



# From Sheep to Shop

A comprehensive review of the fiber arts process

By Angela Mathias

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## Chapter 1: Welcome to the Flock: My Journey with Fiber



There's something magical about holding raw fleece in your hands for the first time. It's soft, it's a little greasy, it smells earthy and alive—and suddenly you're connected to something bigger than yourself. A sheep, a farm, centuries of tradition, and the promise of yarn you'll make with your own two hands.

That's how it started for me, anyway. One moment I was curious about where yarn came from, and the next I was elbow-deep in wool, completely hooked on the whole beautiful process. If you're reading this, maybe you've felt that tug too—or maybe you're about to discover it.

This chapter isn't a how-to (we'll get to plenty of those later). It's an invitation. Come sit with me in my wool office—yes, that's really what I call it—and let me share why fiber arts became my world, and why it might just become yours too.

## How I Found Fiber (Or How Fiber Found Me)

I didn't grow up spinning or knitting. There were no sheep in my backyard, no family tradition of handwork passed down through generations. My fiber journey started the way a lot of modern makers begin: with curiosity, a little bit of yarn, and absolutely no idea what I was getting into.

The first time I saw someone spinning yarn at a local festival, I was mesmerized. The wheel turned, fiber flowed through their fingers, and yarn—actual, real yarn—appeared like magic. I had to try it. I needed to try it.

So I did. And let me tell you, my first attempts were... well, let's just say they were learning experiences. Lumpy, bumpy, wildly uneven yarn that looked more like a science experiment than something you'd want to knit with. But here's the thing: I loved every second of it.

There's something deeply satisfying about taking a cloud of fiber and turning it into something useful, something beautiful, something yours. Every time I sit down at my wheel or pick up my spindle, I feel that same excitement I felt at that first festival.

## Why Wool? Why Now?

All things wool! All things wool! If only I had the courage (and time) to go around chanting this in public. Can you imagine me downtown, in front of the congress building, holding up a sign, chanting for change?

Okay, maybe I'm not that passionate (or maybe I am). But seriously—wool is incredible.

It's warm but breathable. It wicks moisture. It's naturally flame-resistant. It's renewable and biodegradable. It comes in gorgeous natural colors from dozens of different breeds, each with its own character and texture. And when you work with it—really work with it, from fleece to fiber to yarn—you understand why humans have been doing this for thousands of years.

Wool, wonderful wool. Just like Mary Poppins—it's "practically perfect in every way."

Wake up, fumble my way to coffee, shuffle into my wool office. Take a sleepy look around, decide which wooly thing to start my day with. (Sip, slurp, sip.) Every morning. Most often it's yarn or fiber—touching it, sorting it, spinning it, dyeing it, photographing it, packing it up to share with you.

In a world of synthetic everything, working with wool grounds me. It connects me to the land, to the animals, to the seasons, to the long history of makers who came before us. On Distaff Day in centuries past, women resumed their household duties after Epiphany—and spinning was a major part of that work. We're part of that tradition now, keeping those skills alive.

## **From Fleece to Yarn: The Journey That Hooked Me**

Here's what got me completely obsessed: the whole process.

You start with a fleece—literally the wool shorn from a sheep. It's full of lanolin (that's the greasy stuff), bits of hay, maybe some vegetable matter. You wash it, dry it, and suddenly you've got this fluffy, clean cloud of fiber.

Then you card or comb it, aligning the fibers and preparing them for spinning. You sit at your wheel (or pick up your spindle), and you start drafting—pulling fiber out and adding twist. The twist locks the fibers together, and inch by inch, you're making yarn.

When you've spun enough singles, you ply them together—spinning them back on themselves to create a balanced, strong yarn. Then you set the twist, dry it, wind it into a skein, and there it is: handspun yarn. Your handspun yarn.

Every step matters. Every choice you make—how much you draft, how much twist you add, how you ply it—affects the final yarn. And that's the beauty of it. You're not just following a recipe; you're creating something unique every single time.

## **Building a Fiber Community**

The best part of my year? Meeting all of you. In-person at fiber festivals, trunk shows, and markets. Online through messages and emails. At the shop in Buda, where we can chat about your projects and processes over coffee (okay, I'm having coffee—you can have whatever you want).

2022 was filled with meeting people who love yarn, love wool, love spinning, want to love spinning, and love making with yarn. 2023 brought even more fiber people into my world—at Bandera Fiber Fest, at the Texas Yarn Lovers Event, during the Best Little Yarn Crawl in Texas, and at the shop.

What a fantastic start to 2023. Since March I've met so many new fiber people. It's been incredibly nice to meet each of you, hear about your fiber spinning and processes, and share a little bit of Fiber Fate with you.

That's what this is all about: community. Sharing the joy of making. Celebrating each other's projects. Troubleshooting together when something goes wrong. Cheering each other on when something goes right.

Whether you're a seasoned spinner or you've never touched a fleece in your life, you're welcome here. There's room in this flock for everyone.

## What This Book Will Teach You

In the chapters ahead, we'll dive deep into the whole fiber journey:

- **Choosing and understanding fiber:** Different breeds, fiber types, and what they're best for
- **Preparing fiber:** Washing fleece, carding, combing, and blending
- **Spinning techniques:** Spindles, wheels, and everything in between
- **Plying and finishing:** Creating balanced, beautiful yarn
- **Dyeing:** Adding color to fiber and yarn
- **Designing your yarn:** Making yarn for specific projects
- **Using your handspun:** Knitting, crocheting, and weaving with what you've made

Each chapter builds on the last, taking you from raw fiber to finished creation.

We'll work through techniques step-by-step, troubleshoot common problems, and explore creative variations. You'll learn the fundamentals, but you'll also discover your own style and preferences along the way.

This isn't just about following instructions. It's about developing a relationship with fiber—understanding how it works, what it wants to do, and how you can work together to create something beautiful.

## Your Fiber Journey Starts Here

So here we are. You're holding this book (or reading it on a screen), and I'm inviting you into the wonderful, woolly world of fiber arts.

Maybe you're curious about where yarn comes from. Maybe you want to make something completely unique. Maybe you're drawn to the meditative rhythm of spinning or the satisfaction of creating something with your own hands. Maybe you just really, really love wool.

Whatever brought you here, I'm so glad you came.

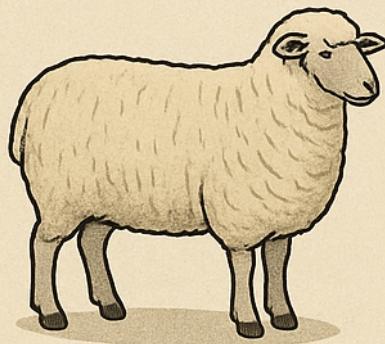
Cheers to making yarn and making with yarn! Let's get started.

— Angela

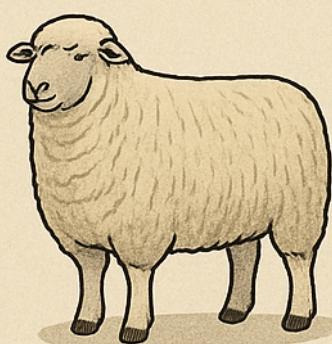
## Chapter 2: Meeting Your Fleece: Sourcing and Selecting Wool

Meeting Your Fleece: Sourcing and Selecting Wool

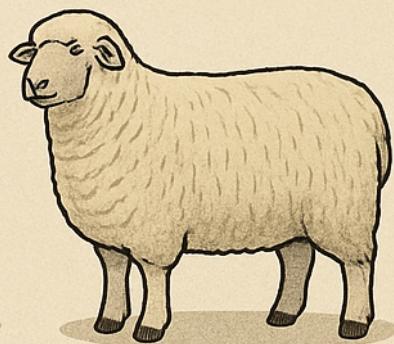
# UNDERSTANDING WOOL BREEDS



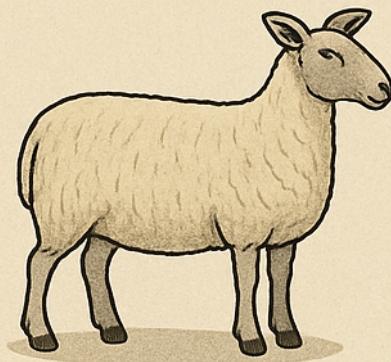
MERINO



ROMNEY



CORRIE DALE



BORDER  
LEICESTER



JACOB



SHETLAND

There's something magical about holding raw fleece for the first time—the lanolin coating your fingers, the crimp springing back when you tug gently, the earthy smell that connects you directly to the animal who grew it. This isn't yarn yet. It's potential.

Before you can spin, you need to choose your fiber. Walking into your first fiber festival or opening that first online fleece order can feel overwhelming. Merino?

Corriedale? Romney? What makes a fleece "good"? How much do you need? What if you choose wrong?

Here's the truth: there's no single "perfect" fleece. There's only the right fleece for your project, your skill level, and what excites you. This chapter will help you understand what you're looking at, where to find it, and how to make confident choices. By the end, you'll be able to walk up to a fleece table, run your hands through the locks, and know exactly what that wool wants to become.

## **Understanding Wool Breeds**

Different sheep breeds produce dramatically different fleeces. Think of it like apples—a Granny Smith and a Honeycrisp are both apples, but they behave completely differently in a pie. Same with wool.

### **The Big Categories**

Wool breeds fall into three main groups, each with distinct characteristics:

#### **Fine Wools** (Merino, Rambouillet, Cormo)

- Extremely soft with tiny fiber diameter (under 22 microns)
- High crimp—lots of tiny waves
- Perfect for next-to-skin wear
- Can be challenging for beginners (slippery, requires careful drafting)
- Spins into fine, delicate yarns

These are the cashmere sweater wools—luxuriously soft but requiring patience and practice to spin well. The high crimp creates wonderful elasticity, but the fine fibers can be slippery in your hands until you develop a feel for the right amount of twist.

#### **Medium Wools** (Corriedale, Romney, Polwarth, Columbia)

- Balanced softness and durability (24-32 microns)
- Moderate crimp with clear lock structure
- Forgiving and versatile—ideal for learning
- Works for garments, accessories, and sturdy projects
- The "everyday" wools most spinners return to again and again

These are your reliable friends in the fiber world. They're soft enough to enjoy wearing, sturdy enough to forgive beginner mistakes, and versatile enough to work for almost any project. The clear lock structure makes them easier to handle during washing and preparation.

#### **Long Wools** (Lincoln, Leicester, Wensleydale, Cotswold)

- Lustrous with dramatic sheen
- Long staple length (6-12 inches or more)

- Lower crimp, more drape
- Beautiful for shawls, art yarns, and doll hair
- Requires different spinning approach—more about smoothing than fluffing

These wools catch the light like silk. The long, lustrous locks create yarns with beautiful drape, perfect for flowing shawls and garments where you want movement rather than structure.

## Breed Characteristics That Matter

When you're evaluating fleeces, these qualities determine what you can make:

**Staple Length:** The length of individual locks, measured from cut end to tip. Shorter (2-3 inches) works for woolen spinning and fluffy yarns. Longer (4-6+ inches) suits worsted spinning and smooth yarns. Your first fleece? Aim for 3-5 inches—versatile and manageable.

When you measure staple length, gently hold a lock at the cut end and let it hang naturally. Don't stretch it—you want the relaxed length. This measurement tells you how you'll draft the fiber during spinning.

**Crimp:** Those waves and zigzags in the fiber. More crimp means more elasticity, loft, and warmth. It also means the yarn will have more memory—perfect for ribbing and textured stitches. Less crimp gives drape and sheen.

To see crimp clearly, hold a lock up to the light and look at it from the side. Fine wools have tiny, tight crimps—sometimes 12-15 waves per inch. Medium wools show moderate, clear crimps. Long wools have gentle waves rather than distinct zigzags. When you tug gently and release, high-crimp wool springs back enthusiastically.

**Micron Count:** Fiber diameter measured in microns. Lower numbers = softer. Under 20 microns feels luxurious. Over 35 microns gets scratchy. Most medium wools sit comfortably in the 25-30 range—soft enough for hats and cowls, sturdy enough for mittens and socks.

You can't see micron count, but you can feel it. Rub a lock against your neck or inner wrist—sensitive areas that will tell you honestly if it's comfortable. Not all vendors know the exact micron count of their fleeces, but they can usually tell you if it's soft, medium, or sturdy. Trust your skin—it's an excellent judge.

**Color:** Wool comes in more than white. You'll find grays, browns, blacks, and everything between. Colored fleeces are gorgeous spun natural or overdyed for rich, complex tones. White fleeces give you a blank canvas for dyeing bright, clear colors.

Natural colors range from creamy ivory to charcoal gray, with shades of brown, silver, and even reddish tones. Some fleeces show beautiful variation within a single lock. White fleeces take dye brilliantly, giving you the full rainbow of possibilities.

Reading about breeds is useful, but touching them is essential. At fiber festivals, don't be shy—vendors expect you to handle fleeces. Pick up locks, pull them gently, feel the crimp, notice the luster. Ask questions. Most shepherds and vendors love talking about their fleeces.

Your preferences will develop through experience. The Merino that feels too slippery when you're just starting might become your favorite after you've spun a few fleeces. Keep notes if you're inclined—breed, source, what you liked, what challenged you. But also trust your hands and your memory.

## Where to Find Fleece

You have more options than you might think, each with advantages depending on where you live and how you like to shop.

### Fiber Festivals and Sheep & Wool Shows

This is where many spinners get hooked. Walking through rows of fleeces, touching everything, talking directly to shepherds—it's an experience. You'll see fleeces skirted and displayed, often with breed information and photos of the sheep.

**Advantages:** Touch before buying. Ask questions. Learn about the farm and flock. Often get better prices than online. Meet other spinners and build community.

**Tips:** Bring cash (many vendors prefer it). Arrive early for best selection. Don't buy everything your first time—one or two fleeces is plenty to start. Take notes on what you like so you remember later. Bring a tote bag or rolling cart—fleeces are heavier than they look.

Many festivals also offer fleece judging competitions where you can see examples of excellent fleeces and learn what judges look for.

### Online Fleece Sales

Many farms sell directly through websites, Etsy shops, or social media. You'll find detailed descriptions, photos, and often video of the fleece.

**Advantages:** Shop year-round. Access breeds not available locally. Compare prices easily. Shop in your pajamas.

**Challenges:** Can't touch before buying. Rely on seller's descriptions and photos. Shipping costs add up (fleeces are heavy).

**How to succeed:** Read descriptions carefully. Look for information about staple length, micron count, and any issues (VM, second cuts, weak spots). Check seller reviews—experienced spinners will mention if fleeces match descriptions. Look for multiple photos showing different parts of the fleece and close-ups of lock structure. Start with smaller amounts (half fleeces or samplers) until you trust the seller's descriptions.

### **Local Farms and Fiber Mills**

If you live in sheep country, you might find farms selling directly. Some fiber mills sell fleeces from their clients' flocks.

**Advantages:** Build relationships with local shepherds. Sometimes get fleeces fresh off the sheep. Support your local fiber community. Potentially lower prices. Learn about sheep care and seasonal rhythms.

**Tips:** Call ahead—not all farms welcome drop-ins. Ask if they have skirted fleeces available. Some farms only sell whole fleeces, others will split them. Visit during shearing season (typically spring) for the freshest selection.

### **Fiber Clubs and Co-ops**

Some spinning guilds and fiber groups organize group buys, splitting fleeces or ordering together for better prices.

**Advantages:** Try small amounts of many breeds. Share shipping costs. Learn from more experienced members. Built-in community support for processing questions.

**How to find them:** Check for local spinning guilds through the Handweavers Guild of America or regional fiber organizations. Look for fiber groups on social media. Ask at your local yarn shop—they often know about fiber communities.

## **Evaluating Fleece Quality**

Not all fleeces are created equal. Here's what to look for when you're deciding whether to buy.

## The Visual Check

Spread a section of fleece out and look at it in good light. Natural daylight is ideal.

**Lock structure:** Locks should be distinct and organized, not matted or tangled. You should be able to separate individual locks easily. Pick up a lock and look at how it holds together—it should have clear organization from cut end to tip.

**Tips and cut ends:** Tips might be weathered or sunbleached—that's normal and gets removed during processing. Cut ends should be relatively even. Jagged, short bits mixed in are "second cuts" (when the shearer went over the same spot twice) and create annoying short fibers that pill. A few second cuts are inevitable, but if you're seeing them throughout the fleece, that's a problem.

**Color consistency:** Some variation is natural and beautiful. But dramatic differences might indicate staining or heavy weathering.

**Vegetable matter (VM):** Bits of hay, straw, or burrs. Some VM is inevitable—sheep live outside. But if you're picking out huge amounts, that fleece will be frustrating to process.

## The Touch Test

This tells you what the visual can't. Don't be shy—vendors expect you to handle fleeces.

**Squeeze a lock:** Does it spring back? Good crimp and elasticity. Does it stay compressed? Might be weak or damaged.

**Tug gently:** The lock should hold together. If it breaks apart easily, the fleece might be tender (weak) from illness, poor nutrition, or stress during the sheep's year.

**Feel the tips:** Are they soft or harsh and brittle? Harsh tips mean weathering—you'll need to remove more length during processing.

**Grease level:** Lanolin feels waxy and slightly sticky. Some breeds produce more than others. Very dry fleece might have been stored a long time. Extremely greasy fleece takes more washing but isn't necessarily bad—just different.

## The Smell Test

Yes, really. Fleece should smell like sheep—earthy, lanolin, slightly animal. It should not smell rotten, moldy, or like urine. Those smells indicate problems you can't fix.

## What to Ask

When you're talking to a seller (in person or online), these questions help you make informed decisions:

- What breed? (Confirms what you're looking at)
- How long is the staple? (Helps you plan your spinning approach)
- Do you know the micron count? (Not all sellers do, but it's useful)
- When was it sheared? (Recent is good; years-old fleece can deteriorate)
- How was it stored? (Cool, dry, and dark preserves quality)
- Is it skirted? (Removes the worst bits—belly wool, tags, edges)
- Any issues I should know about? (Good sellers will be honest)

Don't be shy about asking. Shepherds and fleece vendors want you to be happy with your purchase. They'd rather answer questions than have you disappointed.

## How Much Fleece Do You Need?

This trips up new spinners constantly. Fleece are big. A whole fleece might be 4-10 pounds or more, depending on breed.

### Starting Amounts

For your first fleece, consider buying:

- **Half a fleece** (2-4 pounds): Enough to really learn the fiber without committing to huge amounts
- **A sampler pack** (4-8 ounces of multiple breeds): Lets you compare and discover preferences
- **One pound**: Plenty for several small projects or one medium project

You can always buy more. You can't unbuy fleece that's overwhelming you.

### Estimating Project Needs

Raw fleece loses 20-40% of its weight during washing (that's dirt and lanolin leaving). Then you lose a bit more to waste during processing.

**Rough formula:** 1 pound raw fleece = 10-12 ounces clean fiber = approximately 400-600 yards of worsted-weight yarn (depending on your spinning)

**Common projects** (clean fiber needed):

- **Fingerless mitts**: 2-3 ounces
- **Hat**: 3-4 ounces
- **Cowl**: 4-6 ounces
- **Shawl**: 6-10 ounces
- **Sweater**: 16-24+ ounces

Buy a little more than you think you need. Running out halfway through a project is heartbreaking, and you can always use extra for sampling or practice.

## Making Your First Purchase

You're standing at a fleece table or scrolling through online listings. Here's how to choose.

### For Your Very First Fleece

Go with a **medium wool**—Corriedale, Romney, or Polwarth are all excellent choices. Here's why:

- Forgiving to wash and process
- Clear lock structure helps you learn
- Soft enough to enjoy, sturdy enough to handle beginner mistakes
- Versatile for different spinning styles
- Reasonably priced

Look for:

- 3-5 inch staple length
- Obvious crimp
- Minimal VM
- Well-skirted (clean edges, no belly wool)
- Natural color if you're not planning to dye immediately

### Trust Your Hands

After all the technical evaluation, pay attention to what draws you. If you keep coming back to a particular fleece, if it feels good in your hands, if you're already imagining what it could become—that matters. Spinning takes time. You'll spend hours with this fiber. Choose something that makes you happy.

### Don't Overthink It

I've watched new spinners agonize over their first fleece purchase for so long that they leave without buying anything. Here's permission: you don't have to find the perfect fleece. You need a fleece to learn with. If it's a medium wool in decent condition, you'll be fine. You'll learn what you like and don't like. That knowledge is worth more than finding the mythical "perfect" first fleece.

## Storing Your Fleece

You've made your purchase. Now what?

### Short-Term Storage (Before Processing)

Keep fleece in a **breathable container**—a mesh laundry bag, paper feed sack, or cotton pillowcase. Plastic bags trap moisture and can lead to mold or mildew.

Store in a **cool, dry place** away from direct sunlight. Basements work if they're not damp. Closets are fine. Attics can get too hot.

**Protect from moths and carpet beetles.** These fiber pests love wool. Cedar chips, lavender sachets, or moth-away products help. Check your fleece occasionally—if you see tiny holes or webbing, you have a problem that needs immediate attention. Freezing fleece for 72 hours kills any eggs or larvae if you suspect infestation.

### **Long-Term Storage (Processed Fiber)**

Once you've washed and carded your fleece, store it in breathable bags or boxes with moth protection. Some spinners use vacuum-sealed bags for very long storage, but make sure fiber is completely dry first.

Label everything—breed, color, purchase date, and any processing notes. Trust me, six months later you won't remember which bag is the Corriedale and which is the Romney.

## **Building Your Fleece Knowledge**

Every fleece teaches you something. Your first one might feel overwhelming—so much fiber! But as you wash, card, and spin it, you'll start understanding what that particular wool wants to do. How much twist it needs. Whether it wants to be fluffy or smooth. What it's perfect for.

Keep notes if you're inclined. Breed, source, what you liked, what was challenging, what you made. Some spinners keep a fiber journal with photos and samples. Others just remember. Either way works.

Try different breeds as you gain experience. That Merino you found too slippery at first? You might love it after you've spun a few fleeces. The Romney that seemed plain? You'll appreciate its reliability when you need consistent yarn for a big project.

Visit fleeces like you'd visit a farmers market—touching, comparing, learning what's in season and what speaks to you. Talk to other spinners about their favorite breeds. You'll discover that everyone has different preferences, and that's part of the beauty.

The relationship you're building isn't just with fiber. It's with the animals who grew it, the shepherds who raised them, the land they grazed, and the centuries-old tradition you're joining. Every time you choose a fleece, you're voting for the kind of fiber world you want to support—small farms, rare breeds, sustainable practices, local economies.

That's a lot of meaning in a bag of wool. But it's also just the beginning of your next project, waiting for your hands to transform it into something beautiful.

In the next chapter, we'll take that fleece you've chosen and learn how to wash it—transforming greasy, dirty raw wool into clean, fluffy fiber ready for spinning. You'll learn techniques that work for different fleece types, troubleshoot common washing challenges, and discover how satisfying it is to see that transformation happen in your own hands.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/Concept	Description
<b>Visual fleece evaluation</b>	Assessing lock structure, tip condition, color consistency, and vegetable matter content to judge quality
<b>Physical fleece testing</b>	Using touch to check crimp elasticity, tensile strength, tip condition, and grease level
<b>Smell assessment</b>	Identifying normal sheep smell versus problematic odors indicating rot, mold, or contamination
<b>Breed category identification</b>	Recognizing fine, medium, and long wool characteristics and matching them to project needs
<b>Staple length assessment</b>	Measuring fiber length from cut end to tip to determine appropriate spinning technique
<b>Crimp evaluation</b>	Identifying crimp patterns and predicting yarn elasticity, loft, and memory
<b>Vendor communication</b>	Asking informed questions about breed, processing, storage, condition, and any issues
<b>Quantity estimation</b>	Calculating fleece needs based on project requirements, accounting for 20-40% washing loss
<b>Proper fleece storage</b>	Using breathable containers, cool/dry conditions, and pest prevention for raw and processed fiber

## Glossary of Terms

**Crimp:** The natural waves or zigzag pattern in wool fibers that creates elasticity, loft, and warmth in yarn; fine wools have tight, frequent crimps while long wools have gentle waves

**Cut end:** The end of a wool lock where it was sheared from the sheep; should be relatively even in quality fleece without excessive second cuts

**Fiber diameter:** The thickness of individual wool fibers, measured in microns; determines softness and next-to-skin comfort (lower numbers = softer)

**Fine wool:** Sheep breeds producing very soft, high-crimp fleece under 22 microns; includes Merino, Rambouillet, and Cormo

**Grease:** The lanolin coating on raw fleece that feels waxy and protects the fiber; washes out during processing

**Lock:** A naturally organized cluster of wool fibers that grows together and maintains its structure after shearing; the basic unit of fleece evaluation

**Long wool:** Sheep breeds producing lustrous fleece with long staple length (6-12+ inches) and low crimp; includes Lincoln, Leicester, Wensleydale, and Cotswold

**Medium wool:** Versatile sheep breeds with balanced characteristics (24-32 microns, 3-6 inch staple); includes Corriedale, Romney, Polwarth, and Columbia; ideal for beginners

**Micron count:** Measurement of fiber diameter in microns (one millionth of a meter); lower numbers indicate softer fiber (under 20 = luxurious, over 35 = scratchy)

**Second cuts:** Short fiber pieces created when a shearer goes over the same area twice; causes pilling and processing frustration

**Skirting:** Removing the lowest-quality wool from fleece edges, belly, and rear before sale; well-skirted fleeces are cleaner and easier to process

**Staple length:** The length of a wool lock from cut end to tip; affects spinning technique, yarn characteristics, and whether woolen or worsted preparation works best

**Tender fleece:** Weak fiber that breaks easily, usually caused by stress, illness, or poor nutrition during the sheep's year; difficult to spin successfully

**Tips:** The ends of wool locks that grew first and have been exposed to weather longest; may show wear, sun damage, or brittleness

**Vegetable matter (VM):** Plant debris (hay, straw, seeds, burrs) caught in fleece; removed during washing and processing; excessive amounts make fleece frustrating to work with

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## Exercises

### Exercise 1: Hands-On Breed Comparison

Visit a fiber festival, farm, or yarn shop that sells raw fleece. Handle at least three different breeds, noting the differences in staple length, crimp, and softness. Take notes or photos to remember which characteristics appeal to you most.

**Hint:** Focus on how each fleece feels in your hands rather than trying to memorize technical details. Notice which ones you keep coming back to touch again—that's valuable information about your preferences.

### Exercise 2: Quality Evaluation Practice

Practice the visual and touch evaluation techniques on any available fleece sample. Assess lock structure, test crimp by squeezing and releasing, gently tug to check strength, and examine tips and cut ends. Write down your observations.

**Hint:** Look for clear lock structure that separates easily, crimp that springs back when compressed, locks that hold together when tugged gently, and relatively clean cut ends without excessive second cuts.

### Exercise 3: Project Planning Calculation

Calculate how much raw fleece you would need for a project you want to make. Account for 30% weight loss during washing and processing. If possible, verify your calculation with an experienced spinner.

**Hint:** For a hat requiring 3-4 ounces of clean fiber, you would need approximately 4.5-6 ounces of raw fleece to account for washing loss. Always round up slightly to ensure you have enough.

### Exercise 4: Breed-to-Project Matching

Research three different wool breeds online or in breed guides. Compare their characteristics and identify which would be best suited for: a) a baby blanket, b) hiking socks, c) a drapey shawl. Explain your reasoning.

