

How to Spin Wool

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The art of spinning wool is making a resurgence in today's society. People are re-discovering the unique qualities of wool, the preferred spinning fiber. Wool is waterproof and keeps you warm even when wet.

Part
1

Getting Started

1 Choose your equipment. You will have to decide if you prefer a drop spindle or a spinning wheel. Both have benefits and drawbacks. Drop spindles are good to use when starting out, but spinning wheels tend to be a faster way to spin.^[1]

- Using a drop spindle. Creating your own drop spindle is simple and easy. When you've mastered the spindle, you'll have mastered all the different steps for spinning (drawing out the fibers, twisting the fibers into yarn, and winding up and storing spun yarn).
- The best drop spindle to begin with is the top whorl drop spindle with a hook at the top. This one is sturdy enough to be dropped on the floor as you're getting accustomed to spinning.
- The spinning wheel is more difficult to master than the drop spindle, because it requires pedals to work the speed of the wheel and has more parts than a drop spindle. However, once you've gotten the hang of spinning on a wheel, you can spin more quickly than with a drop spindle.
- A spinning wheel works by rotating the bobbin using the drive band. While you treadle, the wheel turns and the flyer and the bobbin rotate. You twist the fibers in your hand and these are wound around the bobbin. You have to change the speed of bobbin in order to get the yarn on the bobbin automatically. Different types of spinning wheels can facilitate the wrapping of the yarn around the bobbin in different ways.

2 Learn the terminology of the spinning process. There are lots of words that you're not going to be immediately familiar with when you're just starting out. You'll need to learn the words for the different aspects of the spinning process before you can start spinning.^{[2][3]}

- Roving is a continuous rope of fibers that have already been carded and are ready to spin.
- Carding is when you prepare cleaned but unprocessed wool by hand carding or with a drum carder. A drum carder is a mechanical device, either hand cranked or electric, that cards fibers for spinning. The device you use to hand card is typically a large paddle set with $\frac{1}{4}$ inch (0.6 cm) curved metal tines.
- A niddy-noddy is a double-headed tool used in skeining spun yarn. Skeining basically means to wind the thread off the spindle.
- A skein is a length of yarn or thread that has been loosely coiled and knotted. When you're spinning you're looking to create skeins of thread.

3 Get familiar with the equipment. Spinning wheels have the same basic equipment whatever type they are. Some have more components than others, but usually the basic components are the same. You'll need to keep the different parts of the spinning wheel in mind when you're learning to spin.^[4]

- The **flywheel** is the piece that rotates when you treadle, which causes the rest of the pieces to move. Not all wheels look the same (or look like the typical "fairytale" wheel), but all spinning wheels have some type of wheel.
- The **drive band** wraps around the flywheel and the **flyer whorl** (which is the pulley attached to the flyer and driven by the drive band. There are different sized grooves on the flyer whorl that determine how fast the wheel will spin) and the **flyer** (a U-shaped piece of wood that has hooks lining up one or both arms; these hooks store the yarn on the bobbin). The drive band rotates the flyer which puts the twist into the fiber.
- The **tension knob** adjusts the tension of the drive band by lowering and raising the **mother-of-all** (which is the bar that mounts the flyer, bobbin, and tension knob).

- The **bobbin** is what operates on the spindle along with the flyer, storing the yarn. It can operate with or separately from the drive band. The **orifice** is the opening at the end of the spindle where the yarn goes through and connects to the flyer's hooks.
- The **treadle** is the pedal that operates the wheel and is used by your feet. This determines the speed of the spinning wheel.

