

Do the Twist - An Introduction to Spinning with a Drop Spindle

Prior to the invention of the spinning wheel, every girl would have been taught to spin with a drop spindle. Spun fibers were essential to almost every aspect of life, and while spinning can be done without a spindle, that simple tool made the task efficient. In order to provide the amount of thread, yarn or cord necessary for her household, a woman would have had to spend every "free" moment with her spindle. It takes much longer to spin the thread than to weave it. The spindle had to be her constant companion.

There are two common types of suspended, or drop spindles – high-whorl and low-whorl. Few spindle shafts have survived in the archaeological record, and one cannot know for certain how a spindle was used based solely on the whorl. However, through the artistic record we know that high-whorl spindles were used in Egypt, Turkey and the steppes, and low-whorl spindles were more common in Europe. Scandinavia used both types. The whorls themselves were made of whatever material was readily available – clay, bone, wood, lead, glass, amber, stone... The material did not matter to the resulting fiber – but the shape and weight were important.

Spinning is the act of drawing out and putting twist into fiber in order to hold it together and increase its strength. Thicker yarn has less capacity than thin yarn to hold twist. A thicker yarn has fewer twists per inch. To spin a thick yarn, one needs a heavier spindle. A heavier spindle has a higher moment of inertia, and is better able to resist the tendency to back-spin. Conversely, to spin a thin yarn one needs a lightweight spindle. A lightweight spindle will spin very fast, allowing twist to build up quickly. This is important to build up the strength of the yarn so that it is able to support the weight of the spindle. A thin yarn can hold many twists per inch. A mid-weight spindle (1-2 ounces) is easiest for learning to spin.

Fiber can be spun with an "S twist" or a "Z twist." S twist results from twirling the spindle counter-clockwise. Z twist results from twirling the spindle clockwise. It does not matter which way you spin, but once you start, you must continue always in the same direction until the spindle is full. The easiest method to learn to spin is called "park and draft." Once you are comfortable manipulating the spindle and roving, you will be ready to move on to suspended spinning. See page 2 for the steps in starting to spin.

At some point you will run out of fiber and will need to add more roving. The easiest way to do this is to stop spinning before you reach the end of the supply in your hand. Fluff out the end and overlap the ends of the new roving. As you draft new fibers, you will draw from both the old and new supply so that they become twisted together.

After you have spun a supply of yarn, you will need to finish it. Carefully wind the cop off the spindle onto a niddy-noddy, or the back of a chair. Tie the yarn in several locations to keep it from tangling. Now you must set the twist. Place the hank in very hot water, gently press it down until the fibers have absorbed the water, and allow it to steep until the water cools. Gently squeeze out the excess water (do not wring!) and hang to dry. You can now create something with your yarn (called a single), or ply it. If you wish to ply, you can wait to finish the yarn until after it is plied.

Definitions

Whorl: the weight that is placed onto a shaft to assist in the act of spinning.

Roving: a length of fibers which have been carded or combed in preparation for spinning.

Draft: to draw out a small amount of fibers from the roving prior to spinning.

Cop: spun yarn that has been wound onto the spindle shaft.

Ply: to twist together 2 or more singles to create a balanced, stronger yarn. Ply in the opposite direction from the initial spin.

Staple: an individual fiber of wool.

Suggested Reading

There are many books and articles out there about hand spinning. These are 2 books I have found particularly helpful:

Franquemont, Abby. "Respect the Spindle." Interweave Press, Loveland, CO. 2009

Gibson-Roberts, Priscilla. "Spinning in the Old Way." Nomad Press, Fort Collins, CO. 2006

"Park and Draft"

