

SPINNING BASICS

Drafting for Woolen and Worsted-Style Yarns on a Spindle

BY CAROL HUEBSCHER RHOADES

SPINNING ON A SPINDLE doesn't mean that you are limited to one type of yarn. It's the same working on a spindle as it is on a spinning wheel: you can choose a fiber, its preparation, and a drafting technique to get the yarn you want. To get a particular yarn, select an appropriate spindle. The finer and lighter the yarn, the lighter the spindle—so use either a very lightweight spindle (less than 1 ounce) or a supported spindle. Conversely, it is best to spin a heavy yarn on a heavier (2 ounces or more) spindle.

The principles for spindle-spinning either woolen or worsted-style yarns are the same as for wheel spinning.¹ The tricky part is coordinating your hand



movements. When I am spinning woolen (long draw) on the spindle, my right hand is in charge of turning the spindle and pinching the twist off and on as I draft back with my left hand. For worsted spinning (short draw), my left hand holds the fiber while my right hand controls the spindle, drafts fiber forward, and controls the twist as it enters the drafted fibers. I also work with my hands at a slight angle along a horizontal plane; that is, my spindle-controlling hand is slightly lower than my fiber-holding hand. The angle between the yarn and the spindle hanging down from the spindle hand and the yarn and fiber between my hands is about 100° to 110° F. This position allows me to work with my shoulders and elbows relaxed. Many spinners, however, prefer a vertical alignment of spindle,

¹ For more on these techniques, see Carol's previous Spinning Basics articles in *Spin·Off*: "Handcarding with a Light Touch," 25, 3 (Fall 2001), 74–79; "The Long Draw," 28, 4 (Winter 2004), 74–76; and "The Short Draw," 29, 1 (Spring 2005), 30–31.



Easing body movements during spinning

SUGGESTIONS FROM ELIZABETH HENSHAW, B.A. MOVEMENT STUDIES

For spindle-spinning while standing, your stance will depend on which arm extends and to what degree. Try various positions and use what is comfortable. Always try for fluid movements that use the energy from gravity, up through the body and out to the arms and hands. Move as you work rather than stand rigidly. Work with your feet apart and toes pointing a little outward. The foot opposite the arm that extends should be slightly forward of the other foot—about half-a-foot length. Now you can use the energy from the bottom of your foot up to your hand as you spin. As the arm extends for drafting, the back foot pushes forward (the heel raises slightly off the ground) while the front foot lightly presses into the ground. As your hands return to the starting position, shift your weight toward your back foot.

Take frequent breaks from spindle-spinning to relax your shoulders and stretch your back, hands, and fingers.

Woolen drafting on the spindle

1. In the home position the hands are about 4" apart. To begin spinning, rotate the spindle with the spindle hand. I usually start with a slow spin and then add more spin as I draft back the fibers. Pinch off a section of rolag (about 1 to 1½"). Be sure that there is some yarn between the spindle hand and the section of rolag. The spindle hand stays close to the home position (for me, slightly above and to the right of the navel) except when I'm turning the spindle.



2. As the spindle turns, elongate the pinched-off section of rolag by extending the fiber hand. Do not let more fiber enter from the rolag. As necessary, open and close the thumb and forefinger of the spindle hand to allow twist into the yarn being drafted.



3. When the yarn has been drafted to the desired diameter, and there is only a small amount of unspun fiber at the tip of the pinched-off section of rolag, move the fiber hand back toward the spindle hand. The fiber hand is still pinching off the rolag to prevent the twist going up into the unspun fibers while the fingers of the spindle hand open slightly to allow the newly spun yarn to drop down toward the spindle. Note that the hands do *not* meet when they're going back to the home position.




4. Back to the home position and ready to start drafting another section of the rolag.



yarn, and fiber.² Experiment with various positions to see what is most comfortable for you. You may find that one way is more comfortable for woolen drafting and another for worsted.

I try to keep my movements as even as possible during spindle spinning. I can control the size and density of the yarn by using evenly prepared fibers, moving my

drafting hand at set lengths for each draft, and keeping the spindle turning as consistently as possible. When the spindle gets close to the floor while my hands are in the “home” position (see photo 5), then I stop, hold the length of yarn under control, and wind on. It is tempting to start raising the arms up to get just a bit more spinning done before winding on, but that

shift in position can cause a difference in the drafting and the resulting yarn. Usually people tend to draft more thinly as their arms go up because gravity helps pull more fiber from the mass. 

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² See, for example, Maggie Casey, “Spinning Basics: Spindle Spinning,” *Spin·Off*, 29, 2 (Summer 2005), 48–49. Priscilla A. Gibson-Roberts discusses spindle, yarn, and hand positions on pages 73–81 of *High Whorling: A Spinner’s Guide to an Old World Skill*. Cedaredge, Colorado: Nomad Press, 1998.

Worsted drafting on the spindle



5. In the home position, the hands are about 1 to 2" or half a staple length apart. Rotate the spindle so that it spins fast enough to keep an even spin while you draft and add twist to several lengths but not so fast that you feel tempted to draft out overly long lengths. Note how the strip of top is wrapped around my wrist to keep it under control during spinning. You can also use a wrist distaff to hold the fiber.³
6. I draft about half a staple length of fiber forward, pulling it from the fiber mass with my spindle hand. As soon as the fiber is drafted, the spindle hand moves toward the fiber hand, guiding the twist into the drafted fibers and smoothing the yarn. Note that the hands do not meet but go back to the home position, about half a staple length apart.
7. If you draft back with the fiber hand, the spindle hand pinches off the twist as the fiber hand releases fibers into the drafting zone. The spindle hand then moves toward the fiber hand, guiding the twist into the drafted fibers and smoothing the yarn. Both hands should then move back to the home position rather than continue upward or sideways.
8. With a close-to-vertical drafting method, both hands are raised high and the arm with the fiber hand is at 90° from the body. This angle gives you more yarn length before winding on, but it is tiring. An angle halfway between vertical and horizontal should feel more comfortable and allow you to spin a good length before winding on.

³ For making one type of wrist distaff, see Linda Hendrickson, “Ply-Splitting for Wrist Distaffs: Something New to Do with Your Handspun,” *Spin·Off*, 29, 2 (Summer 2005), 50–57.