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Fibres for felt makers and spinners

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Take the piece of yarn (leader) and tie it onto the spindle shaft underneath the whorl. Bring the leader up and over the whorl, and wrap it around the hook. There should be a few inches of yarn extending beyond the hook.

This is a good time to get a feel for the drop spindle. Make a loop in the end of the leader yarn. Hold the loop end of the leader yarn in one hand. Allow the drop spindle to dangle from the leader. Use the fingers of your other hand to grasp the end of the shaft and give the spindle a spin. You can spin the spindle clockwise or counter clockwise, whichever is more comfortable to you. Watch the twist travel up the leader cord as the spindle spins. By twisting and untwisting the leader a few times, you will start to get a feel for the weight and spin of the drop spindle. Try switching hands. This will help you decide which hand is more comfortable holding the fibre (call this the fibre hand) and which one will spin the spindle (the spinning hand).



Untwist your leader cord ready to start. Now pick up the wool tops and break off a length about 1m (1 yd) long, Then pull off a length about a ¼" wide or about the width of a pencil.

Loosely wrap this thin length of fibre around the wrist of your fibre hand to keep it from getting tangled up in the twist as you spin.



Put a couple inches of wool through the loop on your leader yarn and fold it back onto itself.



Until you get the hang of drop spindle spinning, you can sit and have your spindle suspended very slightly above your knee. Holding at the end of the section where the fibre overlaps itself with your fibre hand, give the spindle several good spins. Allow the twist to travel up the leader and onto the fibres to secure them together.



Look at what you have now. The starter yarn and the fibre have twisted together to form yarn. Immediately above the yarn is the "drafting zone" or "drafting triangle". If this triangle has more fibres in it, the yarn will be thicker; if it has fewer fibres in it, the yarn will be thinner.

Hold the shaft end of your spindle between your legs to stop it unwinding and use the thumb and forefinger of your spinning hand to pinch the fibres in the same place where your fibre hand was holding the twist. This frees up your fibre hand to slide back over the wool top. Now gently pull to ease and thin the fibres out in this triangle (this is called drafting).



Keep going. Holding the fibre in your fibre hand, spin the drop spindle and then catch it between your legs again, use your spinning hand to hold the pinch and draw out another triangle of fibre. Your fibre hand is holding onto the wide end of the triangle and as you release your other hand the twist travels up the next few inches.



Keep repeating until the yarn starts to feel too long for your arms and then, keeping it taut, unwrap the yarn from the hook and wind it onto the spindle clockwise under the whorl in such a way that it forms a cone, leaving enough length to bring the yarn back up over the whorl and to wrap around the hook. Then you can continue spinning. The yarn just below the whorl should be the fat part of the cone. This helps to keep the spindle from wobbling as you spin.



Joining:

When you've spun most of the length of wool, you'll want to join on another piece. Fluff out the end of wool you still have, or, if you've spun right up to the very end, split open and frizz out the end of yarn. Pull off a new length of wool top as described above and overlap the wool and the end of yarn. You want the fibre from the spindle end and the fibre from the handful to interlock and mesh, so that the join will be strong.

Twist the spindle to join the new fibre supply. Once you've joined them, rub your fingers up and down over the join. It should hold together and no tails or ends should pop out. Try pulling on the yarn. Is the join strong enough to hold together? Practice joining - it's important to have a sound yarn.

Drop Spindle Spinning:

Once you get the hang of the spinning process, you can try standing to use it as a drop spindle, which will allow you to spin more yarn before needing to wind it onto the spindle. The process is the same, only instead of suspending it slightly above your knee, you let it hang in the air. You can see that it's important that the yarn has the proper amount of twist so that it will hold together and keep the spindle in the air. If it doesn't have sufficient twist, it will drift apart and the spindle will fall.

Keep Practicing:

The yarn you're making won't look perfect, but don't panic. Everyone starts out spinning uneven, over-twisted and / or under-twisted yarn. You have to start somewhere, the important thing is to keep trying.

You can decide to keep this as a singles yarn (one ply), or you can spin another single and ply them together.

To finish a singles yarn put your drop spindle in a bowl or shoe box so it won't roll away from you. Wind your yarn around your hand and your elbow creating a large loop. You are winding your yarn into a hank. Tie the beginning and ending strings to the hank using a couple of small pieces of string.

The twist in the yarn is set by washing. Fill a bowl with warm water and add a little liquid soap. Submerge your hank of yarn and let it soak for around 20 minutes. Don't agitate your yarn too much or the wool will begin to felt. Then gently rinse any soap from your yarn and roll it up in a dry towel to remove as much water as possible. Hang your hank to dry. If it is still twisting up a bit, this means your yarn has a little more twist than it needs - to help stretch out these twists you can add some weight to it.

For 2ply yarn wind off your first yarn into a ball. Spin a second yarn ensuring you turn the spindle in the same direction as for your first yarn. Wind your second yarn into a ball. When you ply your two singles together, put each ball of yarn into its own container so they won't get tangled together. Your fibre hand will hold your two singles yarns together. You will attach them to the leader yarn and spin just like you did the fibre. Remember, if you spun your two singles counter clockwise, then you ply them clockwise and vice versa. When you have finished plying your yarn wash and set the twist as explained above.