

Twisting Fibers

A Spinning Class for Beginners

By Marina Wymarc

Introduction

Spinning, drop spinning, hand spinning- the art has many names and variations, but the most basic precepts stay the same. *Spinning* is a method of binding plant or animal fibers together to create yarn or thread by applying twist. Fibers can be spun together using a spinning wheel or a *hand-* or *drop-spindle*. For the purposes of this class, we are concerned with the second method. Within the realm of drop spinning in period Europe there are two methods: we shall call them *high whorl* and *low whorl*.

High or low refers to the placement of the *whorl* on the *shaft* of the spindle. Low whorl is what is often identified as 'colonial' spinning. High whorl is the less recognized but wider spread and more period method. It is this method that this class will focus on. In addition to the whorl and shaft, most high whorl spindles have one or more *notches* through which the yarn passes on its way to the *hook* from which the whole thing hangs. Spun yarn is wound about the shaft.

Spinning your own yarn in a period fashion is fun, simple, and relaxing- so let's get started!

So how does it work?

To begin spinning, you will need two things: a basic high whorl spindle and a length of carded wool *roving*.

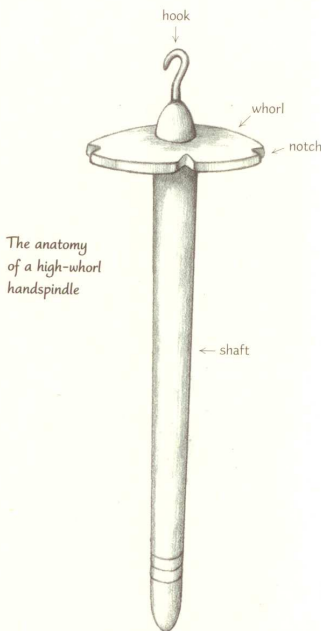
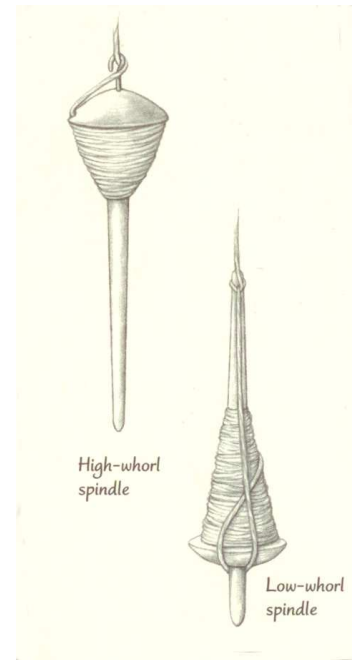
1. Preparing the Fiber¹

To begin, pull off an eight- to ten-inch section of the roving. Divide this in half along the grain. Continue dividing the wool in this way until you have a piece about as wide as a finger. Wind all but one of these pieces into individual coils. Setting these aside, grab the piece you will be spinning. For the purposes of this section, this piece will be referred to as the roving.

Beginning at one end tug gently on a few fibers until they just begin to slide out from the rest. As you pull you should be able to see the length of the fibers, called the *staple*. Stop pulling when about ¼ of the staple remains in the larger body of fiber. Repeat this, moving down the roving until you have a long, wispy line of fiber. (If it gets to be too much, you can break the roving into smaller pieces.) Catch one end of the roving in your left fingers and begin wrapping the roving away from you around your left wrist. Release the first end and be certain that 8-10 inches of the free end can hang free. This is the end we will attach to the spindle.

2. Beginning the Strand

Now that we have fiber to work with, we must attach the spindle and add twist. Taking the free end of the roving between the fingers of your left hand, hold the spindle (hook-first) at a right angle to the fibers. Catch the fibers in the hook about 2 inches from



¹ I have never mastered drawing from the roving directly and so must draw out all of a length before I begin to spin; this process is described here. If you prefer to draw directly from the roving, continue to (2).

the end and begin turning the spindle clockwise. As the spindle turns, bring the spindle up so that it is in line with the fiber. Grip the fiber firmly at the point where it twists into a thread (this is called the *triangle*). Now give the spindle a gentle flick clockwise to get it spinning on its own. This will tighten up the fibers you've spun.

3. Two Schools of Thought

The traditional and most popular method of drop-spinning is to feed fiber to the thread as the spindle twirls suspended. There are a number of books on this method, my favorite of which is in the bibliography at the end of this handout.

I have never mastered this method. Instead, I add spin to the thread and *then*, stopping the spindle, feed fibers to it – as two separate actions. This is the method I will teach in this class.

