Spinning For Beginners: a guide

Intro to Spinning: Basic Ideas, Tools, and Terms

Low Tech, High Satisfaction: Spinning with Simple Tools

CD Spindles: Making Your Own Hand-Spindle
**Introduction to Spinning**

**Starting with Wool**

Sheep’s wool is the most popular fiber among handspinners because it is easy to spin and versatile. There are dozens of **breeds** of sheep, such as Lincoln, Romney, Corriedale, Suffolk, and Merino, and each breed produces a unique type of wool. By choosing from suitable breeds, spinners can use wool to make warm, comfortable, and stylish sweaters, scarves, mittens, hats, socks, afghans, rugs, and many other kinds of garments and accessories. One advantage to making your own yarn is that you can choose the qualities in the fiber that you want to emphasize in your finished project. Yes, the results are definitely worth it!

A single **fleece**—one sheep’s annual growth—of wool usually weighs between 4 and 12 pounds. A good spinning fleece costs around $4 to $12 per pound. Shepherds who produce good wool pay extra attention to their animals throughout the year. Some put **jackets** or **blankets** on their sheep to keep hay out of the wool; those fleeces may be especially clean, although covering is not essential to the growing of good wool. The best fleeces will have been **skirted** to remove any dirty, stained, or inferior wool; they will also contain only minimal amounts of hay, chaff, or burrs, which are hard to remove.

**Preparing the Wool for Spinning**

Wool fibers are easier to spin if it’s **prepared** by separating the fibers into a loose, fluffy arrangement. You can buy a fleece and do the washing and preparation yourself, or pay a little more (usually $15 to $25 per pound) for wool that’s been washed, dyed (if you choose), and processed.

Special tools have been designed for preparing wool and other fibers. A **flicker**, **flick carder**, or **pet comb** (average cost for the latter is under $10) is excellent for loosening individual locks and pulling out any short or weak fibers. **Flicking** works best for a fleece with distinct locks and a staple length of 4 inches or more. **Mini-combs**, **Viking combs**, and **English wool combs** (cost $50 to $150, and up) work best for wool with locks that are at least 4 inches long. You can comb several locks at a time. **Combing** is a separating process that removes any short fibers as it loosens and aligns the long fibers. After combing, the long fibers are pulled into a smooth, continuous strand called a **top** (the short fibers are set aside for a different use or discarded); fibers can be pulled off with your fingers, or through a tool called a **diz** (a small disk with a hole in it). A few mills are set up to do combing, and sometimes you can buy commercially combed tops of wool or other fibers.

In **raw** fleece, the fibers are coated with **grease** (lanolin and other natural body oils), condensed perspiration, and dust; all this is removed when the fleece is **washed** or **scoured**. Washing your own fiber is easy, although there are a few tricks to it. We suggest that you start with clean wool for your first efforts.

Washing reveals any **luster** or shininess of the wool, and exposes its true **color**, which may be pure white, off-white, yellowish, silver to charcoal gray, jet black, tan, or reddish brown. After washing, fleece can be **dyed in the wool**, or you can dye the spun yarn. Dyeing fleece is fun, because there are many ways to combine different colors into a single yarn with either very subtle or bold **variegation**.

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Handcards or carders (average cost $30 to $65) are good for preparing medium to short wool (staple length 4 inches or less); drumcarders (cost $150 to $500 or more) can handle short, medium, or long wool, depending on how they are set up. Carding is a blending process, good for evening out the variations in color, crimp, or length between different parts of a fleece; for blending different colors of dyed fleece; and for combining wool with mohair, angora, or other fibers. Wool can be lifted off a carder as a fluffy, pillow-like, rectangular batt. Spinners sometimes roll batts into slender tubes called rolags or pull them lengthwise into long strands called slivers or rovings. The carding process can easily be automated, and there are dozens of small mills around the United States that sell carded batts or rovings; some will custom-card wool that you supply.

Making Yarn

Many kinds of spinning tools are available today—everything from simple wooden handspindles to high-tech electric spinners, from antique wool and flax wheels to modern wheels. The diversity of spinning tools is a wonderful story in itself, but it’s important to remember that in handspinning, it’s the skill and sensitivity of the spinner’s hands that shapes the yarn. The spinner is in control; the tool is just an assistant.