**Hint:** Baby blanket: soft fine or medium wool (Merino, Polwarth) for next-to-skin comfort. Hiking socks: sturdy medium wool (Romney, Corriedale) for durability. Drapey shawl: long wool (Leicester, Wensleydale) for luster and drape.

## Chapter 3: Washing Raw Fleece: From Lanolin to Loft

There's something magical about washing fleece for the first time. You start with stiff, greasy locks that smell distinctly of sheep—and through nothing more than hot water and patience, you end up with soft, fluffy fiber ready to become yarn. It's the first big transformation in your fleece-to-yarn journey, and it never gets old.

I'll be honest: washing fleece isn't glamorous. You'll stand at your sink longer than seems reasonable, your kitchen will smell like wet sheep, and you might wonder if you should have just bought roving. But this is where you really start to understand your fiber. You'll feel how the crimp springs back when the lanolin releases. You'll see the true color emerge. You'll begin to know whether you've got soft, drapey fiber or something with more body and bounce. This hands-on knowledge will inform every decision you make from here forward.

The challenge? Fleece needs hot water to release lanolin, but hot water plus agitation equals felt. We want clean fiber with all its spinning potential intact, not a lumpy mat. So we're going to learn the gentle approach—how to use heat and soap without the movement that would bind those fibers together permanently.

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand how to evaluate your water temperature, handle wet fiber without causing felting, execute the multi-bath washing process, troubleshoot common problems, and dry your fleece properly. You'll have the confidence to transform any raw fleece into clean, lofty fiber ready for the next steps in your spinning journey.

## WHAT WE'RE ACTUALLY REMOVING



## AND WHAT WE'RE KEEPING



### **What We're Actually Removing (and What We're Keeping)**

Raw fleece carries the sheep's own protection system: lanolin (that waxy, slightly sticky coating), suint (dried perspiration that's water-soluble), dirt from the pasture, and often bits of hay, straw, or other vegetable matter. Some of this rinses away easily. The lanolin requires hot water and soap to emulsify and release.

You might have heard that lanolin is wonderful for your hands—and it is, in the right form. In raw fleece, though, it makes the fiber difficult to work with and prevents proper drafting during spinning. We need it gone. But we're not trying

to strip the fiber completely. Well-washed fleece should still have a pleasant hand—slightly soft, not squeaky or brittle.

We're keeping the fiber's crimp, structure, and the natural characteristics that make it perfect for spinning. The goal is removing what the sheep doesn't need anymore while preserving what makes the fiber beautiful.

## **The Felting Fear (and How We Avoid It)**

Let me put your mind at ease: yes, you can felt your fleece during washing. But you won't, because you're going to follow the cardinal rule: **never agitate wet wool**. No swishing, no stirring, no rubbing, no running water directly onto the fiber. We'll move the fiber from bath to bath gently, and we'll let the water do the work.

Think of wool fibers as having tiny scales along their length—like a pine cone or a miniature roof with shingles. In hot water, those scales open up. If you agitate the fiber while the scales are open, they catch on neighboring fibers and lock together. That's felt. Once it happens, you can't undo it. So our entire washing approach is designed around keeping everything calm and still.

Felting requires three things: heat, moisture, and agitation. Washing provides the first two, so we eliminate the third completely.

## **Materials and Setup: Getting Your Washing Station Ready**

Good news: you probably already have most of what you need. Fleece washing doesn't require fancy equipment, just thoughtful setup and the right supplies. I do most of my fleece washing at the kitchen sink, though I'll use a large plastic basin or even the bathtub for bigger batches.

### **Essential Supplies**

#### **For containing the fiber:**

- Mesh laundry bags or zippered lingerie bags (3-4 bags for a typical washing session)
- These let water flow through while keeping your locks organized and preventing fiber loss down the drain
- Alternative: mesh produce bags or a clean pillowcase (though mesh drains better)

#### **For washing:**

- Dawn dish soap or another grease-cutting dish detergent (I use basic blue Dawn—gentle but effective on lanolin)
- Alternatively: dedicated wool scours like Power Scour or Unicorn Power Scour

- Very hot water—as hot as your tap provides, ideally 160-180°F (71-82°C)
- If your water heater doesn't get that hot, heat water in a kettle to boost the temperature

### **For handling and draining:**

- Large basin, sink, or bathtub
- Rubber gloves if you're sensitive to hot water or lanolin
- Thermometer (optional but helpful for consistency)
- Towels for drying
- Drying racks, sweater drying screens, or clean towels spread in a safe drying area

### **Nice to have:**

- A second basin so you can have the next bath ready while one is soaking
- A salad spinner for removing excess water (sounds silly, works great)
- White vinegar for a final rinse (optional—helps with any soap residue)

### **Workspace Setup**

Before you fill your first basin, set up properly. You're going to be at this for a while—each bath takes 15-20 minutes, and you'll do at least three—so make yourself comfortable. Clear your counter space. Set out your soap, mesh bags, and towels. Know where your fiber will dry (you'll need space for wet locks to spread out with air circulation).

Set up your drying station first—either sweater racks positioned near a fan, or towels spread on a table where air can circulate. There's nothing worse than finishing your careful washing only to realize you have nowhere to put the clean fiber.

If you're using your kitchen sink, put on some music or a podcast. This is meditative work, but it takes time.

### **Preparing Your Fleece**

Take your skirted fleece and divide it into manageable portions. I typically wash 4-8 ounces at a time—enough to fill a mesh bag loosely without cramming. Fiber needs room for water to circulate and lanolin to escape. If you pack the bags too full, the centers won't get clean.

As you're loading your mesh bags, try to keep the locks oriented the same way—tips pointing one direction, cut ends the other. This isn't absolutely critical, but it makes your life easier later when you're carding or combing. It's also a good moment to pull out any remaining vegetable matter or seriously short bits you missed during skirting.

Some spinners tie locks in bundles with figure-eight ties before washing to keep them perfectly organized. I find this fussy for most fleeces, but if you're washing a longwool with gorgeous locks you want to preserve for worsted spinning, it's worth considering.

## **The Washing Process: Step by Step**

Here's where we get into the actual washing. The method I'm sharing is sometimes called the "soak method" or "hot bath method"—it's the gentlest approach and the one I trust for fleeces I care about. The basic principle: hot water and soap do the work, time does the rest, and we keep our hands off as much as possible.

### **First Bath: The Lanolin Release**

This bath does the heavy lifting—most lanolin releases here.

#### **Step 1: Fill your basin**

Fill your sink or basin with very hot water—as hot as your tap provides. You're aiming for 160-180°F if you're measuring, but "too hot to put your bare hands in comfortably" works as a guideline. Fill the basin deep enough to completely submerge your bagged fiber—usually 6-8 inches of water.

#### **Step 2: Add soap**

Add a good squirt of dish soap—I use about 1-2 tablespoons for a sinkful. You want enough to cut the grease but not so much that you'll be rinsing forever. Give the water a gentle swirl to distribute the soap, then stop moving it. From here on, still water is your friend.

#### **Step 3: Submerge the fiber**

Gently—and I mean gently—lower your mesh bags into the hot soapy water. The fiber will want to float at first. Press it down slowly until it's submerged, then leave it alone. Don't swish. Don't poke. Don't check on it every thirty seconds. Just let it sit.

I know this feels counterintuitive. We're used to scrubbing things to get them clean. But with fleece, the heat and soap are doing all the work. The lanolin is melting and emulsifying. The dirt is loosening. Movement would just cause problems.

#### **Step 4: Wait**

Set a timer for 15-20 minutes and walk away. This is a good time to set up your next bath.

### **Step 5: Check your water**

When the timer goes off, look at your water without disturbing the fiber. If you're washing a particularly greasy fleece, you'll see the water has turned cloudy or even milky—that's lanolin. There might be dirt settled at the bottom. This is all good. It means things are working.

### **Step 6: Remove the fiber**

Here's where gentle handling matters most. Reach into the water and lift out your mesh bags slowly. Let the water drain back into the basin—don't squeeze, don't wring, just let gravity do its thing. The fiber is vulnerable right now, hot and wet with all those scales open. Treat it like you're handling something precious, because you are.

Set your bags aside on a towel while you prepare the next bath. Don't let them cool down completely—we want to keep the fiber warm through all the baths.

### **Second Bath: Continuing the Clean**

Drain your first bath and fill the basin again with fresh hot soapy water using the same proportions as before. Submerge your mesh bags gently, and repeat the 15-20 minute soak.

This second bath catches whatever the first bath loosened but didn't quite remove. You'll usually see less dramatic cloudiness this time—the water might be slightly murky rather than milky. That's a good sign. It means you're making progress.

When the soak is done, lift the bags out gently and check the water. If it's relatively clear, you can move on to rinsing. If it's still quite dirty or greasy-looking, you might want to do a third wash bath before rinsing. Some fleeces—particularly those from sheep that live in dusty conditions or haven't been skirted well—need that extra wash. Don't rush it. Better an extra bath now than fiber that never quite feels clean.

### **Rinse Baths: Removing the Soap**

Now we're rinsing away the soap. Fill your basin with hot water—same temperature as before, but this time no soap. Submerge the fiber gently and let it soak for 10-15 minutes. The shorter time is fine here since we're not trying to dissolve anything, just rinse.

Lift the bags out gently and check the water. If you see any suds or if the water feels slippery, you need another rinse. Repeat until the water is completely clear and doesn't feel soapy. This usually takes two rinse baths, sometimes three if you used a lot of soap.

Some spinners like to add a splash of white vinegar to the final rinse—about 1/4 cup per basin. The acid helps neutralize any lingering soap and can make the fiber feel a bit softer. I do this sometimes, especially with fleeces that seem to hold onto soap, but it's not required.

**The temperature consistency note:** Keep everything consistently hot throughout. If you shock the fiber with a sudden temperature change—hot to cold between baths—you're more likely to cause felting. Keep all baths hot until you're completely done washing and rinsing.

### **Removing Excess Water**

After your final rinse, you need to get excess water out before drying. The fiber is still vulnerable, so we're still being gentle. Here are your options:

**Towel pressing:** Lay a clean towel on your counter. Open a mesh bag and spread the locks out on the towel in a single layer. Lay another towel on top and press down gently with your hands. Don't rub, don't twist—just press. The towels will absorb a lot of water. You can roll the towel up with the fiber inside and press the roll gently if you want, but don't wring it.

**Salad spinner method:** I know this sounds ridiculous, but it works beautifully. Put a small amount of fiber in a salad spinner (still in the mesh bag if it fits, or loose if your spinner has a basket). Spin it for 10-15 seconds. The centrifugal force removes water without any of the agitation that causes felting. This is my favorite method—fast, effective, and safe.

**Gravity draining:** The simplest method—just let the bags hang over your basin or sink for 10-15 minutes. Gravity pulls the water down and out. This takes longer but requires no effort and zero risk.

Whatever method you choose, the goal is fiber that's damp but not dripping. You don't need it bone-dry before moving to your drying station—in fact, a bit of moisture is fine. You just don't want it so wet that it takes days to dry.

### **Drying Your Clean Fleece**

You're almost done. Your fiber is clean, the hard part is over, and now you just need to dry it properly. This is less technically demanding than washing, but it

still matters. Fiber that dries too slowly in a humid environment can develop mildew or a musty smell. Fiber dried in direct sun can become brittle. We're looking for good air circulation in a clean space, away from direct sunlight.

## **Drying Methods and Setup**

**Sweater drying racks:** These mesh racks (the kind you'd dry a hand-knit sweater on) are perfect for fleece. They allow air to circulate above and below the fiber. Set them up in a room with decent air movement—near a fan, by a window with a breeze, or in a room where air circulates naturally.

**Towels on tables:** Spread clean towels on a table and lay your fiber out in a single layer. This works fine, though it takes more space and dries a bit slower since air can't circulate underneath. Change the towels if they get very wet, and flip the fiber once during drying.

**Outside drying:** If you have a clean, shaded outdoor space with good airflow, this can work beautifully. I've dried fleece on my covered porch with great results. Just make sure it's protected from direct sun (which can fade and damage fiber) and from any chance of rain. Also watch for curious insects or birds—you don't want your clean fleece to become nesting material.

**The fan trick:** Position a fan to blow across (not directly at) your drying fiber. This cuts drying time dramatically and virtually eliminates any mildew risk. I almost always use a fan, especially if I'm drying fiber in a humid season.

## **Arranging Fiber for Drying**

Take your damp fiber and spread it out on your drying surface. Don't pile it up—you want a single layer with a bit of space between locks so air can circulate. As you spread it out, gently open up any locks that are compressed. You're not pulling or stretching, just encouraging the fiber to spread a bit so it dries evenly.

If you kept your locks oriented during washing, maintain that now. It's easier to grab a handful of fiber for spinning later if everything is pointing the same direction. But honestly, if the locks got mixed up, it's fine. Clean fiber is the main goal.

The fiber will bloom as it dries—the crimp will spring back, the locks will get fluffy, and you'll finally see what you really have. This is one of my favorite moments in the whole process. The transformation from greasy, compressed locks to soft, lofty fiber is something you have to see to fully appreciate.

## **Knowing When It's Dry**

Drying time depends on your environment—humidity, air circulation, how much water you removed before drying. In a dry climate with a fan, fiber might be ready in 12-24 hours. In humid conditions without much air movement, it could take 2-3 days.

To test for dryness, pick up a lock and feel it thoroughly. It should feel completely dry—no cool spots, no hint of dampness. Pay special attention to the thicker parts of the lock where the cut end is. Tips dry first, so don't be fooled by dry tips on damp locks.

When in doubt, give it more time. Storing fiber that's even slightly damp is asking for mildew, and there's no recovering from that smell. Be patient now and save yourself future heartbreak.

## **Troubleshooting and Special Situations**

### **When Things Go Wrong: Common Problems and Solutions**

#### **Problem: The fiber felted**

This is the heartbreaker. If you notice felting—fiber that's matted, compressed, or stuck together—stop immediately. Unfortunately, you can't unfelt fiber. What likely happened: either you agitated the fiber (swished it, rubbed it, or moved it around in the water), or you shocked it with a sudden temperature change. For the remaining unwashed fiber, slow down and be even more gentle. The felted portion might work for a small felted project, but it's not suitable for spinning.

#### **Problem: The fiber still feels greasy after multiple washes**

Some fleeces are just greasier than others—particularly fine wools like Merino can have substantial lanolin. If your fiber still feels sticky or greasy after two wash baths, do another hot soapy bath. Make sure your water is truly hot—lukewarm water won't emulsify lanolin effectively. You might also try using a bit more soap. Some spinners add a splash of Dawn Power Clean or a dedicated wool scour for particularly greasy fleeces.

#### **Problem: The fiber feels soapy or sticky after rinsing**

You've got soap residue. Do another hot rinse (or two) until the water runs completely clear and the fiber doesn't feel slippery. If you're still having trouble, try the vinegar rinse—1/4 cup white vinegar in your final rinse bath. The acid neutralizes soap residue beautifully.

## **Problem: The fiber has a weird smell after drying**

If it smells musty or mildewy, the fiber didn't dry fast enough or wasn't fully rinsed. You can try rewashing and drying more quickly with better air circulation. If it smells like sheep but not in a bad way—that's actually normal. Clean fleece has a subtle sheepy smell that most spinners find pleasant. It fades as you work with the fiber and is usually completely gone from the finished yarn.

## **Problem: Some vegetable matter is still stuck in the locks**

Hot water and soaking will remove loose VM, but stuck bits often need hand-picking. You can do this after the fiber is dry—just work through it and pull out the hay, straw, or whatever's in there. Some VM will also work out during carding. If there's a lot of VM, you might consider a different preparation method (like combing, which removes more VM than carding).

## **Washing Different Fleece Types**

### **Fine wools (Merino, Rambouillet):**

These are the most felting-prone fleeces due to their high crimp and fine fiber diameter. Use the gentlest handling possible. Some spinners lower the water temperature slightly (150-160°F instead of 180°F) to reduce felting risk, though this means you might need an extra wash bath to fully remove lanolin. Consider washing smaller batches—4 ounces or less—so you can be extra careful.

### **Longwools (Leicester, Lincoln, Wensleydale):**

These gorgeous locks deserve special treatment to preserve their length and luster. Many spinners tie longwool locks in loose bundles with figure-eight ties before washing to keep them organized. Handle these even more gently than usual—the length makes them more vulnerable to tangling. Some people wash longwools in a single layer in a basin rather than in mesh bags, just laying the locks in the water and lifting them out in one piece.

### **Primitive breeds (Shetland, Icelandic, Navajo-Churro):**

Many primitive breeds have dual coats—a soft undercoat and a coarser outer coat. You can wash these normally, but be aware that the two coat types may behave differently. The undercoat is usually more prone to felting. Some spinners separate the coats before washing if they plan to use them differently, but you can also wash them together and separate later if needed.

### **Down breeds (Southdown, Dorset):**

These tend to be dense and can hold a lot of water. Make sure you're giving them adequate soak time and that water is circulating through the dense locks. They may need an extra rinse bath since the density can trap soap.

### **Alternative Washing Methods**

The hot soak method I've described is what I use and recommend, especially for beginners. But it's not the only way to wash fleece. Here are some alternatives you might encounter:

#### **Cold water fermentation (suint fermentation):**

This ancient method uses cold water and time instead of heat and soap. You soak the fleece in cold water for several days to a week, changing the water periodically. The suint (sheep sweat) dissolves and bacteria break down some of the lanolin. This method is very gentle and produces lovely fiber, but it takes much longer, smells pretty strong during the process, and doesn't remove as much lanolin as hot washing. Some spinners love it for particular fleeces; I find it more trouble than it's worth for most situations.

#### **Washing machine method:**

Some spinners wash fleece in a washing machine using the soak cycle or by manually filling the machine, letting it soak, and then spinning out the water without agitation. This can work, but it's riskier—one wrong move or one forgotten setting and you've got a felted mess. If you try this, you absolutely must avoid any agitation whatsoever. The machine is just functioning as a large basin with a convenient drain. I don't recommend this for beginners or for fleeces you care deeply about.

#### **Commercial scouring:**

If you're processing a lot of fleece or don't have the facilities for washing at home, you can send fleece to a commercial mill for scouring. This costs money but saves time and ensures consistent results. The fiber comes back clean and often picked or carded, ready for spinning. This is a great option if you're buying whole fleeces but don't want to do the washing yourself.

## **Storing and Moving Forward**

Congratulations—you've transformed raw, greasy fleece into clean, fluffy fiber. Take a moment to appreciate what you've done. Run your hands through those clean locks. Feel how the crimp springs back. Notice how the color is clearer now,

how the fiber has loft and life. This is what you'll be spinning. This is the foundation of your yarn.

### **Storing Clean Fleece**

Once your fiber is completely dry, store it properly. I use cotton pillowcases, paper bags, or cardboard boxes—anything breathable that allows a bit of air circulation. Plastic bags are tempting because they seal, but they can trap moisture and lead to mildew, especially if the fiber wasn't 100% dry when you stored it.

Moths are the enemy now. Clean fleece smells delicious to them. Add moth prevention to your storage: lavender sachets, cedar chips, or moth-repelling herbs. Some spinners use moth-proof bags or add a few drops of essential oil to cotton balls and tuck them in with the fiber. Check your stored fiber periodically for any signs of moth damage—small holes, webbing, or the moths themselves.

Label everything. A year from now you won't remember which bag is the Romney and which is the Corriedale, or where you got that beautiful gray fleece. Write the breed, the source (farm name or festival), the date you washed it, and any other relevant details on a tag or directly on the storage bag. Your future self will thank you.

### **What Comes Next**

Your clean fleece is ready for the next stage: preparation for spinning. In the upcoming chapters, we'll cover carding (using hand cards or a drum carder to align fibers and create rolags or batts), combing (for smooth, worsted preparations), and other preparation techniques. The method you choose will depend on your fleece type, your spinning style, and what kind of yarn you want to create.

Some fleeces—particularly well-organized longwools—can be spun almost directly from the washed lock with minimal preparation. Others benefit from thorough carding to blend the fibers and remove any remaining VM. We'll explore all of this in detail ahead.

For now, though, just appreciate what you've accomplished. Washing fleece is real work—it's time-consuming, it requires attention and care, and it's not particularly glamorous. But it's also where you really begin to know your fiber. You've touched every lock, watched the transformation happen, made decisions about water temperature and soak time. This hands-on knowledge will inform everything you do from here forward. That's worth celebrating.

## Conclusion: Clean Fleece, Clear Path Forward

You've learned the essential skill of transforming raw fleece into clean, lofty fiber ready for spinning. The process balances hot water and soap with gentle handling to prevent felting. Through multiple baths—washing to release lanolin, rinsing to remove soap—and proper drying with good air circulation, you preserve the fiber's integrity while removing everything that would interfere with spinning.

The key principles you've mastered are:

- **Heat without agitation:** Hot water does the work; your job is to keep everything still
- **Time and patience:** Each bath needs adequate soaking time—rushing leads to problems
- **Gentle handling throughout:** From submerging to draining, gentle is the watchword
- **Thorough rinsing:** Soap residue affects spinning, so rinse until water runs clear
- **Proper drying:** Good air circulation prevents mildew; complete drying prevents storage problems

You've also learned how to troubleshoot common problems, adapt the technique for different fleece types, and store your clean fiber properly. These skills give you the foundation to confidently wash any fleece you encounter.

The transformation from greasy, dirty raw fleece to clean, fluffy fiber is one of the most satisfying parts of working with wool. Yes, it takes time. Yes, your kitchen might smell like sheep for an afternoon. But holding that clean fiber—knowing you did this, that you took raw material and made it ready for spinning—that's a special kind of satisfaction.

As you wash more fleeces, you'll develop your own rhythm and preferences. You'll figure out exactly how you like to set up your washing station, whether you prefer the salad spinner or towel pressing for water removal, how you like to arrange your drying racks. The basic principles stay the same, but you'll make the process your own.

In the next chapter, we'll move on to preparing your clean fiber for spinning—carding, combing, and other techniques that transform washed locks into spinning-ready fiber. But for now, take pride in what you've accomplished. You've completed the first major transformation in the fleece-to-yarn journey. Your fiber is clean, your skills are growing, and you're ready for whatever comes next.

## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Hot soak method</b>	Washing technique using hot water (160-180°F) and soap with no agitation to remove lanolin while preventing felting
<b>Multi-bath washing</b>	Series of 3-4 hot baths (2 wash, 2 rinse) that progressively clean fiber without shocking or agitating it
<b>Gentle handling</b>	Lifting and moving wet fiber slowly without squeezing, wringing, or rubbing to prevent felting
<b>Temperature consistency</b>	Maintaining hot water temperature across all baths to avoid shocking fiber with sudden temperature changes
<b>Lanolin removal</b>	Using hot water and grease-cutting soap to emulsify and release the waxy coating from raw fleece
<b>Thorough rinsing</b>	Repeating rinse baths until water runs completely clear and fiber feels free of soap residue
<b>Water removal</b>	Using towel pressing, salad spinner, or gravity draining to remove excess water without agitation
<b>Proper drying</b>	Spreading fiber in single layer with good air circulation (ideally with fan) to prevent mildew while maintaining loft
<b>Lock orientation</b>	Keeping fiber tips and cut ends aligned throughout washing for easier processing later
<b>Felting prevention</b>	Avoiding the combination of heat, moisture, and agitation that causes wool fibers to lock together permanently

## Glossary of Terms

**Agitation:** Movement or friction applied to wet wool that causes the fiber scales to interlock and create felt; must be avoided during washing.

**Crimp:** The natural wave or zigzag pattern in wool fibers that creates elasticity, loft, and trapping of air for insulation.

**Felting:** The irreversible process where wool fibers lock together due to heat, moisture, and agitation, creating a dense, matted fabric.

**Lanolin:** The natural waxy, water-resistant coating produced by sheep that protects their fleece; must be removed for spinning but requires hot water and soap to emulsify.

**Loft:** The fluffy, three-dimensional quality of clean, dry fiber where the crimp has sprung back and the locks have volume and air space.

**Mesh bag:** A breathable fabric bag (like a lingerie or laundry bag) used to contain fiber during washing while allowing water and soap to flow through.

**Micron:** Unit of measurement for fiber diameter (one-millionth of a meter); lower numbers indicate finer, softer fiber.

**Scouring:** The process of washing raw fleece to remove lanolin, dirt, and other contaminants; can refer to home washing or commercial processing.

**Suint:** Dried sheep perspiration present in raw fleece; water-soluble and easier to remove than lanolin.

**Vegetable matter (VM):** Plant material (hay, straw, seeds, burrs) that gets caught in fleece while the sheep is grazing; some removes during washing, stubborn bits require hand-picking.

**Vinegar rinse:** Optional final rinse using diluted white vinegar to neutralize any remaining soap residue and soften fiber.

**Greasy fleece:** Raw, unwashed fleece still containing its natural lanolin, suint, and dirt.

**Clean weight:** The weight of fleece after washing and drying, typically 60-80% of the original greasy weight.

**Salad spinner method:** Technique using a kitchen salad spinner to remove excess water from washed fiber through centrifugal force without agitation.

**Lock:** A natural cluster or bundle of wool fibers that grows together from the sheep's skin, maintaining its structure through shearing and washing.

## Exercises

### Exercise 1: First Fleece Wash Practice

Obtain 4-6 ounces of raw fleece (ideally a medium wool like Corriedale or Romney). Following the step-by-step instructions in this chapter, wash the fleece using the hot soak method. Pay careful attention to water temperature, gentle handling, and adequate soak times. Document your process: note water temperature, number of baths needed, any challenges you encountered, and how the fiber changed from raw to clean. This hands-on practice builds confidence and helps you internalize the gentle handling techniques essential for successful fleece washing.

**Hint:** Success looks like clean, fluffy fiber with no felting, no grease residue, and no soap smell. The locks should maintain their structure and crimp. If your first attempt has issues (slightly greasy fiber, some soap residue, or minor felting at

the tips), that's normal—washing fleece is a skill that improves with practice. Note what went wrong and adjust your technique for the next batch.

### **Exercise 2: Temperature and Time Experiment**

Wash three small samples (1-2 ounces each) of the same fleece using slightly different approaches: Sample A with water at 160°F for 15 minutes per bath; Sample B with water at 180°F for 20 minutes per bath; Sample C with water at 170°F for 15 minutes per bath. Keep all other variables the same (soap amount, handling, number of baths). Compare the results: Which sample feels cleanest? Did any show signs of felting? How did the fiber texture differ? This experiment helps you understand how temperature and time affect cleaning effectiveness and fiber safety.

**Hint:** You'll likely find that hotter water (180°F) removes lanolin most effectively but requires the most careful handling. Cooler water (160°F) is safer but may need an extra wash bath for very greasy fleeces. The sweet spot for most fleeces is 165-175°F with adequate soak time. Your results may vary based on your specific fleece and water chemistry.

### **Exercise 3: Drying Method Comparison**

After washing a fleece, divide it into three portions and dry each using a different method: one portion on a sweater rack with a fan, one on towels without a fan, and one on a sweater rack without a fan. Note the drying time for each method and compare the final fiber quality. This helps you determine which drying approach works best for your space and climate.

**Hint:** The fan-assisted drying should be fastest (12-24 hours in most conditions) and produce fiber with the best loft. Towel-drying without a fan will be slowest and may result in slightly compressed fiber. Understanding these differences helps you plan your washing schedule and choose the best drying method for your situation.

