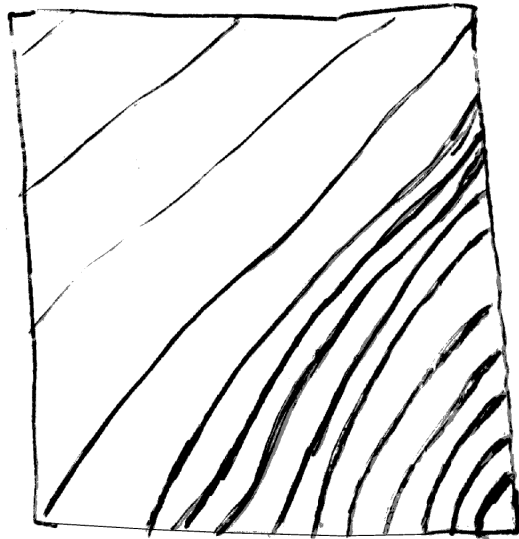


David Earle – Tips for making spinning tops

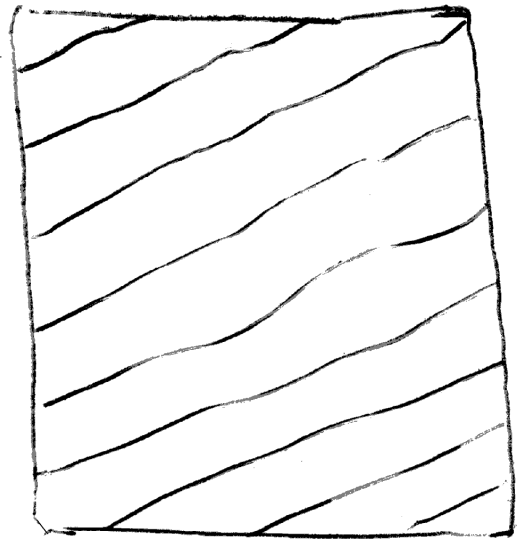
Tools:

I use a 5/8" high speed steel bowl gouge for shaping my tops. This heavy tool roughs out quickly and can overhang the rest more – so I don't waste time moving it. The skew chisel and parting tool come in handy for tight corners.

Materials:



put this one in the barbecue



a good top blank

Blanks should be cut with the grain and made from consistent growth. Fast growth and slow growth on different sides of a top will throw it out of balance. I don't waste time working with rotten, knotty, figured, unbalanced, or cracked blanks. Even with perfect material I toss the 5 -10% that don't balance well.

It's always safer to rough out blanks between centers before fixing in a 4-jaw chuck. I often take a shortcut here, but only with lots of safety equipment. **Never underestimate the ability of a tiny piece of wood to do serious damage to your face.** I once had a small chunk of maple fly off the lathe and crack my face shield in half. I do not recommend fixing square stock in a chuck without tail-stock support.

Shaping the point:

Sharp tips tend to stay in place, rounded tips cause the top to travel all around, usually toward lower ground.

For my little table-top spinners I cut a 45 degree cone, then round off the last 1/16" or so. A really sharp tip will usually get dented, messing up the balance.

Top body:

Let your imagination run wild! There are thousands of different shapes out there. I recommend serious experimentation. This is the only way to find out what you really like. Look to nature & the endless variety of man-made objects around you.

Tops can be made very tall, but they usually won't spin as long and beginners may have trouble getting them going fast enough. It takes good balance and high speed to keep a tall top upright.

The stem:

Practice makes perfect when it comes to shaping a slender stem. You want to cut in the direction of the lathe bed, from right to left, gently supporting the body of the top with your right hand.

A tiny stem will take too much finger strength to get going. Too large and it won't spin fast enough. It's all about gearing. A ratio of 1/7 is a good rule of thumb. (1 being the diameter of the stem, 7 – the diameter of the top body).

I like to point the tip of the stem for spinning upside down. As with many small chucked projects, make sure to leave a tiny stub on the end when parting off with the skew. This can be carved away afterward. If you don't, you'll have a hole in the end of the stem.

Finishing:

Sanding isn't necessary with sharp tools and practice, but it does help if you want a finished appearance. Novice turners might start with 180 grit. I like to use 320 or 400. Excessive sanding will ruin the crispness of the shape and could throw the top off balance.

For a natural finish, wipe with food-grade walnut oil or boiled-linseed oil.

I like to decorate my tops with felt-tipped markers. Lower the lathe speed so you don't melt the felt. When you are finished coloring, raise the speed and use a paper towel to wipe off excess ink. The downside to the markers is that some inks (particularly the reds) fade in sunlight. Acrylic paints & spray paint also work, but are messy and take longer to dry.

Chatter tools, Wire burning, and wood-burning pens are also very effective.

My favorite thing about making tops is the wild array of shapes & colors you can create. Introducing youngsters to them is always a treat. They are fun to collect; inexpensive, small, and available in any country.