No matter which tool you use, the process of spinning is basically the same. The first step is drafting or pulling fibers out of the prepared lock, top, batt, or roving. Drafting just a few fibers at a time makes a very thin yarn; drafting many fibers makes a thick yarn. Twisting the drafted fibers makes yarn. Twist holds the fibers together so they don’t slip apart or rub loose; one of the spinner’s skills is determining the appropriate amount of twist for a given yarn. At the start, you want enough twist to make the yarn strong . . . and not so much twist that the strand you are spinning turns itself into independent corkscrews. After drafting and twisting a length of yarn, you can let it wind onto the bobbin of the spinning wheel or wind it onto a spindle by hand, then start drafting and twisting more yarn. When you finish spinning one batch of fiber, you make a join by splicing on a new supply. A careful join is invisible in the finished yarn.

Turn the wheel (or spindle) one way and you get Z-twist yarn. Turn it the other way and you get S-twist yarn. By convention, most spinners turn the wheel clockwise (Z) to make yarn from loose fiber, but the only rule is that if you start spinning in a given direction you need to keep going that way until you’ve finished with that bobbin or spindle (reversing directions untwists your work).

Depending what type of fiber you’re spinning, the steps of drafting and twisting may be done separately and in sequence, or they can flow together into a continuous process. Spinners working with combed, long-staple wool often draft by moving their hands just a few inches about half the length of the fibers in a gesture called a short draw. Then they deliberately guide the twist into the drafted fibers, making a smooth, dense worsted yarn. Spinners using short-staple wool that has been carded and rolled into rolags may use a long draw, moving one hand back and forth with a full swing of the arm, simultaneously drafting and twisting up to three feet of fuzzy, puffy woolen yarn before winding it on. You’ll see many variations and combinations of these techniques if you watch different people spin; as with most decisions in spinning, what’s right is whatever works best for the individual spinner and the fiber. Because drafting methods can be so unique, there is no precise, consistent way of describing them.

When you turn loose fiber into yarn, you make a singles yarn (a single strand), with the fibers all twisted in the same direction. Singles yarn can be finished and used as is, but spinners often take an extra step, twisting two or more strands of singles together to make plied yarn, which is usually stronger, more uniform, and easier to handle than singles. The simplest plied yarn twists two singles together in the opposite direction to their original spinning (Z singles, S plied). A balanced yarn is a special type of plied yarn, where the twist used in plying exactly balances the twist used in spinning and straightens out the fibers. A balanced yarn is very calm and doesn’t kink at all.

Basic spinning and plying techniques produce plain-vanilla yarn, lovely in itself and useful for all kinds of knitting, weaving, and other projects. A plain-vanilla spinner can achieve plenty of variety simply by using different types of wool (in natural or dyed colors), by varying the thickness and twist of the singles, and by choosing whether or not to ply the yarn. For even more variety, there are advanced techniques for making fancy designer yarns, with unique texture and color effects.
Finishing Wool Yarn

After plying or after spinning, if the yarn will be used as singles make the yarn into a skein by winding it onto a niddy-noddy or skein winder. Tie the skein in at least three places before you remove it from the niddy-noddy. Wool yarn usually gets softer and puffier when you wash and dry it, and it also shrinks in length—usually 10 to 25 percent but sometimes even more. It’s a good idea to wash yarn and let it shrink before you use it, whether you are knitting, weaving, or doing something else.

To wash the skein, fill your sink with comfortably warm water and add a squirt or two of dishwashing liquid or shampoo; set the skein on top of the water and press it down gently to get it wet. Let it soak for a few minutes. Lift the skein out of the water, drain the basin, and fill with rinse water of the same temperature. Set the skein in the water and press down gently again. Remove the skein, drain the water, and repeat the rinse. Squeeze the skein (don’t wring it) to remove excess water, and then let the skein dry on a towel or rack.¹

Felting happens when you agitate or rub wet wool, whether fleece, yarn, or fabric. It’s wonderful to make felt on purpose, but to avoid accidental felting when you’re washing any wool product, be careful to handle it as little and as gently as possible.

If the yarn looks wrinkly or kinky after you wash it, you can smooth it out by steaming it, as you steam wrinkles out of a garment. Use a travel steamer or steam iron, or pass the skein over the spout of a steaming teakettle; five to ten seconds of steaming is enough to smooth most yarns.

Admire your skein. It’s some of the best yarn in the world!

¹ The same process works for washing raw wool. Wash in batches that fit your sink or basin, and gently lift the wool mass as you would a skein.

Low Tech, High Satisfaction

Handspindles provide a great introduction to spinning for the novice. At the same time, the most experienced spinners we know find this simple tool endlessly satisfying. A good spindle can be an excellent traveling companion, tucked into a briefcase, purse, or backpack to help you fill odd moments at meetings or soccer games, or while watching television. If you haven’t discovered the joy of using a fine handspindle, you have a treat ahead of you.