## Chapter 4: Adding Color: Dyeing Fiber with Natural and Acid Dyes



It's always thrilling to watch clear water bloom with color as fiber drinks it in. Maybe you're imagining soft heathered blues for a shawl, vibrant sunset gradients for art yarn, or the warm golden-browns that only onion skins can create. Dyeing your own fiber connects you to centuries of makers who transformed fleece with plants from their gardens and hillsides—and to today's dyers creating electric brights impossible in nature.

This chapter walks you through both worlds. We'll start with natural dyeing using plants, barks, and kitchen scraps—a forgiving, experimental process perfect for embracing happy accidents. Then we'll explore acid dyes (don't let the name worry you), which give you repeatable, saturated colors and precise control. You'll learn the core techniques that work for both methods, understand why fiber takes color the way it does, and discover how to work safely and successfully in your own kitchen or studio.

Why dye fiber instead of finished yarn? When you dye before spinning, color saturates every bit of the fiber. You can blend different colored fibers during prep to create heathered effects impossible any other way. You can spin thick-and-thin art yarn where color shifts with texture. And honestly? There's something deeply satisfying about spinning fiber you've colored yourself, watching your creative vision travel from dye pot through your hands to finished yarn.

## What You'll Learn

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand how to prepare fiber for dyeing (building on your washing skills from Chapter 3), what mordanting means and why it matters, how to extract color from natural materials, how to work with acid dye powders safely, and how to achieve different color effects from solid saturation to variegated rainbows. You'll know which approach suits your creative goals, your workspace, and your comfort level. Most importantly, you'll have actually dyed fiber—because we learn this craft by doing it, watching color develop, and building confidence through hands-on experience.

## A Note on Safety and Joy

Dyeing is safe and fun when you follow basic guidelines. We'll talk about dedicated dye equipment, proper ventilation, and handling materials responsibly—not to scare you, but to help you dye confidently for years to come. Think of it like cooking: you naturally use pot holders and don't taste-test raw chicken. Dyeing has its own simple safety practices, and once they're habit, you'll focus on the creative joy of color.

# Understanding Fiber and Dye: How Color Happens

Before we heat water or measure dye, let's understand what's actually happening when fiber takes color. This knowledge helps you troubleshoot, experiment successfully, and understand why certain steps matter.

## Why Wool Loves Dye

Remember those scales we talked about in Chapter 3, the ones that lock together and cause felting? Those same scales are why wool takes dye so beautifully. Wool is protein fiber—the same basic material as your hair and fingernails. Its structure has microscopic scales and a complex interior that can form chemical bonds with dye molecules.

When you heat wool in water, especially with a bit of acid (like vinegar), those scales lift slightly and the fiber swells. Dye molecules, which are tiny compared to fiber strands, flow into the opened structure. As the fiber cools and the scales close back down, the dye molecules are trapped inside. Add a mordant (we'll talk about these next), and you create actual chemical bonds between fiber and dye—permanent color that won't wash out or fade easily.

This is why the process feels a bit magical: you're not coating the outside of fiber with color like paint. You're actually changing the fiber itself at a molecular level. The color becomes part of the wool.

## Mordants: The Bridge Between Fiber and Color

The word 'mordant' comes from the Latin 'mordere'—to bite. Mordants help dye 'bite' into fiber and hold fast. Chemically, they're metal salts that form bridges: one end bonds to the protein in wool, the other end bonds to dye molecules. Without mordant, most dyes would rinse right back out or fade quickly in light and washing.

For natural dyeing, you'll almost always mordant fiber before dyeing. For acid dyes, the mordant (usually an acid like vinegar or citric acid) is added during dyeing. We'll cover both processes step-by-step.

**Alum (aluminum sulfate)** is your go-to mordant. It's widely available, relatively safe, gives bright clear colors, and works with nearly all natural dyes. You'll use it for probably 90% of your dyeing. **Iron (ferrous sulfate)** darkens and 'saddens' colors, creating beautiful grays, blacks, and muted tones—perfect for over-dyeing to shift bright colors toward earth tones. **Copper (copper sulfate)** shifts colors toward green and brightens yellows—it's more specialized and requires careful handling. **Tin (stannous chloride)** brightens and intensifies colors but can make fiber brittle, so it's used sparingly.

We'll focus primarily on alum, with tips for experimenting with iron once you're comfortable with the basic process.

## **Natural Dyes vs. Acid Dyes: Different Personalities**

Think of natural and acid dyes as two different creative languages, each with its own vocabulary and personality.

**Natural dyes** come from plants, insects, minerals, and fungi. They give you colors that feel connected to earth and seasons—the golds of goldenrod and onion skins, the soft pinks of madder root, the deep browns of black walnut. Natural dyeing is wonderfully forgiving and experimental. You can use kitchen scraps (onion skins, avocado pits), foraged plants, or purchased dye extracts. Colors tend toward subtle, complex, and slightly unpredictable—in the best way. The same dye bath might give you variations depending on water chemistry, temperature, and timing. This unpredictability is part of the joy: you're collaborating with plants and process.

**Acid dyes** are synthetic dyes specifically formulated for protein fibers. Despite the intimidating name, they're called 'acid' dyes because they need acidic conditions (like vinegar) to bond with fiber—the dyes themselves aren't dangerous acids. They give you the entire rainbow in saturated, intense colors: electric blues, hot magentas, deep purples, brilliant yellows. Acid dyes are repeatable—follow the same recipe and get the same color every time. They're perfect when you need color matching, want vibrant intensity, or are dyeing for a specific project vision.

Many dyers love both. Natural dyes for meditative, experimental sessions and earthy palettes. Acid dyes when you need that perfect teal or want to dye matching batches for a big project. You don't have to choose one forever—learn both and use whichever calls to you for each project.

## **Setting Up Your Dye Space: Equipment and Safety**

Good news: you don't need a separate studio or expensive equipment to dye beautiful fiber. Most dyers work in their kitchens, using thrift store pots and basic supplies. The key is setting up thoughtfully so you can focus on color instead of scrambling for tools mid-process.

### **Essential Equipment**

**For both natural and acid dyeing, you'll need:**

- **Large stainless steel or enamel pot** (4-6 quarts minimum for dyeing 4-8 oz of fiber; bigger is better for larger batches). Aluminum reacts with

dyes and mordants, so avoid it. Thrift stores are perfect sources. Mark them clearly as DYE ONLY.

- **Digital scale** that measures in grams—accuracy matters for repeatable colors and proper mordant ratios
- **Measuring spoons and cups** (dedicated to dyeing, not food)
- **Thermometer** (candy/deep fry thermometers work great) to monitor water temperature
- **Long-handled spoon or stirring rod** (stainless steel, wood, or plastic) for moving fiber gently
- **Tongs** for lifting hot fiber safely
- **Fine-mesh strainer** (for natural dyes—straining plant material from dye liquid)
- **Dust mask** (N95 or similar) for handling dye powders safely
- **Rubber gloves** to protect your hands (nitrile gloves work well)
- **White vinegar** (distilled is ideal) or citric acid powder
- **Large bowl or basin** for soaking fiber before dyeing
- **Plastic wrap or lid** to cover dye pots and retain heat
- **Old towels** for cleanup and drying dyed fiber
- **Mesh laundry bags or nylon stockings** (optional but helpful for keeping fiber contained)

#### **Additionally for natural dyeing:**

- **Alum (aluminum sulfate)** and optionally **cream of tartar**—available from dyeing suppliers or sometimes pharmacies
- **Natural dye materials**—we'll discuss sourcing in the next section
- **Extra pot for extracting dye** if you're working with plant materials (can be the same pot used sequentially)

#### **Additionally for acid dyeing:**

- **Acid dye powders** in your chosen colors (brands like Jacquard, Dharma, or Greener Shades are excellent for beginners)
- **Small containers with lids** for mixing dye stock solutions
- **Syringes or pipettes** (optional) for measuring liquid dyes precisely

## **Safety Practices: Simple and Essential**

Dyeing safety is straightforward: treat dye materials with the same respect you'd give any craft or cleaning supplies. These aren't scary chemicals, but they're not food either.

#### **The non-negotiable rules:**

1. **Dedicated equipment only.** Once a pot, spoon, or measuring cup touches dye or mordant, it never goes back to food use. Mark everything clearly with permanent marker or tape. Store dye equipment separately.
2. **Wear a dust mask when handling powders.** Both dye powders and mordants (especially alum) can irritate lungs if inhaled. Put your mask on before opening containers, keep it on while measuring, and don't take it off until powders are dissolved in water. This is the single most important safety step.

3. **Wear gloves.** Dyes and mordants can irritate skin and will definitely stain your hands. Nitrile gloves work well and let you maintain dexterity.
4. **Ventilate your space.** Open windows, run a fan, or work outdoors when possible. You're not creating toxic fumes, but good air circulation is always wise when heating dye baths.
5. **No eating, drinking, or touching your face** while dyeing. Wash hands thoroughly when you're done.
6. **Clean up spills immediately** with damp paper towels. Dispose of towels in the trash, not down the drain in large quantities.
7. **Store dyes and mordants safely**—in labeled containers, away from food, out of reach of children and pets.

**What about the drain and environmental impact?** Small-scale fiber dyeing has minimal environmental impact. Natural dyes are plant-based and biodegradable. Acid dyes in home-dyeing quantities are safe for septic and municipal water systems—they're designed to bond completely with fiber, so there's little dye left in exhaust water. Alum is used in water treatment and isn't harmful in small amounts. That said, it's good practice to let dye baths cool completely before pouring them out, and to pour them slowly rather than all at once.

Once these practices become habit (and they will, quickly), you won't think about them any more than you think about using oven mitts. You'll focus on the color magic happening in your pots.

## Preparing Your Workspace

Before you start dyeing, set up your space so everything flows smoothly. Clear your stovetop or work area. Lay out old towels to catch drips. Fill your large bowl with room-temperature water for soaking fiber. Have your scale, measuring tools, and thermometer within easy reach. Set out your gloves and dust mask where you'll see them. Put your stirring spoon and tongs next to the stove.

This preparation might seem fussy, but it makes the actual dyeing peaceful instead of frantic. You'll have both hands full of wet fiber at various points—you don't want to be searching for tongs or realizing your thermometer is in another room.

## Natural Dyeing: Color from Plants and Earth

Natural dyeing connects you to place and season in a way that feels almost magical. The onion skins you've been saving give you golds and oranges. Black walnuts from your neighbor's tree create rich browns. Goldenrod blooming by the

roadside offers bright yellows. Even avocado pits and skins—usually trash—dye fiber soft, blushing pinks.

We'll walk through the complete process with a beginner-friendly dye (onion skins) so you understand each stage. Then we'll explore other natural dye materials and how to experiment confidently.

## Sourcing Natural Dye Materials

### Excellent beginner natural dyes (accessible and forgiving):

- **Onion skins** (yellow and red): Save skins from cooking or ask your grocery store produce department—they often have bags of skins they'll give you free. Yellow onions give golden yellows and oranges; red onions give rusty oranges and browns. You'll need skins from about 6-8 onions per 4 oz of fiber.
- **Avocado pits and skins**: Produce gorgeous dusty pinks and soft peach tones. Save pits and skins in the freezer until you have 6-8 pits' worth.
- **Black walnut hulls**: Create rich, deep browns and blacks. Forage fallen walnuts in autumn (wear gloves—they stain everything). You can also buy walnut hull powder from dye suppliers.
- **Marigold flowers**: Give clear, bright yellows. Grow them in your garden or buy dried flowers.
- **Madder root** (purchased): Classic dye that gives reds, pinks, and oranges depending on temperature and mordant. Buy as powder or chopped root from dye suppliers.

### Other options to explore once you're comfortable:

- Goldenrod flowers (bright yellow)
- Indigo (blue—requires different process)
- Cochineal insects (purchased—vivid reds and pinks)
- Oak galls (browns and grays)
- Eucalyptus leaves (reds, oranges, golds)
- Logwood (purchased—purples and blacks)

**About foraging:** If you're gathering plants from the wild, make absolutely certain you've identified them correctly (some plants are toxic), get permission from landowners, never harvest from protected areas or parks, and take only what you need—typically no more than 10% of a plant population. Many dyers stick with kitchen scraps and purchased materials for simplicity and sustainability.

**Dye extracts:** Companies like Botanical Colors and Earthues sell natural dye extracts—concentrated powders made from traditional dye plants. These give more predictable, intense colors than raw plant materials and are easier to store and measure. They're more expensive than kitchen scraps but less than buying fresh dye plants, and they're perfect when you want specific colors reliably.

# Step-by-Step: Your First Natural Dye (Onion Skins)

Natural dyeing happens in three separate stages, each requiring time and attention. Fiber must be thoroughly wet before entering any bath to ensure even color. Low, gentle heat prevents felting while allowing dye to bond.

## Stage One: Mordanting the Fiber

Mordanting must happen before dyeing with natural dyes. We'll use alum, which gives clear, bright colors and is the most beginner-friendly mordant.

### What you'll need:

- 4 oz clean, dry wool fiber (your washed fleece from Chapter 3, or purchased roving)
- 12-15% alum by weight of fiber (about 17-20 grams for 4 oz fiber)
- 7% cream of tartar by weight of fiber (about 10 grams—optional but helps colors stay bright)
- Large pot
- Scale
- Dust mask and gloves

### Process:

1. **Weigh your fiber dry** and calculate mordant amounts. For 4 oz (113 grams) fiber: 17 grams alum, 10 grams cream of tartar.
2. **Soak the fiber** in room-temperature water for at least 30 minutes, until thoroughly wet. This is crucial—dry fiber added to mordant bath will take color unevenly.
3. **Fill your pot** with enough water for fiber to move freely (about 3-4 gallons for 4 oz fiber). Heat water to lukewarm.
4. **Put on your dust mask.** Measure alum and cream of tartar into a small container. Add a cup of hot water and stir until dissolved.
5. **Add dissolved mordant to pot** and stir to distribute evenly.
6. **Add wet fiber gently**, making sure it's fully submerged. Use your stirring rod to press it under water gently—no agitation, just submersion.
7. **Heat slowly** to 180-185°F over 30-45 minutes. You want a very slow temperature rise—sudden heat causes felting.
8. **Maintain temperature** at 180-185°F for one hour. You can stir very gently every 15 minutes to ensure even mordanting, but remember: minimal movement.
9. **Turn off heat** and let pot cool completely (this can take several hours or overnight). Fiber can stay in the mordant bath during cooling—this extended contact improves mordanting.
10. **Remove fiber gently** when cool. Squeeze out excess water gently (no wringing). You can dye immediately, or dry the fiber and store it for later—mordanted fiber keeps indefinitely.

**What you're seeing:** The fiber won't look different after mordanting—maybe slightly brighter white. That's normal. The alum has bonded with the protein

structure, creating sites where dye molecules will attach. The magic happens in the dye bath.

## **Stage Two: Extracting the Dye**

While your fiber is mordanting (or after, if you've mordanted ahead), prepare your dye bath. For onion skins, this is beautifully simple.

### **What you'll need:**

- Skins from 6-8 yellow onions (about 2-3 cups loosely packed)
- Large pot
- Strainer
- Bowl or second pot to hold dye liquid

### **Process:**

1. **Place onion skins in pot** and cover with water (about 3-4 quarts).
2. **Bring to a simmer** and maintain for 45-60 minutes. The water will turn deep golden-orange.
3. **Strain out onion skins** through your strainer into a bowl or second pot. You can compost the spent skins—they've given up their color.
4. **Your dye liquid is ready.** It should be a rich golden-orange color. If it seems pale, you can simmer it longer to concentrate, or add more onion skins and simmer again.

**Note:** Some dyers skip straining and dye with the plant material still in the pot. This can give more intense color but makes handling fiber trickier. For your first dye session, straining makes the process cleaner and easier.

## **Stage Three: Dyeing the Fiber**

Now the transformation happens. Your mordanted fiber will drink in the color you've extracted, and you'll watch it develop before your eyes.

### **What you'll need:**

- Mordanted fiber (wet or re-soaked if dried)
- Strained dye liquid
- Large pot
- Thermometer

### **Process:**

1. **If your mordanted fiber has dried, re-soak it** in room-temperature water for 30 minutes until thoroughly wet.
2. **Pour dye liquid into your pot** and add additional water if needed so fiber can move freely. You want enough liquid to cover the fiber completely with a few inches to spare.
3. **Heat dye bath to lukewarm** (about 100°F).
4. **Add wet fiber gently**, submerging it completely. Use your stirring rod to make sure no air pockets are trapped.

5. **Heat slowly to 180-185°F** over 30-45 minutes. Slow heating is crucial for even dyeing and preventing felting.
6. **Maintain temperature** for 45-60 minutes. You can stir gently every 15 minutes. Watch the magic: fiber will gradually take color, and the dye bath will become paler as fiber absorbs the dye molecules.
7. **Check for exhaustion:** After 45 minutes, lift a bit of fiber with your tongs and look at the dye bath. If it's nearly clear (pale yellow instead of orange), the dye is exhausted—fiber has absorbed all available color. If the bath is still quite colored, continue heating.
8. **Turn off heat** and let fiber cool in the dye bath. This extended contact deepens color.
9. **When cool, remove fiber gently** and squeeze out excess dye liquid (it can go down the drain).
10. **Rinse in lukewarm water** until water runs clear. The first rinse might release some excess dye—that's normal. By the second or third rinse, water should be clear.
11. **Final rinse:** Add a tablespoon of white vinegar to a basin of lukewarm water and give fiber a final soak for 5 minutes. This sets color and restores fiber's pH.
12. **Squeeze out excess water gently** (no wringing), roll in a towel to absorb more water, then lay flat on a drying rack or towel in a well-ventilated area. Dry completely before spinning or storing.

**What you've created:** Depending on your onion skins and water, you'll have fiber ranging from soft golden yellow to rich orange-gold. The color will be even throughout, and it will feel slightly softer than before dyeing (the heat and moisture relax the fiber).

## Exploring Other Natural Dyes

Once you've successfully dyed with onion skins, you can apply the same three-stage process to other natural dyes. The mordanting stage stays the same. Dye extraction and dyeing vary slightly depending on the material.

**Avocado pits and skins:** Simmer pits and skins for 1-2 hours to extract dye (they need longer than onion skins). Strain and dye as with onions. You'll get soft pinks and peach tones—surprisingly delicate from such a sturdy pit.

**Black walnut hulls:** These are powerful—use gloves for everything. Simmer hulls for 1-2 hours. The dye is so strong you might not need mordant (experiment both ways). Dye at lower temperature (160-170°F) to avoid overly dark results. You'll get rich browns to near-black.

**Madder root:** For reds and pinks, temperature is crucial. Keep dye bath at 160-170°F—higher heat shifts color to brown. Simmer madder root for 45-60 minutes to extract, strain, and dye at controlled temperature. Patience gives you true reds.

**Marigold flowers:** Simmer fresh or dried flowers for 30-45 minutes. Strain and dye as with onions. You'll get clear, cheerful yellows.

## Experimenting with Modifiers and Over-Dyeing

Once you're comfortable with basic natural dyeing, you can explore color modification—shifting hues after dyeing using different pH or mordants, or layering colors through over-dyeing.

**Iron after-bath:** After dyeing, place fiber in a weak iron solution (1/2 teaspoon iron dissolved in a quart of hot water) for 10-15 minutes. This 'saddens' colors—yellows become olive, oranges become rust, pinks become mauve. It's perfect for shifting bright colors toward earthy, muted tones.

**pH shifts:** Some dyes change color with pH. Try placing a small sample of dyed fiber in water with a tablespoon of baking soda (alkaline) or vinegar (acid) and watch color shift. This is pure experimentation.

**Over-dyeing:** Dye fiber one color, dry it completely, then mordant and dye again with a different color. Yellow over-dyed with blue gives green. Pink over-dyed with yellow gives coral. This is how you create complex, heathered colors impossible with single dye baths.

## Troubleshooting Natural Dyeing

**Uneven color/splotches:** Usually caused by fiber not being thoroughly wet before dyeing, or by crowding too much fiber in the pot. Solution: Always soak fiber completely and give it room to move in the dye bath.

**Pale color/not enough dye uptake:** Either insufficient mordant, not enough dye material, or too-short dyeing time. Solution: Use full mordant amounts (12-15% alum), use plenty of dye material (equal weight of plant material to fiber is a good starting ratio for most dyes), and maintain heat for full time.

**Color fading after washing:** Insufficient mordanting or inadequate rinsing (soap residue can strip color). Solution: Make sure mordant bath reaches and maintains proper temperature for full hour, and rinse thoroughly after dyeing.

**Felting:** Too much agitation or temperature shock. Solution: Handle wet fiber gently, heat slowly, and keep water temperature consistent.

**Color different from expected:** Natural dyes vary with water chemistry, plant source, and mordant. This is part of their charm. If you need repeatable results, use dye extracts and keep detailed notes about amounts and timing.

# Acid Dyeing: Vibrant, Repeatable Color

If natural dyeing is like watercolor—soft, subtle, collaborative with materials—acid dyeing is like acrylics: vivid, controllable, and boldly expressive. You'll get colors that simply don't exist in the natural dye world: electric turquoise, hot magenta, deep violet, brilliant lime. And you'll get them the same way every time you follow the same recipe.

Acid dyeing is also more streamlined than natural dyeing. No separate mordanting stage—the acid (vinegar) is added during dyeing. No plant material to extract and strain. Just dye powder, water, acid, heat, and time. This makes it perfect for production dyeing when you need multiple batches of the same color, or for experimental color mixing when you want to play with combinations.

## Understanding Acid Dyes and Choosing Colors

**What are acid dyes?** Despite the name, these aren't dangerous acids. They're called acid dyes because they need acidic conditions (pH around 4-5, achieved with vinegar or citric acid) to bond with protein fibers. The dyes themselves are synthetic molecules designed to attach permanently to wool's protein structure when heated in acid conditions.

**Types of acid dyes:** You'll see different categories. **Washfast Acid Dyes** (also called Country Classics) are perfect for beginners—they're affordable, easy to use, give vibrant colors, and are reasonably lightfast and washfast. **Sabraset dyes** are similar. **Lanaset dyes** are professional-grade with superior lightfastness and washfastness but are more expensive and require slightly different techniques. Start with Washfast/Country Classics—you can always explore others later.

**Choosing colors:** Many dyers start with primary colors (a true red like Scarlet, a yellow like Sun Yellow, and a blue like Turquoise or Royal Blue) plus black. From these, you can mix almost any color. Or buy pre-mixed colors that appeal to you—there's no wrong approach. Dye suppliers sell sample sets perfect for exploring.

**How much dye to buy:** A little goes a long way. Typically you'll use 0.5-4% dye by weight of fiber (0.5% gives pastels, 2% gives medium saturation, 4% gives deep jewel tones). For 4 oz (113 grams) of fiber at 2%, you need only about 2.25 grams of dye powder. A 2-ounce jar of dye powder will dye pounds of fiber.

## Step-by-Step: Solid Color Acid Dyeing

We'll dye 4 oz of fiber a solid, medium-saturated color using 2% dye—a perfect middle ground that gives you rich color without using excessive dye.

### What you'll need:

- 4 oz (113 grams) clean, dry wool fiber
- Acid dye powder in your chosen color
- White vinegar (about 1/4 cup)
- Large pot
- Scale (measuring in grams)
- Dust mask and gloves
- Small container for mixing dye
- Thermometer

### Process:

1. **Calculate dye amount:** For 2% dye on 113 grams fiber:  $113 \times 0.02 = 2.26$  grams dye powder. Weigh carefully.
2. **Soak fiber** in room-temperature water for 30 minutes until thoroughly wet.
3. **Put on dust mask.** In a small container, mix your dye powder with a small amount of hot water (about 1/2 cup) and stir until completely dissolved. This is your dye concentrate.
4. **Fill pot** with enough water for fiber to move freely (3-4 gallons for 4 oz fiber). Add 1/4 cup white vinegar and stir.
5. **Add dissolved dye to pot** and stir well to distribute evenly throughout the water. The water should be uniformly colored.
6. **Add wet fiber gently**, submerging completely. Make sure there are no air pockets and fiber can move freely.
7. **Heat slowly to 185-190°F** over 30-45 minutes. Slow heating is crucial for even dyeing.
8. **Maintain temperature** at 185-190°F for 30-45 minutes. Stir gently every 10 minutes to ensure even color uptake.
9. **Watch for strike:** After 20-30 minutes at temperature, the fiber will have absorbed most of the dye and the water will become much clearer. This is called 'strike'—the moment dye bonds fully with fiber. Continue heating for another 10-15 minutes after strike to ensure complete bonding.
10. **Turn off heat** and let fiber cool in the dye bath. This isn't strictly necessary with acid dyes (unlike natural dyes), but it doesn't hurt.
11. **When cool enough to handle, remove fiber** and rinse gently in lukewarm water. The water should run clear immediately—if it's still colored, rinse again. Acid dyes bond completely, so there should be minimal color release in rinsing.
12. **Squeeze out excess water** (gently, no wringing), roll in a towel, and lay flat to dry completely.

**What you've created:** Fiber that's evenly colored throughout in your chosen hue. The color will be vibrant and permanent. When completely dry, it's ready to spin or felt.

## Color Mixing and Custom Shades

One of acid dyeing's greatest joys is mixing your own colors. Start with primary colors and you can create anything.

### Basic color mixing:

- Yellow + Blue = Green (more yellow gives yellow-green, more blue gives blue-green)
- Red + Yellow = Orange (more red gives red-orange, more yellow gives golden orange)
- Red + Blue = Purple (more red gives violet, more blue gives blue-purple)
- Any color + Black = deeper, richer version (use black sparingly—a little goes far)
- Any color + its complement (opposite on color wheel) = muted, grayed version

**How to mix:** Dissolve each dye color separately in hot water, then combine the dissolved dyes in the proportions you want. For example, for teal: mix 1 part blue dye solution with 1 part yellow dye solution. For coral: mix 2 parts red with 1 part yellow. Keep notes so you can repeat successful combinations.

**Test first:** Before dyeing a whole batch, test your color mix on a small sample of fiber (10-20 grams). This lets you adjust proportions without wasting fiber or dye.

**Keeping dye journals:** Serious dyers keep notebooks with fiber samples stapled in, noting exact dye amounts, percentages, timing, and results. This turns experimentation into repeatable recipes.

## Variegated and Hand-Painted Effects

Variegated dyeing applies different colors to different parts of the same fiber. Techniques range from controlled (specific color placement) to random (letting colors flow and mix). These effects are impossible to achieve with solid dyeing and create stunning handspun yarn.

### Kettle-Dyed Variegated Fiber

This technique lets you apply multiple colors to fiber in one pot, creating organic color transitions and blends.

**Process:** Soak fiber and place in pot with water and vinegar (no dye yet). Heat to 180-190°F. Using a spoon or turkey baster, drizzle different colored dye solutions onto different areas of the fiber. Don't stir—let colors stay where you place them. As fiber heats, dye will strike in place, with some bleeding and blending at color boundaries. Continue heating until dye exhausts and water clears. Cool and rinse.

You'll get fiber with distinct color sections that blend softly into each other—perfect for spinning variegated yarn with long color repeats.

## **Hand-Painted Fiber**

Hand-painting gives you complete control over color placement—you're literally painting fiber like a canvas.

