Graduation Cap and Gown History

November 25, 2014

Many people may not think too deeply about the academic apparel required for their graduation ceremony. For some it’s a one-time thing, for ambitious students and faculty, it’s an occasional outfit worn to distinguish rites of passage. Similar to getting married, graduation is an important cultural tradition that has three ritualistic steps. First, walking into the ceremony is a separation of society. Second, is inculcation to transformation and lastly returning to society with a new status. A Graduation Cap and Gown History is a long one, going back centuries.

Graduation Cap and Gown History: Why Wear Caps and Gowns?

The question remains, why do we wear a cap and gown while completing these milestones? Academic regalia came to fruition when universities started forming in the 12th and 13th centuries. Students and teachers typically wore clerical clothing because the church was highly influential at this time. Many professors were priests, monks or clerics and their students were usually studying to do something similar. Historians believe scholars wore long robes and hoods to keep warm in these unheated buildings.

Unknown Medieval University class in the 1300s.
The significance of the hood dates back to Celtic Groups and Druid priests who wore capes with hoods that symbolized higher intelligence and superiority. The first picture is said to be from the 18th century, and the picture on the right is of modern Druids.
Image Source: Wikipedia: This is a picture of John Wycliffe, professor of theological studies at the University of Oxford and his followers in the mid-1300s.

Graduation Cap and Gown History: Medieval Times

While medieval universities initially inspired the academic dress, the first recognized schools that officiated graduation attire were Oxford and Cambridge. By 1321, they forbade “excessive apparel” in universities requiring everyone to wear long gowns during ceremonies to create unity.
Image Source: [Discovery](#)

Image Source: [Wikipedia](#); Andrea Mantegna in 1474 (left) Linus Pauling in 1922 (right)
The graduation hat has changed throughout the centuries and with many variations. The most prevalent style is the mortarboard cap which pairs with standard graduation gowns. These caps are believed to have been developed in the 15\textsuperscript{th} century evolving from hats known as birettas used by Catholic clerics, scholars, and professors. The origin of the biretta dates back as far as 1311 in churches.

**Graduation Cap and Gown History: Distinctive Shapes**

![Image Source: Wikipedia: The oldest quadrangle of Oxford University, constructed in the years from 1288-1378.](https://example.com/image)

You may wonder, what is with that cardboard square shape? The answer is debatable. Most historians believe it merely signifies the form of a book to give a scholarly appearance or is meant to represent the shape of the quad within the Oxford campus (as seen in above image).
The mortarboard borrows its name from the flat board used by bricklayers to lay mortar. Therefore, some people believe the reason the cap is square because it represents the mortar board of a master workman. Despite the uncertainty of origin, the style has remained accepted and popular at most educational institutions.
This original European academic style was pervasive throughout the centuries and even into colonial America. After the Civil War, academic regalia was reserved strictly for graduation. For that reason, the cap and gown symbolize recognition and achievement. While hoods are no longer in use for warmth, they remain in use as a decorative piece representing one’s field of study.

**Graduation Cap and Gown History: Into the 20th Century**

Until the 1950’s, graduation caps and gowns were typically gray in the USA. Within in this decade, students became more interested in using different colors to represent their school the way European countries have been doing since the 1800s. Since color photos were expensive and uncommon until the 1960’s, most graduation shots were still in black and white. In the above photo, you can see this school had begun to use gowns in different shades. However, the general look of academic regalia seems timeless in the past few centuries. In conclusion, the cap and gown tradition has been alive and evolving for centuries and will always remain an important part of one’s academic experience.
How to Wear a Graduation Tam and Which to Choose

You’re probably thinking to yourself “Do I really need instructions on how to wear a tam?” Yes, despite the graduation tam being a mark of higher education. Moreover, the choosing of the correct type of tam isn’t nearly as straightforward.

What are tams? Tams are high-quality graduation cap used in place of the standard mortarboard. They are made of a high-end black velvet material with a soft poof-like top. The standard mortarboard is a polyester encased cardboard square that sits on top of the head. Mortarboards are traditionally used for primary and secondary school graduations. Tams, on the other hand, are typically used for higher level graduations such as masters and doctorate ceremonies (occasionally for bachelors).
Faculty members wear tams to differentiate them from their students, especially at primary through bachelors level graduation ceremonies. Students from Bachelors up through Doctoral programs wear tams alongside their school’s faculty. The different number of sides a tam possesses denotes the level of education the wearer of the tam earned.

Four-sided tams are most often used to denote a Bachelors level of educational attainment but can be used for Masters Degrees. Often the school decides which should be used, so always double-check before purchasing. Six-sided tams should be used for masters as well as EdD programs and eight-sided tams should be used for Doctoral programs.

After deciding how many sides your tam should have, the first thing you need to do before ordering is to **choose the correct size**.
Items You Need to Measure

- A Measuring Tape OR a String and Ruler
- That Head on Your Shoulders

As you can see in the image, you have to measure your head using a tape measure. If you didn’t have a measuring tape on hand, you can use a string to wrap around the head then measure it with a ruler afterward. Tams have a stretchy elastic band that has some give and take but do come in three sizes; Small, Medium, and Large.
Tam Size Measurements:

- Small: 21” (*Baseball Cap Size 6.5 to 7.0*)
- Medium: 22.5” (*Baseball Cap Size 7.0 to 7.5*)
- Large: 24” (*Baseball Cap Size 7.5 to 8.0*)

How to Wear Tam

Take your tam out of its packaging and make sure it is the correct size and number of sides.

Place the tam on your head. One of the corners should be facing forward bringing a point between your eyes.
Tam Without Bullion

Front View (Without Tassel)

Back View (Without Tassel)

Adjust the top of the tam to have a slight tilt to the right
Tam With Bullion

Front View (with tassel)

Rotate the tam so the bullion tassel is on the left side of your head.

Back View (with tassel)
Ref.:

https://www.graduationsource.com/blog/graduation-cap-and-gown-history/

https://www.graduationsource.com/blog/graduation-tam-selection-instructions/

Look also

https://aboutphilippines.org/education.html#Graduation