left; k2tog will swirl to right. For a straight dec line, use a double dec as on nose every 4th round. Continue around, changing to d.p.n. when sts become too few for circular needle. When 3 sts rem, either finish off, or add a few inches of 3-st I-cord for a superpointy top.

Finishing: Try the thing on, and mark eye positions with a blunt needle. Snip a st (half a st, actually) in the middle of where an eye is to be, and ravel 3 to 4 sts in each direction. Pick up the raw sts top and bottom, and 2-st I-cord them as foll: On d.p.n., cast on 2 sts; transfer them to the pick-up needle, and *k1, k2tog-b (knit 2 sts together through back loops). Replace the 2 sts onto the LHN, and rep from * around each eye. Weave the end to the beginning.

Rep for mouth—adding a sneer with extended I-cord, if so inclined.

Note on alternative features: If you prefer, chart purl stitches for chin and eyebrows. Measure carefully so you’ll know where to place them. If the eyes are hard to see through, fold up flaps for eyelids and tack in place, as I did on “Aran Mask with Fair Isle Hat.” You can lower a hat that looks too high, as on “Diagonal-Patterned Face” (facing page, center) by adding applied I-cord bands below it. □

Meg Swansen, owner of Schoolhouse Press, teaches and writes prolifically.