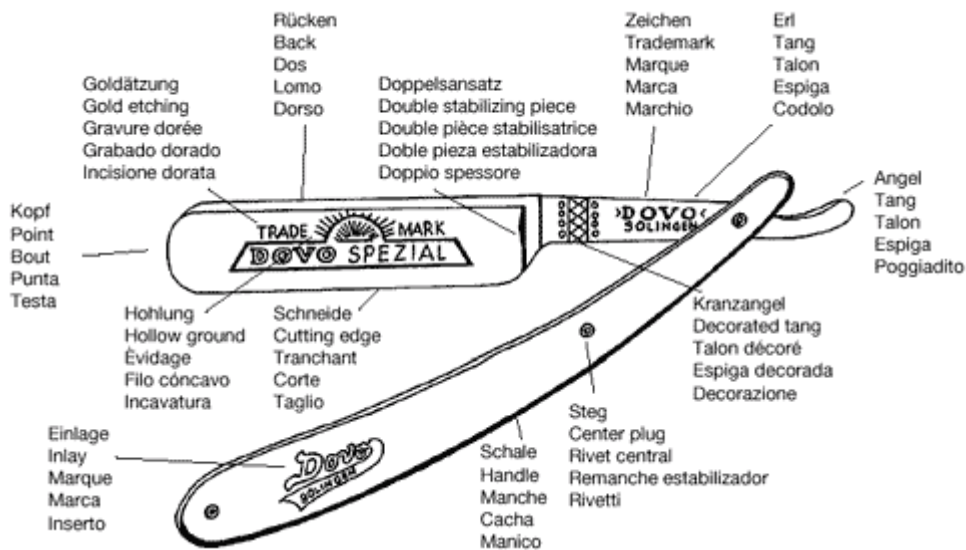


# The Invisible Edge

## Choosing, using and caring for your straight razor



### ***Buying Your First Straight Razor: Some Points To Keep In Mind***

Increasing numbers of men are returning to the use of straight razors for their daily shave but some, certainly, are unsure just what to go for. This e-book should help you to make that all-important first purchase.

So what to look out for in your first straight razor? Let's look first at just what makes a straight razor what it is. A straight razor is, essentially, a very simple tool. The scales (sometimes called 'the handle' or 'the sheaves') aren't even really necessary in terms of using the blade to shave with. Their only function is to protect the blade when the razor is not in use, and of course to provide a guard against the edge so you don't accidentally cut yourself when handling the razor.

Most vintage razors that you will see for sale have a blade made from high-carbon steel that has been strengthened and tempered in order that an extremely fine - and sharp - edge can be achieved. Some older razors are made of cast steel but for the purposes of this article these can be ignored. Stainless steel, which is a relatively new invention, is now used in some modern razors (some are on our site at <http://www.dovorazors.com>) and gives a longer-lasting edge but is more difficult to hone back to sharpness when the time comes.

The piece of steel that makes the blade of the razor is forged to shape and specially ground (the 'hollow grind') to optimum shape and profile. This was of course at one time done entirely by hand but latterly by machine. Very few modern straight razors are hand-made and those that are made in this way are very expensive. When forged and ground, the blade is then finished by honing to a sharp edge. Again, this used to be done by hand but is now at least machine-assisted. It is worth noting that most new razors aren't usually 'shave ready' and generally need some honing and then stropping prior to use. If buying a vintage razor, ready-honed models that are ready to shave with straight away are available at [The Invisible Edge](#) website. A honing service for UK and EC residents, for your own dulled razor is now being offered at our new website [Razor Sharpening UK](#). All the razors for sale on our [Dovo Razors UK](#) site are hand-honed and shave-ready free of charge though do note that this entails breaking the box 'seal' in order to gain access to the razor! Also keep an eye out at our new site [Thiers-Issard UK](#) – currently stocked with shaving accessories, the razors arrive at or near March 2009!

Properly looked after, a straight razor should only need honing perhaps twice yearly, though it will need stropping on a special [leather strop](#) before each shave. This in effect gives a 'new edge' for each shave and is one of the reasons that straight razors achieve such good results once the shaving technique is learned. Again, there are many resources on the Internet to help the newcomer, including various forums such as [Straight Razor Place](#), run by razor collectors and enthusiasts who are always pleased to offer help and advice.

So why do some razors cost more than others? Well, some of this price is in the steel - the best quality Swedish carbon steel and very high-grade Sheffield carbon steel is more expensive than regular carbon steel. Also the degree of work in making the blade affects the price - the more shaping and grinding that is done, the higher the cost.

