

Spinning Step by Step: How to use a drop spindle

Calming. Centering. Relaxing. These are just a few of the words spinners use to describe how they feel as fiber passes through their fingers, miraculously turning into yarn through the alchemy of hand spinning. Soon, you'll enjoy the same creative sensations...AND you'll be knitting with yarn you made yourself!

Getting Ready

Always remember: there's a reason it's called a "drop spindle." That's right: You will drop your spindle while you're learning, and even afterward. So make sure you have a nice cup of tea (or glass of wine!) by your side, and try to be patient with yourself. Spinning is an ancient art form—you can learn the basics in a short time, yet spend years mastering the craft and creating new types of yarn.

What else do you need?

- Your drop spindle
- Some fiber (wool is usually easiest to learn with)
- A comfortable, supportive chair (not a cushy one...a wooden kitchen chair will work nicely)

Step 1: Getting to know your spindle

There are several kinds of drop spindles, with different names, weights, and purposes. The one in found in most kits is called a "high-whorl spindle," which means the whorl (disc-shaped piece of wood) is attached near the top of the shaft, where the hook is located. The whorl helps the spindle keep spinning, putting the twist in yarn. Take a moment to look at your spindle. Place the hook against your palm with the shaft pointing up and give it a spin. Feel the weight of the spindle as you hold the hook between your thumb and forefinger. Tie a piece of yarn to the hook and practice spinning it. Getting comfortable with your spindle now can help smooth your spinning path later.

Step 2: Getting to know your fiber

Wool is the fiber most people use when they learn to spin. It's elastic, forgiving, and—if you pick the right kind—has nice, long fibers (called "long staple" in spin-speak).



A great wool for new spinners comes from Corriedale sheep. It is a wonderfully soft, long-staple fiber that has been processed into a long "rope," also known as "top" (you may also hear people call this "roving").

Pull a few individual hairs out of your top and examine them: How long are they? This length is important—you'll need to remember it when you begin drafting (pulling out small amounts of fiber as you spin yarn).

Step 3: Preparing your fiber for spinning (predrafting)

While you could spin directly from the end of your wool top, you'd probably find controlling the process difficult. That's why it's important to prepare your fiber in advance.

Start by splitting the top in half, lengthwise. Do this slowly, and try not to rush the process. A few inches at a time should do it.





Then split the top in half again. If it breaks apart, that's a sign that you need to move more slowly and carefully as you proceed.

When done, you should have four long, thin lengths of fiber from which to spin. (Top can be split into many, many lengths, depending on the thickness of yarn a spinner wants to create...we'll stick with splitting it into quarters for now, though.) Wind each length of fiber into a loose, neat ball.

Step 4: Attaching fiber to your spindle



Note: Most spinners spin yarn with a "Z-twist," by turning the spindle in a clockwise direction. (Most commercial yarn is also spun with a Z-twist.) Z-twist refers to the slant of the yarn, which mimics the slanting middle line of a Z. (S-twist yarn slants the opposite way.) At left is a photo showing Z-twist, which is the way we're going to spin.

To begin your yarn, break off a two-foot length of predrafted fiber and lay it over your left hand, so the gentle pressure of your thumb and forefinger hold it in place. With your right hand, pick up your spindle and carefully catch some fibers with the hook, twisting the shaft of the spindle clockwise with your right thumb and forefinger.



This action will cause the fibers to twist and begin to form yarn. Be sure you've caught and twisted enough fiber to support the weight of the spindle. If not, the spindle will drop to the floor when you release it. But that's OK! Remember: That's why we call it a drop spindle!

Step 5: Spinning with a "safety net"

Time to sit down on that upright, firm wooden chair. Now that your fiber is attached to the drop spindle (which is held in your right hand), gently pull those fibers away from the fiber supply—several inches should do it. Pinch the fiber supply with your left hand, and give the shaft a spin with your right hand (you can also roll it quickly UP your right leg toward your hip or DOWN your left leg toward your foot to get clockwise spin).



