

How to Spin with a Drop Spindle

A drop spindle is used for twisting (spinning) fibres like sheep wool, alpaca, flax, silk, cotton etc into yarn. It has a weighted disc called a *whorl* and a hook at the top to guide the yarn. The resulting yarn can be knitted to produce garments as normal.

A drop spindle is a good introduction to the world of spinning and is often a first step to a spinning wheel. Spindles have been used to turn wool into thread for thousands of years. It's a simple technique that requires some practice to master - It's a bit like rubbing your tummy and patting your head at the same time! Watch out though - spinning is highly addictive!

Explore your fibre...

Fibre is made up of individual hairs that, when twisted, lock together. Grasp some of the fibre and pull it from the rest. The hairs should slide past each other and come away. If they don't you are pulling the same group of fibres (*hairs*) in different directions so just move your hands further apart and try again. Now, try that again but this time add some twist to the fibre you are pulling by twirling the fibre between your fingers. Keep pulling and keep twisting. You will be able to pull for longer and it will be much stronger. This is how spinning works - it's simply about adding twist!

Explore your spindle...

The spindle is basically a shaft with a hook at the top and a disc or whorl. There are many different kinds but they all do the same job and they all work in the same way. Use a length of commercial yarn make a leader - take about 1 yard of yarn, double it and tie it around the shaft of the spindle - any knot will do. Wrap the yarn around the shaft a couple of times and then take it up over the whorl and under the hook. Hold the leader at the end and let the spindle dangle. Spin the spindle. You can use your fingers on the bottom of the shaft or you can roll the spindle on your thigh. Practice spinning the spindle using the leader so that it spins smoothly and evenly. The leader will twist tighter if you keep spinning in the same direction; it will untwist if you spin in the opposite direction or if you allow the spindle to back-spin.

Spin fibre into yarn...

Now you can attach the fibre to your leader by overlapping the two together. Pull some fibre away as you did before - this is called drafting. Spin the spindle and allow the twist to move from the leader into the drafted fibre. It doesn't matter which hands you use - gently hold the fibre in one hand and use your index finger and thumb to stop the twist moving into the fibre supply. The other hand controls the spinning and drafting. Keep drafting and spinning in this way - allowing the twist to move into the drafted fibre but not into the fibre supply until you have an arms length of twisted yarn. Unhook the yarn from around the hook and, keeping a slight tension, wind everything you've spun around the shaft. Take the last 6 inches or so up over the whorl and under the hook and continue spinning and drafting as before.

The Park & Draft technique...

Many beginners find it easier to draft and spin in two distinct stages rather than trying to do it all at the same time. Spin the spindle and, just before it stops, grasp it with your knees or tuck it under your arm. Pinch off the twist so it does not travel and draft the fibre while the spindle is parked. You can then release the stored twist into the drafted fibre and pinch it off before it can enter the fibre supply. You are likely to find that as you begin to become proficient with this method you will soon start to instinctively draft and spin at the same time.

Plying...

The yarn you've spun is called a "single". To make a finished yarn you will need 2 singles and ply them together. Tie the ends of both singles to your leader and spin the spindle in the opposite direction to the one in which you spun. Slowly feed the 2 singles together - use one hand to separate the singles to stop them from tangling and the other hand to pinch and release twist. Be careful not to twist too much - you will undo all the original twist, your singles will break and your spindle will drop!

Finishing...

Your plied yarn *can* be knitted but first it needs finishing to allow the yarn to bloom and even out. Use a niddy noddy or the back of a chair to form a skein and soak your yarn in warm water with a dash of washing up liquid for about 20 minutes. Rinse it in water of the same temperature (*it will felt otherwise!*), gently squeeze out any excess water and hang it up to dry. Hey! You've made yarn! Your first yarn will be a bit uneven with some bits more twisted and more tightly plied than others - that's quite normal! It won't be long before you are able to spin a more even, consistent yarn.

The photo opposite is the result from my very first attempt with a drop spindle and it is responsible for my subsequent obsession. I shall treasure it for ever!

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Gai EVANS

