

# SPINNING WITH A DROP SPINDLE

We wore our own skins first, of course. Then the second-hand skins of other creatures. Fig leaves, for a season—but the fashion passed. Cloth has been the preferred covering for the past few thousand years. Before the weaving of cloth, the spinning of fibers. An ancient and mysterious craft.

Whether performed by living fingers or by whirling machinery, the process is the same. Fibers are set parallel, each one a little ahead of the one before. Then twisted together. The twist is it. Without twist there'd be no cord, nor any yarn, nor rope, nor cloth. What keeps the twist in is the mystery. Geometry, surface cohesion, elasticity, and a little magic.



Roving is fiber prepared all the way up to spinning: cleaned and combed straight. Drop spindles are weights that are spun to put in twist. You will hold some roving in one hand, pull a few fibers out, and allow the spinning weight to twist the fibers into yarn. A chop stick stuck into a potato or a twig tied to a rock will make a spindle. Some of the best, finest spinning done was entirely by hand—just fingers, the Incans. And, of course, there are spinning wheels of various designs. But a drop spindle is a good start.

Let's begin. Get a yard or so of your hairiest yarn—knitting worsted will do. Tie one end to the shaft of the spindle (Fig. 3). Wrap it around under the point of the spindle (Fig. 4). Catch the top of the spindle (in the notch) with a half-hitch (Fig. 5). And the spindle's ready. Set it down a minute.

Pull out a handful of fibers from the roving. Hold in your left hand. Take the end of yarn from the spindle. Lay the end across the fibers, six or eight inches back over your wrist. Hold the end securely and let the spindle dangle down from your left hand. When you spin the spindle, twist accumulates in the held end of yarn; and this twist transfers to the loose fibers as they draw each other into the newborn yarn (note: "hand" here usually means "thumb and forefinger of").

The knack will elude you for a while: a simultaneous coordination of several actions. It's easier than riding a bicycle, for instance. And, you'll never forget how, and will not remember why it was once so difficult.

One experiment before we begin. Pull out a clump of roving, eight or ten inches long. Grab with both hands near the middle, with your hands together. Hold tightly, and try to pull the roving apart. Not easy. Now move your hands six or seven inches apart. Pull. The roving separates with little effort. It depends on whether or not you're holding both ends of the same fibers. The trick to spinning is to pull the fibers out enough so that they'll slide past each other into the twist and become yarn. And not to pull them out so far that the yarn breaks. Pause a minute and study some individual fibers.

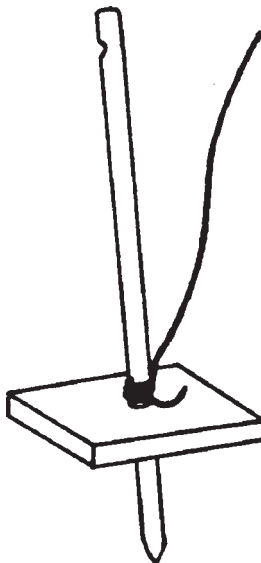
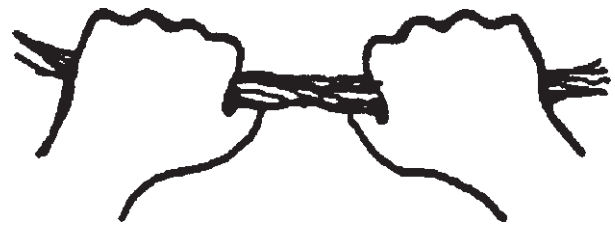


figure 1.

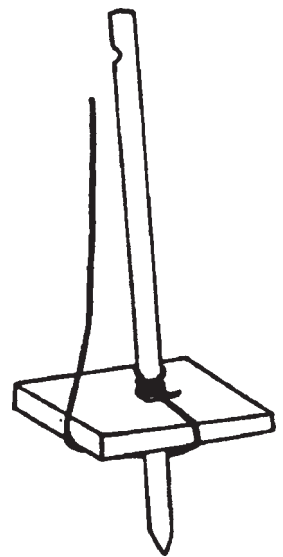


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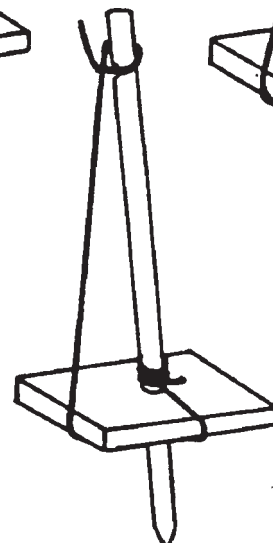


figure 3.