However, you can liken razors to wristwatches in some respects - after all, the movement - the 'heart' - of even the very best wristwatch can only be made so well. There comes a point when it cannot, mechanically speaking, be made any better. The rest is 'window-dressing' - gold bracelets, diamond-studded bezels and so on.

It's the same with razors. Deeply-engraved blades, gold-washed blades, gold-plated tangs, fancy patterning and the like all add to the cost, as do scales made of progressively more expensive materials. The same blade fitted with standard plastic scales may be a third of the price - or less - than one clad in genuine mother-of-pearl - but it will give you the same close shave as its expensive variant!

With vintage razors there is also the complication of collectable desirability. It's a truism to state that anything is only worth what someone is willing to pay for it and this is nowhere more true than with collectors. A razor made by a sought-after maker, or one to complete a collection, may fetch many times in excess of its original price, even allowing for inflation.

My own advice for someone wanting to take up the art of straight razor shaving is this: don't spend too much - it may not be for you. Look for a razor made in either

Sheffield or Solingen. Buy a '5/8' or '6/8' (blade depth) hollow ground for preference. They are easier to handle for newcomers than the really big stuff and, because they are more common, are usually cheaper. For a good choice of vintage razors see our [shave-ready razors page](#) . Expect to pay somewhere between £35 - £45 (\$70 - \$90) for a decent 'beginners' razor.

If you do want to have a go on eBay or the like at buying one from elsewhere, ensure that the blade isn't worn (the ones to go for have statements like 'minimal hone wear' and good images) and especially that there are no nicks or cracks - however 'insignificant' or small - in the blade. Avoid any where the blade looks tapered with large flattened areas to top and edge - these are usually worn out and won't shave well.

If you would like to buy new, look no further than our websites, [Dovo Razors UK](#) and [Thiers-Issard UK](#) (from March 2009). Certainly the Dovo and 'TI' razors are more expensive than most vintage models but they are of course brand-new and, if you want a new razor, these are amongst the best available. It's like almost anything you buy in life – the old adage 'you get what you pay for' is true. I always advise to buy the best you can afford as it's a rich man that can afford a cheap suit!

### ***Using your straight razor***

So you've got yourself a straight razor and there you are, stood in front of the bathroom mirror, gazing dubiously at this object in your hand that is the stuff of legend. Will you still have both ears after you're finished or will you end up looking like you've been in a fight in a Marseilles waterfront bar? Truth is that, unless you're totally and utterly hamfisted, the worst that will happen is you'll end up with a couple of nicks. And *because* the blade is so sharp you'll find a touch from a styptic pencil will stop the skin leakage pretty much instantly. That's not to say you can't cut yourself with a straight razor - you can, and badly. So read through the points below before shaving with a straight razor for the first time and you will never have to call it a 'cut-throat'!

### ***Preparing for your first shave***

This is how *I* shave. Shaving with any razor is a personal thing and you'll probably end up doing it differently to me but, as a beginner, do it this way. I know this way works!

There are also many sources on the internet to tell you how to shave with your straight razor but the first time can be a bit, well, *tense*. This is definitely a rite of passage during which you do not need interruption so try to arrange it so you have a bit of time alone. Lock the bathroom door. Here we go.

Make sure you have the following:

- Your razor (of course!)
- Your [razor strop](#), hung from a handy point.
- A [shaving brush](#)

- [Shaving soap](#) and mug, if possible (some great shaving mugs can be found on eBay and they are CHEAP!
- [Alum block](#) or 'styptic pencil' (just in case).

Fill the shaving mug with warm water – about hand hot is best. If in doubt, have it cooler rather than hotter. Stand your brush in the water and go take a shower or busy yourself for a few minutes – this gives time for the brush bristles to soften a little. If you've taken a shower as well, your facial bristles will also be softened, giving an even better shave.

Run some warm water into the handbasin. This is for rinsing the razor. Be careful when rinsing and DO NOT bang the razor on the bowl as you could easily blunt it or even break the edge. Take your brush and use it to work up a lather on the soap. If you're using shave cream, apply it directly to the brush and lather-up in the palm of the hand. Lather your face well. Take your time - straight razor shaving is not to be hurried!

**An important point.** Try to leave the lather in place for a couple of minutes before you start shaving. It softens the bristles and believe me, it makes a difference!

