

Introduction to the Hand Spindle ~ Lo Tech, High Satisfaction

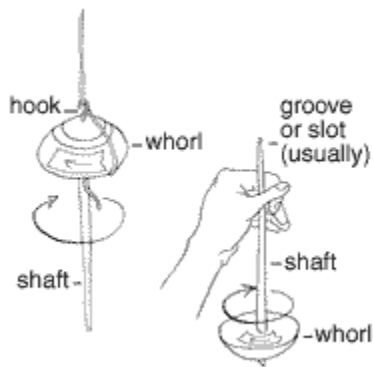
Spinning with simple tools [Supplies www.fiber2yarn.com](http://www.fiber2yarn.com)

- 1 hand spindle, well balanced and not too heavy
- 12 ounces 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 2430" long
- a little time
- a little patience
- a lot of fun

ARE YOU CURIOUS ABOUT SPINNING, but not sure whether you'd like it? Do you drift past spinning tools and unspun fibers, wondering what it would be like to use them? You don't have to invest in or borrow a spinning wheel to find out; with a well-designed hand spindle and a bit of prepared fiber-both readily available today, thanks to the thousands of contemporary spinners who have created a thriving marketplace for you to choose from-you can explore this ancient craft. And best of all, if you select a good spindle, you'll never "outgrow" it, even if you decide later that you'd like a wheel. Your spindle can be an excellent traveling companion, tucked in a briefcase, purse, backpack, or gym bag to help you fill odd moments at meetings, soccer games, in line at the department of motor vehicles, or watching television.

A good spindle This is crucial. The wrong spindle will not let you discover the true pleasure of spinning, and 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 elements include:



We're going to concentrate here on drop spindles. They have shafts between about 9 and 15" long, and whorls between 2 and 3" across (although their whorls may be as small as 1/2" or as large as 5"). Drop spindles twirl in mid-air as you spin, and are most 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. *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! *Top Whorl shown on left, Bottom whorl on*

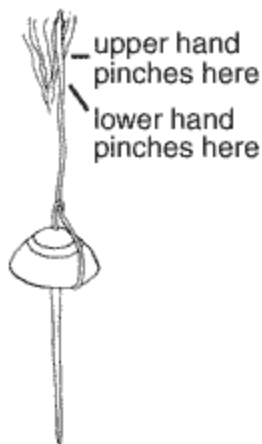
right.

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 might be perfect for you anyway.)

The weight depends on the type of yarn you want to spin-heavy yarn, heavy spindle. A drop spindle which weighs more than 4 ounces (the substance of a medium-sized apple) is too heavy for general use. Hold off on the 1/2-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 critical. 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 will remain 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. (The drawings above show this.)

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!



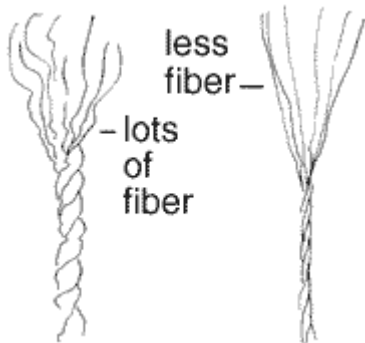
Take the piece of tape with the arrow and put it on the whorl (those demo spindles above show how).

Some puff Fiber, raw material, wool . . . you need something to spin. "Puff" is not an 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 which 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 a pancake-like arrangement, and roving, sliver, and top are rope-like). Let your senses guide your selection. The fiber should hang together well when you hold it gently, but it should have some air in it-like puff. (A slick, smooth preparation will be harder 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" long and 12" wide.

What makes yarn Fiber is turned into yarn by twist. Completely untwisted fiber will pull 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 as this occurs 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 spinning, your goal is to pay attention to the fiber which is between your hands-the fiber that's 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" 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 even if 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 your yarn is strong and your hands know what they're doing, so you don't have to stop the spindle while you draft.

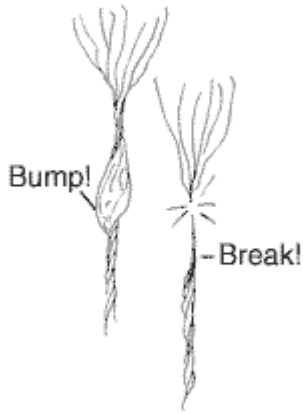
Soon after that you'll think that you're reaching a long way down to rotate the spindle, and you'll find yourself with between 2 and 3 feet of yarn that you have made. It's time to wind on.

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 the new yarn wraps around the spindle shaft, over the initial wraps of the starter yarn. Leave enough new yarn free to catch in 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.

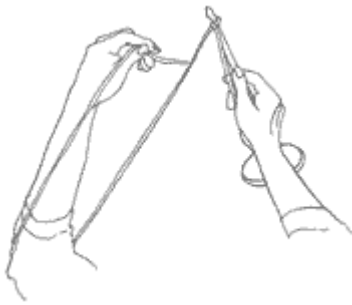
Bumps and breaks





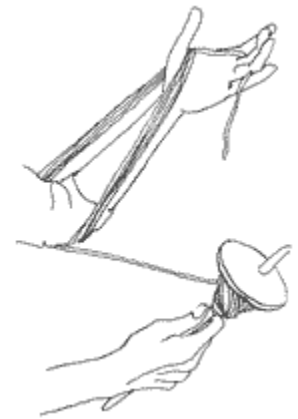
Lumps happen in yarn when there's too much fiber between your fingers when the twist comes along and turns it into yarn. Make sure your lower hand is pinching back the twist until your upper hand has pulled out the fiber and gotten it ready. Breaks occur when there's too little fiber in that spot between 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 cop of yarn that fills the spindle-the spindle feels heavier 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. Here's a handy way to do that:

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 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 door knob 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.

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