Here we go. Give the spindle a good clockwise twist with right hand. Let it spin, without letting go of the yarn end (Fig. 6). Right hand grabs yarn end just before the new fibers start (Fig. 7). Let twist accumulate for a few turns. Now right hand tight, loosen left, and pull yarn end through fibers—three or four inches (Fig. 8). A few will catch on the old yarn. Left hand tight, slide hand up yarn. Twist travels up, binding old yarn to new fibers (Fig. 9).

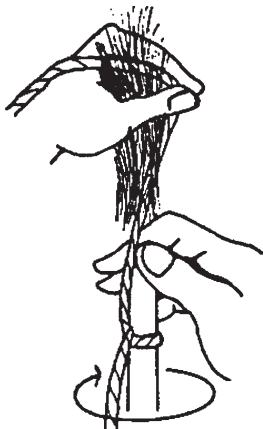


figure 6.

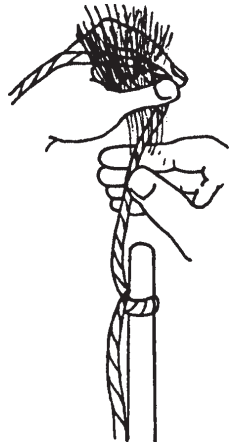


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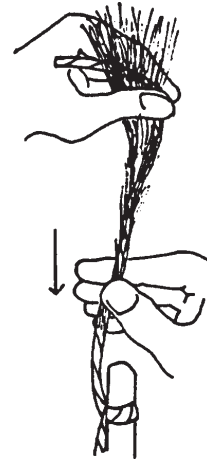


figure 8.

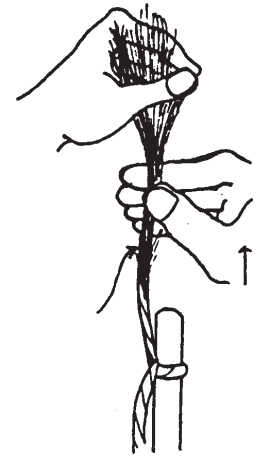


figure 9.

That's it, the hard part. When the yarn breaks, pick it up and start again. As you work at it, the breaks become less and less frequent. Persistence furthers.

Now—unless you're standing on a high stool—the new yarn you've made has got so long that the spindle's hit ground. You must stop and wind up the new yarn around the spindle.

First wrap the new yarn around your left hand, hanging on to the end (Fig. 10). Unhook the original piece from the notch and tip. Wind the new yarn off your left hand on to the spindle shaft (Fig. 11).



figure 10.



figure 11.



figure 12.

Eventually, the spindle is too full of yarn to wind on more. Break it off and make a skein. A niddy-noddy is best here—for even tension and for speed. But wrap around a skeiner, or a chair or between your palm and elbow. (You can pull full cones off the spindle intact, save until you have several and do all your skeining at once.) You don't need to wash roving-spun yarn (but wetting, then letting dry under moderate tension helps set the twist). Dye the yarn, weave with it, knit, as you will. It's yours.

You have learned the main thing. Mohair, alpaca, cotton, flax, silk, jute, dog hair—each with its peculiar tricks. But the door's open.

A good spinner does it all on purpose. Lumps where lumps are intended. Even and smooth to a consistent diameter, thick or thin. Or loops every 3/8 inch. Hand-spun doesn't necessarily mean clumsy and inept. Taste, of course is a personal matter.



"S" twist



"Z" twist

Make a cone, towards the bottom. Leave a couple of feet unwound. Hook the end of the yarn back around spindles as before (Fig. 12). Don't let end loose from your left hand.

And go, as before. All of these motions smooth and speed up with practice.

Yarn gains strength from plying. A three-ply yarn is stronger than a single-ply yarn of the same diameter. Plying is spinning two or more single yarns together, usually in the opposite direction from which the singles were spun. The countervailing twists lock each other in. If singles are spun clockwise, they're plied counterclockwise. Z-twist and S-twist are other names for clockwise and counterclockwise.