

Yarn structure and drafting

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When you first learn to spin, you are very happy that you can make yarn. You keep practicing, and eventually you have your “default yarn”, the yarn you spin when you’re not thinking. Your hands just go and you get yarn. Yay, yarn!

But sometimes, you don’t want your default yarn. Different breeds of wool with different characteristics, such as the sheen of a long wool like Wensleydale or the squishiness of shorter stapled Merino, need different spinning techniques to bring out the glory of the fiber. There’s also what type of yarn do you want? Are you going to be weaving with it? Are you making a warp or a weft? Are you going to knit socks, a sweater, or a shawl?

True Worsted

Fibers are prepared such that they lie parallel to each other. This is usually done with wool combs.

Fibers are drafted in the same direction as prepared (i.e. fibers are parallel to yarn).

There is no twist in the drafting zone (the magic triangle that starts where your yarn begins and ends in your fiber supply). “Short forward draw” is a common technique.

In general, Worsted yarns are more tightly spun, smoother, and harder wearing. Worsted yarns make good weft for weaving.

True Woolen

Fibers are prepared by carding.

Fibers are generally drafted perpendicular to the way they lie in the preparation.

There is twist in the drafting zone. “Long draw” is a common technique.

In general, Woolen yarns are floofier than worsted yarns, have more spring, and trap more air. Woolen yarns make squishy knitting yarns.

Drafting techniques

There are many different drafting techniques, this is just a sampling. Also, you may know these techniques by different names.

Short forward draw

This is described as used for a spinning wheel, where you have both hands working with the fiber.

Your back hand holds your fiber supply lightly. Your front hand is pinching at the end of the yarn to make sure twist doesn't go into your fiber supply. Your front hand pulls forward a bit to draft out fiber, usually just 1-3" depending on your fiber length. Your back hand pinches the fiber to stop the twist from travelling into the fiber. Front hand releases pinch to let twist travel into the drafted fiber. Front hand follows new yarn back until it reaches the back hand. Front hand takes over pinching to protect twist from travelling into fiber supply. And repeat. In general, your back hand doesn't move much.

An alternate form of this drafting technique, you pull the fiber back with your back hand.

Long draw

This is described as for using a spinning wheel, where you could have both hands working with the fiber (or one hand turning your great wheel).

Hold your fiber very loosely in one hand. Have twist travelling into your fiber supply as you continually pull backwards. This only works at speed. Trust in the magic, it will just work.

Double drafting

Often related to long draw.

Draft out a long length of fiber and quickly add a small amount of twist, pretty much just enough to have the fiber hold together.

Go back to the end of the proto-yarn closest to your spinning device. With your spinning device still spinning, finish drafting out the proto-yarn, evening it out.

From the fold

Pull off a chunk of prepared fiber that seems like it's been combed (usually top or roving). The chunk should be about one fiber length long.

Fold in half over your index finger. Spin in a long draw method.

This lets you spin fibers perpendicular from the way they were prepared, i.e. mimic carded prep from a combed preparation. It also helps tame very slippery fibers, such as silk.

Don't forget the distaff

If you look at any image of someone spinning in period, she has a distaff. Once you start spinning with a distaff (especially with hand prepared fiber) it's hard to go back to not having one. A distaff gives you a third hand that helps control your fiber supply, so there's less chance of having your fiber supply accidentally get completely tangled in your spindle. This third hand is not gripping your fiber tightly, so it doesn't get matted. When you're spinning with a spindle, it means you have an extra hand to draft with.

If you're dealing with a long fiber material, such as a really long wool (12-18") or flax, a distaff really helps tame the fibers.

If you're dealing with a fiber that felts if you look at it funny, wrapping it on a distaff keeps it out of your sweaty palms.

What are you spinning?

In practice, modern spinners spin a combination of worsted and woolen. Most of us do not prepare our own fiber, so we don't have access to actual combed or carded prep. We often spin a woolen prep (a batt) in a worsted manner, or a worsted prep in a woolen matter.

What's most important is that you're spinning a yarn you like. If you want a hard wearing yarn that may not pill as much, and will probably catch the sheen of your fiber if it has one, you'll want to spin as close to worsted as possible. If you want a squooshy yarn that will be soft, you probably want to spin more woolen.

To do any and all of this, the thing you need to do the most is practice. After 30 years, I'm fair decent at making yarn, but I am not a 'technical' spinner. I'm only just beginning to make specific types of yarn.

Resources

<https://15thcenturyspinning.wordpress.com>

Blog of a woman attempting to recreate 15th century spinning techniques using experimental archaeology. A lot of nice reference images and videos.

What are batts, top, roving, and so forth?

<http://abbysyarns.com/2007/08/whats-are-batts-top-roving-and-so-forth/>

An excellent description of the various modern fiber preparations by Abby Franquemont. Abby also made the video “Drafting: The long and short of it” produced by Interweave Press.

Example of double drafting (and carding)

NAVAJO WEAVER CLARA SHERMAN CARDING AND SPINNING

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=D_p7OIghMVw

Many eastern European women spinning with distaffs

Prelo u selu Selanac-Obicaji Radjevine-Dobrivoje i Dobrila Pantelic

According to Google translate: “Prelo in the village Selanac-Customs RAĐEVINA-Dobrivoje and Dobrila Pantelic” and the detected language was “Croatian”.

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YYdhME5mX_I

The best part of this video is that if you watch the hands, the women are spinning differently. There is no one true way! Do what is right for your hands and body and habits.