4. Now for the Spinning

Holding the fiber at the triangle, roll the spindle between your fingers in a flicking motion as hard as you please. The spindle should drop from your fingers to twirl at the end of your thread. Allow it to spin there for a moment or two until it is a little overspun², then secure it somewhere – hold it between your knees, for instance. Transfer the triangle to your right hand and grasp the roving a few centimeters down with your left. If you are spinning directly from the larger roving, you will likely have to tug quite a bit to draw out fiber – but tug *gently*. If you are using a length of fiber prepared as directed above, you should not have to draw out as much. Draw out about three inches of fiber and grip the end of that thinner length firmly in your left hand. This will become your new triangle. Keeping the spindle supported, release the old triangle in your right hand and allow twist to travel up the new length of thread. You may need to add spin to insure that the new thread is strong.

When the thread becomes too long to handle easily, secure the spindle again and remove the thread from the hook, being certain to retain the twist. Move the end of your thread to the shaft, just below the whorl and begin wrapping it clockwise around the shaft. Wrapping the thread around the shaft causes it to be tighter than if you had turned the shaft to wind on the thread. Catch the trailing end of thread in the notch and bring it up to wind counterclockwise around the base of the hook twice, and then catch it in the hook.

**And now, you too can spin!
How easy was that?**

Tools and Gear

Fibers

- Wool – was the most common and ‘cheapest’ fiber in Europe in period. Comes from sheep. Comes in a variety of staples and crimps. Natural shades are white to brown to gray to black. Common breeds sold for spinning are Merino (short, soft, sometimes temperamental) and Colonial (long, softish, very tame.) Australian wool is also highly recommended as being strong and easy to spin.
- Alpaca – *Very* highly recommended. Is long, soft, and fairly tame. Natural colors range widely – white, blue-gray, black, rose beige, cinnamon brown and brown-

² Different fibers and different weights of yarn demand different amounts of twist. Don't be frustrated if your thread breaks or falls apart – simply use less or more spin.

- black. Spins to a soft and glossy finish. Beware: loose bits of fiber *will* get *everywhere*.
- Cotton – very short, very soft, very light and fluffy. When cotton is sold by weight, you can get a ludicrous amount for your money. However, be aware; cotton is extremely difficult to spin as finely as possible. Cotton requires a much different technique from wool. Occasionally classes on spinning cotton pop up, and should be taken advantage of.
 - Silk – There are two types of silk: cultured and wild (or tussah). Cultured silk is usually white, though it is sometimes dyed to brilliant colors. Tussah is generally a more creamy color when undyed. Silk is very strong and very, very temperamental. I have found that heroic amounts of patience are required to spin it finely- though not as much as cotton. Spins to a highly glossy finish.
 - Camel down – An exotic fiber, sold in small amounts. Forms into puffs rather than rovings. Somewhat wiry, tends to like to stick to itself. A very good fiber to spin in a high wind or humidity. Both adult and baby camel down are suitable to spin. *Note – If camel and alpaca fibers are bleached they will be weakened.*
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These are merely fibers I am familiar with. There is always a larger selection to choose from, particularly at wool fairs and online.

Equipment

- Spindles – these come in a wide variety of weights and sizes.
- Niddy-noddies – used for forming skeins. Difficult to find.
- Gauges – used for determining size of yarn in wraps per inch (wpi).
- Nostepinnes – used for forming center-pull balls.
- Cards and Combs – used for forming raw wool and other fibers into something ready to be spun.
- Distaffs – used to hold a main body of fiber to be spun. Despite common wisdom, distaffs can be and were used for wool. Any long rod or stick that will firmly hold the fiber and can be secured or stuck through a belt can be used as a distaff. Winding fiber about your wrist as directed above utilizes the same principles as a distaff.

Resources

Illustrations from *Spinning in the Old Way*.

***Spinning in the Old Way* by Patricia Gilberts.** Covers everything from the basics to wool breeds to equipment to plying and finishing yarn. An excellent book for beginners and old hands at the craft.

***Handspinner's Handbook* by Bette Hochberg.** Details a great many fibers, both exotic and common.

All of the below are found at Pennsic.

The Spanish Peacock. High quality wooden tools – and the price reflects that quality! Very highly recommended if you can afford them. Found at Pennsic, in the Kingdom of Atlantia, and online. Booth #174.

Ursula's Alcove. Undyed fibers and clay or glass spindles. Also books. Booth #166.

Minerva's Spindle. Colonial and Merino wools, also some other fibers. Very reasonable prices. Booth #158.

Brush Creek Wool Works. Wool, silk, and exotic fibers including camel. Booth #87.