**Process:** Soak fiber thoroughly. Lay it out on plastic wrap on a table or counter. Mix dye solutions (more concentrated than for immersion dyeing—try 4-6% to ensure good saturation). Using brushes, sponges, or squeeze bottles, apply different colors to different sections of the fiber. You can create stripes, gradients, random splotches, or careful color progressions. When you're satisfied with color placement, wrap fiber in the plastic wrap (this keeps it moist and contains dye), place in a pot with a steaming rack or crumpled foil to keep fiber above water, add an inch of water to the pot, cover, and steam for 30-45 minutes to set dye. Cool, unwrap, and rinse.

Hand-painted fiber gives you artist-designed colorways—think sunset gradients, rainbow progressions, or sophisticated tonal blends.

## **Troubleshooting Acid Dyeing**

**Uneven color:** Fiber not thoroughly wet before dyeing, or not enough water in pot for fiber to move freely. Solution: Always soak completely and give fiber room.

**Dye won't exhaust/water stays colored:** Not enough acid, or temperature not high enough. Solution: Add more vinegar (another 1/4 cup) and make sure you're reaching and maintaining 185-190°F.

**Color different from expected:** Dye powder can vary between batches, and different water chemistry affects results slightly. Solution: Keep detailed notes and test samples first for critical color matching.

**Spotting or speckling (when you wanted solid):** Dye powder not fully dissolved before adding to pot, or dye added to water that's too hot (causes immediate strike in spots). Solution: Dissolve dye completely in separate container with hot water, and add to lukewarm dye bath before adding fiber.

**Colors bleeding together in variegated dyeing (when you wanted distinct sections):** Too much water in pot, or too much stirring. Solution: Use less water (fiber should be moist but not swimming), and don't stir after adding dye.

**Felting:** Same as with natural dyes—too much agitation or temperature shock. Solution: Gentle handling and slow heating.

## After Dyeing: Storing, Spinning, and Combining Colors

### Storing Dyed Fiber

Dyed fiber stores exactly like undyed fiber (remember Chapter 3's storage guidelines), with one additional consideration: light exposure can fade colors over time, especially with natural dyes. Store dyed fiber in breathable containers (cotton bags, paper, cardboard) away from direct sunlight. Include moth deterrents (cedar, lavender). Make sure fiber is bone-dry before storage—any moisture can cause mildew or color bleeding between different colored fibers stored together.

Many dyers photograph their colorways and keep samples with notes about dye recipes—your future self will thank you when you want to recreate a beloved color.

### Planning Color for Spinning

Dyed fiber looks different when spun into yarn, and yarn looks different when knit or woven into fabric. Colors that seem bold on fiber can soften when spun. Variegated fiber creates different effects depending on how you spin it—spinning thin singles preserves distinct color sections, while spinning thick or plying multiple strands blends colors more.

#### Consider your end use:

- Solid colors are versatile—perfect for colorwork, clear stitch definition, classic projects
- Subtle variegation (tonals, close color families) works beautifully for textured stitches and wearables
- High-contrast variegation (rainbow, complementary colors) is stunning in simple stockinette or garter but can overwhelm complex stitch patterns
- Natural-dyed earth tones blend beautifully together and suit rustic, traditional projects

Spin a small sample and knit or weave a swatch before committing to a large project—this shows you exactly how your colors will behave in fabric.

## Blending Colors During Fiber Prep

One of handspinning's unique joys is blending different colored fibers before spinning. This creates heathered yarns—those beautiful tweedy, multi-toned yarns where colors play together rather than sitting in distinct sections.

**How to blend:** During fiber prep (carding or combing—techniques covered in the next chapter), combine different colored fibers. Pull off sections of blue fiber and pink fiber, layer them on your cards, and card together. The colors blend but don't fully mix—you get a heathered purple with visible blue and pink flecks. The more you card, the more blended colors become.

### Classic combinations:

- White + any color = pastel, softened version
- Analogous colors (neighbors on color wheel, like blue and purple) = harmonious, sophisticated blends
- Complementary colors (opposites on color wheel, like orange and blue) = vibrant, complex tweeds
- Multiple natural-dyed earth tones = rich, dimensional neutrals

Blending is where dyeing and spinning truly merge—you become a color artist, painting with fiber.

## Your Color Journey Begins

You've learned to transform clean white fleece into a rainbow of possibilities.

Whether you're drawn to the earthy, meditative practice of natural dyeing with plants and kitchen scraps, or the vibrant, controlled artistry of acid dyeing, you now have the skills to add color magic to your fiber journey.

Remember the core principles that apply to all dyeing: fiber must be thoroughly wet before entering any bath; heat slowly to prevent felting; handle wet fiber gently; and maintain proper temperature for dye to bond permanently. These fundamentals, combined with safety practices that quickly become habit, let you dye confidently and creatively.

Start simple—maybe onion skins for natural dyeing, or a single solid color with acid dyes. Build confidence through repetition. Then experiment: try new plant materials, mix custom colors, explore variegated techniques, blend different colored fibers. Keep notes and samples. Share your results with other dyers (online communities and local fiber guilds are full of generous color enthusiasts). Most importantly, enjoy the process. There's profound satisfaction in holding fiber you've colored yourself, knowing that every step from fleece to finished yarn carries your creative touch.

Your dyed fiber is now ready for the next stage: preparation for spinning. In Chapter 5, we'll explore how to prepare fiber—whether dyed or natural—through carding, combing, and other techniques that align fibers and prepare them for the wheel. The colors you've created will travel through your hands, twist into yarn, and eventually become something beautiful and entirely your own.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Mordanting</b>	Pre-treating fiber with metal salts (usually alum) to create chemical bonds between fiber and dye molecules, making color permanent
<b>Natural Dyeing Process</b>	Three-stage process: mordant fiber, extract dye from plant materials, dye mordanted fiber in extracted dye bath
<b>Acid Dyeing Process</b>	Single-stage immersion dyeing using synthetic dye powder, vinegar, heat, and time until dye exhausts completely
<b>Strike</b>	The moment when dye bonds fully with fiber and dye bath water becomes clear—indicates complete dye uptake
<b>Dye Exhaustion</b>	When fiber has absorbed all available dye molecules from the bath, leaving water nearly clear
<b>Iron After-Bath</b>	Modifier bath using iron sulfate to 'sadden' (darker and mutes) natural dye colors toward earthy tones
<b>Over-Dyeing</b>	Layering colors by dyeing fiber one color, drying completely, then mordanting and dyeing again with a different color
<b>Kettle-Dyed Variegation</b>	Applying multiple dye colors to different areas of fiber in one pot, creating organic color transitions
<b>Hand-Painting</b>	Painting dye directly onto fiber laid flat, then steaming to set color—gives maximum color placement control
<b>Color Mixing</b>	Combining primary dye colors to create custom shades and understanding color wheel relationships
<b>Dye Percentage (DOF)</b>	Weight of dye powder as percentage of fiber weight (0.5% = pastels, 2% = medium saturation, 4% = deep jewel tones)
<b>Color Blending</b>	Carding or combing different colored fibers together before spinning to create heathered, tweedy effects

## Glossary of Terms

**Acid Dyes:** Synthetic dyes formulated for protein fibers that require acidic conditions (vinegar or citric acid) to bond permanently with fiber

**Alum (Aluminum Sulfate):** The most common and beginner-friendly mordant; creates bright, clear colors with most natural dyes

**Color Wheel:** Visual representation of color relationships showing primary, secondary, and tertiary colors plus complementary (opposite) colors

**Complementary Colors:** Colors opposite each other on the color wheel (red/green, blue/orange, yellow/purple) that create neutral grays when mixed

**Dye Bath:** The pot of water, dye, and acid (or mordant) in which fiber is immersed for dyeing

**Dye Concentrate:** Dye powder dissolved in a small amount of hot water before being added to the dye bath

**Dye Extraction:** Process of simmering plant materials in water to release their color molecules into the liquid

**Exhaust/Exhausted Dye Bath:** When fiber has absorbed all available dye and the water becomes clear or very pale

**Heathered Yarn:** Multi-toned yarn created by blending different colored fibers before spinning, giving a tweedy appearance

**Iron (Ferrous Sulfate):** Mordant or modifier that darkens and mutes colors, shifting them toward grays, blacks, and earthy tones

**Lightfast:** Color's resistance to fading when exposed to light over time

**Mordant:** Metal salt that creates chemical bridges between fiber protein and dye molecules, making color permanent

**Natural Dyes:** Colorants derived from plants, insects, minerals, or fungi—typically give earthy, subtle colors

**Primary Colors:** Red, yellow, and blue—colors that cannot be created by mixing other colors

**Sadden:** To darken and mute a color, typically using an iron modifier bath

**Secondary Colors:** Orange, green, and purple—created by mixing two primary colors

**Strike:** The moment when dye molecules bond with fiber and the dye bath water begins to clear noticeably

**Tertiary Colors:** Colors created by mixing a primary with an adjacent secondary (red-orange, yellow-green, blue-purple, etc.)

**Variegated:** Fiber or yarn with multiple colors in distinct sections rather than solid, even color throughout

**Washfast:** Color's resistance to fading or bleeding when washed

**WOF (Weight of Fiber):** The dry weight of fiber being dyed, used as the basis for calculating mordant and dye amounts

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## Practice Exercises

### Exercise 1: Natural Dye Sampler

Mordant and dye six small samples (1/2 oz each) using three different natural dye materials (onion skins, avocado, and one other). For each dye, create two samples: one with alum mordant and one with iron after-bath. Label each sample with dye source, mordant, date, and any observations. Mount in a notebook to create your personal natural dye reference.

**Hint:** This exercise builds your understanding of how different mordants affect the same dye material, and creates a valuable reference for future projects. You'll see how iron shifts colors toward muted, earthy tones while alum gives brighter, clearer colors. Keep detailed notes—water chemistry and plant variations mean your results are unique to your location and materials.

### Exercise 2: Acid Dye Color Wheel

Using primary colors (red, yellow, blue) plus black, mix and dye 12 small samples to create a color wheel. Include: three primaries, three secondaries (orange, green, purple), three tertiaries (red-orange, yellow-green, blue-purple), and three muted tones (each primary mixed with a tiny amount of its complement). Use 2% dye depth for consistency. Label each sample with the dye formula used.

**Hint:** This exercise teaches color mixing fundamentals and gives you a reference for future custom color work. You'll discover how little dye is needed to shift colors, and how complementary colors mute each other. Save this color wheel—it's your personal mixing guide. Note that different dye brands may mix slightly differently, so this is specific to your dye line.

### Exercise 3: Variegated Exploration

Dye 4 oz of fiber using a variegated technique (kettle-dyed or hand-painted) with 3-4 colors of your choice. Spin half of the fiber into singles and ply the other half. Knit small swatches with both the singles and plied yarn. Observe and note how the same dyed fiber creates different color effects when spun and plied differently.

**Hint:** This exercise connects dyeing to spinning and helps you understand how color behaves through the entire process. You'll see that singles preserve more distinct color sections while plying blends colors more. The knitted fabric will look different from the yarn in your hand. This knowledge helps you plan dyeing for specific project effects. Take photos of fiber, yarn, and swatches together for your reference library.

## Chapter 5: Preparing Fiber: Carding and Combing Techniques

### WOOLEN PREPARATION & SPINNING

#### CARDING



#### SPINNING



Woolen preparation are light, lofty, warm, and has a soft halo. Perfect for garments where warmth and softness matter most—like cozy sweaters, hats, mittens. Slight fuzziness means stitch definition isn't super crisp, so intricate lace or cables can look a bit mud. But for colorwork or simple

### WORSTED PREPARATION & SPINNING

#### COMBING



#### SPINNING



It's ideal for projects needing durability and stitch clarity—socks, structured garments, lace, cables. It's less insulating than woolen yarn because there's less trapped air, but it wears like iron and shows off your knitting beautifully. It wears like iron and shows off your knitting beautifully.

You've washed your fleece, maybe dyed it into glorious colors, and now you're holding this cloud of clean, beautiful fiber. But if you tried to spin it right now—just grabbed a lock and started drafting—you'd quickly discover it's a frustrating tangle. The locks stick together, second cuts hide in there, and getting a smooth draw feels impossible. This is where preparation comes in, and honestly, this is where I think the real magic happens.

Fiber preparation is where you make creative decisions that will live in your yarn forever. When you card fiber, you're opening it up, jumbling those fibers in all directions, trapping air between them. The result? Loft, warm, slightly fuzzy yarn with a soft halo—what we call woolen preparation. When you comb fiber, you're doing the opposite: aligning every fiber parallel, removing the short bits, creating a sleek ribbon. That becomes smooth, strong, lustrous yarn—worsted preparation.

Neither method is better. They're different tools for different visions. I card the Corriedale fleece I'm spinning for a squishy hat—I want all that trapped air for warmth. I comb the same breed when I'm making hard-wearing sock yarn that needs strength and stitch definition. Same fleece, completely different yarn, all because of how I prepared it.

This chapter will teach you three core preparation methods: hand carding (the most accessible and portable), drum carding (faster and perfect for blending), and combing (for that sleek, aligned fiber). We'll talk about what tools you actually need, how to match preparation to fiber type, and what to do when things go wrong. By the end, you'll be able to look at a project pattern and think, "I need a woolen-spun two-ply for this," then prepare your fiber accordingly.

## **What Preparation Actually Does**

Raw fleece grows in locks—bundles of fibers that grew together on the sheep, held by crimp and a bit of remaining lanolin. Even after washing, those locks want to stay together. Preparation opens those locks and organizes the individual fibers so they'll draft smoothly when you spin. Think of it like untangling hair before braiding—you need every strand separated and ready to move.

But preparation does more than just separate fibers. It organizes them spatially. Carding tumbles fibers in all directions, creating a three-dimensional web where fibers cross and overlap randomly—imagine a bird's nest. Combing lays fibers parallel, like brushing long hair until it's perfectly smooth—every fiber pointing the same direction. This organization determines whether your yarn will be airy and soft (carded) or sleek and strong (combed).

This is also your last chance to remove things you don't want in your yarn: vegetable matter that survived washing, short second cuts that would create lumps, and very short fibers called noils that can make yarn feel fuzzy or weak. Combing removes these automatically. Carding includes them—which can be a feature, not a bug, if you want rustic texture.

## **Woolen vs. Worsted: Two Philosophies of Yarn**

These two terms—woolen and worsted—describe entire systems of fiber preparation and spinning, and they create completely different yarns from the same fleece. Understanding this distinction is like learning that you can cook an egg a dozen different ways. Same ingredient, radically different results.

Woolen preparation means carding fiber so it's jumbled and three-dimensional, then spinning it with air trapped throughout. The resulting yarn is light, lofty, warm, and has a soft halo. It's perfect for garments where warmth and softness matter most—think cozy sweaters, hats, mittens. The slight fuzziness means stitch definition isn't super crisp, so intricate lace or cables can look a bit muddy. But for colorwork or simple textures? Gorgeous.

Worsted preparation means combing fiber into parallel alignment, then spinning it smoothly with less air. The yarn is dense, strong, smooth, and lustrous. It's ideal for projects needing durability and stitch clarity—socks, structured garments, lace, cables. It's less insulating than woolen yarn because there's less trapped air, but it wears like iron and shows off your knitting beautifully.

## **Hand Carding: The Foundation Technique**

Hand cards are simple tools—two wooden paddles covered with angled wire teeth, like very aggressive pet brushes. They've been used for centuries because they work beautifully and require no electricity, no maintenance, just your hands and a bit of practice. I love carding while sitting on the porch or chatting with friends at fiber guild. It's meditative and portable.

The basic motion is surprisingly gentle. You're not scrubbing the cards together like you're trying to start a fire. Instead, you're transferring fiber from one card to the other in smooth, light strokes, letting the wire teeth catch and open the fibers. Each pass opens the locks a bit more, mixes the fibers, and removes debris. After several transfers, you'll have a light, airy web of fiber on one card that you can roll into a rolag.

Rolags are the traditional output of hand carding—small, fluffy rolls about the size of a hot dog, with fibers oriented perpendicular to the length of the roll. This orientation makes them draft beautifully for woolen spinning.

## **Choosing Your Hand Cards**

Hand cards come in several sizes, typically ranging from 3×6 inches up to 5×8 inches or larger. Bigger cards hold more fiber and speed up the process, but

they're heavier and can tire your hands. I started with medium 4×6 inch cards and still reach for them most often—they're the sweet spot between capacity and comfort.

### **Tooth density is crucial:**

- **Fine cards (72+ teeth per inch):** For fine wools like Merino or Cormo—the close-set teeth can catch and open those delicate fibers
- **Medium cards (48-60 tpi):** Work for most medium wools like Corriedale, Romney, or Columbia
- **Coarse cards (36-48 tpi):** For longwools, coarse breeds, or blending in texture fibers like mohair or silk

Using fine cards on coarse fiber is frustrating—the fiber just sits on top of the teeth. Using coarse cards on fine fiber means the fiber slips through without getting properly opened.

Look for cards with curved backs (they fit your hand better) and well-secured cloth backing (cheap cards have teeth that pull out). Budget around \$60-100 for a good pair.

## **The Hand Carding Process: Step by Step**

**Step 1: Prepare your fiber.** Start with clean, dry fleece. Take a small lock—about the amount that would fit in a small handful—and gently open it lengthwise to pre-draft it slightly. Pick out any obvious vegetable matter or second cuts.

**Step 2: Load the card.** Hold one card in your non-dominant hand, teeth facing up, resting on your knee or lap. Lay fiber across the teeth in a thin, even layer, working from the base of the teeth toward the tips. The fiber should lie perpendicular to the handle. Don't pack it on—you should be able to see teeth through the fiber. A common beginner mistake is loading too much fiber, which makes carding exhausting and ineffective.

**Step 3: Card the fiber.** Hold the loaded card in your non-dominant hand, teeth up. Hold the empty card in your dominant hand, teeth down. Starting at the edge of the loaded card closest to you, bring the top card down and pull it toward you in a smooth, light stroke. You're just skimming the surface—the teeth should barely engage. The fiber will transfer from the bottom card to the top card. Lift the top card away and repeat, working across the width of the card.

**Step 4: Transfer and repeat.** After several strokes, most of the fiber will be on the top card. Flip your hands so that card is now on the bottom, and repeat the carding motion, transferring fiber back to the other card. Continue this back-and-

forth transfer 4-6 times total, until the fiber is evenly mixed, fluffy, and all the locks are completely opened.

**Step 5: Make a rolag.** When the fiber is fully carded, it will form a light web on one card. Place a dowel (or a smooth pen, or even your fingers) at the edge of the carded web. Gently roll the dowel toward the handle of the card, gathering the fiber into a small, fluffy roll. When you reach the end, the rolag will lift off the card. It should be light and squishy, not dense.

## Troubleshooting Hand Carding

**Problem: The fiber just sits there and won't transfer between cards.** This usually means you're pressing too hard—you're mashing the teeth together instead of letting them glide past each other. Lighten your touch significantly. It can also mean your card tooth density doesn't match your fiber. If you're using coarse cards on fine fiber, the fiber slips through. If you're using fine cards on coarse fiber, the teeth can't penetrate the fiber mass.

**Problem: My rolags are lumpy or uneven.** You probably didn't card enough times. It takes 4-6 transfers to fully open and mix the fiber. Also check that you're loading fiber evenly across the card. Use smooth, full strokes that cover the entire width of the card.

**Problem: My hands and wrists hurt after carding.** You're working way too hard. Carding should be gentle and rhythmic, not aggressive. Lighten your pressure, check your posture (cards should rest on your lap, not held in the air), and take frequent breaks.

**Problem: Fiber sticks to the cards and won't roll off.** You've loaded too much fiber—it's packed into the teeth. Next time, use less. If the fiber feels sticky or tacky, it might have residual lanolin or might be slightly damp. Make sure fiber is completely dry before carding.

## Creative Carding: Blending Colors and Fibers

This is where carding becomes genuinely creative. You're not just preparing fiber—you're designing custom color and texture blends that don't exist anywhere else. I love taking two or three dyed colors and carding them together to create a completely new colorway, or adding a little sparkle of silk or Angelina fiber for subtle shimmer.

To blend colors, load your card with small amounts of each color in the proportions you want. For a 50/50 blend of blue and yellow, load equal amounts.

For a blue with just a hint of yellow, load mostly blue with a few wisps of yellow. Then card as usual. The more you card, the more thoroughly blended the colors become. Stop early for a tweedy, marled effect. Card longer for a more solid, uniform color.

You can also blend fiber types. A classic combination is 80% wool with 20% silk—the silk adds strength and luster without changing the wool's essential character. Wool with mohair creates a fuzzy halo. Wool with a bit of nylon adds durability for socks. Just make sure the fibers have similar staple length and fineness, or one will dominate and the other will fall out during spinning.

For intentional color patterning, try loading colors in stripes across the card—when you roll the rolag, you'll get color bands that create beautiful effects in the yarn. Or load one color as a base layer and another as highlights on top—this creates a base color with flecks of the accent color throughout.

## **Drum Carding: Speed and Versatility**

A drum carder is essentially a mechanical version of hand cards—two drums covered with carding cloth, one large (the main drum) and one small (the licker-in), turned by a hand crank. You feed fiber into the licker-in, which transfers it to the main drum, where it's carded and formed into a thin web. After several passes, you remove the carded fiber as a batt—a flat, rectangular sheet of airy, prepared fiber.

The speed advantage is real. What takes 20-30 minutes to card by hand takes maybe 5 minutes on a drum carder. If you're preparing fiber for a sweater's worth of yarn, or if you do production spinning, a drum carder will save your hands and your sanity. They're also unbeatable for blending—you can create perfectly uniform color blends or complex layered batts that would be nearly impossible by hand.

The downside is cost and space. A basic drum carder starts around \$200; a high-quality one can run \$500-800 or more. They're also not portable—these are workshop tools. But if you find yourself carding often, especially for blending projects, a drum carder becomes indispensable.

### **Anatomy of a Drum Carder**

The main drum is the large cylinder—usually 8-12 inches wide and 4-6 inches in diameter—covered with carding cloth (angled wire teeth on cloth backing). This is where the fiber lives during carding. The licker-in is a smaller drum positioned

close to the main drum, also covered with carding cloth. When you feed fiber into the gap between the drums, the licker-in catches it and transfers it to the main drum.

You turn a hand crank that rotates both drums via gears or belts. The gear ratio determines how many times the main drum rotates for each turn of the crank—higher ratios mean faster carding but require more effort. Most carders have a ratio between 4:1 and 8:1.

Just like hand cards, drum carders come with different carding cloth densities. Fine cloth (72+ tpi) for fine fibers, medium (48-60 tpi) for most wools, coarse (36-48 tpi) for longwools and blending. Some carders have interchangeable drums so you can swap cloth types. Match the cloth to your fiber for best results.

## **Using a Drum Carder: Step by Step**

**Step 1: Prepare your fiber.** Start with clean, dry, opened fleece. Pre-draft the locks slightly by gently pulling them lengthwise—this helps them feed smoothly. Have all your fiber within reach.

**Step 2: Feed the fiber.** Turn the crank slowly with your dominant hand. With your other hand, present small wisps of fiber to the licker-in, spreading them evenly across the width of the drum. Don't dump fiber in—feed it gradually, letting the licker-in catch and pull it onto the main drum. The fiber should form a thin, even layer on the drum.

**Step 3: Continue until the drum is full.** Keep feeding fiber and turning the crank until the main drum is covered with a thin layer—you should still be able to see the carding cloth through the fiber. This is one pass. Don't overfill the drum or the carder will jam.

**Step 4: Card additional passes.** For thorough carding, pass the fiber through 3-4 times. Use the doffer (a long, flat metal tool) to lift a section of fiber off the drum without removing it completely, then let it feed back through the licker-in. Or remove the entire batt, tear it into chunks, and feed it through again. Each pass opens and blends the fiber more completely.

**Step 5: Remove the batt.** When the fiber is fully carded, use the doffer to gently lift the fiber web off the drum. Start at one edge and work the doffer under the fiber, separating it from the carding cloth. The batt will come off as a rectangular sheet.

**Step 6: Prepare for spinning.** You can spin directly from the batt by tearing off strips, but I prefer to pre-draft it. Gently pull the batt lengthwise to thin it into a long, even strip—this makes drafting during spinning much easier.

## Advanced Drum Carding: Art Batts and Blending

This is where drum carding becomes art. Art batts are intentionally designed fiber preparations that combine colors, textures, and even add-ins like silk, locks, or sparkle into visually stunning batts. They're beautiful objects in themselves—many spinners collect them as much for their appearance as for spinning.

The basic technique is layering. Instead of feeding all your fiber at once, you feed it in intentional sequences. Start with a base color, card it onto the drum. Then add a second color, carding it on top of the first. Then a third color. When you remove the batt, you'll see color stripes or gradations. The more passes you card, the more the colors blend; fewer passes keep them more distinct.

For gradient batts (a smooth transition from one color to another), feed your colors in overlapping layers—start with pure blue, then add blue mixed with a bit of green, then equal blue and green, then mostly green with some blue, then pure green. This creates a beautiful fade that spins into subtly shifting yarn.

Add texture in the final pass. Card your base colors thoroughly, then on the very last pass, add small locks of contrasting fiber, bits of silk, or Angelina sparkle. These sit on the surface of the batt and create texture in the final yarn. Don't overdo it—a little sparkle goes a long way.

## Drum Carder Maintenance and Troubleshooting

A drum carder is a mechanical tool, so basic maintenance keeps it working smoothly. After each use, brush the carding cloth with a stiff brush to remove any residual fiber, lint, or debris. This prevents buildup that can dull the teeth or cause uneven carding. Every few months, lightly oil any moving parts—gears, bearings, the crank shaft—with machine oil or the manufacturer's recommended lubricant.

**Problem: The carder jams or the crank is hard to turn.** You've overloaded the drums with too much fiber, or you fed it too fast and it's packed between the licker-in and main drum. Stop cranking immediately. Carefully remove as much fiber as possible by hand, then use the doffer to clear the drums. Next time, feed fiber more slowly and in smaller amounts.

**Problem: The batt has thick and thin spots.** Your feeding was uneven—you dumped fiber in clumps instead of spreading it evenly across the width. Practice feeding slowly and consistently, moving your hand back and forth to distribute fiber. Also make sure you're pre-drafting locks before feeding.

**Problem: The carding cloth has bent or damaged teeth.** This usually happens if you accidentally feed something hard through the carder—a twig, a knot, a second cut with a bit of skin. Bent teeth can sometimes be carefully straightened with pliers, but it's tedious. Prevention is key: inspect your fiber before carding and remove any hard bits.

## Combing: Creating Worsted Preparation

Combing is the preparation method for worsted spinning—creating sleek, smooth, strong yarn with excellent stitch definition. Where carding jumbles fibers in all directions, combing aligns every fiber parallel, like brushing hair until it's perfectly straight. The process also removes short fibers, vegetable matter, and second cuts, leaving only the longest, finest fibers. The result is top: a continuous, rope-like preparation that drafts like butter and spins into yarn with a completely different character than carded fiber.

Combing is more physically demanding than carding, and it's slower. But for certain fibers and certain projects, it's absolutely worth it. Longwools like Wensleydale or Leicester—breeds with staple lengths of 6-8 inches or more—are born to be combed. Their natural luster and strength shine in worsted preparation. Fine wools like Merino can also be combed for ultra-smooth sock yarn or lace. But short-stapled fibers (under 3 inches) are frustrating to comb—too much fiber ends up in the noils.

There are several combing tools—English combs (large, mounted on posts), Viking combs (smaller, hand-held), mini combs (very portable), and even dog combs. The principle is the same: load fiber onto one comb, pull it through the teeth of the second comb to align and remove shorts, then transfer the combed fiber between combs until it's fully prepared.