Supply list

- 1 (one) handspindle, well-balanced and not too heavy
- About 1/2 ounce of prepared fiber, preferably medium-grade wool, in a color you like
- Tiny piece of masking tape, with an arrow drawn on it
- A piece of wool starter yarn, about 24—30 inches long

A good spindle

This is critical. The wrong spindle will not let you discover the true pleasure of spinning, whereas the right one will do at least half the teaching. Some simple spindles work well, and some fancy ones don’t. And vice versa.

There are many kinds of spindles, in all sizes, weights, and forms. The basic spindle elements include hook or groove, whorl, shaft.

We’re going to concentrate here on drop spindles. Their shafts normally fall between 9 and 15 inches in length, and their whorls average between 2 and 3 inches across (although their whorls may be as small as 1 1/2 inches or as large as 5 inches). Drop spindles twirl in midair as you spin, and are often made of wood. Some have the whorl at the top of the shaft and some have it at the bottom. Either arrangement will do.

What makes a good spindle? You’ll discover that in spinning there are no rules, but we can offer guidelines. (If you fall in love with a spindle that doesn’t exactly fit our description, it’s probably perfect for you anyway.)

Spindle weight depends on the type of yarn you want to spin—heavy yarn, heavy spindle. A drop spindle that weighs more than 4 ounces (the weight of a medium-sized apple) is too heavy for general use. And hold off on the 1/4-ounce spindle (with a whole walnut’s amount of gravity) until you have some experience. Look for a weight between 1 1/2 and 2 1/2 ounces (with the heft of an apricot or a plum).
Balance is essential. The location of the whorl on the shaft affects the spindle’s balance, as does the shape of the whorl itself. Check a bottom-whorl spindle by resting its tip on a non-abrasive surface (like your leg) and giving it a twirl; let your fingers flick the shaft so it spins, and then make a circle of your fingers so the spindle can rotate freely but remains upright. To check a top-whorl spindle, attach a short length of yarn to the hook at the top, give the shaft a quick roll between your fingers, and watch the spindle rotate.

Spin the spindle a few times. Then note your impressions. Does the spindle rotate freely (does it feel like it wants to spin), or does it wobble? Does it keep going for a while, or feel sluggish? Is the shaft easy to grasp and twirl? Do you like this spindle? If you have hesitations, keep looking; there are more spindles out there. Basically okay? Go for it!

Take the piece of tape with the arrow and put it on the whorl to remind you which way to turn it.

Some puff
Fiber, raw material, wool . . . you need something to spin. “Puff” is not the official name, but it does describe the quality you want your first fiber to have.

There are lots of reasons to prepare your own fiber, but there are also wonderful bags of ready-to-spin stuff out there that you can start on . . . or work with forever. With prepared fiber, you can spin now.

You want a medium-grade wool in batt or roving/sliver/top form (a batt is pancake-like, and roving, sliver, and top are rope-like). The fiber should hang together well when you hold it gently, but should have some air in it like puff. (A slick, smooth preparation will be hard to work with until you’re proficient.) Pick a color you like, either natural or dyed.

Separate a piece of your fiber from the mass by gently pulling it free. You want a segment about 4—6 inches long and 1/2 inch wide.

What makes yarn
Fiber is turned into yarn by twist. Completely untwisted fiber pulls apart easily. Twisted fiber, or yarn, is strong and won’t pull apart. The twist comes from the spindle, and the transformation takes place between your hands. What your hands do is called drafting: letting the fibers slide past each other and then letting the twist catch them.

The size of your yarn is determined by how much fiber is caught by the twist. When you’re spinning, your goal is to pay attention to the fiber between your hands the fiber that is about to become yarn. Everything else can take care of itself!

The first twist
Tie your starter yarn around the long portion of the spindle’s shaft, next to the whorl. Turn the spindle a few times in the direction of the arrow, so the yarn wraps around the shaft. Take the starter yarn through the hook or notch at the top of the spindle (on a bottom-whorl spindle which doesn’t have a hook or groove, make a half-hitch about 1/2 inch below the tip of the shaft).

A top-whorl spindle can hang from the starter yarn. Ultimately a bottom-whorl spindle will do the same, but while you’re learning, rest it on a table so it doesn’t fall.

Your lower hand will rotate the spindle and release the twist. Your upper hand will hold the unspun fiber, gently prepare it to become yarn, and then keep the twist from moving into the fiber before you want it to.

Spin the spindle in the direction of the arrow; hold the loose end of the starter yarn with your upper hand, and watch the twist collect in the yarn.

