



Words Barbara Coddington & Bella Head  
Images Richard Humphrys

## Turn, turn, turn

There is a spindle for every purpose. 1) The Majacraft Ultralight is ideal for spinning silk or very fine wool. 2) A heavy whorl, like this one made from a large old doorknob, makes a spindle better for thicker yarns. 3) The hand-carved whorl of this Golding spindle is weighted with a brass ring to increase its spin time and speed. 4) Ashford's Turkish spindle forms a centre-pull ball as the yarn is spun; its cross arms are removable so the ball is too. Like the Golding, it has an elongated 'swan's neck' hook to secure the yarn. 5) The rose sheoak spindle from Spindlemaker is light and fast—a sporty spindle. 6) A larger, heavier spindle may turn more slowly, giving the spinner more time for drafting. 7–8) The Indian brass takli and the bead-whorl spindle are supported spindles, used with their tip resting on a surface or in a small bowl. They're most often used for cotton or silk.



The spinning wheel as we know it did not come into common use until the mid-16th century so for 9,500 years prior to this, all fabric—from fine Egyptian mummy cloths to blankets to delicate medieval lace ruffles to the huge sails on ships—was made from yarn spun on the humble spindle.

# making yarn

For each of the world's spinning cultures it seems there is a different form of spindle—the cross-arm or Turkish spindle, the hooked or high whorl spindles of Europe and Northern Africa; the Indian takli and the bead-whorl spindles of Asia and South America for spinning fine yarns of cotton and silk. Early spinning wheels were the charkha—now well-known as the sort Gandhi used for meditation—and the great wheel (also known as the walking wheel) of Europe and North America.

Common fibres used in spinning were flax (a plant widely used to make linen thread which in turn was used to make anything from everyday clothing to fine lace to sails on ships), cotton and wool. Silk was also used a lot but was generally reeled directly from the cocoon rather than spun into yarn.

There is almost nothing that cannot be spun. (I even tried spinning the lint from my dryer once!) There's mohair, alpaca, angora, tencel (from wood pulp), soy silk, possum fur and many combinations of synthetic fibres. Wool is still our most useful contemporary natural fibre, from very fine merino to quite coarse carpet wool.

## Don't get fleeced

Wool is generally considered the best fibre to start with. It comes in many different forms from raw greasy

fleece, right as it has been shorn off the sheep's back, to beautifully clean processed tops or roving. A medium-grade carded sliver is an excellent choice for a beginner. There is no waste or messy preparation, and it comes in a range of lovely natural colours as well as assorted dyed colours from palest pastels to vivid brights. Sliver is readily available from any local spinning supply shop, and as little as 150–200 grams will give you plenty of spinning pleasure as well as make you a generous beanie, a pair of socks, a child's vest or a pair of mittens.

## Choosing a spindle

A spindle is affordable, portable and a fun tool to use. It's also easy to use once you've mastered the basics.

Different spindles are for spinning different yarns. A heavy spindle makes fat yarn, a delicate light one spins cobweb lace yarn. Also, you will see that some have the shaft pointing downwards (high whorl) and others have the shaft pointing up (low whorl). The whorl is the disc-shaped part on the shaft of the spindle. Some have hooks and some have notches to hold the yarn. Some have cross pieces that the yarn winds around (Turkish spindle). Some have beads or what looks like a gold coin as whorls and are quite tiny (supported spindles). And others can be extremely ornate. You can also make your own at home. It does not matter

which one you choose as long as it spins well and feels right for you.

If you have a spinning supply shop nearby go and look at some. Hold one in your hands. Twirl it in your fingers. Is it balanced or does it wobble? Is it heavy or light? Does it feel right for you?

As a beginner, choose the best spindle and the best fibre you can afford. Neither is expensive and the investment will only encourage you to continue making yarn. An unbalanced spindle, or one that is not a pleasure to hold in your hands, and poor quality, dirty fibre can be very off-putting. (Note that a homemade spindle doesn't necessarily mean it will be unbalanced.)

As you become a spinner, a

## Spinning potential

By twisting fibres you fill them with potential energy—stored twist. When you let go, they'll untwist. But by winding them onto your spindle shaft, you're conserving that twist to use later, for weaving or knitting or anything else you care to do with it.