## Choosing and Using Combs

**English combs** are the classic tool: two large rectangular paddles (8-12 inches long) covered with long, sturdy tines, mounted on posts or clamps. One comb is fixed in place; you load fiber onto it, then use the second comb to pull through the fiber. They're efficient and handle large amounts of fiber, but they require a

dedicated workspace and are intimidating for beginners. They're also expensive —\$200-400 for a good pair.

**Viking combs** (also called hand combs or Swedish combs) are smaller, lighter, and held in your hands rather than mounted. They're much more approachable for beginners and are portable—I can comb while sitting on the couch. They process less fiber at a time than English combs, but for small batches or learning, they're perfect. Expect to pay \$80-150 for a pair.

**Mini combs** are even smaller—about the size of a large hairbrush—and very affordable (\$30-60). They're great for sampling fibers or combing small amounts, but they're slow for production work.

### **Tooth spacing matters:**

- **Fine combs (tines spaced  $\frac{1}{4}$  inch or less):** For fine wools
- **Medium combs (tines spaced  $\frac{1}{2}$  inch):** Work for most breeds
- **Coarse combs (tines spaced  $\frac{3}{4}$  inch or more):** For longwools and very coarse fibers

## **The Combing Process: Step by Step**

**Step 1: Prepare your fiber.** You need clean, dry fleece with a staple length of at least 3 inches—longer is better. Separate the fleece into locks. Keep the locks organized with the cut ends together and the tip ends together.

**Step 2: Lash the fiber onto the comb.** Take a small handful of locks and lay them across the tines of one comb with the cut ends firmly seated in the teeth and the tip ends hanging off. The fiber should be secured by the base but free at the tips. This is called lashing. If you're using English combs, the loaded comb is now fixed in place. If using hand combs, hold the loaded comb in your non-dominant hand.

**Step 3: Comb the fiber.** Take the second comb in your dominant hand. Starting at the very tips of the fiber (the ends farthest from the comb), gently pull the second comb through the fiber. The tines will catch and align the fibers, and short fibers, noils, and debris will stay caught in the second comb while long fibers transfer. Make several passes, working gradually deeper into the fiber mass, until you've combed all the way to the base.

**Step 4: Transfer the fiber.** Now most of the long, aligned fiber is on the second comb, and the first comb holds short fibers and waste (the noils). Remove the noils from the first comb—you can save them for blending into textured yarn or discard them. Now lash the combed fiber back onto the first comb and repeat the

combing process. Each transfer aligns the fiber more perfectly. Usually 2-3 transfers are enough.

**Step 5: Remove the top.** When the fiber is fully combed—smooth, lustrous, and perfectly aligned—it's time to remove it as top. Hold the comb with the combed fiber in one hand. With the other hand, grasp the fiber tips and gently pull, sliding the fiber off the tines. It will come off as a continuous, rope-like bundle. Coil it loosely or pull it into a long strip for spinning.

## Working with Noils and Waste

Combing removes a lot of fiber—sometimes 20-30% of your starting weight ends up as noils and waste. This can feel wasteful, especially if you paid good money for that fleece. But noils aren't trash. They're short fibers, second cuts, and bits of vegetable matter—the stuff that would create weak spots and lumps in worsted yarn. By removing them, you're ensuring your top spins into strong, smooth yarn.

That said, you can absolutely use noils. The easiest option is to card them—run them through hand cards or a drum carder to blend them into spinnable fiber. The resulting preparation will be textured and rustic, perfect for tweedy yarn or art batts. Noils also work beautifully for felting projects—they felt readily because they're short and have lots of exposed scales.

The amount of waste depends on fleece quality. A well-skirted, clean fleece from a breed with long staple and minimal second cuts will have very little waste—maybe 10-15%. A fleece with lots of vegetable matter, short staple, or heavy second cuts can lose 40% or more to noils.

I keep a bag for noils and add to it over time. When I have enough, I card them all together into a blended batt—it's like a surprise fiber blend, and it often spins into really interesting yarn.

## Combing Different Fiber Types

**Longwools** (Wensleydale, Leicester, Lincoln, Teeswater) are what combing was made for. These breeds have staple lengths of 6-10 inches or even longer, with natural luster and strength. Combing aligns their length and makes their luster shine. The long staple means very little waste—most of the fiber makes it into the top. If you're new to combing, start with a longwool. It's forgiving and the results are stunning.

**Fine wools** (Merino, Cormo, Rambouillet) can be combed for ultra-smooth, soft yarn—think high-end sock yarn or baby garments. But they require fine-toothed combs and more patience. The fibers are delicate and shorter (typically 3-4 inches), so you'll have more waste. The payoff is yarn with incredible softness and strength.

**Short-stapled fibers** (under 3 inches) are generally not worth combing. You'll lose so much to noils that you'd be better off carding. Breeds like Shetland or Southdown, which have 2-3 inch staples, are much happier carded.

**Slippery plant fibers** (silk, Tencel, bamboo) benefit enormously from combing. These fibers are so slippery that they're hard to control during spinning if they're carded. Combing aligns them and makes them much easier to draft smoothly.

## Choosing the Right Preparation for Your Project

This is where preparation becomes creative decision-making. You're standing in your studio with a beautiful fleece, and you're planning a project. Do you card or comb? The answer depends on what you want the final yarn to do and be.

Ask yourself: What does this project need? A hat for winter warmth? Card the fiber—you want that lofty, insulating woolen yarn with trapped air. Socks that will see hard wear? Comb the fiber—you want strong, smooth worsted yarn that resists abrasion. A drapey shawl with beautiful stitch definition? Comb. A cozy, soft sweater? Card. The preparation determines the yarn's character, which determines how your project performs and feels.

Also consider the fiber itself. Some fibers practically beg to be prepared a certain way. A gorgeous Wensleydale with 8-inch locks and incredible luster? It's asking to be combed—don't hide that luster in carded fluff. A crimped Corriedale with 3-inch staple? It's perfect for carding—that crimp will trap air and create springy, warm yarn. Respect what the fiber naturally wants to do.

### Preparation Decision Matrix

Here's a practical way to decide: Start with the fiber. If the staple length is under 3 inches, carding is your best bet—combing will create too much waste. If it's 3-5 inches, you can go either way depending on project needs. If it's over 5 inches, especially with natural luster, combing will showcase the fiber's best qualities.

Next, think about the project:

- **Warmth and softness?** → Carded/woolen
- **Strength and durability?** → Combed/worsted
- **Clear stitch definition?** → Combed/worsted
- **Rustic texture?** → Carded/woolen
- **Drape and flow?** → Combed/worsted
- **Loft and insulation?** → Carded/woolen

Consider your tools. If you only have hand cards, that's fine—you can create beautiful yarn from carded fiber. If you have both cards and combs, you have more creative options.

Finally, when you're unsure, sample. Take a small amount of your fiber and prepare it both ways—card some, comb some. Spin a small skein from each. Wash and dry them. Compare them side by side. Which one makes you happier? Which one better suits your project vision? This is how you build intuition for preparation choices.

## Common Preparation Scenarios

**Scenario 1: Winter hat from Corriedale fleece (3.5-inch staple, lots of crimp).** → **Card it.** You want warmth and softness. Carding preserves the crimp, traps air, and creates lofty yarn that's perfect for a cozy hat.

**Scenario 2: Hard-wearing socks from Merino fleece (3-4 inch staple, very fine).** → **Comb it.** Socks need strength and abrasion resistance. Combing aligns the fibers and removes shorts, creating smooth, dense yarn that will last. Consider blending in a bit of nylon for extra durability.

**Scenario 3: Lace shawl from Wensleydale locks (8-inch staple, high luster).** → **Comb it, absolutely.** This fiber is made for combing. The long staple combs beautifully with minimal waste, and combing showcases the natural luster. The resulting smooth, strong yarn will show off lace stitches perfectly.

**Scenario 4: Rustic sweater from Jacob fleece (4-6 inch staple, natural colors).** → **Card it.** Jacob is a primitive breed with wonderful texture. Carding preserves that rustic character and creates soft, textured yarn. The natural color variations will create beautiful heathered effects.

**Scenario 5: Art yarn with multiple colors and textures.** → **Drum card it.** You want to blend colors and add texture fibers. A drum carder lets you create complex layered batts with intentional color placement and surface texture.

# Conclusion

If washing fleece is the foundational skill that connects you physically to fiber, then preparation is the creative skill that lets you shape what that fiber becomes. Every time you choose to card or comb, every time you blend colors on a drum carder or layer an art batt, you're making artistic decisions that will live in your yarn and your finished projects.

You've learned three core preparation methods in this chapter. Hand carding is accessible, portable, and perfect for creating fluffy rolags for woolen spinning. Drum carding is faster, ideal for blending, and opens up endless creative possibilities with color and texture. Combing produces sleek, aligned top for worsted spinning, showcasing fiber luster and creating strong, smooth yarn. None of these methods is better than the others—they're different tools for different visions.

The key is matching your preparation to your goals. Ask yourself: What does this project need? What does this fiber want to do? Then choose your preparation method accordingly. Over time, these decisions become intuitive.

Remember that preparation skills develop through practice. Your first rolags might be lumpy. Your first batt might have thick and thin spots. Your first combed top might have more noils than you expected. That's completely normal. Keep practicing. Your hands will learn. Your eye will develop. And one day you'll look at a fleece and instantly know exactly how you want to prepare it.

As you move forward into spinning (which we'll cover in the next chapter), you'll discover how profoundly preparation affects your yarn. Carded fiber spins differently than combed fiber—it drafts differently, it behaves differently, it creates different yarn. Understanding this connection between preparation and spinning is what transforms you from someone following instructions into someone making informed creative choices.

Keep experimenting. Try preparing the same fleece multiple ways. Blend colors you've never combined before. Comb a fiber you've always carded, or card a fiber you've always combed. Sample, document, and learn from every preparation. This is how you build your personal knowledge base and develop your unique style as a spinner.

You're ready now to take your prepared fiber—those beautiful rolags, batts, and top—and spin them into yarn. That's where we're headed next, and everything you've learned about preparation will inform every moment at your wheel.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Woolen preparation</b>	Carding fiber to create jumbled, three-dimensional alignment; produces lofty, warm, insulating yarn with soft halo
<b>Worsted preparation</b>	Combing fiber to create parallel alignment; produces smooth, strong, lustrous yarn with clear stitch definition
<b>Hand carding</b>	Using two hand cards to open and mix fiber through gentle transferring strokes; creates rolags
<b>Rolag</b>	Small, fluffy roll of carded fiber with fibers oriented perpendicular to roll length; traditional woolen preparation
<b>Drum carding</b>	Using mechanical carder with two drums to process fiber quickly; creates batts
<b>Batt</b>	Flat, rectangular sheet of carded fiber removed from drum carder
<b>Art batt</b>	Intentionally designed batt combining multiple colors, fibers, and textures in creative layers
<b>Combing</b>	Using combs with long tines to align fibers parallel and remove short fibers; creates top
<b>Top</b>	Continuous rope of aligned fiber produced by combing; drafts smoothly for worsted spinning
<b>Noils</b>	Short fibers, second cuts, and debris removed during combing; can be saved for carding or felting
<b>Lashing</b>	Securing fiber onto comb by the cut ends with tips hanging free; first step in combing process
<b>Color blending</b>	Carding multiple colors together to create custom colorways; degree of blending controlled by number of passes
<b>Gradient blending</b>	Layering colors in overlapping sequence to create smooth color transitions in batts
<b>Staple length</b>	Length of individual fiber locks; determines which preparation method works best (3+ inches for combing)

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## Glossary of Terms

**Art batt:** A creatively designed batt that intentionally combines multiple colors, fiber types, and textures in layers; both functional preparation and aesthetic object.

**Batt:** A flat, rectangular sheet of carded fiber removed from a drum carder; can be used as-is or pre-drafted for spinning.

**Carding:** The process of opening and mixing fiber using cards with wire teeth, creating three-dimensional fiber alignment for woolen spinning.

**Carding cloth:** Fabric backing with angled wire teeth attached; covers hand cards and drum carder surfaces.

**Combing:** The process of aligning fiber parallel and removing short fibers using combs with long tines; creates worsted preparation.

**Doffer:** Long, flat metal tool used to lift fiber off a drum carder.

**Drum carder:** Mechanical carding tool with two rotating drums covered in carding cloth; processes fiber faster than hand cards.

**English combs:** Large, traditional combs mounted on posts or clamps; efficient for processing large amounts of fiber.

**Gradient:** Smooth color transition created by layering colors in overlapping sequence during carding.

**Hand cards:** Two wooden paddles covered with angled wire teeth; used to card fiber by hand.

**Lashing:** The process of securing fiber onto a comb by the cut ends with tips hanging free; first step in combing.

**Licker-in:** Small drum on a drum carder that catches and feeds fiber onto the main drum.

**Longwool:** Sheep breeds with staple length of 6+ inches and natural luster; ideal for combing (e.g., Wensleydale, Leicester).

**Main drum:** Large cylinder on drum carder where fiber is carded and held.

**Noils:** Short fibers, second cuts, and debris removed during combing; can be saved for carding or felting projects.

**Pre-drafting:** Gently pulling fiber to thin and open it before carding or spinning; makes processing easier.

**Rolag:** Small, cylindrical roll of carded fiber with fibers oriented perpendicular to the roll length; traditional woolen preparation.

**Staple length:** The length of individual fiber locks; determines appropriate preparation method.

**Teeth per inch (TPI):** Measurement of tooth density on carding cloth; must match fiber fineness (fine fibers need high TPI).

**Top:** Continuous rope of parallel-aligned fiber produced by combing; used for worsted spinning.

**Viking combs (hand combs):** Smaller, hand-held combs that don't require mounting; more portable and beginner-friendly than English combs.

**Worsted:** Preparation method that aligns fibers parallel through combing; produces smooth, strong, lustrous yarn.

**Woolen:** Preparation method that mixes fibers in all directions through carding; produces lofty, warm, textured yarn.

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## Practice Exercises

### Exercise 1: Your First Rolags

**Objective:** Practice basic hand carding technique and create spinnable rolags.

#### Materials needed:

- Hand cards (medium tooth density)
- 2-3 ounces of clean, medium wool fleece (Corriedale or similar)

#### Instructions:

1. Take a small lock of fleece and pre-draft it gently
2. Load it onto one card in a thin, even layer
3. Card using light, smooth strokes, transferring between cards
4. Card 4-6 transfers until the fiber is fluffy and well-mixed
5. Roll it off into a rolag
6. Repeat until you've made 10 rolags
7. Notice how your technique improves with each rolag

**Reflection:** Compare your first rolag and your tenth rolag. How are they different? Take one rolag and try spinning from it—notice how the fiber drafts and feels.

**Hint:** Your first few rolags may be uneven—that's normal. By the tenth rolag, you should notice improved consistency and fluffiness. The fiber should draft easily with a slight resistance, and the yarn should have a soft, slightly fuzzy character.

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### Exercise 2: Comparing Carded and Combed Fiber

**Objective:** Directly experience the difference between woolen and worsted preparation.

## **Materials needed:**

- Hand cards
- Combs (any type)
- 2 ounces of clean fleece with 4+ inch staple length (Romney, BFL, or similar)

## **Instructions:**

1. Divide your fleece into two equal portions
2. Card one portion into rolags using your hand cards
3. Comb the other portion into top using your combs
4. Spin a small sample skein from the carded fiber (about 25-30 yards)
5. Spin another sample from the combed fiber, keeping twist and thickness similar
6. Wash and dry both samples
7. Lay the two skeins side by side and examine them

**Reflection:** How do they differ in texture, luster, strength, and appearance? The carded yarn should be loftier and softer with a slight halo. The combed yarn should be smoother, more lustrous, with clearer twist definition. This physical comparison is worth a thousand words.

**Hint:** The carded yarn should be loftier, softer, and have a slight halo. The combed yarn should be smoother, stronger, more lustrous, with clearer twist definition. This direct comparison helps you understand how preparation shapes yarn character.

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## **Exercise 3: Creating a Color-Blended Batt**

**Objective:** Practice drum carding and color blending to create a custom art batt.

## **Materials needed:**

- Drum carder
- 2-3 ounces total of dyed fiber in 2-3 colors
- Optional add-ins (silk, Angelina, contrasting locks)

## **Instructions:**

1. Choose 2-3 colors that you love together
2. Decide on a pattern: gradient, stripes, or random blend
3. Feed your first color onto the drum, carding it evenly
4. Add your second color in your chosen pattern (overlapping for gradients, distinct sections for stripes)
5. Add the third color
6. On the final pass, add any texture fibers or sparkle
7. Remove the batt and admire it
8. Spin your art batt and watch how the colors interact

**Reflection:** Did the colors blend the way you expected? What would you do differently next time? Save a photo of the batt and the resulting yarn for your records—this is how you build your color-blending intuition.

**Hint:** Feed colors in intentional sequences—overlapping layers create gradients, distinct sections create stripes. Add texture fibers in the final pass so they sit on the surface. The resulting yarn will show how blending degree (more passes = more blended) affects color appearance.

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### **Exercise 4: Combing a Longwool**

**Objective:** Experience the satisfaction of combing a fiber that's ideal for the technique.

#### **Materials needed:**

- Combs (any type, but English combs work particularly well)
- 2-3 ounces of clean longwool fleece with 6+ inch staple (Wensleydale, Leicester, or Teeswater)

#### **Instructions:**

1. Take a handful of longwool locks and lash them onto your comb, cut ends secured in the teeth
2. Comb through the tips gently, working deeper with each pass
3. Transfer the combed fiber to the other comb and comb again
4. Repeat until the fiber is sleek and perfectly aligned
5. Remove the top and notice its silky smoothness
6. Look at the small amount of noils—longwools are efficient to comb
7. Spin a bit of this top and notice how smoothly it drafts

**Reflection:** Notice how the luster shines in the yarn. This is what combing does best. If you've been intimidated by combing, this exercise shows you why it's worth learning.

**Hint:** Longwools are forgiving to comb—the long staple means most fiber makes it into the top, and the natural luster becomes even more pronounced. The top should be silky smooth and draft with almost no resistance. The yarn should be strong, lustrous, and show clear twist definition.

## Chapter 6: Spinning Yarn: From Fiber to Handspun



There's something deeply centering about spinning—the gentle rhythm of your hands, the quiet hum of a wheel, the way fiber transforms into yarn right between your fingers. It's where all your earlier work comes together: the fiber you washed, the colors you dyed, the preparations you carded or combed. Now you'll bring those fibers to life as yarn.

Spinning isn't just a technical skill—it's a practice in presence. Your breathing slows. Your hands find their rhythm. The world narrows to just you, the fiber, and the twist traveling up between your fingers. Some spinners describe it as moving meditation; others simply call it the most peaceful part of their day.

This chapter takes you from your very first twist to confident, consistent yarn. You'll start with a drop spindle—the ancient, portable tool that teaches you the fundamental mechanics of spinning. Then you'll move to the spinning wheel, exploring different wheel styles, finding your ergonomic setup, and developing the coordination that becomes second nature with practice. By the end, you'll

understand how to control twist, adjust thickness, and create yarn that matches your vision—whether that's sturdy sock yarn, soft sweater yarn, or art yarn with wild texture.

The fiber you've prepared is ready. Let's spin.

## Materials and Tools

### For Drop Spindle Spinning:

- **Drop spindle** (top whorl or bottom whorl, 1.5-3 oz weight for beginners)
- **Prepared fiber**: 2-4 oz roving, rolag, or top from Chapter 5
- **Leader yarn**: 18-24 inches smooth, strong yarn (cotton or commercial wool)
- **Lazy kate or empty jar** (to hold your spindle while plying)
- **Small bowl of water** (for wetting fingers if needed)

**Spindle selection guidance:** Top whorl spindles (disk near the shaft top) spin longer and feel more stable for beginners. Bottom whorl spindles (disk near the shaft bottom) are faster but require more control. Weight matters—lighter spindles (under 1.5 oz) suit fine fibers and thin yarns; heavier spindles (2-3 oz) work better for thicker yarns and learning. A 2 oz top whorl spindle is the most versatile starting point.

### For Wheel Spinning:

- **Spinning wheel** (any style—see wheel selection section below)
- **Prepared fiber**: 4-8 oz roving, rolag, or top
- **Leader yarn**: 24-36 inches
- **Lazy kate** (holds bobbins for plying)
- **Extra bobbins** (at least 3 total)
- **Niddy noddy or swift** (for skeining finished yarn)
- **Wheel oil** (for maintenance)
- **Comfortable chair** with proper height (see posture section)
- **Footstool** (optional, for ergonomic positioning)

### Optional but Helpful:

- **WPI (wraps per inch) gauge** or ruler (to measure yarn thickness)
- **Yarn scale** (to track yardage)
- **Nostepinne or ball winder** (for winding center-pull balls)
- **Spinning apron** (keeps fiber clean and close)

## Understanding Twist: The Foundation of Yarn

Before you touch spindle or wheel, understand this: **yarn is just fiber held together by twist**. That's it. Twist spirals around the fiber, locks it together, and creates strength.

**Twist direction** matters for structure and appearance:

- **Z-twist** (clockwise rotation): Twist spirals up and to the right, like the center stroke of the letter Z. This is standard for single-ply yarn in Western spinning.
- **S-twist** (counterclockwise rotation): Twist spirals up and to the left, like the letter S. Used for specialty yarns and traditional plying.

**Twist angle** determines yarn character:

- **Low twist** (relaxed angle, 15-25° from fiber axis): Soft, drapey, lofty yarn with visible fiber. Blooms beautifully but pills more easily. Ideal for cozy sweaters and scarves.
- **Medium twist** (balanced angle, 30-45°): Versatile, durable yarn with good stitch definition. Works for most projects.
- **High twist** (steep angle, 50°+): Strong, dense, durable yarn with lots of energy. Perfect for socks, bags, and hard-wearing items. Can feel wiry if overspun.

**Twist amount** relates to fiber thickness:

- Thin yarn needs more twists per inch (tpi) for strength—8-12 tpi for fingering weight
- Thick yarn needs fewer—3-6 tpi for bulky weight
- Balanced yarn has just enough twist to hold together without kinking back on itself

You'll develop a feel for this through your hands. Trust the process.

## Drop Spindle Spinning: Learning the Fundamentals

The drop spindle teaches you everything. It forces you to separate drafting (pulling fiber) from twisting (spinning the spindle), making both processes visible and deliberate. Master the spindle, and the wheel becomes intuitive.

### Setting Up Your Spindle

1. **Attach the leader:** Tie your leader yarn to the spindle shaft just above the whorl (for top whorl) or below it (for bottom whorl).
2. **Secure the leader path:** Bring the leader over the edge of the whorl, loop it around the shaft hook or notch at the top, and leave 6-8 inches hanging free.
3. **Attach your fiber:** Overlap the leader end with your prepared fiber by 3-4 inches. Hold the overlap firmly—this is your starting point.

### The Basic Spin: Park and Draft Method

This method separates the two actions completely—perfect for learning.

1. **Hold the fiber:** Grasp your fiber source in your non-dominant hand (left for righties), held comfortably at chest height. Pinch the fiber-leader overlap with your dominant hand (right), thumb and forefinger together, 4-5 inches above the spindle.

2. **Spin the spindle:** With your dominant hand, flick the spindle shaft clockwise (for Z-twist) like you're spinning a top. Let it drop and spin freely.
3. **Park the spindle:** Trap the spindle between your knees or under your arm to stop it spinning. The twist is now stored in the leader.
4. **Draft the fiber:** Keep pinching firmly at your original spot—this pinch point prevents twist from entering the fiber while you draft. With your fiber hand, gently pull back 4-6 inches of fiber, thinning it to your desired yarn thickness. You're not pulling hard—you're coaxing fibers to slide past each other.
5. **Release the twist:** Slide your pinch point up into the drafted fiber. Twist travels up instantly, transforming the loose fiber into yarn. Watch it happen—this is the magic moment.
6. **Wind on:** When you have 12-18 inches of spun yarn, unhook it from the shaft notch, wind it around the shaft just above the whorl in a neat spiral (not overlapping), then re-secure it in the notch with a half-hitch loop. Leave 6-8 inches free to continue.
7. **Repeat:** Spin the spindle again, draft more fiber, release twist, wind on. This is spinning.

### **Troubleshooting:**

- **Fiber breaks:** Too much twist for the thickness, or you drafted too thin. Add less twist or draft thicker.
- **Twist runs into your fiber supply:** Your pinch point isn't firm enough. Pinch tighter while drafting.
- **Lumpy, uneven yarn:** Completely normal for beginners. Consistency comes with practice—aim for "consistently inconsistent" at first.
- **Spindle wobbles:** Whorl might be off-center, or you're flicking too hard. Spin gently and check spindle balance.

### **Progressing to Suspended Spinning**

Once park-and-draft feels comfortable, try spinning with the spindle suspended—no parking.

1. **Spin and hold:** Flick the spindle and let it hang, spinning in the air. Keep your pinch point firm above the forming yarn.
2. **Draft while it spins:** With the spindle suspended, draft fiber with your fiber hand while maintaining your pinch point. You're working against the pull of the hanging spindle.
3. **Release twist gradually:** As you draft, slide your pinch point up slowly, letting twist enter the drafted section while you continue pulling more fiber.
4. **Wind on before it hits the ground:** When the spindle gets too low (12-18 inches of new yarn), wind on and continue.

This method is faster and develops your rhythm. The spinning spindle provides momentum and consistent twist. Your hands learn to work independently—one drafting, one controlling twist.

## Joining New Fiber

When you run out of fiber or want to add a new color:

1. **Overlap:** Lay the new fiber end over the last 3-4 inches of your spun yarn.
2. **Draft together:** Draft both old and new fiber together as one unit, thinning the overlap zone.
3. **Spin normally:** Add twist through the overlap. The twist locks them together invisibly.

A good join is invisible in the finished yarn. If you see a bump, you overlapped too much fiber—keep overlaps thin.

## Filling the Spindle

Wind your yarn in a cone shape (cop) around the shaft, building it evenly. Keep weight balanced—a lopsided cop wobbles and spins poorly. When the cop gets heavy (usually 1-2 oz of yarn), it's time to wind off into a skein or move to plying.

Don't overfill. A too-heavy spindle is hard to spin and will drop faster than you can draft.

## Plying: Creating Balanced Yarn

Single-ply yarn is fragile and energized—it wants to twist back on itself. **Plying** combines two or more singles in the opposite twist direction, creating balanced, stable yarn.

### Two-Ply on a Drop Spindle

1. **Wind off your singles:** Wind your spun single into a center-pull ball, or use two separate spindles/bobbins with one single each.
2. **Attach both singles:** Tie both single ends to your spindle leader together.
3. **Spin backward:** Spin your spindle counterclockwise (S-twist) to ply Z-twist singles. The singles wrap around each other.
4. **Control tension:** Hold both singles with even tension in your fiber hand. Let them twist together naturally as twist travels up.
5. **Wind on:** Wind the plied yarn onto your spindle shaft.

**Ply twist amount:** Use less twist than you put in the singles—about 60-70% as much. Underplied yarn is loose and soft but weak. Overplied yarn is stiff and can bias in knitting. Balanced plied yarn hangs straight when you hold a loop—it doesn't twist on itself.

## Chain Plying (Navajo Plying)

This technique plies a single strand back on itself, creating a three-ply yarn that preserves color sequences (perfect for hand-painted fiber).