Feather out one end of your fiber and overlap it onto the starter yarn. Pinch the fiber and yarn together with your lower hand, and pinch just above that point with your upper hand.

Rotate the spindle with your lower hand, then move that hand back up to its “pinch” position. Don’t worry much about what the spindle’s doing; the only thing you don’t want it to do right now is to...
turn backwards, away from the arrow, and untwist your work. It's okay if the spindle flops over to one side after it has rotated, or when you stop it. As long as there's twist in the starter yarn for you to work with, that's fine.

Move your upper hand a little way up the fiber, pulling gently to loosen the fiber between your hands. Then pinch the fiber with your upper hand and slide the lower hand up next to it. The twist will glide up behind your lower hand. You've just made yarn!

Continuing to spin

That's it. Your hands repeat the pinch, pull, slide movements, while your lower hand occasionally reaches down to rotate the spindle. As you practice, you'll feel at first like too much is going on at once. Then you'll find that yarn is strong and your hands know what they're doing, so you won't have to stop the spindle while you draft.

Soon after that you'll think that you're reaching a long way down to rotate the spindle, and you'll find yourself with between 2 and 3 feet of yarn that you have made. It's time to wind on.

Winding on

To keep your yarn from tangling while you wind on, catch it behind your elbow. Release the end from the hook or half-hitch and turn the spindle (always in the same direction) so that the new yarn wraps around the spindle shaft, over the initial wraps of the starter yarn. Leave enough new yarn free to catch the hook or to make a new half-hitch. That's it—back to spinning!

When you run out of fiber in your hand, take a new piece and feather out one of its ends. Feather out the end of the old piece as well, overlap the two ends, and let them twist together in a join.

Bumps and breaks

Lumps happen in yarn when there's too much fiber between your fingers at the time that the twist comes along and turns it into yarn. Make sure your lower hand is pinching back the twist until your upper hand has pulled out the fiber and gotten it ready.

Breaks occur when there's too little fiber in that spot between your fingers. Fix a break by feathering the end of the yarn and the end of your fiber and making a new join.

Thick-and-thin can be a design element in fancy yarns. While you're learning, experiment a bit with these extremes so you can see how they occur and can later produce them when you want to.

Winding off

After a while, you'll have a mass of yarn that fills the spindle—the spindle feels heavy to work with, and the yarn begins to get in your way when you rotate the shaft. It's time to wind your yarn off into a skein. See the drawing below for a handy way to do this.

Tie the skein with small pieces of yarn (the two ends of your spinning will do; a third tie is helpful).

Set the twist by running some lukewarm water in a sink, setting your skein on the water, and gently pressing the skein so that it is submerged. Leave it for a few minutes, lift it out, squeeze gently to remove some of the water, and hang it over a faucet or doorknob to drip dry.

Congratulations! You're a spinner. There are many more things to learn about spinning, like how to make plied yarns and designer yarns, how to spin all sorts of different fibers, and what to do with your yarn (if you want to do more than pat and admire it). But you've just crossed the threshold.

Welcome!
I would like to start by saying that the idea for a spindle made from compact disks (CDs) is not original to me. I first heard about it from postings on the Spindlitis Net, run by Teri Pittman.¹

The CD spindle is very easy to build and can be made as a top-whorl (my preference) or a bottom-whorl spindle.

¹ Editor’s note: Will the originator of this idea please stand up? We’d love to know who came up with this marvelous and thrifty tool, and to acknowledge their ingenuity.

Melissa Croci, of Groveland, California, has been spinning for five years, and started on spindles when Spin-Off published an issue featuring them (Spring 1995). She credits her husband, Carl, with expediting construction of her first CD spindle, and her Angora rabbits and two cats for helping with fiber production.

Outdated or duplicate CDs can be turned into efficient spindles. Here are the necessary supplies and tools. Black rubber gaskets are used to reduce the size of the CDs center holes so the dowel will pressure-fit in place. The clear plastic tubing is needed only if you’re using the thinner dowel, and serves as a spacer for the section of dowel which fits into the rubber gasket. Hooks are optional; you can carve a hook shape into one end of the dowel. A lightweight saw or pruner handles all the cutting involved; sturdy scissors work best on the plastic tubing.
Materials and tools

Except for the CDs (I use the free ones that arrive in the mail), all the materials can be found at a good hardware store.

