

How to use a Drop Spindle

When learning to spin, we recommend using wool roving because wool is not as slippery as some other fibers and so is easiest for a beginner to use. Wool that has been processed into roving has all of its fibers aligned and stretched out so that they are easier to use. However, the roving is probably thicker than you would like to use for your spun yarn. The size of the yarn you make is determined by the thickness of the roving you allow to be twisted by the drop spindle. The final yarn will be twice as thick as this initial twisted thread if you make a 2-ply yarn as many hand spinners do. Most people initially spin a fairly thick yarn (worsted to chunky), then create finer yarns later as they become more comfortable with the process. And the first yarns may be lumpy and bumpy. These create excellent textures when knit!

So to thin out the roving, you will need to “draft” it. Drafting involves slowly pulling on the fibers, letting them slide between each other, but not so much that they pull completely apart. You will need to hold your hands far apart, at least as far apart as the length of the individual pieces of fiber. (You can pull out individual strands from the end to determine this length. Generally about 2-3” for wool.) Pinch the end of the fiber, then pull gently on the main bulk to slide it away from the end. (If the fibers won’t slide, you may have your fingers too close together. The fibers also won’t slide if there is twist in the fibers. You will need to untwist it and try again.)

Draft out about a foot of your roving to prepare it for spinning. This opens the fibers and makes them easier to work with while spinning.

Beginning drop spindling is best done sitting in a chair. The “park and draft” method, explained here, allows you to concentrate on just one movement at a time.

We will discuss a “top whorl” variety of drop spindle. That is, the round disk of wood which provides weight, known as the whorl, is located at the top of the spindle while it is being spun. This also places the hook at the top.

The drop spindle should come with a leader string attached to the shaft (handle). If not, use a piece of string about two feet long and tie it in a loop. Attach the loop to the shaft of the drop spindle using a lark’s head knot.

Bring the leader string from the shaft, up around the edge of the drop spindle’s whorl and wrap it around the hook at the top. You should have about 5-6 inches of the leader string extending beyond the hook.

Open the loop at the top of the leader string and pass about two inches of your drafted fiber through it. Fold the short end of the fiber back across the remaining fiber, enclosing the loop of the leader string. Pinch that doubled portion of the fiber, just above the end of the leader string.

Spin the drop spindle clock-wise until you build up a tight twist in the string. Place the shaft of the drop spindle between your knees. Now, being sure to maintain the pinch on the fiber, draft a few inches of the fiber to be spun. Remember that in order to draft, your fingers will need to be at least as far apart as the length of the individual fibers you are spinning. As the fibers slide, the area above your pinch should be thinning. When it reaches the desired thickness, slide your pinch over that area allowing the twist to enter it,

but not move into the fibers which have not yet been thinned. The process involves a repeated pinch, pull (draft), then slide motion. Continue until you no longer have excess twist in your spun fiber.

At this point you will want to spin the drop spindle again (clock-wise as before) and repeat the pinch, draft, and slide. When you have a long length of spun fiber and are satisfied with its twist, you can unhook the fiber from the spindle's hook and wrap the spun fiber around the shaft of the spindle below the whorl.

On this first attempt, do not aim for perfection. Most first-timers create a bumpy yarn (thick and thin) that actually makes a very nice art yarn. I have seen some wonderful hats made from first spinnings that have great texture.

Keep in mind that roving is a continuous string of individual fibers. Pulled too hard, it separates rather than just thins. It hasn't broken. To rejoin the fibers, spin the drop spindle and build up some twist. Overlap the loose ends of the roving with the loose ends from the fiber attached to spindle. Let the twist travel up into those ends to twist them together. Remember, it is only the twist holding the fibers together, so this joined area is really no different from any other area.

Spindles drop for several reasons, but the most common is insufficient twist in the string. The twist will tend to stay in the thinnest sections of the string, leaving less twist in any thick areas (in some cases, to the point where the fibers won't hold together). You can solve this thick-thin problem by removing the twist from the thicker section (simply pinch on either side of it and untwist it), pull to draft it out farther, then allow twist to move back into it.

Another reason drop spindles drop is exactly the opposite. Those thin areas that collect the twist can overspin to the point where they break. In this case, you will want to pull off the overspun area leaving soft fuzzy loose ends to overlap and respin.

As you spin, watch your drafting technique. You don't want to push the fibers back away from the spindle, that creates a tangled mass in your hand that is hard to spin. You want to be sure to pull the fibers back, so they slide over one another, keeping them straight and aligned.

This is the method to create a single twisted fiber string. Yarn is usually made up of plied fiber strings. To do this, you would spin half your fiber on your drop spindle, then wind it off into a ball. Spin the other half of your fiber in the same way and wind it off into a ball. You will then ply those two single completed fiber strings together. To do this, hold the two ends of the strings together and feed them through the leader string and back onto themselves as you did initially with the roving. Spin the spindle counter-clockwise to ply. This twists the two fiber strings together into a balanced yarn. No drafting is required. Wrap the plied fibers around the shaft of the spindle as you did before until you have finished.

The internet contains a number of illustrated instructions for drop spindling as well as videos.