Now strop your razor as described below. You're ready! I would suggest you start with the easy bits - your cheeks, as they are pretty flat and accessible. Don't try fancy tricks like shaving against the grain or the *coup de maitre* just yet! Remember that your razor is, essentially, a push cutter, NOT a bacon slicer. It does not rely on any slicing action to cut your stubble! DO NOT try to 'slice' your stubble off - you'll take a flap of skin with it! Instead, hold the open razor so that the handle is upward and the thumb and fingers rest comfortably on the tang. Stretch the skin slightly with your free hand, always keeping it behind the cutting edge. A good place to start is at the base of the sideburn (assuming you don't sport big sideburns) and draw the blade gently down your cheek. The angle of blade to skin to aim for is about 20 degrees. To get this right, it's about two widths of the razor spine away from the skin when the edge is resting on it. Deeper and you'll tear the stubble. Shallower and you risk a cut. It takes practice! Don't be disappointed if your first shave leaves you with stubble. It isn't a quick fix.

A most important rule: ***let the tool do the work.*** If you don't get a close shave, do NOT apply pressure, thinking that this will work. It won't and you'll be left, probably, with a bad cut. If this seems complicated – it isn't, but it also isn't easy to describe well. Try taking a look on [YouTube](#) and search for 'straight razor' – there are some good videos that show exactly how to do it!

It's all about practice, technique and, above all, *patience*. Take your time. Enjoy it. Soon you will be leaving the bathroom with a smooth, glowing face, smug in the knowledge that you have tamed the tiger. You can go into work and know that you have the skill - and courage - to apply three inches of the sharpest steel ever made to your face - and lived to tell the tale. Okay, so that's a bit melodramatic. Or is it?

Now let's take a look at learning how to care for your cherished possession.

Caring for a straight razor involves a bit more attention than holding it under a running tap then chucking it in the bathroom cabinet. This course of action might be okay for a cheap disposable safety razor, or even the more expensive variety - the blades still get thrown away so it doesn't matter. A straight razor has just one blade, it's delicate and doesn't respond well to harsh treatment *but* - treat it with respect and you will never need to buy another!

### ***Some dos and don'ts.***

#### *DO -*

- Rinse your razor thoroughly after use, taking care to remove all trace of soap.
- Allow it to dry, or dry it carefully on paper, before storing it away in its box.
- Give it a few passes on the strop before storing it – this ensures that the edge is dry, preventing corrosion to the superfine edge.
- Put it out of reach of children! This might seem obvious but kids seem to love these things.
- Always treat it with the respect you'd show anything that's very, very sharp.

#### *DON'T -*

- Bang the edge of the blade on the sink if rinsing - it can break!
- Use it as a box cutter/letter opener/pencil sharpener - you will ruin it!
- Leave it lying around open when lathering your face etc. - your fingers will regret it!
- Ever, ever, *EVER* use it to behead a pimple or lance a boil - the results can be truly horrible.
- Use it for any purpose than the one it's made for - to shave your face.

It's commonsense, really.

### ***Stropping the razor***

The drawing at the top of this article is from a DOVO catalogue and should help when we're talking about caring for your razor. If you would like more information on the 'jargon' have a look [here](#). In fact, apart making sure your straight razor is clean and dry after use, there are only two tasks that you're ever likely to perform. These are *stropping* (frequent) and *honing* (infrequent). We'll look first at stropping.



A Dovo hanging strop (left) and paddle strop (right)

A straight razor should be stropped before each use, and some people advocate stropping again half-way through a shave. A strop is usually a flat strap of leather with a hanging ring at one end and a grip at the other (see one above) made from high-quality cowhide, though paddle strops (above right) are also popular, these being strips of cowhide glued to flat boards or stretched over wooden frames. On the hanging strop, the round ring is used to hang the strop on a coat hook or similar, then the strop is pulled taut – but not bar-taut, you could break it! - by grasping the rectangular handle at the other end. The razor is stroked from the bottom to the top and back again, with the edge trailing, at right-angles to the length of the strop. At the end of each stroke the blade is not lifted from the strop but rolled around the axis of the back of the blade before commencing the next stroke.

You've maybe seen old films where barbers strop blades like they were buttering bread. This is fine if you want a blunt edge! The correct 'rolling' action takes a little getting used to but take it slowly - it's not a race - and a little practice will soon have you stropping like a pro. You don't need to apply much pressure but ensure that the back and edge of the blade keep in contact with the strop at all times. Remember that, in terms of sharpening, stropping is the final act – it brings the blade edge to its ultimate point of sharpness so concentrate far more on technique than speed. About 20-30 strokes should be enough, with last few using the lightest contact possible.