- two CDs
- 1 hardwood dowel, \( \frac{7}{8} \) inch or \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch (8 mm or 9.5 mm) in diameter and 12 inches (30 cm) long (use the larger-diameter dowel if you want a spindle with a thicker shaft)
- 1 rubber gasket, inner diameter \( \frac{5}{8} \) inch (9.5 mm) and outer diameter \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch (9 mm); only needed if you’re using \( \frac{7}{8} \)-inch (8-mm) dowel; may also be found at Radio Shack or other electronics suppliers
- 1 piece of poly tubing, inner diameter \( \frac{5}{8} \) inch (8 mm) and outer diameter \( \frac{1}{2} \) inch (9.5 mm), 1 inch (2.5 cm) long
- 1 small cup hook (optional)
- small saw or pruning shears (to trim spindle shaft and make optional notch)

Assembly

Step 1
Hold the two CDs together and insert the gasket into the aligned holes in the centers of the CDs.

Step 2 for \( \frac{7}{8} \)-inch (9.5-mm) dowel
Insert the 12-inch dowel into the center hole of the gasket.

Step 2 for \( \frac{7}{8} \)-inch (8-mm) dowel
Slide the 1-inch (2.5 cm) length of poly tubing onto the 12-inch (30-cm) dowel so the tubing’s end is about \( \frac{1}{4} \) inch (6 mm) from one end of the dowel. Insert the end of the dowel with the tubing into the center hole of the gasket.²

Step 2 notes for both sizes of dowel
The rubber gasket should provide a secure grip on the dowel. One end of the dowel should protrude about 1 inch (2.5 cm) from one side of the CDs; the long shaft of about 11 inches (28 cm) will protrude from the other side. (Precise placement of the dowel can be adjusted later to suit your preferences.)

Step 3
If you prefer a top-whorl spindle, screw the cup hook into the shorter end of the dowel. If you prefer a bottom-whorl spindle, screw the cup hook into the longer end of the dowel. Making a pilot hole with a fine drill bit can facilitate this task. For really fine cup hooks, it isn’t necessary. For slightly coarser hooks, the pilot hole can prevent the end of the dowel from splitting.

If you prefer a notched spindle, omit the cup hook and cut a small notch in the end of the dowel.

Step 4
Adjust the length of the spindle shaft to your preferences by trimming the dowel. All mine end up about 10 inches (25.5 cm) long.

¹ Editor’s note: Our tubing wasn’t precisely the right size, so we found we had to put the tubing into the gasket, then insert the gasket into the CDs, and finally work the shaft of the dowel into the tubing.

² Editor’s note: Our tubing wasn’t precisely the right size, so we found we had to put the tubing into the gasket, then insert the gasket into the CDs, and finally work the shaft of the dowel into the tubing.
Beginning spinners often want smooth, uniform yarn that resembles the yarn their teacher makes or the yarns featured in books and magazines. Instead, the new spinner typically churns out wads of lumpy, bumpy yarn. Don’t despair! This rib scarf is a perfect project to show off your first handspun yarn in all its inconsistent glory! In fact, in a few years, you may be struggling to recreate this “designer” yarn.

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Measuring handspun
The number of times that a yarn can be wrapped in the space of an inch is a quick way to tell its approximate weight. Visit your local yarn shop and pick up an inch gauge or simply wrap your yarn around a ruler so the strands are touching, but not overlapping. Don’t pull the yarn too tightly as you wrap. The number of wraps will give you an idea of whether your yarn is lace-, fingering-, sport-, worsted-, or bulky-weight. For a chart outlining the ranges correlating with each yarn style, see www.interweave.com/projects_articles.

Spinning
Made of two-ply mohair yarn, this scarf is quick to knit up. It has a thick strand and a thin strand. The fatter strand is created by using a long-draw method on a spinning wheel (for step-by-step instruction on how to use the long-draw method, visit www.interweave.com/spin/projects_articles). The thick strand varies from eleven to seven wraps per inch. You can achieve a similar effect with any yarn of the same measurements, even if it had been spun with a different technique. Keep in mind that the long-draw method is one of the best ways to get a lofty yarn. Yarns spun with other methods may be denser.

For the thinner strand, you can use a commercial singles mohair yarn or spin your own and give the short forward-draw method a try. Spin this yarn in the same direction as you did for the fatter one. The thinner strand measures sixteen wraps per inch. When the fat and thin yarns are plied together, the resulting two-ply measures about six wraps per inch. When you ply, remember that you want to spin in the opposite direction from which you spun your singles.

Knitting
With a US size 10½ straight or circular needle, cast on 26 stitches.

Row 1: K2, p2 across the row, end with k2.
Row 2: P2, k2 across the row, end with p2

Repeat Rows 1 and 2 until the scarf measures 62 inches long.
Bind off.

Resources