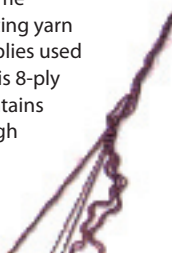
Most fibres are spun with a clockwise twist (known as a Z twist). They can be used on their own and lately there seems to be a growing trend for using these 'energised' singles in knitting to make a really dynamic fabric with stitches that lean.

Twisting two singles together balances them, giving them strength and integrity—and making them much less likely to untwist or come apart. This is what's known as plying. Singles spun clockwise (Z-twist) are usually plied anti-clockwise (known as an S-twist)—the opposite forces are what balance the yarn.

Often more than two strands of singles yarn make up the final yarn, hence the terms 2-ply, 4-ply, 8-ply etc. Originally ply referred to the number of strands that made up the final yarn rather than how thick it was.

As a spinner you will have the wonderful advantage of making your yarn plied or unplied, as thick or thin or textured or smooth as you like. It can be composed of whatever fibre or combination of fibres that pleases you or suits the project you have in mind.

If you untwist some commercial knitting yarn you can see the plies used to make it up. This 8-ply yarn actually contains eight plies, though this isn't always the case!



As a beginner, choose the best spindle and the best fibre you can afford. Neither is expensive and the investment will only encourage you to make yarn.

maker of yarn as well as cloth, a lot of new words will enter your vocabulary—words such as tops, sliver, roving, fleece, crimp, staples, drafting, plying, carding. It's always helpful to learn to speak the local dialect if you play to stay somewhere awhile—see the glossary below.

What's the best way to learn?

Beginning spinning is an exciting time. Spindle spinning is not difficult—but it does involve subtleties in finger, wrist and hand movements that are difficult to convey in pictures or words. Gentle persistence and perhaps sharing the experience with a friend will be helpful in learning. Visit your local spinning shop or a guild to start finding other spinners, or try online—<groups.yahoo.com/group/anzweavespin/> is a great place to find other spinners Down Under.

You can pick up a spindle anywhere, anytime—and spin often. Remember, no one is going to take you to task for not making the right sort of yarn. Just spin, and feel yourself reconnect with the rhythms of life and thousands of years of our past. ♪

As you become a spinner, a lot of new words will enter your vocabulary. Here's a quick guide to the lingo.

- Card(er): a toothed paddle or brush for preparing fleece
- Cop: A cone of spun yarn
- Crimp: the natural waves in the staples of a sheep's wool
- Distaff: a support to keep unspun fleece away from the spindle
- Draft: to pull fibres away from the spindle, thinning them out and allowing them to twist
- Drop spindle: a spindle that spins in midair, hanging from the yarn
- High whorl: a spindle with its weight near the top of the shaft
- Low whorl: a spindle with its weight near the bottom of the shaft
- Ply, plying: a single strand of twisted fibre; twisting strands together to form a multi-stranded yarn
- Rolag: fibre that is carded and loosely rolled prior to spinning
- Roving: fibre that is carded and combed into a long wide strand prior to spinning
- Single(s): twisted, unplied fibres
- Sliver: fibre that is clean and prepared for spinning
- Spindle: a shaft and whorl used for spinning
- Supported spindle: a spindle that rests on a surface during spinning
- Staple(s): a tuft of fleece; also, the length of fibres in a tuft
- Tops: fibres that are carded or combed prior to spinning
- wpi/wraps per inch: the number of times a yarn can be wrapped around an object (such as a dowel or ruler) in the space of one inch; this helps determine how to spin a yarn for a particular project.

### Further reading

A Handspindle Treasury From the Editors of Spin-Off Magazine (Interweave Press) ISBN 978-1-8830108-5-0

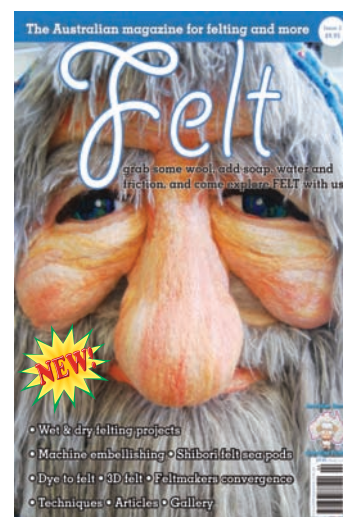
Spinning in the Old Way Priscilla A. Gibson-Roberts (Nomad Press) ISBN 978-0-9668289-8-6

Spindle Spinning: From novice to expert, Connie Delaney (Kokovoko Press) ISBN 0-9660952-0-0

Hand Spinning and Woolcombing by Grace M Crowfoot and H. Ling Roth (Charles T Branford) ISBN 978-0-6860982-4-9

Handspindles, Bette Hochberg (Bette and Bernard Hochberg) ISBN 978-0-9600990-2-3

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# Start spinning

**Hands on** When you're getting started, there are a few things to aim for, but among them is to have fun. Don't worry too much about whether you drop the spindle at first or make lumpy yarn. (You will love it no matter what!)