When you see the spin moving up the yarn, stop the spindle shaft between your knees. Using your right hand, pinch off the yarn where the twist ends and don't let go. With your left hand (holding the fiber lightly so the fibers can slide past each other), gently pull up on the top, thinning out the fibers near the bottom. Doing this, you are creating a triangle-shaped area called the drafting zone. This area should be as long as the length of the few fibers you pulled out of your top earlier.

Now you can slide your right hand—still pinching—up the fibers you’ve drafted out of the bunch. Watch the twist move up the newly released fibers to where you’ve pinched off the yarn below the drafting triangle. Spin the spindle again, to add more twist and strengthen the yarn. Again, stop it between your knees when the twist has almost reached the hand pinching off the fiber.

Moving along slowly like this—some people even say “spin, stop, slide,” as they work—is a great way to learn while maintaining control of your spindle. Remember, you are always in charge, and can stop the spindle any time you feel like “things are getting away from you” or moving too quickly.

Step 6: Spinning in thin air

Time to take the leap and spin with the spindle dangling in the air... You’ll still hold and draft the fibers as you did before, but this time you won’t stop the spindle between your knees.

Instead, when the spindle slows, give it a clockwise twist with your right hand (or a rapid roll UP your right thigh). Remember, if the spindle starts to spin backwards, your yarn will unwind and eventually break. It’s normal to drop the spindle now and then. No need to panic, though. The spindle won’t unwind in the blink of an eye, and you can always stop it if you need to.



This is a lot to remember. You may feel like you have ten left thumbs at first...but don’t give up! After some practice, you’ll suddenly notice your yarn is consistent, stronger, with just the right amount of twist. And before you know it, you won’t have to stop the spindle as often.

Step 7: Winding on

When your yarn is so long that you have to raise your arm over your head to keep the spindle from touching the floor—or before it gets this long, if you want—it’s time to wind it.



Remove the start of the yarn from the hook and—keeping it taut—wind clockwise onto the shaft under the whorl. Be sure to wind on neatly, so you can remove it from the spindle easily when you’re done. When about eight inches of yarn are left, bring the yarn up over the side of the whorl, and through the hook again. You’re ready to keep spinning!

Next time, you can just unhook the yarn and wind on; once you’ve done it, you won’t have to worry again about removing the beginning of the strand from the hook.

When the spindle is full, wind your yarn onto a tennis ball, a large-gauge knitting needle, or an empty toilet paper tube. If you prefer—and if you’re not afraid of the possibility of undoing a few tangles later on—you can simply slide the cone of yarn off the bobbin and set it aside while you continue to spin.

Step 8: Setting the twist

Now that you’ve spun a ton of beautiful yarn, it’s time to set the twist. This process helps make the yarn stronger and more consistent, and will also clean the fiber. First, you’ll need to wind your yarn into a hank. You can do this with a niddy-noddy (skein winder) or by winding it firmly around your

upper arm between your hand and elbow (the same way people wind long electrical cords or cables). Gently tie scrap yarn around your hank in several places to keep it neat—tie the scrap yarn in little figure eight loops.

Next, fill a sink or bowl with hot water and a little dish soap. Gently lay your hank of yarn on top of the water and press it straight down until it absorbs water. DO NOT swish, rub, or move the yarn in any way or it may felt. Just let it rest in its warm bubble bath for a while. After about 10 minutes, remove the hank gently and let it sink into a sink or bowl of hot water with a little bit of white vinegar in it. Repeat this step to rinse the soap out of the hank; make sure the water temperature is consistent.

When it's well rinsed, you can gently squeeze your hank in a towel or spin it in a salad spinner to remove some of the water. Again, don't over handle the yarn or it will felt. Hang the hank over a hook to dry. If it twists in on itself, try hanging a spray bottle from the bottom of the hank to straighten it—but don't over-stretch it. You want to keep the elasticity and bounce in your newborn yarn.

Congratulations! You can knit, crochet, or weave whatever you want with your yarn. And your creations will always be unique—because your hand-spun yarn is as unique as your fingerprint.

If you have any questions about hand spinning, we're happy to help. Just drop me a note at: KnitSix@gmail.com

Happy spinning!

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