1. **Make a slip knot loop** at the end of your single, about 12 inches long.
2. **Pull a new loop** through the first loop (like crocheting a chain).
3. **Spin backward** (S-twist) while pulling new loops. The three strands twist together.
4. **Keep loops even** for consistent yarn thickness.

Chain plying takes practice but creates gorgeous, balanced yarn from variegated singles.

## Spinning Wheel Basics: Choosing and Setting Up Your Wheel

The spinning wheel mechanizes what you learned on the spindle: it adds twist continuously while winding the yarn onto a bobbin simultaneously. Your hands are free to focus entirely on drafting.

### Wheel Styles and Selection

**Saxony wheel** (classic castle shape): Footman-driven, large wheel, traditional appearance. The flyer and bobbin sit horizontally on a "mother-of-all" frame. Smooth, rhythmic treadling. Beautiful to look at, requires more space. Excellent for beginners—the mechanics are visible and easy to understand.

**Castle wheel** (vertical design): Compact footprint, flyer and bobbin above the wheel. Takes up less floor space. Faster treadling than Saxony. Good for small spaces and portability.

**Norwegian wheel** (vertical or angled): Traditional Scandinavian design, often with vertical flyer. Very compact. Requires specific posture—you sit lower or the wheel sits higher.

**Modern compact wheels**: Folding or small-footprint designs (Ashford Traveller, Schacht Ladybug). Highly portable, easy storage. Great for apartments or traveling to spinning groups.

**Electric spinners** (Ashford eSpinner, Hansen miniSpinner): No treadling—motor-driven. Expensive but effortless. Perfect for spinners with mobility issues or those who want to focus purely on fiber.

**What matters most**: Comfort and smooth operation. An expensive wheel you hate using is worthless. A basic wheel that feels good will produce beautiful yarn.

**Try before you buy:** Test wheels at fiber festivals, spinning guilds, or shops. Spin for 15-20 minutes—does your back hurt? Do your legs tire? Does the treadling rhythm feel natural? Trust your body.

### Drive System: Bobbin-Lead vs. Flyer-Lead

**Bobbin-lead (Irish tension):** The drive band goes around the bobbin. The bobbin pulls the yarn onto itself. You control take-up with a brake band on the flyer. Stronger take-up, great for beginners and fine yarns. Most modern wheels use this system.

**Flyer-lead (Scotch tension):** The drive band goes around the flyer whorl. The flyer twists the yarn, and a separate brake band on the bobbin controls take-up. Gentler take-up, better for thick or delicate yarns.

Both work beautifully. Learn what your wheel uses and how to adjust it.

### Wheel Anatomy You Need to Know

- **Flyer:** The U-shaped arm that adds twist
- **Bobbin:** The spool that holds finished yarn, sits inside the flyer
- **Hooks:** Small hooks on the flyer arms guide yarn onto the bobbin
- **Whorl:** Grooved pulley on the flyer or bobbin (different groove sizes = different speeds)
- **Drive band:** Cord connecting the drive wheel to the whorl
- **Treadle:** Footboard you pump to turn the wheel
- **Footman or connecting rod:** Links treadle to wheel
- **Tension knob:** Adjusts drive band or brake band tightness
- **Maidens:** Uprights that hold the flyer assembly
- **Mother-of-all:** Frame that holds maidens (on some wheels)

### Setting Up Your Wheel

1. **Adjust tension:** The drive band should be snug but not tight—you want the wheel to turn smoothly without slipping. Start with medium tension and adjust as you spin.
2. **Check brake band** (if your wheel has one): It should barely touch the bobbin or flyer. Too tight = yarn yanks out of your hands. Too loose = yarn doesn't wind on.
3. **Thread the leader:** Tie a 24-36 inch leader to the bobbin (through a hole or around the core). Bring it up through the flyer orifice (the hole at the base), loop it over a flyer hook.
4. **Test treadle:** Practice treadling without fiber. Find a steady rhythm—not too fast. The wheel should spin smoothly in one direction. If it's jerky, check your drive band tension and footman connection.

### Ergonomic Setup: Posture and Position

Poor posture leads to sore backs, tight shoulders, and tired legs. Set up your spinning space like you're setting up an office workstation.

**Chair height:** Your feet should rest flat on the treadle(s) with knees at 90° or slightly higher. If you're reaching down, the chair is too high. If your knees are cramped, it's too low. Add a cushion or use a footstool to adjust.

**Wheel distance:** Sit close enough that you're not leaning forward to reach the orifice. Your arms should be relaxed, elbows at your sides or slightly forward.

**Back support:** Use a chair with good lower back support, or add a lumbar cushion. Your spine should be neutral—not hunched, not hyperextended.

**Fiber supply position:** Keep your prepared fiber in a basket or on a distaff at chest to shoulder height on your non-dominant side. You shouldn't be reaching down or twisting to grab fiber.

**Lighting:** Position a bright light to illuminate the orifice and your hands. You need to see the yarn forming clearly.

**Breaks:** Stand and stretch every 30-40 minutes. Spinning is repetitive motion—prevent strain by moving regularly.

### **Hand and Wrist Position**

**Forward hand** (dominant hand, usually right): This hand stays 4-8 inches in front of the orifice, controlling twist entry. Keep your wrist straight—not bent up or down. Pinch with thumb and forefinger, other fingers relaxed. This hand is your twist gate.

**Back hand** (fiber hand, usually left): This hand holds the fiber supply and drafts. Keep it 8-12 inches behind your forward hand. Your wrist should be neutral, arm relaxed. This hand pulls and thins the fiber.

**Common mistake:** Tense, raised shoulders and bent wrists. Check in with your body every few minutes—drop your shoulders, straighten your wrists, breathe.

## **Spinning on the Wheel: Building Coordination**

Wheel spinning requires coordination between feet (treadling), forward hand (controlling twist), and back hand (drafting). It feels overwhelming at first. Then suddenly, it clicks.

### **Treadling Practice**

Before adding fiber, master treadling.

- 1. Start the wheel by hand:** Give it a spin clockwise (for Z-twist).
- 2. Begin treadling:** Press the treadle in rhythm—down, up, down, up. Not hard, not fast. Gentle and steady.

3. **Keep it going:** Focus on smooth, continuous motion. If the wheel stops or reverses, start it by hand again.
4. **Find your rhythm:** Some spinners treadle fast, some slow. Find a pace that feels sustainable—you'll be doing this for hours.

Practice until treadling is automatic. You should be able to treadle while talking, thinking, or watching the fiber.

### **First Yarn on the Wheel: Long Draw Method**

**Long draw** suits woolen-prepared fiber (rolags from carding). It's fast, intuitive, and produces soft, airy yarn.

1. **Attach fiber to leader:** Overlap 3-4 inches of fiber with the leader, pinch together.
2. **Start treadling:** Get the wheel spinning at a moderate pace.
3. **Let twist enter:** Pinch the fiber-leader join with your forward hand. Let twist run into the fiber for 2-3 seconds, locking the join.
4. **Draft back:** With your back hand, pull the fiber supply backward 12-18 inches in one smooth motion. The fiber thins as you pull. Keep your forward hand pinched—it prevents twist from entering while you draft.
5. **Release twist:** Open your forward hand slightly. Twist rushes up through the drafted fiber, transforming it into yarn right before your eyes.
6. **Let it wind on:** The wheel pulls the new yarn through the orifice and onto the bobbin. Move the yarn to a different hook every few yards to build an even bobbin.
7. **Repeat:** Pinch, draft back, release twist, wind on. This is the rhythm. Your hands move in and out like an accordion.

**Long draw creates yarn quickly.** The long drafting motion suits the three-dimensional fiber structure of rolags—fibers pull from all directions, creating a lofty, woolen yarn with air trapped inside.

### **Troubleshooting:**

- **Yarn too thin/breaks:** You're drafting too thin or adding too much twist. Draft thicker or treadle slower.
- **Yarn too thick/slubby:** Draft more fiber or treadle faster to add more twist.
- **Twist runs into your fiber supply:** Your forward hand isn't pinching firmly enough, or you're pinching too far back. Pinch closer to the orifice.
- **Yarn won't wind on:** Tension is too loose. Tighten the brake band or drive band slightly.
- **Yarn yanks out of your hands:** Tension is too tight. Loosen the brake band.

## **Short Forward Draw: Worsted Spinning**

**Short forward draw** suits combed top or roving with parallel fibers. It produces smooth, strong, lustrous yarn with clear stitch definition.

1. **Hold the fiber supply** in your back hand, fibers pointing forward toward the orifice.
2. **Pinch with your forward hand** about 6 inches from the orifice.
3. **Draft forward**: With your back hand, slide forward 3-4 inches, pulling a small amount of fiber from the supply. You're not pulling hard—you're letting fibers slide out in a controlled way.
4. **Let twist enter**: Relax your forward hand slightly. Twist enters the drafted section, turning it into yarn.
5. **Slide forward hand back**: Move your pinch point back to 6 inches from the orifice. The new yarn feeds onto the bobbin.
6. **Repeat**: Draft forward, let twist in, slide back. Small motions, continuous rhythm.

**Short forward draw is controlled and meditative.** Your hands barely move. The fiber flows through your fingers in a steady stream. This method keeps fibers parallel, creating worsted yarn structure—smooth and strong.

## **Adjusting Twist and Thickness**

**More twist** = stronger, denser yarn:

- Treadle faster
- Draft slower
- Move your forward hand farther from the orifice

**Less twist** = softer, loftier yarn:

- Treadle slower
- Draft faster
- Keep your forward hand closer to the orifice

**Thicker yarn**:

- Draft more fiber in each pull
- Let more fibers into the drafting zone

**Thinner yarn**:

- Draft less fiber
- Thin the fiber more during drafting

**Consistency comes with time.** Your hands develop muscle memory. You'll feel when the yarn is right.

## **Joining New Fiber on the Wheel**

Same as the spindle: overlap 3-4 inches, draft the overlap thin, let twist lock it together. A good join is invisible.

## Plying on the Wheel

Plying on the wheel is faster and easier than on a spindle.

### Two-Ply Setup

1. **Load bobbins on lazy kate:** Place two bobbins with singles on the lazy kate (a holder that lets bobbins rotate freely).
2. **Thread both singles together:** Bring both singles through the orifice as one, tie to an empty bobbin on the wheel.
3. **Reverse wheel direction:** You're plying opposite to your singles twist. If you spun Z-twist (clockwise), ply S-twist (counterclockwise).
4. **Treadle and let them ply:** The singles twist around each other as they feed through your hands. Control tension so both singles feed evenly.
5. **Check balance:** Stop periodically and let a loop of plied yarn hang. Does it twist back on itself? Add more or less ply twist until it hangs straight.

### Three-Ply

Same as two-ply, but feed three singles through together. Three-ply yarn is round, bouncy, and incredibly durable—perfect for socks and hard-wearing projects.

### Chain Plying on the Wheel

Same technique as on the spindle, but faster. Pull loops through continuously while treadling backward. The wheel winds on automatically.

## Finishing Your Yarn: Skeining and Setting Twist

Yarn fresh off the bobbin is tense and kinked. **Finishing** relaxes the twist and sets the yarn structure.

1. **Skein the yarn:** Wind it off the bobbin onto a niddy noddy or swift in a continuous loop. Tie the skein loosely in 3-4 places with scrap yarn to prevent tangling.
2. **Soak:** Submerge the skein in warm water with a drop of wool wash. Let it soak for 15-20 minutes. The fibers relax and bloom.
3. **Rinse gently:** Don't agitate—you're not felting. Just press the water through.
4. **Remove excess water:** Press the skein in a towel, or spin it in a salad spinner (dedicated to fiber).
5. **Hang to dry:** Hang the skein with light weight (a few ounces) to help it dry straight. Or hang without weight for a softer, loftier yarn.
6. **Thwack (optional):** Once dry, hold one end of the skein and smack it against a table or your leg several times. This evens out the twist and fluffs the yarn. Surprisingly satisfying.

Your yarn is now finished, balanced, and ready to knit, weave, or crochet.

## **Yarn Types and Styles You Can Create**

Once you control twist and drafting, you can create any yarn you imagine.

**Lace weight** (800-1200 ypp): High twist, very thin drafting. Requires fine fiber and light tension.

**Fingering weight** (400-500 ypp): Moderate twist, thin drafting. Versatile for socks, shawls, sweaters.

**Sport to DK weight** (250-350 ypp): Medium twist, medium drafting. Great for garments and accessories.

**Worsted to Aran weight** (150-250 ypp): Moderate twist, thicker drafting. Quick to spin and knit.

**Bulky weight** (100-150 ypp): Lower twist, thick drafting. Cozy and fast.

**Art yarn**: Intentionally uneven—thick and thin sections, slubs, coils, add-ins like silk or sparkle. Let your creativity loose.

### **Novelty techniques:**

- **Core spinning**: Wrap fiber around a strong core thread for structure
- **Corespun boucles**: Wrap fiber loosely around a core for loopy texture
- **Beaded yarn**: Thread beads onto singles before plying, trap them in the ply
- **Spiral plying**: Ply a thick single with a thin single for striped effect

## **Troubleshooting Common Spinning Issues**

**Yarn drifts apart**: Not enough twist. Treadle faster or draft slower.

**Yarn is wiry and overspun**: Too much twist. Treadle slower or draft faster.

**Thick and thin sections**: Inconsistent drafting. Focus on pulling the same amount of fiber each time. Consistency comes with practice—be patient with yourself.

**Yarn breaks while spinning**: Either too much twist for the thickness, or you're drafting too thin in spots. Add less twist or draft more evenly.

**Fiber won't draft**: Fibers are compacted or tangled. Fluff your preparation before spinning, or use a different preparation method.

**Wheel squeaks**: Needs oil. Put a drop of spinning wheel oil on all moving parts—axle bearings, footman joints, bobbin shaft.

**Wheel reverses direction**: You're treadling unevenly or stopping. Keep treadling rhythm steady and continuous.

**Bobbin fills unevenly:** Move yarn to different hooks regularly, building the bobbin evenly from back to front.

## Building Your Spinning Practice

Spinning is a practice, not a destination. Every spinner's yarn looks different—that's the beauty of handspun.

**Start simple:** Spin medium-weight yarn from easy fiber (Corriedale, Romney, or commercial roving). Don't attempt lace weight or art yarn on day one.

**Spin often:** Fifteen minutes daily builds skill faster than two hours once a week. Your hands need repetition to learn.

**Spin a lot of yarn:** Your first few ounces will be inconsistent. That's normal. Spin through it. By the time you've spun a pound, you'll see dramatic improvement.

**Sample different fibers:** Every breed spins differently. Merino is soft and slippery. Romney is strong and springy. Longwools are lustrous and smooth. Try them all.

**Join a spinning group:** Learning alongside others accelerates your progress. You'll see different techniques, get troubleshooting help, and find community.

**Save your early yarn:** Don't throw it away. A year from now, you'll look back and see how far you've come.

**Use your handspun:** Knit or crochet with it, even if it's imperfect. Handspun has a life and character that commercial yarn can't match.

## Connecting to Previous Chapters

Everything you've learned comes together in spinning:

- **Chapter 1's fiber knowledge** helps you choose breeds that spin the way you want—soft Merino for next-to-skin garments, strong Romney for socks, lustrous longwools for shawls.
- **Chapter 2's washing techniques** prepared clean fiber that drafts smoothly and spins without vegetable matter interrupting your rhythm.
- **Chapter 4's dyeing** gave you custom colors that now become one-of-a-kind yarn—colorways no one else has.
- **Chapter 5's preparation methods** directly affect your spinning: rolags for woolen long draw, top for worsted short draw. The preparation you choose determines the yarn you create.

Spinning transforms all that earlier work into something functional and beautiful—yarn that carries your intention, your color choices, your hands' rhythm.

## What's Next

With spinning skills established, you're ready to explore advanced techniques: plying variations, art yarn methods, and yarn design for specific projects. You can also return to Chapter 5 to experiment with different fiber preparations and see how they change your yarn's character.

Most importantly, you can now take fiber from raw fleece all the way to finished yarn—a complete cycle that connects you to thousands of years of textile tradition.

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You've learned the rhythm. You've felt twist travel through your fingers. You've watched fiber become yarn. This is spinning—part skill, part meditation, entirely yours.

The wheel or spindle doesn't care if your yarn is perfect. It just wants to spin. So do you. Keep going.

## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Twist (Z and S)</b>	Z-twist spirals clockwise (standard for singles); S-twist spirals counterclockwise (standard for plying). Direction determines yarn structure and balance.
<b>Twist angle</b>	Low twist = soft, lofty yarn; medium twist = balanced, versatile yarn; high twist = strong, durable yarn. Angle determines yarn character.
<b>Park and draft</b>	Drop spindle method: spin spindle, park it, draft fiber, release twist. Separates actions for learning clarity.
<b>Suspended spinning</b>	Spinning with spindle hanging freely while drafting—faster, more rhythmic method once basics are mastered.
<b>Drafting</b>	Pulling fiber to thin it before twist enters. Controls yarn thickness. Forward hand pinches to control twist entry; back hand pulls fiber.
<b>Joining</b>	Overlapping new fiber with spun yarn, drafting together, and adding twist to lock invisibly.
<b>Plying</b>	Combining two or more singles with opposite twist to create balanced, stable yarn.
<b>Chain plying</b>	Plying a single strand back on itself in loops (like crochet chain) to create three-ply yarn that preserves color sequences.
<b>Bobbin-lead (Irish tension)</b>	Wheel drive system where drive band powers the bobbin; brake band on flyer controls take-up. Stronger pull, good for beginners.

<b>Flyer-lead (Scotch tension)</b>	Drive band powers flyer; brake band on bobbin controls take-up. Gentler, better for thick or delicate yarns.
<b>Long draw</b>	Drafting method: draft fiber backward 12-18 inches, then release twist. Suits woolen preparations (rolags), creates lofty yarn.
<b>Short forward draw</b>	Drafting method: small forward drafts (3-4 inches), continuous twist entry. Suits worsted preparations (top), creates smooth yarn.
<b>Wheel ergonomics</b>	Proper posture: feet flat, knees 90°, back supported, fiber at chest height, wrists straight. Prevents strain and fatigue.
<b>Skeining</b>	Winding finished yarn into a loop on niddy noddy or swift for washing and storage.
<b>Setting twist</b>	Soaking and drying finished yarn to relax fibers, even out twist, and stabilize yarn structure.
<b>WPI (wraps per inch)</b>	Measuring yarn thickness by wrapping around a ruler. Determines yarn weight category.
<b>Balanced yarn</b>	Yarn with correct ply twist—hangs straight without twisting back on itself. Achieved by plying with appropriate opposite twist.

## Glossary of Terms

**Art yarn:** Intentionally textured or uneven yarn with creative elements—thick and thin sections, slubs, coils, add-ins, or novelty fibers.

**Bobbin:** Spool that holds spun yarn on a spinning wheel, sits inside the flyer.

**Brake band:** Cord or band that creates friction on bobbin or flyer to control how fast yarn winds onto the bobbin.

**Chain plying (Navajo plying):** Plying technique that folds a single strand back on itself in loops to create three-ply yarn.

**Cop:** Cone-shaped package of yarn wound onto a spindle shaft.

**Core spinning:** Spinning technique that wraps fiber around a strong core thread for structure and stability.

**Drafting:** Pulling fiber to thin it into a yarn-width strand before twist is added.

**Drafting zone:** The section of fiber between your two hands where drafting occurs.

**Drive band:** Cord connecting the drive wheel to the flyer or bobbin whorl, transfers power from treadling.

**Drop spindle:** Handheld spinning tool with a shaft and weighted whorl that spins to add twist to fiber.

**Flyer:** U-shaped arm on a spinning wheel that adds twist to fiber and guides it onto the bobbin.

**Footman:** Rod connecting the treadle to the drive wheel on a spinning wheel.

**Join:** Connection point where new fiber is attached to existing yarn by overlapping and twisting together.

**Lazy kate:** Stand that holds bobbins or spindles, allowing them to rotate freely while feeding yarn for plying.

**Leader:** Strong starter yarn tied to bobbin or spindle to which fiber is attached to begin spinning.

**Long draw:** Drafting technique with long backward pulls (12-18 inches), suits woolen preparations, creates airy yarn.

**Maidens:** Upright posts on a spinning wheel that hold the flyer assembly.

**Mother-of-all:** Frame on some spinning wheels that holds the maidens and flyer assembly.

**Niddy nody:** Tool for winding yarn into skeins, consists of a central bar with perpendicular arms at each end.

**Noils:** Short fibers combed out during worsted preparation, can be saved for carding into textured yarn.

**Orifice:** Opening at the base of the flyer through which yarn passes onto the bobbin.

**Park and draft:** Drop spindle method where the spindle is stopped (parked) while drafting, then twist is released into drafted fiber.

**Plying:** Twisting two or more singles together in the opposite direction to create balanced yarn.

**Rolag:** Small cylindrical roll of carded fiber with fibers oriented perpendicular to the roll length, used for woolen spinning.

**S-twist:** Twist that spirals up and to the left (counterclockwise rotation), like the letter S. Standard for plying.

**Scotch tension:** Spinning wheel drive system where the drive band powers the flyer and a brake band on the bobbin controls take-up.

**Setting twist:** Finishing process of soaking and drying yarn to relax fibers and stabilize twist structure.

**Short forward draw:** Drafting technique with small forward pulls (3-4 inches), suits worsted preparations, creates smooth yarn.

**Single:** One strand of spun yarn before plying.

**Skein:** Loop of yarn wound on a niddy noddy or swift, tied in several places to prevent tangling.

**Spindle whorl:** Weighted disk on a drop spindle that provides momentum and stability during spinning.

**Suspended spinning:** Drop spindle technique where the spindle hangs freely while spinning and drafting occur simultaneously.

**Swift:** Umbrella-like tool that holds skeins open for winding into balls or onto bobbins.

**Top:** Continuous rope of combed fiber with fibers aligned parallel, used for worsted spinning.

**TPI (twists per inch):** Measurement of how many times yarn twists around itself per inch of length.

**Treadle:** Foot pedal on a spinning wheel that powers the drive wheel.

**Twist angle:** The angle at which twist spirals around the fiber axis—determines yarn softness, strength, and drape.

**Whorl:** Grooved pulley on flyer or bobbin that the drive band loops around; different grooves provide different speed ratios.

**Worsted preparation:** Fiber prepared with parallel alignment (combed top), spun with short forward draw to create smooth, strong yarn.

**Woolen preparation:** Fiber prepared with three-dimensional alignment (carded rolags), spun with long draw to create lofty, airy yarn.

**WPI (wraps per inch):** Method of measuring yarn thickness by wrapping it around a ruler and counting wraps per inch.

**Z-twist:** Twist that spirals up and to the right (clockwise rotation), like the center stroke of the letter Z. Standard for singles.

**YPP (yards per pound):** Measurement of yarn weight—higher numbers indicate thinner yarn.

## Chapter 7: Felting: Creating Fabric Without Spinning



Picture this: You're at your first fiber festival, and you wander into a booth filled with whimsical felted animals—tiny mice with seed bead eyes, plump sheep with curly locks, a fox with a mischievous expression. "I made these all from raw fleece," the maker tells you, demonstrating how a barbed needle transforms a wisp of fiber into a solid ear. No spinning wheel. No loom. Just fiber, a needle, and a little bit of magic.

That's felting—and it might just become your favorite way to work with fiber.

While the last two chapters taught you to transform fiber into yarn through careful preparation and spinning, felting takes a completely different path. Instead of aligning fibers parallel and adding twist, felting tangles fibers together permanently using friction, moisture, heat, or barbed needles. The result? Solid fabric that won't unravel, sculptural forms that hold their shape, and a deeply satisfying tactile experience that connects you to thousands of years of textile history.

Felting is ancient—likely discovered when someone wore wool socks in wet boots and found them shrunken and matted. It's also immediate. Unlike spinning, where you work with small amounts of fiber to create yarn that must then be knitted or woven, felting shows results quickly. Within twenty minutes of rolling a wet, soapy bundle of fiber, you'll have solid fabric in your hands. Within an hour of poking fiber with a felting needle, you'll have created a three-dimensional creature.

This chapter introduces both primary felting techniques: **wet felting** (using water, soap, and agitation to lock fibers together) and **needle felting** (using barbed needles to mechanically tangle fibers). You'll learn the science behind why wool felts, how to choose appropriate fibers, and step-by-step techniques for creating flat fabric, seamless vessels, and adorable sculptural pieces. We'll troubleshoot common frustrations and celebrate happy accidents.

Best of all? Felting is the perfect way to use fiber you've already worked with in previous chapters—singles that are too fragile to ply, dyed fiber you want to showcase without spinning, even the noils left over from combing. Felting welcomes experimentation, forgives mistakes, and rewards you with tangible results that you can wear, use, or give as gifts.

Let's get our hands wet and discover why felting might just be the most satisfying fiber technique you'll learn.

## **What Makes Felting Work: The Science of Scales**

Remember learning about fiber structure back in Chapter 1? Those microscopic scales covering each wool fiber aren't just interesting biology—they're what makes felting possible.

When wool gets wet with hot, soapy water, those scales open up like tiny shingles lifting in the wind. When you add friction—rubbing, rolling, agitating—the fibers move past each other, and those open scales catch and lock together. As the wool cools and dries, the scales close, permanently tangling the fibers into

solid fabric. It's a one-way transformation: once felted, wool can't be "unfelted" back into loose fiber.

This is why you can accidentally felt a wool sweater in the washing machine (hot water + agitation = disaster), but it's also why we can intentionally create beautiful felted fabric and sculptures. Understanding this process helps you control it: more heat and friction = faster felting; gentler handling = slower, more controlled felting.

### **Fiber Selection Matters:**

Fine wools like Merino have more scales per inch and felt quickly and densely. Medium wools like Corriedale and Romney felt reliably and are perfect for beginners. Coarse wools felt more slowly and create sturdier fabric. Longwools with their lustrous, smooth fibers felt reluctantly—beautiful for spinning, frustrating for felting.

Alpaca, mohair, and cashmere will felt, but they lack wool's crimp, so they need wool blended in (usually 20-30%) to create structure. Plant fibers like cotton and linen won't felt at all—no scales. Silk won't felt on its own, but it gets trapped beautifully in felting wool, adding sheen and strength. Synthetic fibers won't felt no matter how much you agitate them.

**Critical Warning:** Superwash wool—treated to be machine-washable—has had its scales removed or coated with polymer. It will NOT felt, no matter how much you agitate it. Always check your fiber source. If it says "machine washable" or "superwash," save it for spinning and choose untreated wool for felting.

## **Wet Felting vs. Needle Felting: Choosing Your Path**

Felting splits into two distinct techniques, each with unique strengths:

**Wet Felting** is the traditional method: you lay out fiber in thin, perpendicular layers, wet it with hot soapy water, and agitate it through rubbing, rolling, and sometimes throwing. Wet felting excels at creating flat fabric (for scarves, wall hangings, or fabric yardage), seamless vessels (bowls, slippers, hats formed over resists), and large sculptural forms. It's faster than needle felting for big projects and creates strong, dense fabric. The downsides? It's wet and messy (protect your workspace!), requires physical effort (your hands and arms will get a workout), and offers less control over fine details.