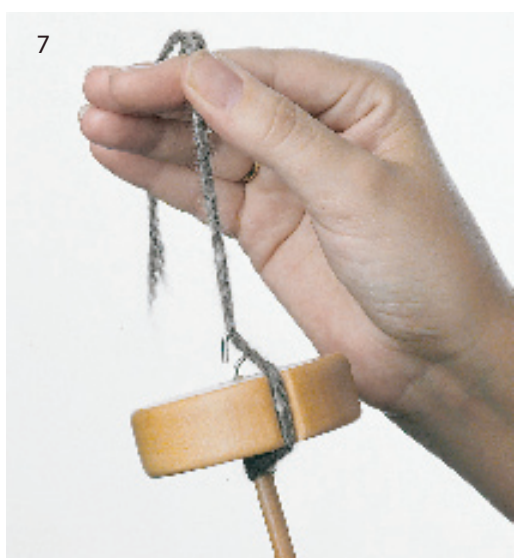
**Find some fibre** When you source fleece for spinning, one form it may take is wool 'in the grease'. 1) Clean, quality greasy fleece like this, with no dirt or vegetable matter, can be spun pretty much as is though you may need to separate any matted tips—a metal comb or dog/cat brush is fine for this. You may prefer to start with 2) commercially prepared roving.

Almost any fibres will need at least some gentle preparation ('predrafting') before you begin.

Separate a piece about 10–15 cm long (similar to the length of a wool staple, as in the first picture) from your main fibre; it will be easier to manage at first than a big one. If using roving, 3) tug a piece off with your hands about 15 cm apart (any less and it may refuse to budge). 4) Fan out the fibres horizontally into a squarish shape.

**Prepare your spindle** You can use a high-whorl or a low-whorl spindle, whichever you prefer. Using some rough yarn that will give your fibre some traction, tie a 1m leader to the shaft of your spindle with 5) a half hitch. On a high-whorl spindle, tie the knot just below the whorl. On a low-whorl spindle 6) tie the leader above the whorl. Turn the spindle clockwise a few times to wind it onto the shaft. (On a low-whorl spindle, wind it all the way up the shaft.) Secure the leader to the top of the spindle—a high-whorl spindle will often have 7) a notch to guide the yarn to the hook, while a low-whorl spindle may have a notch or a hook, or neither! Another hitch will work to secure the leader if your low-whorl spindle is hookless.

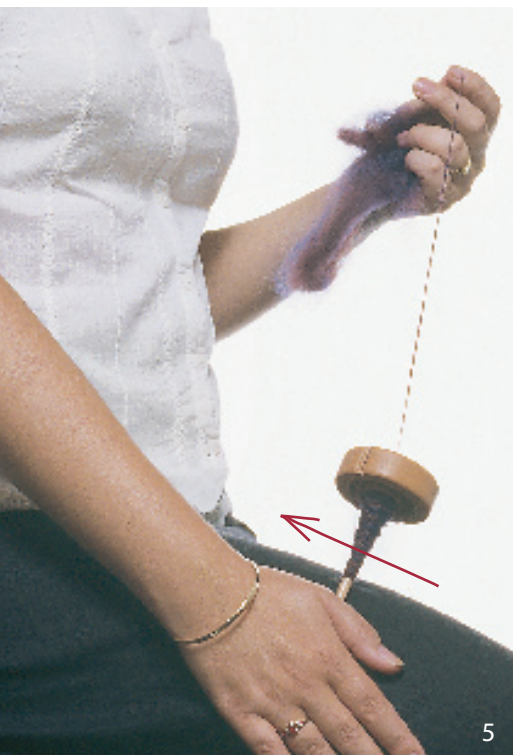
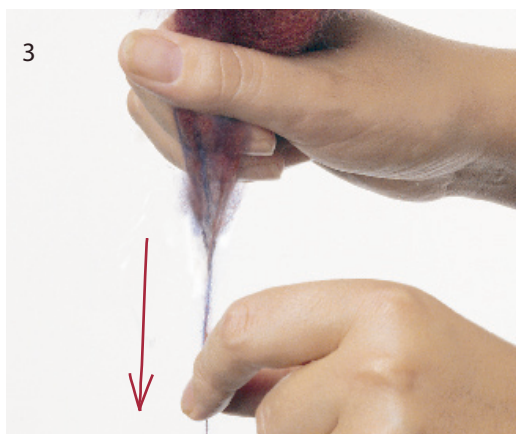
**Play around** Leave about half a metre of yarn above the hook. Twist the spindle like a top in your fingers. See how the leader begins to twist and kink? You're nearly ready to start spinning. >>