- Attach a leader.
- Hold the spindle in your dominant hand. (will assume right hand for the sake of the directions)
- Hold the fiber in your opposite (left) hand.
- Pull out a small amount of fiber – called drafting. Know the staple length of your fibers. If your hands are closer together than the length of the fiber, you will not be able to draft. Pinch the fiber and leader together with the left hand.
- Twirl the spindle with your right hand. It does not matter which direction you spin, as long as it is always the same. Allow the twist to build up in the leader. Don't let go of the fiber.
- Catch the spindle and hold it between your knees.
- Keeping tension on the leader, slowly slide your fingers back, allowing the twist to move up the fiber.
- When you reach the end of your drafted fiber, pinch.
- Spin the spindle.
- Park it.
- Pinch the fiber with your right hand.
- Draw out some fiber with the left hand.
- Move your right hand up the fibers toward your left hand, and let the twist travel.
- Ta-da! You have made yarn. 😊
- When the length of yarn becomes too long to spin easily, wind it around the shaft. If using a high-whorl spindle, catch the yarn in the hook. If using a low-whorl spindle, tie a half hitch at the top of the shaft to secure the yarn.

Note: these directions are not comprehensive. They are meant only as a gentle reminder when you are spinning alone.

When you feel comfortable with twirling and drafting, it is time to stop parking the spindle. Wind the yarn onto the shaft until there is about 6 inches remaining. Pinching the fiber in your left hand, twirl the spindle with your right hand, then quickly pinch the fiber with your right hand and draft out the new fibers with your left hand. Allow the twist to travel while the spindle is still spinning. Repeat the pinching and drafting until the spindle stops rotating. Give it another spin and start again.

Don't get frustrated. It takes time for your hands to develop the skill of drafting. What is the worst that will happen? The spindle will back-spin before you have noticed it, the fibers will fly away from each other, and gravity will take over. So what? Pick up the spindle, give it a spin, and attach the loose fibers again. With practice, you will be able to feel the twist in the yarn and will know when it is slowing. A drop spindle is extremely portable, so take it with you and spin a little every day. Very soon spinning will be a habit. Enjoy!

Questions? You can contact me at nichol5@nycap.rr.com

Common Problems You May Encounter

The spindle keeps back-spinning:

- You are drafting too many fibers at a time for the spindle to handle. Pull fewer fibers from the roving each time.

The thread keeps breaking:

- You are not twirling the spindle fast enough to keep the twist moving up the thread at the same rate that you are drafting. Flick the spindle with more force, or try rolling it quickly on your thigh. Rolling it up your right thigh produces Z spin.
- You are drafting too few fibers for the weight of the spindle. Pull more fibers from the roving each time.
- If the yarn breaks at a join, you are not overlapping the fibers enough. Fibers should overlap approximately half the staple length.

The roving gets stuck in the yarn:

- Wrap the roving around your wrist, or if it is long enough, over your shoulder. Better yet, try using a distaff.

There are kinks in the yarn:

- You are over-spinning. This is most common when still “parking and drafting.” Carefully allow the spindle to back-spin until the yarn relaxes, but is still twisted, or keeping the yarn under tension, draft more fiber before twirling the spindle again.

I can't draft the roving:

- Your hands are too close together. Space your hands at least a staple length apart.
- Twist has gotten past your fingers and into the roving. Park the spindle. Pinch the yarn near the roving. Depending on the amount of roving you have, you can either release it, allowing it to untwist; or break off your yarn, untwist the roving, and join them back together.

There are thick and thin spots in the yarn:

- This is due to inconsistent drafting, and will correct itself with practice. To “repair” particularly thick spots, park the spindle between your knees then pinch the yarn to either side of the thickness, being sure your hands are at least a staple length apart. Untwist the area between your fingers and gently pull until the fibers elongate. Release the fingers closest to the spindle, allowing the twist to travel. To “repair” overly thin spots, take a few un-spun fibers and again untwist the yarn at the thin spot. Carefully add the new fibers between your fingers, and then let the yarn re-twist. This is more difficult than thinning out thick spots. You can also opt to break the thread at the thin spot, and re-join it at the proper thickness. In general, wait until you are comfortable twisting the spindle and drafting the roving before you worry about the evenness of the yarn you create. Plying the yarn will also compensate for thick and thin spots.