4 Select a spinning wheel. If you've decided that you want to use a spinning wheel rather than a drop spindle, then you'll need to learn about the different kinds of spinning wheels. If you're just starting out it might be best to rent or borrow a spinning wheel, so that you get the hang of it and decide it's really what you want to do. There are several different basic types of spinning wheels.^[5]

- The Saxony is the typical fairy tale type of wheel with wheel on one end, flyer on the other, sloping frame, and typically three legs. This spinning wheel tends to be more expensive.
- Castle wheels have the flyer positioned above the wheel. They normally have three to four legs, but tend to be more compact than the other types of wheels. They are good for someone who has less working space. In terms of more traditional wheels, this one is the cheapest.
- Norwegian wheels are similar to the Saxony. They typically have three to four legs, a large wheel, and are usually quite ornate. They are also typically within the same price range as the Saxony
- Modern wheels can often have an odd appearance as they are typically hybrids of other types of spinning wheels. They often have better engineering than the other kinds and some can even fold up! As for price, it depends on the wheel, but they typically run less than the previous wheels.
- Electric spinners are nice because you don't have to worry about the treadle or the wheel (they don't have them). They can be placed on a table and used manually and are easy to carry and store. These also tend to run more cheaply than the typical, full length spinning wheel.
- Spindle wheels don't have a flyer and bobbin. Instead, a pointed spike both twists and accumulates the spun yarn. These are also less expensive than the typical spinning wheels.

5 Know what to look for in choosing a spinning wheel. There are certain things you'll need to consider when you're choosing a spinning wheel. These will determine the kinds of thread you spin, what speed you spin at, and how easy the treadles are to use.

- The speed of your wheel (what "gear" the treadle is in, essentially) determines how quickly the twist develops in your yarn. Fine fibers like Merino wool and angora or short fibers like cotton require faster speeds. More coarse fibers like Romney or Border Leicester need a slower speed. It's best to find a spinning wheel that has a range of speeds so that it can be more versatile.
- On single drive wheels the drive band goes around the wheel one time. Then it goes around the drive pulley on the flyer or the bobbin. Double drive wheels also use one drive band but it goes around the wheel twice. The single drive is easier for beginners to use, because it has a separate break system. When you have to change the speed of the bobbin it's easier to do on the single drive wheel (because it breaks). On the double drive wheel, you actually have to speed up.
- Bobbin capacity depends on the manufacturer. There are no one-size-fits-all bobbins. The best way to compare bobbin capacity is to calculate the volume of the bobbin available to wind on the yarn. Many manufacturers have a selection of different bobbin sizes.

Part 2

Preparing the Wool

1 Choose your fleece. Try to get a fleece that has been just sheared, because the grease makes the wool softer. You will also need to keep a few things in mind when choosing your fleece. These include what you're making out of the spun yarn, color, and faults in the fleece that will make your spinning experience difficult!

- Think about what you're planning to do with the finished yarn. Are you making socks? Weaving? Knitting? Making outerwear? Different kinds of fleece have different softness levels, which you'll need to look into when you're choosing the fleece to spin with.
- Watch for certain faults in the fleece that will inhibit your spinning. Avoid buying fleece with a break in it. If you give a lock of fleece a sharp tug and it breaks (typically in the middle), this will cause pilling in the roving and make for weak yarn. Fleece that has vegetable matter in it makes for difficult carding and cleaning (if you like combing the fleece and have the time, you can get this, but otherwise it's best not to).

- Check that the crimp of your fleece is even. Spread out the fleece and check at least three different areas (haunch, shoulder, mid-side, for example). You want to make sure that one area isn't coarser and hairier than another area.
- Wheel-to-flyer ratio determines what type of yarn can be spun. A wheel that has a ratio for medium or bulky yarns will be used for spinning wool, so the size of your yarn will depend on your wheel.

2 Wash in hot water. Often you have to scour (wash) the fleece before carding and spinning. This is to remove the oils from it, which can make it difficult to spin. Although you can wash in cold water, it's recommended that you use hot water. You want the water to be hot enough to be uncomfortable, but not so hot that you can't actually wash the wool.

- Use a large bathtub or basin. You can divide into sections to make it easier to wash it well, and so that you don't crowd the fleece.
- Some handspinners like to leave the grease in (called "spinning in the grease") and wait to clean the fiber when setting the twist into the yarn. However, leaving in the grease can make it difficult to dye and can ruin the carding cloth on a drum carder.

3 Put in about a cup of laundry detergent. You can use just about any laundry detergent as long as it doesn't have bleach or added conditioner. Conditioner can leave behind a filmy residue on the fleece.

