



Feltmaking – what you need and how to do it.

Equipment required for making felt

Basic essentials:

Fleece - the very best is Merino (not a native breed), which is generally sourced from Australia or South Africa. There are a number of very helpful, reputable suppliers in the north of England that I use on a regular basis, there are also loads of internet suppliers – prices vary. For easy felting choose combed tops, of a fine grade, I find 64s a very good grade to work with quickly. The 's' grade or 'Bradford Count' denotes the size of the fibre in microns. If you want to get a bit more experimental, most animal hairs / fibres will felt to an extent but it is generally best to use sheep fleece as a base and either blend in the other fibres or use bits in the decorative layer. Man made fibres will not felt, but again, can be incorporated as decoration. Pieces of previously made felt can be cut into shapes and added as decoration and pieces of fancy knitting wools are good for embellishment as well, however, 'superwash' and similarly treated wools will not work as they will not shrink and that is the essence of how felting works.

Soap – any type of soap will do! You can use diluted washing-up liquid but it's quite hard on your hands. Diluted cheap mild shampoo is my favourite option. Those little bars of soap from hotels, or the slivers from the end of bars of hand soap are fine too, but can be a bit messy to use. (You just rub it directly onto your wetted fleece. It's very easy to end up with a massive surfeit of suds though!)

Rolling mat – the cheapest option is to recycle bubble wrap but it doesn't last very well and you end up with lots of soggy polythene to get rid of! It is handy though if you are not doing much or are making small pieces. Sushi mats are fairly readily available at the moment and last very well, the best ones I have found are from Ikea and cost about 50p each. You can use straw beach mats for larger pieces but I find them a bit unwieldy and very easy to demolish. For very big pieces the very cheap kitchen roller blinds that are made out of bamboo splints are really good and can be obtained from most DIY shops and IKEA.

Recently I have discovered the rubberised sticky mats that you can buy in pound shops for stopping things from slipping about on trays etc. They're bit floppy to roll hard but work well on small pieces although they do tend to get a bit covered in bobbly bits of fleece after a while. A nice cheap option though, as you get quite a long piece for a pound and then cut it into smaller squares.

Net – this is used to protect the felt patterned surface while you are wetting the felt down. It stops everything moving about and makes it easier to lift, turn etc, but it's not vital, many people don't use it at all. I usually use offcuts of net curtain material which can be obtained from places like Belfast Linens from their remnants bin for pennies.

Jug / bowl – a plastic measuring jug is useful for pouring hot water over the felt during the process and a washing up bowl or bucket is handy to squeeze out the excess without having to travel, dripping, to the sink.

Optional extras:

Empty washing-up liquid bottles – these are very good for using for hot soapy water. They are rather more manageable and directional than a jug of water. Definitely the best option if working with a group of enthusiastic five-year olds! The more you have, the better, if you are working with a group – it saves on squabbles but they can't make too much mess while you are helping individuals.

Lengths of broom handle or expanded foam swimming 'noodles' – these can assist the shrinking process but are by no means essential, I occasionally use them with very large pieces of felt. Place at the lower edge of your wetted fleece and mat and roll it up into the centre of the bundle at the rolling and shrinking stage.

Salad spinner – this is an ideal item for 'spin drying' small pieces of felt when you have made them with children and they need to take them away afterwards – it saves them having to cart off really soggy pieces, or you ending up with a lot of wet towels from rolling them in them to dry! Kids really enjoy spinning their felt too.

Old towels, old terry nappies, old flannels – these make the rolling process much easier. If you wrap a piece of towelling (or a face flannel if it is a small piece of felt in a sushi mat), around your bundle before rolling it, it will prevent it from slipping about too much. This is particularly useful if you are working on a formica table top or hard floor surface. They also come in very handy for sopping up soapy puddles on tables where children have been over-enthusiastic with the wetting process! Using flannels instead of large towels where possible saves on having to do loads of washing afterwards. At the time of writing this, Tesco's are selling 'value' face flannels for 20p each – they are perfect for the job if you haven't got a lot of old ones kicking about, as you can buy enough for a whole group for only a couple of pounds and they last for ages.

Feltmaking by hand

1. Tease out pieces of fleece and make an even layer on a rolling mat with all the fibres laying in the same direction.
2. Build up more layers, the fibres crossing those in the previous layer at right angles. Make at least three layers.
3. Decorate your piece if desired, with contrasting colours, pieces of prepared felt or other fibres.
4. Lay a piece of net curtain over your sample to keep the pattern in place and carefully pour some very hot water into the centre of the net. Starting from the centre and working outwards, rub gently with a bar of soap. (Alternatively, trickle hot soapy water over the sample from a washing up liquid bottle or jug.)
5. Work in soap and more hot water all over the surface, with a gentle rubbing ('polishing') motion, taking care not to disturb your pattern, until the entire sample is evenly wetted and flattened. (Don't overdo the wetting or the soap, or you'll end up with a very sloshy sudsy mess dribbling onto the floor!)
6. Roll up in the mat (not too tightly) and squeeze out excess water.
7. Wrap the roll in a piece of old towelling, to prevent slippage and roll on the table top to create friction and begin the shrinking process. Do not be afraid of rolling it hard – it needs some elbow grease! Do this for about 50 rolls, then unwrap the bundle. The sample should have started to shrink and wrinkle up particularly at the edge that was in the centre of the roll.
8. Peel the net carefully off the sample if it has wrinkled or started to attach itself to the felt, smooth it, replace, and turn the sample through 90 degrees so that a different edge will now be in the centre of the roll.
9. Add more hot water, roll up and repeat the whole process three more times so that it has been rolled from each edge in order to shrink it evenly. Once you are happy that your piece has shrunk to the desired size and strength, rinse under the cold tap, screw it up and throw it against the sink a few times to help to 'set' the felt, squeeze out and dry.