**Needle Felting** uses special barbed needles that catch fiber scales and push them through layers, tangling them mechanically. You stab repeatedly (yes,

stabbing is the technical term) until fibers lock together. Needle felting is perfect for three-dimensional sculptures (those adorable festival animals!), adding details to wet-felted pieces (eyes, noses, decorative elements), and creating designs on existing fabric. It's dry, portable, and offers precise control. The downsides? It's slower for large areas, requires specific needles that break if you're not careful, and yes, you will occasionally stab your fingers (comes with the territory—use finger guards!).

Many felters love both techniques and use them together: wet felt a flat piece for a bag, then needle felt a decorative design on the surface. Wet felt a basic animal body shape, then needle felt facial features and details. Understanding both techniques gives you maximum creative flexibility.

This chapter teaches both methods with separate sections, so you can dive into the one that calls to you first, or work through both to discover your preference.

## **Wet Felting: Water, Soap, and Transformation**

Wet felting is alchemy in your hands—loose, airy fiber transforms into solid, permanent fabric through nothing more than water, soap, and your own energy. It's physical, meditative, and deeply satisfying.

### **Materials and Setup for Wet Felting**

#### **Essential Materials:**

- **Fiber:** Start with 2-4 ounces of prepared wool in a medium breed (Corriedale, Romney, or Merino). Use commercially prepared roving, batts from your drum carder (Chapter 5!), or clean, picked locks. Avoid superwash wool and very coarse or very fine fibers until you've mastered the basics. This is a perfect opportunity to use fiber you've dyed in Chapter 4.
- **Soap:** Any soap works, but avoid detergents with additives. Many felters love olive oil bar soap, Dr. Bronner's liquid castile soap, or specialized felting soap. You need just enough to make the water slippery—too much creates excessive bubbles that slow felting.
- **Hot water:** The hottest water your hands can tolerate comfortably (around 120-140°F). Keep a kettle or pot of hot water nearby for refilling.
- **Work surface:** A bamboo sushi mat or bubble wrap (bubble side up) provides texture for friction. You'll roll your project in this. Some felters use pool noodles or rolling pins as rolling cores for larger pieces.
- **Towels:** Both for absorbing excess water and for protecting your work surface. Old towels work perfectly.
- **Spray or squeeze bottle:** For applying water evenly without disturbing fiber layout.
- **Plastic sheeting or shower curtain:** To protect your table or floor.

**Optional but helpful:** Rubber gloves (if your hands are sensitive to hot water or soap), a washboard or textured surface for extra friction, and a salad spinner or washing machine for the final fulling stage.

### **Workspace Setup:**

Cover your work surface with plastic sheeting, then layer a towel, then your bamboo mat or bubble wrap. Have your fiber pulled into manageable tufts (about the size of your palm). Fill your spray bottle with hot, soapy water (a few squirts of soap in 2 cups of water). Keep extra hot water and towels within reach.

Wear clothes that can get wet and soapy. Roll up your sleeves. Put on music or a podcast—wet felting takes 30-60 minutes, and rhythm helps.

One more thing: wet felting is messy. Embrace it. The first time I wet felted, I somehow got soapy water on the ceiling. Now I just plan for chaos and clean up afterward. It's part of the joy.

### **Laying Out Fiber: The Foundation of Felt**

Fiber layout determines everything about your finished felt—its strength, evenness, and appearance. This is where patience pays off.

#### **Step 1: Pull Thin Tufts**

Hold your fiber source (roving, batt, or cloud of picked locks) in one hand. With the other hand, grasp a small section and pull gently, letting the fibers slide apart rather than breaking. You want wispy, translucent tufts—if you can't see through them, they're too thick. Think "angel hair" rather than "clump of wool."

This feels counterintuitive at first. Beginning felters tend to lay out thick, substantial layers because thin layers look insubstantial. Trust the process: thin layers felt beautifully, while thick layers felt unevenly or not at all.

#### **Step 2: Lay First Layer (Horizontal)**

Starting at one edge of your work surface, lay thin tufts side by side in parallel rows, all oriented in the same direction (let's say horizontal, left to right). Overlap each tuft slightly with the previous one—about 1/4 inch. Cover your entire planned area, extending 2-3 inches beyond your desired finished size to account for shrinkage.

This first layer should look wispy and see-through, like a veil of fiber. If you can't see the mat beneath it at all, it's too thick—remove some fiber and spread it more thinly.

### **Step 3: Lay Second Layer (Vertical)**

Now lay a second complete layer perpendicular to the first—if your first layer ran horizontally, this layer runs vertically (top to bottom). Use the same thin, overlapping technique. This perpendicular orientation is what creates fabric strength: fibers running in multiple directions lock together and prevent tearing.

### **Step 4: Lay Third Layer (Horizontal Again)**

Add a third layer running the same direction as your first layer (horizontal again). Three layers is standard for most flat felt projects—it creates fabric that's sturdy but not overly thick. For delicate scarves, two layers might suffice; for rugs or slippers, you might use four or five layers.

### **Step 5: Add Decorative Elements (Optional)**

Before wetting your fiber, you can add design elements: contrasting fiber colors laid in patterns, silk fibers or yarn for sheen and texture, even pre-felted shapes cut from previous projects. These will felt into your base layers. Just remember: anything you add now becomes permanent.

#### **Visual Check:**

Step back and look at your layout. It should be uniform in density—no thick clumps or visible holes. The overall thickness should be consistent across the entire piece. The edges should extend beyond your target size. If you spot problems, now is the time to fix them—once you add water, the fiber becomes harder to rearrange.

### **The Wet Felting Process: From Wet to Fulled**

Now comes the transformation. This process takes 30-60 minutes depending on fiber type, thickness, and your energy level. Put on music, settle in, and enjoy the meditative rhythm of felting.

#### **Stage 1: Wetting (5-10 minutes)**

Goal: Saturate fiber completely without disturbing your careful layout.

Sprinkle hot, soapy water over your fiber layout, starting at the center and working outward. Don't pour—sprinkle gently. The fiber should darken as it absorbs water, but it shouldn't swim in puddles. Add water gradually, letting each application soak in before adding more.

Once the fiber is thoroughly damp, place a piece of sheer fabric (organza or tulle works perfectly) over the top. This prevents your hands from catching and pulling

fiber. Press down gently with flat hands, encouraging water to penetrate all layers. You can add more hot, soapy water through the sheer fabric.

Press, don't rub. Your goal is saturation, not agitation—not yet. The fiber should be thoroughly wet, flat, and still clearly showing your original layout. If you've added decorative elements, they should still be exactly where you placed them.

Some felters skip the sheer fabric and work with very soapy hands, barely touching the fiber surface. Either method works—experiment to find your preference.

### **Stage 2: Pre-felting (10-20 minutes)**

Goal: Begin locking fibers together through gentle friction while the fabric is still fragile.

Now you can start creating friction, but gently. With the sheer fabric still in place (or with very slippery, soapy hands), rub the fiber surface in small circular motions. Start with feather-light pressure—you're encouraging fibers to begin tangling, not forcing them.

Work systematically across the entire piece. Every few minutes, lift the sheer fabric and check your progress. The fiber should start looking more unified, less like distinct layers. The surface will begin to feel slightly resistant rather than slippery-loose.

**The Pinch Test:** After 10-15 minutes of gentle rubbing, pinch a small section of fiber between your thumb and forefinger and lift gently. If individual fibers pull up and the layers separate, keep working. If the fiber lifts as a cohesive sheet—even if it's still soft and delicate—you've achieved pre-felt. This is your green light to increase agitation.

Don't rush this stage. Pre-felting creates the foundation that allows vigorous fulling without the fabric falling apart. Patience here saves heartbreak later.

### **Stage 3: Fulling (15-30 minutes)**

Goal: Shrink, strengthen, and densify the felt through vigorous agitation.

Once your pinch test confirms pre-felt, remove the sheer fabric and get serious. Now you want friction, pressure, and heat.

**Rolling:** Roll your felt tightly in the bamboo mat or bubble wrap, like a burrito. Roll it back and forth with firm pressure, using your whole forearms, for about

50-100 rolls. Unroll, rotate the felt 90 degrees (so different areas get equal pressure), and roll again. Repeat this roll-rotate cycle multiple times.

As you roll, the felt will shrink visibly. This is good! You're compacting the fibers, making them lock more tightly. The fabric will become firmer, thicker, and stronger.

**Throwing:** Some felters love the throwing method—literally throwing the rolled bundle against the table or floor. This creates intense agitation and speeds felting. It's also deeply satisfying when you're frustrated. (Just warn anyone nearby about the rhythmic thumping sounds.)

**Temperature cycling:** If felting seems to stall, shock the fiber by dipping it in ice water, then returning to hot, soapy water. The temperature change makes scales open and close more dramatically, speeding the felting process.

### **How do you know when it's done?**

Felt is finished when:

- It's shrunk 30-40% from your original layout size
- The surface is smooth and uniform, with no visible loose fibers
- When you pinch and pull, the fabric stays together and bounces back
- Individual fibers are no longer visible—it looks like fabric, not fiber

The "fabric test": hold the felt up to light. If you see individual fibers or thin spots, keep working. If it looks uniformly dense, you're done.

### **Stage 4: Rinsing and Finishing (5 minutes)**

Rinse your felt thoroughly in cool water to remove all soap. Squeeze (don't wring) to remove excess water. Roll in a towel and press to absorb more moisture.

Shape the felt to your desired dimensions—it's still somewhat malleable when wet. Lay flat to dry, or pin to a blocking board if you need specific dimensions.

Some projects benefit from a final fulling stage in a washing machine: place the felt in a mesh bag or pillowcase, add towels for friction, and run a hot wash cycle with soap. Check every 5 minutes to monitor shrinkage. This creates extremely dense, sturdy felt perfect for slippers or bags.

### **Troubleshooting Wet Felting Challenges**

#### **Problem: Fiber won't felt at all—it stays loose and separated even after 45 minutes of work.**

Possible causes:

- You're using superwash wool (check your fiber source)

- Water isn't hot enough (needs to be uncomfortably hot)
- Not enough soap (water should feel slippery)
- Fiber is too coarse or lustrous (longwools felt slowly)
- Insufficient agitation (you need more friction and pressure)

Solutions: Add hotter water and more soap. Increase pressure dramatically—really rub, roll, and throw. If it's been an hour with no progress, check if your fiber is superwash or a non-felting breed.

**Problem: Felt has holes or thin spots.**

Cause: Uneven fiber distribution during layout—some areas had too little fiber.

Solution during felting: If you catch this during pre-felting, you can add small wisps of fiber to thin areas, wet them, and work them in. Once you're past pre-felt stage, this becomes harder.

Prevention: Take more time during layout, checking for even density throughout.

**Problem: Felt is lumpy or has thick and thin areas.**

Cause: Some areas had clumps of fiber instead of thin, even layers.

Solution: Not much you can do once it's felted. The lumpy texture might be interesting for art pieces, but it's not ideal for fabric.

Prevention: Pull thinner tufts during layout. Remember: see-through thin.

**Problem: Felt didn't shrink much—it's still almost the size I laid out.**

Cause: Insufficient fulling time, or you stopped at the pre-felt stage.

Solution: Keep going! More rolling, more friction, more time. Felt should shrink 30-40%. If it hasn't, it's not fully felted yet.

**Problem: Decorative elements (silk, yarn, pre-felt shapes) didn't felt in and are loose.**

Cause: They were placed on top of the surface instead of integrated into the fiber layers, or they were added after wetting started.

Solution: Needle felt them in place after wet felting is complete (see next section!).

Prevention: Place decorative elements between fiber layers or on the bottom layer before wetting, so they get trapped as fibers tangle.

**Problem: My hands are exhausted and I'm only 20 minutes in.**

Cause: Wet felting is physically demanding—it's a workout.

Solution: Take breaks. Switch between rubbing, rolling, and throwing to use different muscle groups. Some felters use washing machines or salad spinners for the fulling stage to save their hands. There's no shame in using tools.

**Remember:** Every felter has made fiber soup at least once—that project where everything went wrong and you ended up with an unidentifiable blob. It happens. You learn more from failures than successes. That blob can become stuffing for a needle-felted sculpture or can be torn up and re-felted. Nothing is wasted in fiber work.

### **Project: Simple Felted Coaster**

Let's make something useful and beautiful: a felted coaster or small trivet. This project is perfect for first-time wet felters—small enough to complete in one session, functional enough to use daily, and forgiving enough to build confidence.

#### **Materials:**

- 1 ounce prepared wool roving or batt (one color, or multiple colors for a blended effect)
- Hot, soapy water
- Bamboo mat or bubble wrap
- Spray bottle
- Towels
- Sheer fabric (optional)

**Finished size:** Approximately 4x4 inches (will vary based on felting time and pressure)

#### **Process:**

1. **Layout:** Following the techniques from earlier sections, lay out three thin, perpendicular layers of fiber in a rough square shape, about 6-7 inches on each side (remember shrinkage!). If using multiple colors, you can create stripes, gradients, or random blends—all will look beautiful.
2. **Wet:** Gradually sprinkle hot, soapy water over the fiber until thoroughly saturated. Cover with sheer fabric if desired. Press gently to encourage water penetration.
3. **Pre-felt:** Rub gently in circular motions for 10-15 minutes, checking frequently with the pinch test. Be patient—this small piece will pre-felt quickly, but don't rush.
4. **Full:** Once the pinch test shows cohesive fabric, roll vigorously in your bamboo mat. Roll 50 times, rotate 90 degrees, roll 50 times, rotate, repeat. The square will shrink and become firm and dense. Continue until it passes the fabric test—no visible individual fibers, uniform density.
5. **Shape:** While still damp, you can trim edges with scissors to create a perfect square, round the corners, or leave them organic and irregular. Felt edges won't fray, so cut freely.

6. **Finish:** Rinse thoroughly, squeeze out excess water, roll in a towel to absorb moisture, and lay flat to dry.

### **Variations:**

- Make a set of four in coordinating colors
- Add a silk or yarn design on the surface before felting
- Felt a larger piece (8x8 inches) for a trivet
- Create a round coaster by laying fiber in a circular pattern

**What you're learning:** This simple project teaches fiber layout, the complete wet felting process, recognizing felting stages, and finishing techniques. Once you've made one successful coaster, you understand wet felting. Everything else is just scaling up or shaping differently.

## **Needle Felting: Sculpting with Fiber**

If wet felting is alchemy, needle felting is sculpture. With nothing but a barbed needle and loose fiber, you can create three-dimensional forms that hold their shape, add intricate details to flat felt, or embellish existing fabric. Needle felting is meditative, portable (felt anywhere!), and deeply satisfying—watching a wisp of fiber transform into a solid form under your needle feels like magic every single time.

### **Materials and Setup for Needle Felting**

#### **Essential Materials:**

**Felting needles:** These are not sewing needles! Felting needles have tiny barbs along the shaft that catch fiber and push it through layers. They come in different gauges (thicknesses):

- **Coarse (36-38 gauge):** Thick needles with large barbs, used for initial shaping and working with large amounts of fiber. These work fast but leave visible holes.
- **Medium (40 gauge):** The workhorse needle—good for most general felting, shaping, and attaching pieces.
- **Fine (42 gauge):** Thin needles for detail work, smoothing surfaces, and finishing. These work slowly but leave minimal marks.
- **Specialty shapes:** Star needles (multiple barbs), reverse needles (barbs point up, used for pulling fiber out), and twisted needles (for faster felting).

Start with a multi-needle set that includes coarse, medium, and fine needles. You'll use medium needles 80% of the time.

**Fiber:** The same wools that work for wet felting work for needle felting. Merino is popular because it's fine and felts quickly. Corriedale and Romney work

beautifully. You can also needle felt with alpaca, mohair, and even silk blends. This is a perfect use for small amounts of fiber—you need very little for most projects.

**Work surface:** You must felt on a surface that allows the needle to pass through without hitting anything hard (which breaks needles instantly). Options include:

- Foam felting pads (dense foam blocks sold specifically for needle felting)
- Dense upholstery foam (2-4 inches thick)
- Felting brush (a pad with stiff bristles that allow needles to pass between them)
- Thick folded towel (works in a pinch, but wears out quickly)

Avoid felting directly on tables, cutting mats, or your lap (ouch).

**Finger guards:** Leather or rubber thimbles that protect your fingers from inevitable stabs. Some felters use them religiously; others prefer the tactile feedback of bare fingers. Try both and decide.

**Optional tools:** Multi-needle holders (felt faster by using 3-7 needles at once), cookie cutters or molds for shaping, pipe cleaners or wire for armatures in sculptural work, and seed beads or glass eyes for creature faces.

### **Safety Notes:**

Felting needles are sharp and brittle. They WILL break if you:

- Bend them while felting (keep them perpendicular to your work)
- Hit a hard surface underneath your work
- Try to felt through too much fiber at once
- Drop them (they're fragile)

You WILL stab yourself at least once. It's a rite of passage. The stabs are sharp and sudden but rarely serious—more surprising than painful. Work slowly, watch your fingers, and use guards if you're nervous.

Keep needles in a safe container when not in use. Don't leave them sticking out of your work where you might sit on them or brush against them.

### **Workspace Setup:**

Place your foam pad or felting brush on a stable surface at a comfortable height. Have your fiber pulled into small wisps within reach. Keep different needle sizes organized and accessible. Good lighting helps—you need to see what you're doing clearly.

Needle felting is portable: once you have a small foam pad and a few needles, you can felt while watching TV, sitting in the garden, or traveling. Many felters keep a small kit in their bag for waiting rooms and long flights.

## **Basic Needle Felting Technique: The Stab and Felt**

Needle felting mechanics are simple but require attention to avoid broken needles and stabbed fingers. Let's practice with a basic exercise: felting a simple ball.

### **Step 1: Prepare Your Fiber**

Pull a small wisp of fiber from your roving or batt—about the size of a cotton ball when loosely fluffed. This will felt down to approximately half its original size, creating a ball about 1 inch in diameter.

### **Step 2: Begin Stabbing**

Place the fiber wisp on your foam pad. Hold your needle like a pencil, with your hand above the work. Position the needle perpendicular to the foam surface—this is critical. Stab straight down into the fiber, pushing the needle about halfway through the fiber wisp (approximately 1/2 inch deep for this first stage). Pull the needle straight back out, following the exact same path.

Repeat. Stab, withdraw. Stab, withdraw. Find a rhythm—not too fast (you'll lose control), not too slow (you'll get bored). A steady, moderate pace works best.

**What's happening:** The barbs on your needle are catching fiber and pushing it through the layers beneath, tangling everything together. You're mechanically creating the same fiber entanglement that wet felting creates with water and friction.

### **Step 3: Rotate and Shape**

After 15-20 stabs, the fiber will start feeling firmer. Pick it up (carefully—needles are sharp), flip it over, and continue stabbing from the other side. Rotate frequently, stabbing from all angles. This creates even density throughout the form.

As you work, gather any loose fiber wisps back into the main form and stab them in. The shape will gradually compact and become firmer. What started as a fluffy cloud will become a solid ball.

### **Step 4: Deepen Your Stabs**

Once the form holds together (it won't fall apart when you pick it up), you can stab deeper—pushing the needle through the entire form and into the foam beneath. This compacts the center and creates very firm felt.

Keep rotating and stabbing until the ball is uniformly firm. Squeeze it—it should feel solid, like a stress ball, with minimal give. The surface should be relatively smooth, with no loose wisps.

### **Step 5: Surface Finishing**

Switch to a fine needle (42 gauge). Stab lightly all over the surface, using shallow stabs (just 1/4 inch deep). This smooths the surface and eliminates the fuzzy texture left by coarser needles. The ball should look polished and feel smooth.

**Congratulations!** You've needle felted your first form. This basic technique—stab, rotate, compact, smooth—applies to every needle felting project, from simple balls to complex sculptures.

#### **Common mistakes:**

- **Angling the needle while it's in the fiber:** This breaks needles instantly. Always enter and exit perpendicular. If you need to change angles, fully withdraw the needle first, then reposition.
- **Stabbing too deep too early:** If you push the needle all the way through loose fiber, you're just pushing fiber into your foam pad, not felting it together. Start with shallow stabs until the fiber holds together, then deepen your stabs.
- **Not rotating enough:** If you stab only from one side, that side becomes dense while the other stays loose. Rotate constantly for even felting.
- **Working too fast:** Slow, controlled stabs are safer and more effective than rapid, careless ones. Speed comes with practice.

**The "firmness test":** Squeeze your felted form. If it compresses easily and feels spongy, keep felting. If it resists compression and feels solid, it's done. Under-felted forms will lose shape over time; properly felted forms hold their shape permanently.

## **Creating Three-Dimensional Forms: Basic Shapes and Creatures**

Once you can make a firm ball, you can make anything—because complex sculptures are just simple shapes attached together. Let's learn to build dimensional forms.

### **Adding Fiber to Existing Felt:**

Sometimes you need to make a form larger, fix a flat spot, or add a protrusion (like an ear or limb). Here's how:

1. Take a small wisp of new fiber
2. Place it on the area where you want to add volume
3. Stab through the new fiber into the existing felt beneath, tangling them together

4. Continue stabbing until the new fiber is firmly attached and blended smoothly with the original form

This technique means mistakes are never permanent—you can always add more fiber to reshape or enlarge areas.

### **Attaching Separate Pieces:**

To attach two felted forms (like adding legs to a body or a head to a torso):

1. Leave the attachment area of one piece slightly under-felted and fuzzy (don't finish it smooth)
2. Position the two pieces together
3. Stab through both pieces at the attachment point, tangling their fibers together
4. Work around the entire join, stabbing from multiple angles
5. Add small wisps of matching fiber to the join area and stab them in, hiding the seam

The join should be as firm as the rest of the sculpture—if you can pull the pieces apart, keep felting the join.

### **Building a Simple Creature: A Felted Mouse**

Let's put these techniques together to create an adorable mouse. This project teaches form-building, attachment, and adding details.

#### **Materials:**

- Small amount of gray or brown fiber (about 1/2 ounce)
- Tiny amounts of pink fiber (ears, tail)
- Two seed beads (eyes)
- Medium and fine felting needles
- Foam pad
- Optional: pink embroidery floss for tail

#### **Process:**

**Body (15 minutes):** Felt an egg-shaped form about 2 inches long and 1.5 inches wide at the widest point. Make one end (the head) slightly smaller than the other (the body). Felt firmly.

**Ears (5 minutes each):** Take a tiny wisp of pink fiber. Felt it into a thin, flat oval shape (about 1/2 inch long). Make two. These should be quite thin and delicate. Position each ear on the head and stab the base firmly into the head, leaving the top edges loose and floppy. Fold the ear slightly forward for dimension.

**Tail (3 minutes):** Roll a tiny wisp of pink fiber into a thin rope by rolling it between your palms. Felt lightly to hold the rope shape (or use pink embroidery

floss). Attach firmly to the back of the body by stabbing the end deeply into the felt.

**Legs (5 minutes each):** Felt four small cylinder shapes (about 1 inch long, 1/4 inch diameter) from gray fiber. Attach to the bottom of the body, positioning them so the mouse can stand. Stab each leg attachment thoroughly.

**Face details (5 minutes):** Take a tiny wisp of pink fiber and felt it into a small ball (nose). Attach to the front of the head. Stab two seed beads into position for eyes—the needle will push them into the felt and they'll stay in place. You can also needle felt two tiny black fiber dots for eyes instead of beads.

**Finishing (5 minutes):** Go over the entire mouse with a fine needle, smoothing the surface and blending any visible seams. Add a few whiskers by threading thin thread or embroidery floss through the face with a sewing needle.

**Total time:** About 45-60 minutes for your first mouse. Subsequent mice will go faster as you develop muscle memory.

**What you've learned:** This project teaches all fundamental needle felting skills—creating basic shapes, attaching pieces, adding details, and finishing surfaces. Once you can make a mouse, you can make any simple creature by varying proportions and details: longer ears = rabbit, longer neck = bird, spots = fawn.

**Design tip:** Search online for "needle felted animals" for inspiration and study how other felters build forms. Most creatures follow the same basic construction: body, head, limbs, ears, tail, facial features. It's like building with soft, fuzzy building blocks.

### **Needle Felting on Surfaces: Decoration and Embellishment**

Needle felting isn't just for three-dimensional sculptures—it's also a powerful surface decoration technique. You can needle felt designs onto existing felt, fabric, or even knitted items, adding color, pattern, and dimension.

#### **Basic Surface Felting Technique:**

1. Place your base fabric on your foam pad
2. Arrange fiber in your desired design on the fabric surface
3. Stab through the design fiber and into the base fabric, tangling them together
4. Continue stabbing until the design fiber is firmly attached and won't pull away
5. Use fine needles for crisp edges and smooth surfaces

## Project Ideas:

- **Add a flower design to a wet-felted scarf:** Arrange small wisps of colored fiber in a simple flower shape on the finished scarf. Needle felt the design in place. The flower becomes a permanent part of the scarf.
- **Decorate a felted bag:** Create stripes, polka dots, or abstract patterns by needle felting contrasting fiber onto the bag surface.
- **Embellish knitted items:** Needle felt small designs onto wool sweaters, hats, or mittens. The felting needles will tangle the design fiber with the knitted fabric.
- **Create wall art:** Needle felt elaborate designs onto flat felt backgrounds—landscapes, portraits, abstract compositions. This technique is called "fiber painting" and can create incredibly detailed images.

## Using Cookie Cutters as Guides:

Place a cookie cutter on your base fabric. Fill the shape with fiber, then needle felt it in place. Remove the cookie cutter—you've created a perfect shape. This works beautifully for stars, hearts, circles, and other simple shapes.

## Combining Wet Felting and Needle Felting:

Many felters use both techniques in a single project:

- Wet felt a flat scarf, then needle felt a decorative border
- Wet felt a simple vessel shape, then needle felt a detailed design on the surface
- Wet felt a background, then needle felt dimensional elements (flowers that stand up, textured areas)

This combination offers the best of both worlds: wet felting for fast, large-area fabric creation, and needle felting for precise details and dimensional elements.

## Troubleshooting Needle Felting Challenges

### Problem: My needles keep breaking.

Causes:

- Angling the needle while it's in the fiber (most common cause)
- Hitting a hard surface underneath (check your foam pad—is it worn through?)
- Using needles that are too fine for the amount of fiber (fine needles are fragile)
- Felting too fast and losing control

Solutions: Slow down. Focus on keeping the needle perpendicular. Check your foam pad and replace if necessary. Use coarser needles for initial shaping, saving fine needles for finishing. Accept that broken needles are part of the learning curve—every felter breaks needles regularly.

### Problem: My form won't hold its shape—it's floppy and squishy.

Cause: Insufficient felting time. The fibers haven't tangled enough to create firm felt.

Solution: Keep stabbing! Rotate the form and stab from all angles. Stab deeper, pushing the needle through the entire form. The firmness test doesn't lie—if it compresses easily, it needs more work.

### **Problem: My form is lumpy and uneven.**

Cause: Uneven stabbing—some areas are over-felted while others are under-felted.

Solution: Rotate constantly while felting, giving all areas equal attention. Add small wisps of fiber to flat or dented areas and felt them in to build up the form.

### **Problem: The surface is fuzzy and rough instead of smooth.**

Cause: You're using coarse needles for finishing, or you haven't felted the surface enough.

Solution: Switch to fine needles (42 gauge) and stab lightly all over the surface with shallow stabs. This smooths the texture and eliminates fuzz.

### **Problem: I can't get fine details—everything looks blobby.**

Cause: Using needles that are too coarse, or trying to add details before the base form is firm enough.

Solution: Ensure your base form is very firm before adding details. Switch to fine needles for detail work. Use tiny wisps of fiber for small features—less fiber = more control.