It's also true that stropping seems for some reason to be a second-runner to honing in the eyes of many users and yet, without correct stropping, the best honing work is rendered virtually useless. Do take time to get it right and you will be rewarded by smooth, close shaves.

### ***Honing the razor***

Let's make one thing clear. Honing a straight razor is not like sharpening a knife. The stones used for razors are much, much finer in grade - 8,000 to 10,000 'grit' and beyond (the bigger the number, the smaller the particles of stone and the smoother the stone).

Straight razors are forged, ground, sharpened and honed at the factory when made. Of these processes, only honing is practical for the owner. Botch a honing job, though, and the razor may need specialist regrinding - if you can find someone to do it!

A straight razor, unlike a kitchen knife or hunting knife, doesn't need to have a strong blade - just a phenomenally sharp one. The cutting angle is typically 15 degrees (as opposed to a more 'normal' 20-25 degrees) and is easily damaged. Fortunately, a razor has one task to perform - to cut hair as close to the skin as possible. It therefore doesn't get blunt as quickly as an ordinary knife used for heavier work and can usually be whetted back to working keenness on the strop. Eventually, though it will have to be honed. The frequency depends on factors such as how tough your beard growth is and how often you shave, but honing is needed *only* when the blade cannot be restored to shave-readiness on the strop.

Here I'm only going to talk about honing a razor that has become just a little too dull for the strop to whet it back to usefulness. If you have acquired a razor with an edge like a putty knife, it may well need a new bevel cutting and a ground-up hone job. In this case, pay a visit to [Razor Sharpening UK](#).

Let's say you have purchased a stone - I'd recommend Belgian 'coticule' [as seen here](#) - as being ideal for your needs of 'maintenance' honing as opposed to 'restorative' honing (the butter knife situation!). These stones use only water as a lubricant - do NOT use oil or they will be ruined. Though fairly expensive they are extremely durable and you'll probably never need to buy another.

Lay the stone flat on a surface it won't slide around on - old newspaper is good but a proper stone holder is better! - with its long axis running away from you. I also stand the stone in a shallow tray to catch excess water. Have a cup of water to hand to add to the stone's surface during honing. Wet the stone surface and rub the stone with the slurry stone (if using a Coticule) until a fine slurry is produced - this is important as it is the minute garnets in a Coticule's slurry that do the sharpening). Hold the razor, fully opened, in the right hand (mirror these instructions if you're left-handed) with the blade at right-angles to the length of the stone. Put the blade on the stone's nearest end with the edge facing *away* from you. The idea is, as in stropping, to have the spine and edge of the blade touching the surface at the same time, giving the ideal angle for honing or stropping, but in honing the ***edge must lead the spine***.

Now slide the blade up the stone, ensuring that the edge is leading and the spine and edge keep in contact - it's easy to lift the spine a little and so spoil the angle. At the end of the stroke, roll the blade over so the edge now faces towards you - no need to lift it off the stone, just roll it around the axis of the spine of the blade. Now draw the blade back down the stone, keeping the contact constant as described earlier. When you get near the end of the stone, roll the blade over again and commence the next up-stroke. You'll notice the slurry starting to build up - don't worry, that's normal. Make about ten strokes each way and then rinse the blade, dry it and test it - if touched very gently with the ball of the thumb it should feel almost 'sticky' (this is in fact the edge biting into the skin, so take care!) - when nearing shave-readiness. Then take it to the strop and give it thirty strokes or so. Now for the fun bit - the 'hanging hair' test. Yank a hair out of your head (this all goes pear-shaped if you're bald or have a shaved

head...). Hold the razor, opened, with the edge pointing upwards. Bring the hair down onto the blade at right-angles to it, nice and slowly. If the razor is shave-ready the hair will go 'ping' and cut straight through! It isn't infallible – hair differs in thickness and coarseness – but it does look cool! Better still, try a shave - you'll soon know if it's been honed enough!

I should stress that honing is quite an art and that beginners should take their time. Concentrate on two things - firstly keeping the blade back and edge in constant contact with the stone and secondly maintaining a light, even pressure during the stroke. Honing is not learnt in five minutes but, once mastered, will enable you to keep your straight razor in tip-top condition indefinitely. And that can't be a bad thing!

If you have any questions regarding the use or care of razors, just [drop me a line](#).



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