

Spinning - The basics

Contributed by sally_in_wales

Ever fancied a go at spinning? Sally_in_Wales shows you how:

Spinning is as simple as twisting a group of fibres into a cord, but to spin a smooth even thread that can be made into fabrics or used for knitting or embroidery takes a bit of practice. Its just a knack really, a bit like patting your head and rubbing your tummy at the same time, and people are often surprised at how quickly they get the hang of it.

What can be spun?

Wool, cotton, linen, silk and even pet hair can usually be spun. The easiest for beginners to use is sheep's wool as it has a natural crimp that helps encourage a strong yarn. Pet hair can be spun but many animals have very smooth hair that will be slippery and hard to spin. If you want to try spinning pet hair it can be useful to blend it with a fibre that spins well if your attempts with it are less than successful.

First you need to prepare the fibre:

Look carefully at your fibre, is it dirty or lumped together? If it is, you need to wash and comb it. Fibres by themselves will felt very easily and this time we want them to stay nice and separate. Just soak the fibre in lukewarm water with a little bit of soap in it until the dirt loosens, then change the water until it runs clear. Pat the fibres dry with a towel than let them air dry completely.

Most fibres can be spun after just teasing them out into a smooth 'cloud' with your hands. You can also use special wool brushes called carders to brush them into a smooth, tangle free roll that spins very easily.

The Spindle:

The drop spindle is a simple device that can be made very cheaply. All you need are a length of dowel and a round section of wood. A slice through a small log would be good but I have made perfectly useable spindles from wooden toy wheels. You can even spin using a pencil poked through a small potato or half apple, but a perfectly round 'whorl' is much easier to handle. Make a notch in the top of the spindle as in the diagram here.

1. Start by tying on a starter string. Tie it just above the whorl, then wind it over the whorl, round the point of the spindle, then back up to the notch. Make a loop (a half hitch) to hold the starter string on the notch.
2. Take a little bit of your prepared wool and fold it over the end of the starter string. Pinch the point just above where the wool and the string meet with one hand.
3. Give the spindle a clockwise twist with your other hand. You should see the twist run up the starter string and into the wool.
4. Now, rest the spindle against you so that it doesn't untwist, and stretch out the wool just above the place where you are pinching the yarn for a short way. Move your hand so that you are now pinching the wool just where the stretched out part turns back into the main mass of wool. Give the spindle another twist and watch the stretched out bit of wool turn into yarn.
5. Keep stretching, pinching and twisting until you have a long length of yarn between the spindle and the wool.
6. Unhook the yarn from the spindle, wind the yarn around the middle part and reattach the yarn just as you did with the starter thread. Keep going until you have as much yarn as you want.
7. You could use this yarn as it is, but you have probably already realised that it is quite weak if it untwists. The usual solution is to ply the yarn. This just means twisting two or more threads back together in the opposite direction (anti-clockwise) to make a thicker, more stable thread. If you have several spindles you can just leave the yarn on the spindles until you are ready to ply, or you can wind it off the spindle into balls and ply that.

What to do with it once it is spun?

First, you need to wind your spun yarn into skeins. The best thing to do this with is a simple device usually called a niddy noddy, but it works just as well to wind it round the back of a chair.

Next, tie the loose ends together and use some short lengths of yarn to tie figure of eight loops at several points around the skein of yarn. This stops the wool tangling up when you wash it.

Almost all yarn needs a bit of a wash once its been spun. Put a few inches of lukewarm, soapy water in the sink and carefully lay the skein of wool into it. Press up and down gently with your hands, being careful not to move the wool around too much. When you think it is fairly clean, let the water drain away and rinse the wool in more water of about the

same temperature. Be careful just to gently squeeze the yarn, don't wring it or it encourages felting.

Lots of interesting information and publications on spinning and dyeing can be found at Sally's website:

www.sallypointer.com