INTERWEAVE PRESS

LOW TECH, HIGH SATISFACTION

Spinning with simple tools

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 handspindle, well-balanced and not too heavy
- About ½ 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

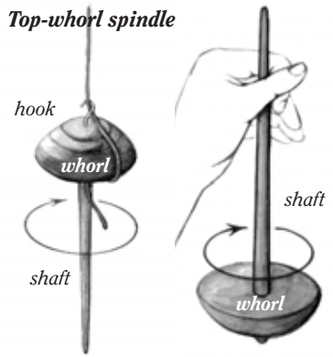
A good spindle

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 1½ 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.[1] Either arrangement will do.



There are two basic types of suspended (or drop) spindles: those with the whorl at the top and those with the whorl at the bottom.

Regardless of type, a spindle needs to be well balanced and to rotate smoothly and freely.

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 ½-ounce spindle (with a whole walnut's amount of gravity) until you have some experience. Look for a weight between 1½ and 2½ 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. (The drawings to the left show this process).

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.

[1] *The other principal types of spindles you'll see are* supported spindles. *Their tips rest on the ground (or another surface) during spinning. The very large ones, with shafts 24–36" long, are* Navajo spindles. *Other supported spindles tend to be smaller than drop spindles, with more delicate shafts and lighter whorls. They may be made of a variety of materials, including metal. These can be perfectly wonderful spindles, although the spinning techniques are slightly different.*

Some puff

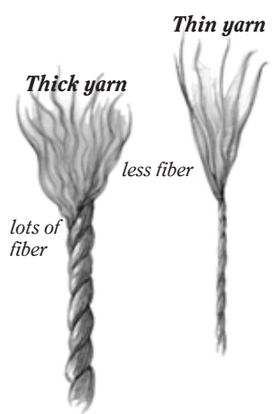
Fiber, raw material, wool . . . you need something to spin. "Puff" is not the official name, but it does describe the quality you want your first fiber to have.

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 ½ inch wide.

What makes yarn



The size of your yarn is determined by how much fiber is caught by the twist at any given point.

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 ½ inch below the tip of the shaft).

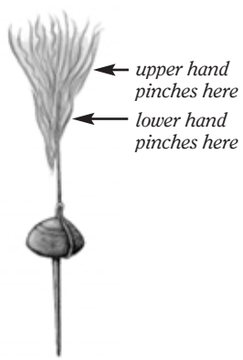
Tie a starter yarn around the long portion of the spindle's shaft and take it through the hook or notch at the top of the spindle.

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!



Your hands work together to draft the fiber and control the twist.

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.

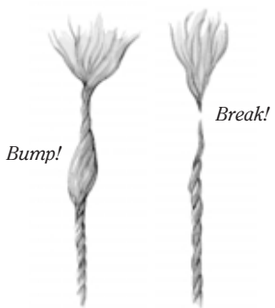
Winding on

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.**

To join in new fiber, feather out the ends of the new and old fibers, overlap them, and let them twist together.

Bumps and breaks



Bumps or lumps occur when a clump of fiber gets caught by the twist. Breaks often happen when there's too little fiber to maintain the yarn's integrity.

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, experiement 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 on page 6 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).

When your yarn gets long, you need to wind on. To keep the strand from tangling while you wind on, catch it behind your elbow. Release the end nearest the spindle and wind the yarn around the spindle shaft.

When your spindle's full, you can wind a skein around your forearm.

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!

This brochure is available for the general advancement of the spinning community. If you would like additional copies please contact Interweave Press at (970) 669-7672. Text by Rita Buchanan. Illustrations by Susan Strawn Bailey.

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