



# The Low Down on Dart

Like many flow props, the rope dart we see today evolved from an ancient weapon and has now become an extremely popular fire and flow toy.

In this piece, we delve into what a rope dart is, history of the rope dart, what rope darts were used for, and the varying styles and terminology of dart.

## What is a Rope Dart?

The [rope dart](#), or shéng biāo in Mandarin Chinese, is a flexible weapon of Chinese origin which, in recent years, has been enthusiastically welcomed into flow arts communities across the globe.

All rope darts are made up of a rope, or the tether, which is usually between 3-5m long, and a dart head. The traditional rope dart, utilised as a weapon (yes, the rope dart was a real weapon), held a metal dart (blade like object) as the head, and you can still find traditional style darts today, commonly wielded by martial arts practitioners.

Those who spin rope dart as a form of flow arts generally prefer a less dangerous head, and you'll often see various knots used as a dart head, such as monkey fist or isis knots. It's also pretty common to see bean bags, tennis balls and even Kong dog toys being used for DIY rope dart heads.



Some rope darts have the inclusion of rings, although these are generally found on more martial arts style versions. These rings are used to separate the head from the tether, allowing the head to move independently without tangling the rope. It's more common in flow style darts to see a swivel being used for the same purpose.

Some rope darts also have a flag attached near the head, and this not only looks pretty as it flies through the air, but it also adds resistance which helps slow the dart down, making it easier to maintain control.

## The History of the Rope Dart

The first written description of the rope dart dates back to the Tang Dynasty (618-907 AD), although some claim it can be dated all the way back to the Western Han Dynasty (206 BC – 24 AD).

Rope dart was used by ancient Chinese soldiers as a 'hidden weapon' due to its compact size and ability to easily be concealed. It was likely used as a tertiary, or last resort weapon, after primary and secondary weapons, such as swords, spears, bows etc. had been used and been unable to be retrieved.

Some other similar flexible weapons used in martial arts and by traditional Chinese military include the meteor hammer – a rope with a heavy head on each end instead of a blade/dart head, and the chain whip – a flexible chain formed by the joining of several metal rods,

usually with a handle on one end and a metal dart on the other. These weapons do share some similar movements, but they each have their own specific techniques.

[Grand Master Dennis Brown](#) (USA) introduced the rope dart to the Western World when he returned home after training in mainland China in the 1980's – the first African American to do so. He is classed as one of the few living rope dart experts.

While there is no formal history on when the rope dart became part of the flow arts world, it's estimated to have begun evolving into a flow prop somewhere in the early 2000's. Shortly after, rope dart became a popular exercise tool, as spinning rope dart (like many flow props) provides a full body workout and an increase in mental health and wellbeing.

Nowadays, it's common to see not only the traditional martial arts style rope dart, but also practice and day flow versions with ball style heads, LED rope darts, smoke darts, and of course, the ever popular fire rope dart.

Many prop makers are becoming super creative with their head designs, including our very own Hannah with her absolutely stunning Morningstar heads.



All rope darts should use a soft rope for the tether to avoid (as much as possible) rope burn when shooting and retrieving your dart. This can range from cotton rope for non-fire versions, to technora (a high-heat and flame resistant rope) for fire versions, dragon rope X, and even space rope (Zylon) – named so for its use as the re-entry parachute cord for a space rocket.



*A newer sibling of the rope dart is the meteor dart.*

Not to be confused with the meteor hammer, the meteor dart is essentially a 2-headed rope dart attached to the tether with two short leashes that fork out from a swivel. It's more common to see a ball-style head on a meteor dart, and they look incredibly impressive when engulfed in flames.

***So, what's the difference between a meteor hammer and a rope dart, and a meteor dart? And what about a puppy hammer and an oxbow? It's all so confusing!***

Let's clear it up for you - unlike the meteor dart with two heads on one end of the tether/rope, the meteor hammer has a head on each end of the rope. Similarly, a puppy hammer, also known as an oxbow, also has a head on each end, although a puppy hammer has knots or nodes in the length rope, making it easier to switch to poi style movements.

Rope dart has been a common sighting in pop-culture, and in both classic and modern films, especially Kung-Fu style movies. Many will recognise the rope dart from Scorpion (Mortal Kombat), Kill Bill, Shang Chi, Kick Ass, Heroes of the East, Shanghai Noon, Romeo Must Die, Kung-Fu Panda 2, and it even makes an appearance in the Scooby Doo movie.

## **Styles of Rope Dart Play**

The rope dart is an incredibly versatile prop and can be used in a wide range of styles. The most common styles are martial arts inspired, and dance inspired.