- Don't completely strip the oils out of the fleece. Removing too much of the natural oils can make it as difficult to spin (which is why some handspinners spin with the oils and wash later).
- You also want to make sure that you aren't using so much detergent that you have to wash the fleece ten times to get all the suds out. Washing too much and too vigorously can turn the fleece into felt, which you want to avoid.

4 Soak fleece for 45 minutes. You will want to soak the fleece in the water to get rid of dirt, oils, and other unclean undesirables. Leaving it to soak means that you won't accidentally turn it into felt.^[6]

- Do not allow running water to run directly on the fleece.

5 Push the fleece gently into the water. You will need to stir the fleece around gently, with your hands or a wooden spoon handle. Remember, too much agitating will turn your fleece into felt.

6 Rinse and repeat. Each time you rinse the wool, make sure that the temperature is the same as the times before. The more open you allow the fleece to be in the water, the fewer wash/rinse cycles you'll have to go through. Depending on how dirty, or how fine the wool is you may have to do more wash/rinse cycles.

- Soak the fleece in hot water with about one-half cup of white vinegar for 30 minutes, for the last rinse.
- Mohair, merino, rambouillet, and other finer wools tend to need multiple washes.

7 Let dry. Gently squeeze the wet wool. Spread on a towel or drying rack, or hang over your porch railing. If you can put them outside to dry, do that. The best weather for drying wool is sunny and windy.

8 Card the fleece using the method of your choose. Carding aligns all the fibers in the one direction. It fluffs them to make the drafting easier. You can send it to a factory, use a drum card, or a hand comb. Consider using a metal dog comb, which is the most inexpensive choice.^[7]

- If you're using carding paddles (which are a good, easy way to go), take a piece of the clean, dry fleece and drape pieces of it in one direction. With the other paddle, you'll gently swipe across the fibers, aligning them in the same direction. When the fleece is fluffy and aligned, put the piece aside.
- No matter what type of carding you're doing, the same basic principle is the same. You are trying to align the fibers one way, whether you're doing it with a metal dog comb, with paddles, or with a drum card.
- One of the things people tend to do wrong is over-card their fleece. Your goal is to make the fleece look presentable, fluffy, and aligned. You don't need to beat the fibers into submission.
- Make sure that the wool is completely dry. Fleece is amazing in its ability to retain water, and wet fleece isn't going to card properly.

**Part
3****Spinning With A Drop Spindle**

- 1 Collect your tools to make a drop spindle.** One of the best things about a drop spindle is that it is relatively easy to make and to use. If you decide to go this route, then you can make your own drop spindle without much cost. Gather the materials listed below.^[8]
 - A one-foot long wooden dowel. Although size isn't that important, a recommended diameter size is 3/8 of an inch. This will act as the main shaft for the spindle.
 - A hook, or wire that can be bent into a hook. You'll make sure to hook your yarn through here.
 - Two heavy CDs to act as the whorl.
 - Rubber grommets that match the diameter of your dowel. You can get these at any farm store or auto part store. So if the diameter of your dowel is 3/8 of an inch, the inside hole (bore diameter) should be 3/8 of an inch, the panel hole should be 5/8 of an inch to match the hole in the CDs, and the outside diameter should be about 7/8 of an inch.
 - Get a serrated knife, or small saw and scissors to cut the dowel.
- 2 Insert cup hook into the top of the dowel.** To do this you'll need to make a hole in the center of the dowel with a pushpin. Screw the cup hook into the hole so that it will stay in place.
- 3 Insert the grommet into the hole between two CDs.** You want the grommet to fit snugly in the center of the CDs. This can be a little frustrating since it's a tight fit, but once you've pulled the edges of the grommet up, it should be good to go.
- 4 Slide the dowel into the center of the grommet.** As long as you've judged the sizes correctly you should be finished making your drop spindle. If it doesn't quite fit, wrap the dowel with electrical tape until the dowel and CDs slip on and fit tightly.
- 5 Prepare your roving.** For a beginning spinner, one piece of roving is going to be too big. Break that piece down into sections that are about 12 inches (30.5 cm) long. Carefully split your roving down the middle to form two strips instead of one. This will make spinning easier if you're just beginning.
- 6 Tie on your leader.** Your leader is a piece of yarn about 18 inches (45.7 cm) long that's tied onto the spindle shaft right above the whorl (the CDs). Put the yarn over the whorl and loop it around the shaft underneath. Put it back over the whorl and secure the end to the hook.^[9]
- 7 Spin the fibers.** Letting the spindle hang beneath your hand, suspended by the leader, take the spindle in your right hand and the leader in your left hand. Spin the drop spindle from the dowel (or shaft) in a clockwise direction.
 - Repeat this process in the same direction until the leader begins to take in the twist. You'll leave a fluff of fiber at the end so you can join on more fiber.
 - It's a good idea to practice making the spindle rotate, so that you get a feel for the direction you'll be spinning the drop spindle to make the yarn.
- 8 Wind on new fiber.** Keeping tension on your spun yarn, allow the twist to run into the newly drafted fiber. Keep repeating this process and check that there is enough twist before you move on. When the yarn is long enough