## Whatever works

We've used a high-whorl spindle for these pictures but the basics are the same no matter which kind of drop spindle you use. You can sit or stand, whichever is better for you. And it also doesn't matter which hand you use to handle the fibre—whichever one you're confident with will do. We'll refer to your 'spindle hand' as the one you use to propel the spindle and your 'fibre hand' as the one holding the fibre. You'll need to use your spindle hand to help the fibre hand with drafting anyway! It all comes together with practice...



**Begin to spin** Lay a few centimetres of the leader over the centre of the predrafted fibre in your fibre hand, perpendicular to the direction of the fibre. Hold the fibre up, letting the spindle dangle down. With your spindle hand, give the spindle a twist clockwise. You will see a twist begin to form in the fibre and start to travel up towards the fibre in your hand. Reach up with your spindle hand and pull down the leader together with some fibre to 2) form a 'V' with the leader in the centre of it.

This is the basic action of spinning: twisting fibres together and controlling the amount of twist. Maintaining this 'V' will help you control the twisting yarn. Try to keep your hand and wrist soft. You don't want to clench the fibre, you want it to glide through your fingers as you draw it downward and as the twist travels upward—and you definitely don't want your wrist to hurt!

What follows is a combination of pulling, pinching and going with what feels right. Spin the spindle and then use your spindle hand to 3) pinch the twist where it enters the fibre, and pull down. Let go and watch the twist travel up the yarn. As the spindle slows, the yarn will stop twisting and you can safely give the spindle another spin. Remember, though, that if the spindle begins to spin in the opposite direction, the yarn will untwist! So keep an eye on it.

Pinch the twist again and pull down some more fibre from the 'V' or, if the spindle is slowing, give it another twirl. Keep the 'V' action right up near your face. Keep this up long enough and eventually your spindle will hit the floor, either when it parts company from the fibre in your hand or, hopefully, when you have spun a length of yarn. Pinch the V with your fibre hand, pick up the spindle and, keeping the yarn taut, unhook it. 4) Turn the spindle clockwise to wind the yarn onto the shaft. Rehook the yarn on the spindle, and spin some more. That's it. You're making yarn! When you're ready, predraft some more fibre, lay the yarn over it like you did the leader, and carry on. And when you want extra spin, try 5) briskly rolling your high-whorl spindle up your right leg and get ready for some speedy spindling.

## Troubleshooting

### What happens when...

The yarn breaks. Just treat it just as you did the leader: lay it over the fibre and start again. If the yarn coming from the spindle is very tightly twisted it may not rejoin easily. Untwist it, or break it off and unwind some yarn that will make a friendlier leader. Why it happens: often the fibre will separate at a weak point where there is not enough twist. Keep an eye on whether your yarn is twisting sufficiently when you rejoin it.

It's hard to join the leader/yarn to the fibre. Put the leader aside and try spinning without it for a minute. Just hook the spindle right into the edge of the predrafted fibre and turn it clockwise, pulling down slightly to form that 'V' shape. You'll see up close what happens when the leader and fibre interact and this may help you get them together. You can also try using a rougher leader or greasy wool for more 'grip'.

The yarn is lumpy. This happens to everybody. Many times experienced spinners will tell you to just love your yarn as it is, because you'll never be able to spin like this again. Be that as it

may, you can still try to smooth out the lumps: gently tease/draft them apart and try spinning them again. You can also smooth them a bit with your spindle hand as you spin.

The 'V' has gotten twisted and the fibre won't come loose from it. If the twist has escaped and travelled up the yarn into the fibre in your hand, first try to untwist it. Hold the spindle and let the fibre hang down. See if it untwists. You may be able to loosen it and then tease the fibres apart a little bit. If that doesn't work, break off the clumpy bit and start again as from the leader.