Dance inspired style focuses more on self-expression and using the rope dart as a prop, or a dance partner. This style is often slower than the martial arts style, and brings flow, fluidity, and grace to the forefront.



Martial arts inspired style focuses more on the traditional style of rope dart, where the movements and techniques mean this prop can be used as a weapon. This style brings accuracy, speed, and power to the forefront.

There are also tethered and non-tethered dart styles. With the tethered style, the dartist will attach, or tether, the rope to their wrist. Non-tethered style is the opposite – the dart is not tethered to the dartist's wrist and allows them to switch between dominant/non-dominant dart play easily.

A slightly less common style of dart play is contact dart. This is the art of manipulating the dart without using one of the traditional hand grips.

## How Long Should Your Rope Dart be?

If your rope is too short, it can make it difficult to execute some moves, especially more complicated wraps. If your rope is too long, it can create too much slack – the dart becomes difficult to maintain control of, meaning you'll get tangled easier. You'll also likely hit the head on the ground more often, shortening the life of your dart head.

The best overall length to start with is found by measuring your wingspan (fingertip-fingertip, with arms outstretched), then add the distance from your shoulder to the ground.



The overall length of the rope dart itself is usually measured from the tip of the dart head to the point where the rope connects to the wrist.

Conveniently, most rope darts can be shortened without needing to cut the tether (rope), by simply adding an extra loop or two around the wrist.

## How Heavy are Rope Darts?

The ideal weight for your dart will depend on what style of spinning you want to do. If you're after a more martial arts style, a lighter head will give you the ability to spin your dart faster. If you're more into the flowy, dance style, a heavier head will slow your dart down.

The more resistance there is when your dart is flying through the air, the slower it will go and the more control you will have. A heavier head will spin slower than a lighter head which can be very helpful in learning control, although too heavy and it becomes tricky to maintain momentum.

If you find your dart is spinning too fast and you're having trouble controlling it, you can add a tail which will help to slow it down – they also look super cool too!

# Rope Dart Terminology

Like many props, rope dart does use some of the general flow arts terminology (check out our [glossary](#)), such as planes, but there are some terms that are specific to [rope dart techniques](#).

One of the greatest things about dart having its own terminology, is that movements and techniques can easily be translated between left and right handed users.

Below are some of the more common and basic rope dart terms, which you may find helpful if you're just starting your journey and want to make rope dart easy to learn.

- Dart – the head part of the rope dart (metal 'blade', monkey fist or other ball, isis knot, bean bag etc.)
- Rope or tether – the rope part of the rope dart
- Dartist – the person wielding the rope dart
- Wushu – the Chinese term for martial arts
- Plane – the relationship between a dartists shoulders and the darts movement
- Plane break – changing the path/plane of the dart
- Grip – the way the dartist holds the rope
- Underhand grip – palm face up with the rope resting on top of the hand (the hand is under the rope), the rope will not fall if the hand is opened
- Overhand grip – palm face down with the rope being held up by the hand (the hand is over the rope), the rope will fall if the hand is opened
- Dart path – the path the dart takes when travelling around the body
- Home position – the beginning position where all rope dart techniques start from
- Down(ward) spin – a spin in wheel plane with the dart falling when passing the dartists eyes
- Up(ward) spin – a spin in wheel plane with the dart rising when passing the dartists eyes
- Anchor side – the non-dominant side of a dartists body, the tether is attached to the anchor wrist
- Lead side – the dominant side of a dartists body, used to control the direction and projection of the dart

**NOTE:** 'left' and 'right' are generally not used with rope dart, instead 'anchor' and 'lead' are used – this makes it easier to translate moves and techniques between left and right handed dartists.

- Anchor spin – a spin in wall plane with the dart falling towards the anchor side
- Lead spin – a spin in wall plane with the dart falling towards the lead side
- Horizontal lead spin – a spin in horizontal plane with the dart spinning towards the lead side
- Horizontal anchor spin – a spin in horizontal plane with the dart spinning towards the anchor side
- Pendulum swing – projection of the dart back and forth/side to side, like a pendulum
- Shot – projection of the dart using any part of the body (elbow, knee, foot etc.) to shoot the dart away from the body/towards a target
- Slack – the rope between the lead and anchor hands (slack control is extremely important to avoid getting tangled in the ‘excess’ rope)

## **So, You're Ready to Start Learning Rope Dart?!**

There's a fantastic, active, and supportive [Facebook group](#) dedicated to rope dart – well worth joining no matter where on your dart journey you are!