that the spindle almost touches the ground, unhook it and wrap it around the base of the spindle next to the whorl.

- This is called a single. You'll want to leave enough yarn unwound so that you can slip it back on the book with a couple of inches to spare.
- If you find that the yarn is pulling apart or too slack, spin your spindle again to store more of the twist.

9 Join more fiber. Overlap the wool a few inches of the fluff of drafted fibers, so that you can catch and twist more onto the leader. Allow the twist to run into the joined fibers, adding more twist by spinning the spindle, because you want to make sure that your join is secure.

- To test the join, give the spindle another twist and bring your right hand back to where the left hand holds the yarn. Move your left hand back about three inches, as you pull and draft out more fibers of wool and allow the spindle to turn a few times.
- Release the yarn with your right hand and let the twist move up into the fibers as you did previously. Now, gently pull more fibers from the fiber mass by pulling back with your left hand, and allowing the twist to run into the drafted fibers.

Part 4

Spinning the Wool

1 Draft the wool. This is when you pull fibers from material to be spun and thin them down to form the size of the yarn you want to spin. If you draft more fibers, your yarn will be thicker; less fibers and it will be thinner.^[10]

- If your fiber is in a long, continuous narrow strip, this is the form of fiber processing called roving. If it's in a wide, rolled-up bundle that unrolls into a wide rectangle, that is the form of fiber processing called a batt.
- Pick a strip about 12 inches (30.5 cm) long and approximately thickness of your thumb (this doesn't have to be exact).
- Hold the strip of fiber in one hand (doesn't matter which). Pull a few fibers from one end of your strip with your other hand. Drafting things the fiber down the the desired thickness for your spun yarn.
- The spinning process will twist the fibers, which also thin them down. As you get better at drafting and spinning, you'll find it easier to judge the size of your drafts.

2 Set up the leader on your spinning wheel. The leader is a piece of yarn that has previously been spun and can be attached to the shaft of your bobbin. Cut a piece of yarn about 36 inches (91.4 cm) and tie it to the shaft of your bobbin. Make sure that you tie it snugly.

- Pull the leader through the orifice on your spinning wheel. Once you do this you're ready to begin the actual spinning!
- If you're just starting to spin, it's a good idea to practice spinning just with the leader so you get a feel for how the spinning wheel works, how to start spinning the wheel just with the treadles.

3 Place your fiber alongside the leader. You will want to overlap them for about four to six inches. You'll hold the bundle of fiber in one hand (the fiber hand), and the leader and fiber in the other hand (this is the drafting hand).

4 Begin treadling. You want to make sure that the wheel is going in a clockwise motion. This will create the "Z" twist in your single strand of spun yarn. Allow the leader and the fiber to twist together, holding them for a moment while they twist, so that they are secure.

- Make sure you let the wheel take up the fiber as you draft more fiber.

5 Begin to spin. Overlap un-spun and spun fiber, holding it with your non-dominant hand and turn the wheel clockwise. This will cause the fiber to twist, which is what turns the fiber into yarn.

- Make sure that your drafting hand is between the fiber hand and orifice of your spinning wheel. You don't, however, have to keep your hands close to the orifice as you spin.
- Always make sure to spin the wheel in a clockwise manner.

6 Draft more wool onto the leader. You will want to slide your drafting hand towards the bundle of fiber to draft more fiber to be spun. It's best when you're just starting to stop spinning, draft the fiber, and then spin, then stop and draft again. As you grow more comfortable, it will turn into one continuous motion.

- Take care that you don't allow the twist to travel to the fiber in your fiber hand.
- Your non-dominant hand should be closest to the wheel and the dominant hand closer to you.

7 Unwind your yarn and make into a skein. You will do this once the spindle is full. Wrap around your hand and elbow, much like winding cord and tie at intervals with acrylic yarn.

- This is when you might use the implement known as the "niddy-noddy." Wrap the yarn from the bobbin onto the niddy. This will create a large loop in a small amount of space, which you'll then tie in sections and remove by sliding it off one shoulder of the niddy.

8 Set the twist. You'll do this by soaking the skein in hot water and hanging it to dry. You can use a plastic hanger, or hang it over a drying rack. Hang something heavy from the skein while drying.

Part 5 Trouble-Shooting Your Yarn

1 Avoid yarn that gets tangled. Sometimes your yarn gets tangled between the bobbin and the flyer. Basically this means that your treadling isn't even (which happens a lot with first time spinners!). Break off the yarn, hook it back up, and start over again.^[11]

- This can also happen because the bobbin is too full, which causes the yarn to spill over the edges of the bobbin and tangle around the shaft. Empty the bobbin as you would normally and start fresh.

2 Find your lost end. Sometimes when you're spinning you lose the end. Don't fret! Roll your bobbin around a few times. Often the end is under the last hook that it was over.

- Try using a piece of tape to see if you can pull up the loose end. This solution works about half the time.
- Otherwise, pick the most likely end and pull enough yarn for a new leader so you can start again.

3 Do something about your lumpy thread. If your yarn is lumpy and bumpy it means that you aren't spinning it consistently. You might be pulling out too much fiber. If so, what you need to work on is getting into a consistent rhythm for spinning.

4 Trouble-shoot your handspinning. Some of the same problems happen in handspinning that happen with a spinning wheel. Sometimes there is a different way of fixing it as opposed to a spinning wheel (for example, you don't have the flyer and the bobbin and so those types of tangles aren't typical).

- Spindle gets away from you. If your spindle gets away from you and the twists runs up into the fiber mass, stop your spindle and untwist your fiber mass. Then, start the drafting again. This is a very common occurrence for beginners.
- If you have thick and thin spots in your yarn (known as slubs), you can do something like keep them and have a novelty yarn (good for knitting scarves). Otherwise you can remove the slubs by pinching the yarn with your hands on either side of the slub and untwisting until the fibers draft out a little.
- Over-twisted yarn is a common beginner's problem. You can tell your yarn is over-twisted if you have a thick strand that feels very hard and dense. The strand can kink back on itself when you relax your tension. To fix this, loosen some of the extra twist by drafting out more fibers.

Can you answer these readers' questions?

 Refresh

On **How to Operate an Aerial Lift**, a reader asks:

Can a man lift the operator from the ground as a normal operation?

[Reply](#)

On **How to Clean Timberland Boots**, a reader asks:

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On **How to Tame a Praying Mantis**, a reader asks:

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Tips

- Practice with your wheel prior to beginning your first project. Learn to adjust the tension properly.
- Talk to other hand-spinners for advice on advantages and disadvantages of various types of wheels. Some shops allow you to rent a wheel for a short period of time to try it out.

Warnings

- Spinning, even hand-spinning, isn't something you can just learn to do in an afternoon. There's a rhythm to it that takes practice to master.

Sources and Citations

1. http://www.wildfibres.co.uk/html/spinning_get_started.html
2. <http://libraryschool.libguidescms.com/content.php?pid=252356&sid=2310229>
3. <http://kws.atlantia.sca.org/terms.html>

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