### **Problem: Attached pieces keep falling off.**

Cause: Insufficient felting at the join—the pieces aren't tangled together enough.

Solution: Stab through both pieces at the attachment point many more times than you think necessary. The join should be as firm as the rest of the piece. Add small wisps of matching fiber to the join area and felt them in to reinforce.

### **Problem: I stabbed myself (ouch!).**

Cause: Fingers too close to the stabbing area, or working too fast.

Solution: Slow down. Keep your non-needle hand away from the stabbing zone. Use finger guards if you're nervous. Accept that everyone stabs themselves occasionally—it's part of the learning process. The pain is brief and rarely serious.

**Remember:** Needle felting has a learning curve. Your first creatures will be blobby and imperfect. Your tenth creatures will be recognizable. Your fiftieth creatures will be adorable. Keep practicing, learn from each project, and celebrate progress rather than perfection.

## **Felting Fiber Selection and Breed Characteristics**

Remember all that breed information from Chapter 1? Now it becomes directly practical. Different breeds felt differently, and choosing the right fiber for your project makes the difference between frustration and success.

### **Best Breeds for Felting**

#### **Excellent for Felting (Beginner-Friendly):**

**Merino:** Fine, soft, high crimp. Felts quickly and densely. Perfect for wearables (scarves, hats), needle felting sculptures, and any project requiring soft texture. Can felt too quickly if you're not careful—watch for over-felting. Available in many colors.

**Corriedale:** Medium fineness, good crimp, reliable felting. The "goldilocks" wool—not too fast, not too slow, just right. Excellent for learning. Makes sturdy fabric suitable for bags, slippers, and general projects. This is my go-to recommendation for first-time felters.

**Romney:** Medium wool with good felting properties. Slightly lustrous, creates fabric with beautiful sheen. Strong and durable—excellent for items that need to withstand wear (rugs, bags, outerwear). Felts reliably but not too quickly, giving you control.

**Shetland:** Fine to medium, crimpy, felts well. Available in beautiful natural colors. Makes soft, warm fabric. Good for wearables and decorative items.

#### **Good for Specific Applications:**

**Icelandic:** Dual-coated breed with soft undercoat (thel) and coarse outer coat (tog). The tog layer felts slowly but creates textured, rustic fabric perfect for rugs and sturdy items. The thel layer felts more easily. Often used together for textured effects.

**Gotland:** Medium-fine with beautiful natural gray colors and slight luster. Felts moderately well. Creates fabric with subtle sheen—lovely for scarves and decorative pieces.

#### **Challenging (Not Recommended for Beginners):**

**Longwools (Lincoln, Wensleydale, Cotswold):** High luster, long staple, low crimp. Felt very slowly and reluctantly. The smooth, lustrous fibers resist tangling. Can be used for special effects (adding luster to blends) but frustrating as primary felting fiber.

**Coarse wools (Scottish Blackface, Navajo-Churro):** Very coarse fibers felt slowly. Create sturdy, textured fabric but require significant time and effort. Better for experienced felters who want rustic texture.

### **Non-Sheep Fibers:**

**Alpaca:** Soft, warm, but lacks crimp. Felts very slowly on its own—needs to be blended with at least 20-30% wool for reliable felting. Beautiful when blended, frustrating alone.

**Mohair:** Lustrous, strong, felts slowly. Often blended with wool for strength and sheen. Kid mohair (from young goats) is softer and felts better than adult mohair.

**Angora (rabbit):** Incredibly soft but almost no felting properties. Must be blended heavily with wool (70% wool, 30% angora maximum) and even then requires patience. The softness is worth it for special projects.

**Silk:** Doesn't felt on its own but gets trapped beautifully in felting wool. Add silk fibers, yarn, or fabric to wet felting for sheen, strength, and visual interest. Popular for art pieces and decorative items.

### **Blending for Custom Properties:**

Many felters blend breeds to achieve specific characteristics:

- 80% Corriedale + 20% silk = sturdy fabric with beautiful sheen
- 70% Merino + 30% alpaca = soft, warm fabric that felts reliably
- 50% Romney + 50% Merino = balanced fabric with strength and softness
- 90% medium wool + 10% longwool = adds subtle luster without slowing felting

You can blend by layering different fibers during wet felt layout or by carding them together first (Chapter 5 skills!) for more uniform blending.

### **Project-Specific Recommendations:**

- **Slippers/rugs (need durability):** Romney, Corriedale, or Icelandic
- **Scarves/wearables (need softness):** Merino, Shetland, or Corriedale
- **Needle felting sculptures (need fine detail):** Merino or Corriedale
- **Bags/vessels (need structure):** Romney, Corriedale, or blends with silk
- **Art pieces (want visual interest):** Blend multiple breeds, add silk and other fibers

## **Using Dyed and Prepared Fiber from Previous Chapters**

One of the joys of working through this book sequentially is watching how skills build on each other. Now you can felt with fiber you've dyed yourself, use batts you've carded, and even incorporate handspun yarn into felted projects.

### **Using Hand-Dyed Fiber:**

That gorgeous gradient you dyed in Chapter 4? Perfect for a felted scarf where colors flow seamlessly from one to another. Lay out your gradient fiber in thin layers, and the felting process will blend the colors beautifully while preserving the overall transition.

Solid-dyed colors can be combined in patterns—stripes, polka dots, geometric designs—that become permanent in the felting process. Unlike knitting or weaving where colors stay separate, felting allows colors to blend slightly at their edges, creating soft transitions.

### **Using Carded Batts:**

Remember those beautiful batts you created on your drum carder in Chapter 5? They're ideal for wet felting. Batts are already in thin, even layers with fibers oriented in multiple directions—exactly what you need for strong felt. Simply pull sections from your batt and lay them out for felting.

Art batts—those wild blends of multiple fibers, colors, and textures—create spectacular felted fabric with complex visual interest. The blending you did on the drum carder translates directly into the finished felt.

### **Using Handspun Singles:**

Sometimes you spin singles that are too delicate or uneven to ply successfully. Instead of discarding them, use them in felting:

- Lay handspun singles in patterns on wet felt surfaces—they'll felt into the fabric
- Coil singles into spiral designs for decorative elements
- Use textured or thick-and-thin singles to add dimension to flat felt
- Needle felt handspun yarn onto finished felt for embellishment

The yarn becomes part of the fabric, adding texture and visual interest while using fiber you've already invested time in spinning.

### **Using Fiber Scraps:**

Felting welcomes all your fiber scraps:

- Leftover bits from dyeing experiments
- Short fibers (noils) from combing

- Small amounts of fiber in odd colors
- Fiber that didn't work for spinning

Blend scraps together through carding, or use them as decorative elements in larger felted pieces. Nothing goes to waste in fiber work—felting is your scrap-busting technique.

### **Project Idea: Scrappy Felted Bowl**

Gather all your fiber scraps—different colors, different breeds, different preparations. Card them together into a wildly colorful batt, or keep them separate for a patchwork effect. Wet felt them into a flat piece, then shape over a bowl mold (any bowl covered with plastic wrap) and continue felting until the fabric conforms to the bowl shape. Remove the mold, trim the edge, and you have a unique, one-of-a-kind vessel that tells the story of your fiber journey.

## **Advanced Felting Techniques and Creative Explorations**

Once you've mastered flat felt and simple sculptures, a world of advanced techniques opens up. These methods require more planning and problem-solving, but they create spectacular results that look like magic to non-felters.

### **Resist Felting: Creating Seamless Vessels**

Resist felting seems like sorcery the first time you see it: you lay out flat fiber, felt it, and somehow end up with a seamless three-dimensional slipper or hat. The secret is the resist—a template that fiber is laid around, preventing those areas from felting together.

#### **How Resist Felting Works:**

1. Create a resist template from plastic, craft foam, or bubble wrap in the shape of your desired object (but 30-40% larger to account for shrinkage)
2. Lay fiber around the resist in thin, perpendicular layers, covering all surfaces
3. Wet and felt the fiber, which shrinks around the resist
4. Cut a planned opening and remove the resist
5. Continue felting the opening edges and refining the shape
6. The result: a seamless, hollow form

### **Simple Resist Project: Felted Bowl**

#### **Materials:**

- 2-3 ounces wool fiber
- Bowl-shaped resist (cut from craft foam or use an upside-down bowl covered in plastic wrap and bubble wrap)
- Hot, soapy water
- Bamboo mat

- Towels

## Process:

1. **Create resist:** Cut a bowl shape from craft foam about 40% larger than your desired finished bowl. The resist should be flat (like a bowl viewed from above) with curved sides.
2. **Layout:** Lay three thin, perpendicular layers of fiber completely covering one side of the resist, extending 2-3 inches beyond the resist edges. Flip the resist over carefully (keeping fiber in place) and fold those extending edges over onto the second side. Now lay three complete layers on this second side, again extending beyond the resist edges. Fold these edges over onto the first side. You've now created a fiber envelope around the resist with overlapping edges.
3. **Wet and pre-felt:** Carefully wet the entire piece with hot, soapy water. Begin gentle pre-felting, working both sides. The fiber will start shrinking around the resist.
4. **Fulling:** Once pre-felted, roll and agitate vigorously. The fiber will shrink and conform to the resist shape. You'll feel the resist becoming more defined as the fiber tightens around it.
5. **Remove resist:** Cut a small opening at the top center of the bowl (this will become the bowl opening). Carefully pull the resist out through this opening. The felt should hold its bowl shape.
6. **Finish:** Continue felting the opening edges, shaping the bowl as desired. You can stretch the opening larger or felt it smaller. Keep felting until the bowl is firm and holds its shape when you set it down.
7. **Final shaping:** While still damp, shape the bowl exactly as you want it. Stuff with towels to hold the shape while drying.

## Other Resist Projects:

- **Slippers:** Use foot-shaped resists (trace your foot, add 40% for shrinkage, cut from craft foam). Felt around the resist, remove through an opening at the top, and continue shaping. The result: custom-fit, seamless slippers.
- **Hats:** Use head-shaped resists (oval forms sized to your head plus shrinkage). Felt around the resist, remove through the bottom opening, and shape the brim as desired.
- **Vessels and vases:** Use cylinder or vase-shaped resists to create seamless containers. Experiment with shapes—tall and narrow, short and wide, asymmetrical forms.

## Resist Materials:

- Craft foam (easy to cut, reusable)
- Bubble wrap (creates textured surface on felt)
- Plastic sheeting
- Pool noodles (for cylinder shapes)
- Balloons (for round vessels—deflate to remove)
- Existing objects wrapped in plastic

## Planning for Shrinkage:

This is the trickiest part of resist felting. Fiber shrinks 30-40%, but the shrinkage isn't always uniform. Experienced felters make test pieces to understand how their fiber behaves, then adjust resist sizes accordingly. Expect your first resist projects to come out smaller than planned—it's part of the learning process. Keep notes on resist sizes and finished sizes to refine your planning.

## **Combining Felting with Other Fiber Techniques**

Felting doesn't exist in isolation—it plays beautifully with other fiber techniques, creating mixed-media pieces that showcase your full range of skills.

### **Embroidery on Felt:**

Felted fabric is an ideal embroidery base—it's stable, doesn't fray, and holds stitches securely without puckering. You can:

- Add embroidered details to needle-felted sculptures (faces, decorative elements)
- Embroider patterns onto flat felt (flowers, geometric designs, text)
- Use embroidery to hide seams or reinforce weak areas
- Combine needle felting and embroidery for complex surface designs

Any embroidery stitch works on felt. French knots add dimension, satin stitch fills areas with color, and backstitch creates clean lines.

### **Beading on Felt:**

Beads attach securely to felt and add sparkle, dimension, and visual interest:

- Seed beads for eyes on needle-felted creatures
- Larger beads as decorative elements on bags or vessels
- Sequins and crystals for evening accessories
- Bead embroidery creating elaborate surface designs

Felt holds beads more securely than most fabrics because the dense fiber grips the thread.

### **Fulled (Intentionally Felted) Knitting:**

Knitting with non-superwash wool, then intentionally felting the finished piece through hot water and agitation, creates dense, warm, sturdy fabric. This technique is called fulling or felting (though technically it's felting already-structured fabric).

Popular fulled projects:

- Slippers (knit large, felt to size)
- Bags (felt for structure and durability)
- Mittens (felt for warmth and wind resistance)
- Bowls (knit, then felt over molds for shaping)

Fulling shrinks knitted fabric 20-40% and obscures stitch definition, creating smooth, dense fabric. Gauge swatches must be fulled to predict finished size.

### **Felted Fabric for Sewing:**

Flat felt can be cut and sewn like any fabric, but with advantages:

- Edges don't fray—no hemming required
- Dense felt provides structure without interfacing
- Felted fabric is warm and insulating
- Custom colors and textures impossible with commercial felt

Use hand-felted fabric for:

- Bags and purses
- Garment details (collars, cuffs, appliqués)
- Home décor (pillows, wall hangings, coasters)
- Book covers and craft projects

### **Mixed-Media Fiber Art:**

Many fiber artists combine multiple techniques in single pieces:

- Wet felt a background, needle felt dimensional elements, add embroidery details and beading
- Felt a vessel, knit a decorative band, attach with embroidery
- Create wearable art combining felted fabric, handspun yarn, and surface embellishment

This is where your full fiber education comes together: you're dyeing fiber (Chapter 4), carding blends (Chapter 5), spinning yarn (Chapter 6), and felting fabric (Chapter 7), then combining everything into unique creations that reflect your personal aesthetic.

### **The Joy of Experimentation:**

Advanced felting is about trying new things, accepting that some experiments fail, and celebrating unexpected results. What happens if you felt around found objects? What if you combine techniques you've never seen combined before? What if you break all the rules?

Some of the most beautiful felted pieces come from "mistakes"—unplanned color blending, unexpected shrinkage creating interesting shapes, or techniques that didn't work as intended but created something even better.

Keep a fiber journal documenting experiments, techniques, and results. Note what worked, what didn't, and ideas for future exploration. Your felting practice becomes a personal journey of discovery.

## The Immediate Joy of Felting

You've just learned one of humanity's most ancient fiber techniques—and discovered why felting has captivated makers for thousands of years. There's something deeply satisfying about transforming loose, airy fiber into solid fabric with your own hands, watching the magic happen as fibers tangle and lock together.

**What makes felting special** is its immediacy. Unlike spinning, where you create yarn that must then be knitted or woven, felting gives you finished fabric in a single session. Unlike weaving or knitting, felting doesn't require mastering complex patterns or structures—just fiber, water (or needles), and your hands. Felting is forgiving: you can add more fiber, reshape forms, and fix mistakes as you work. And felting is endlessly variable: every combination of fiber, color, and technique creates unique results.

Felting also connects you to textile history in visceral ways. When you wet felt, you're using the same basic technique that created the oldest known textiles. When you needle felt a small creature, you're part of a contemporary craft movement that's reinventing traditional techniques. Felting bridges ancient and modern, functional and artistic, simple and complex.

### Where to go from here:

**Practice the fundamentals:** Make more coasters, felt more balls, create simple creatures. Repetition builds muscle memory and intuition. Each project teaches you something about how fiber behaves, how much agitation is enough, how firm is firm enough.

**Experiment with breed differences:** Try felting the same project with different breeds. Notice how Merino felts quickly and densely while Romney takes longer but creates sturdier fabric. Understanding these differences helps you choose fiber intentionally for future projects.

**Scale up gradually:** Once you're comfortable with coasters, try a scarf. After successful small sculptures, attempt larger forms. Resist felting requires planning and patience—make several flat pieces first to understand how your fiber shrinks.

**Combine techniques:** Use your hand-dyed fiber in felting projects. Needle felt details onto wet-felting pieces. Incorporate handspun yarn into felt designs. Let your skills from previous chapters enhance your felting.

**Join the community:** Take a felting class at your local fiber shop or guild. Attend felting workshops at fiber festivals. Connect with other felters online to share techniques, troubleshoot problems, and find inspiration. The fiber community loves welcoming new felters and celebrating everyone's unique creations.

**Keep experimenting:** Try techniques you haven't seen demonstrated. Felt around found objects. Combine unlikely fiber types. Make art with no specific plan, just to see what happens. Some of your best work will come from experiments that went "wrong" in interesting ways.

**Use your felt:** Don't let your felted pieces sit in a drawer. Use the coasters, wear the scarf, display the sculptures, gift the creatures. Felted items are meant to be used and enjoyed. Every time you use something you've felted, you're reminded of the hours you spent transforming fiber into fabric with your own hands.

You now have the skills to transform fiber into fabric without spinning a single yard of yarn. You can create dimensional sculptures, seamless vessels, and decorated surfaces. You understand how fiber structure affects felting results and how to choose breeds for specific projects. You've connected your dyeing, carding, and spinning knowledge to this new technique.

Most importantly, you've discovered another way to work with fiber—another path to creating beautiful, functional, meaningful objects from raw wool. That's the real magic of fiber arts: there are always more techniques to learn, more combinations to try, more ways to express creativity through the ancient, essential medium of fiber.

Now go make something. Felt a coaster. Needle felt a tiny creature. Experiment with that bag of fiber scraps. Get your hands wet and soapy. Stab some fiber (carefully!). Feel the transformation happening under your hands. That's the joy of felting—immediate, tactile, and deeply satisfying.

Welcome to the felting community. We're so glad you're here.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Felting</b>	Permanent fiber transformation using friction, moisture, heat, or barbed needles to tangle wool scales together

<b>Wet Felting</b>	Traditional method using hot, soapy water and agitation to create flat fabric or three-dimensional forms
<b>Needle Felting</b>	Using barbed needles to mechanically tangle dry fibers for sculpture and surface decoration
<b>Fiber Scales</b>	Microscopic overlapping structures on wool that open with heat/moisture and lock together with friction
<b>Pre-felting</b>	Initial gentle felting stage where fibers begin locking together but fabric remains delicate
<b>Fulling</b>	Vigorous agitation stage that shrinks, densifies, and strengthens felt
<b>Pinch Test</b>	Method to determine if fiber has progressed from loose layers to cohesive pre-felt
<b>Fabric Test</b>	Holding felt to light to check for uniform density and complete felting
<b>Perpendicular Layers</b>	Laying fiber in alternating directions (horizontal/vertical/horizontal) to create strong fabric
<b>Resist Felting</b>	Felting around removable templates to create seamless hollow forms like slippers or bowls
<b>Shrinkage</b>	Fiber reduction of 30-40% during felting; must be planned for in layout and resist sizing
<b>Felting Needles</b>	Barbed needles in various gauges (coarse 36-38, medium 40, fine 42) for different felting stages
<b>Work Surface</b>	Foam pad, felting brush, or dense foam that allows needles to pass through without breaking
<b>Stabbing Technique</b>	Perpendicular needle insertion and withdrawal to mechanically tangle fibers
<b>Rotation</b>	Constantly turning work while felting to create even density throughout forms
<b>Firmness Test</b>	Squeezing felted forms to determine if properly compacted or needing more work
<b>Surface Felting</b>	Adding decorative fiber designs to existing fabric using needle felting
<b>Breed Selection</b>	Choosing appropriate wool breeds based on scale density, crimp, and project requirements
<b>Superwash Wool</b>	Scale-removed or polymer-coated wool that will not felt; must be avoided for felting projects
<b>Blending</b>	Combining different fibers (breeds, silk, alpaca) to achieve custom felting properties
<b>Mixed-Media</b>	Combining felting with embroidery, beading, knitting, or other fiber techniques

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## Glossary of Terms

**Art Batt:** Carded fiber blend containing multiple colors, textures, and fiber types; creates complex visual interest when felted

**Barbs:** Tiny hooks along felting needle shafts that catch and push fibers through layers to tangle them mechanically

**Coarse Needle (36-38 gauge):** Thick felting needle with large barbs for initial shaping and working with large fiber amounts

**Corriedale:** Medium wool breed with reliable felting properties; ideal for beginners

**Crimp:** Natural wave pattern in wool fibers; more crimp = more scales = faster felting

**Drum Carding:** Mechanical fiber preparation creating batts; output is ideal for wet felting (Chapter 5)

**Felting Brush:** Work surface with stiff bristles that allow needles to pass between them without damage

**Fiber Painting:** Creating detailed images on felt using needle felting with multiple colored fibers

**Fine Needle (42 gauge):** Thin felting needle for detail work, smoothing surfaces, and finishing

**Finger Guards:** Leather or rubber thimbles protecting fingers from needle stabs

**Foam Pad:** Dense foam block providing safe work surface for needle felting

**Fulled Knitting:** Intentionally felting knitted fabric through hot water and agitation to create dense, sturdy material

**Fulling:** Vigorous agitation stage of wet felting that shrinks, densifies, and strengthens fabric

**Gradient:** Color transition from light to dark or one hue to another; created through dyeing (Chapter 4) and beautiful in felted projects

**Longwools:** Sheep breeds with lustrous, long-stapled fiber (Lincoln, Wensleydale, Cotswold); felt slowly and reluctantly

**Medium Needle (40 gauge):** Workhorse felting needle for most general felting, shaping, and attaching

**Merino:** Fine wool breed with high crimp and many scales; felts quickly and densely

**Multi-Needle Holder:** Tool holding 3-7 needles simultaneously for faster felting of large areas

**Needle Felting:** Mechanical fiber tangling using barbed needles; ideal for sculpture and surface decoration

**Noils:** Short fibers removed during combing (Chapter 5); can be felted into textured fabric

**Perpendicular:** Needle orientation at 90° angle to work surface; required to prevent needle breakage

**Pre-felt:** Initial felting stage where fibers begin locking but fabric remains delicate; passes pinch test

**Resist:** Template (foam, plastic, bubble wrap) that prevents fiber from felting together, creating hollow forms

**Rolag:** Cylindrical fiber roll from hand carding (Chapter 5); can be used in felting projects

**Romney:** Medium wool breed with slight luster; felts reliably and creates strong, durable fabric

**Scales:** Microscopic overlapping structures on animal fibers that enable felting

**Sheer Fabric:** Organza or tulle placed over wet fiber during pre-felting to prevent fiber displacement

**Singles:** Unplied yarn from spinning (Chapter 6); can be incorporated into felted designs

**Stabbing:** Technical term for needle felting action—perpendicular insertion and withdrawal

**Staple Length:** Fiber length from cut end to tip; affects preparation method choice (Chapter 5) and felting suitability

**Superwash Wool:** Chemically treated wool with removed or coated scales; will NOT felt

**Surface Felting:** Adding decorative fiber designs to existing fabric using needle felting

**Top:** Combed fiber preparation with parallel alignment (Chapter 5); can be used in felting

**Wet Felting:** Traditional felting using hot, soapy water and agitation to create fabric

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## Practice Exercises

### Exercise 1: Four Coordinating Felted Coasters

Create a set of four coordinating felted coasters using the wet felting technique. Experiment with different color combinations or patterns (solid colors, stripes, gradients, or random blends). This exercise builds confidence with the complete wet felting process while creating functional items you can use or gift.

**Hint:** Focus on laying thin, even layers and being patient during the pre-felting stage. Each coaster should take 30-45 minutes. The set allows you to try different color approaches and compare how they felt. Don't worry about perfect edges—organic, irregular shapes add handmade charm.

### Exercise 2: Three Simple Needle Felted Creatures

Needle felt three simple creatures: a ball-shaped creature (like a hedgehog or pufferfish), a four-legged creature (mouse, cat, or simple dog), and a bird. This exercise teaches basic form-building, attaching pieces, and adding details. Start with simple shapes and add personality through facial features and posture.

**Hint:** Build each creature from basic shapes: spheres for bodies and heads, cylinders for legs and tails, cones for beaks or ears. Felt each piece firmly before attaching. Use tiny amounts of fiber for facial features—less is more for details. Give each creature personality through eye placement and posture. Your first creatures will be imperfect—that's part of their charm.

### Exercise 3: Combined Wet and Needle Felting

Wet felt a flat piece (approximately 8x10 inches) using fiber you've dyed in Chapter 4, then add a needle-felted design on the surface. This exercise combines wet and needle felting techniques and uses fiber from earlier chapters, demonstrating how skills build on each other. The finished piece can be framed as fiber art or used as a small mat.

**Hint:** Choose colors that contrast enough for the needle-felted design to show clearly. Keep the design simple for your first attempt—geometric shapes, simple flowers, or abstract patterns work well. Wet felt the base until it's completely finished and dry before adding needle-felted elements. Use fine needles for crisp design edges.

### Exercise 4: Breed Comparison Study

Experiment with breed differences by felting three small samples (4x4 inches each) using three different wool breeds (suggestions: Merino, Corriedale, and

Romney or another coarse wool). Use the same technique and timing for all three. Compare the results: which felted fastest? Which created the densest fabric? Which has the most texture? Document your observations.

**Hint:** Lay out each sample with the same number of layers and similar fiber weight. Felt all three simultaneously if possible, giving each the same amount of time and agitation. The differences will be obvious: Merino will felt quickly and densely, Corriedale will felt reliably and evenly, coarser wools will felt more slowly and create textured fabric. Keep these samples as reference for future project planning.

## Chapter 8: Making with Your Handspun: Knitting, Weaving, and Crochet



## Introduction: From Fiber to Fabric—Your Handspun's Next Chapter

There's something magical about that moment when you cast on with yarn you spun yourself. Maybe it's the two-ply Corriedale you spent evenings spinning while listening to podcasts, or the art yarn with thick-and-thin sections that surprised you as it came off the wheel. Your hands already know this yarn intimately—you drafted every inch of it, felt it twist under your fingers, watched it transform from cloud-soft fiber into structured thread. Now it's ready for its next transformation.

I remember the first time I knit with my own handspun. I'd chosen a simple garter stitch cowl pattern—nothing fancy, just back-and-forth knitting that would let the yarn shine. As the fabric grew, I watched my slightly uneven singles create texture that no commercial yarn could replicate. The thicker sections made little bumps that caught the light. The color shifted subtly where I'd joined a new length of fiber. It wasn't perfect by industrial standards, but it was perfectly mine. When I wrapped that cowl around my neck, I felt connected to every step of its creation: the Rambouillet fleece I'd washed, the fiber I'd dyed with madder root, the hours at my wheel finding my rhythm, and finally these stitches that turned yarn into fabric.

This chapter guides you through taking your handspun and hand-dyed yarn on its final journey into finished objects you'll use, wear, and treasure. Whether you knit, crochet, or weave (or want to try all three), handmade yarn behaves beautifully and uniquely in each craft. It brings texture, character, and story to every project.

You'll learn to work with handspun's delightful quirks rather than against them, choose projects that showcase what makes your yarn special, and understand how each craft—knitting, crochet, and weaving—interacts differently with handspun texture and twist. You'll discover why swatching matters even more with handspun, how to adjust patterns for your yarn's personality, and how to embrace the organic beauty of fabric made entirely by your own hands.

By the end of this chapter, you'll understand how to match your handspun to projects that honor the fiber, the spinning, and the making. You'll know which stitch patterns love textured yarn, which weave structures show off color transitions, and how to let your yarn guide you toward its perfect finished form. Most importantly, you'll have the confidence to take that precious skein of handspun and turn it into something you'll love using.

Your fiber journey doesn't end when you take yarn off the niddy noddy—it's just beginning its most exciting chapter.

## **Why Handspun is Different (and Why That's Wonderful)**

Walk into any yarn shop and you'll see rows of perfectly uniform skeins—every yard identical to the last, twist angle precisely controlled, thickness calibrated to exact specifications. Commercial yarn is engineered for consistency. Your handspun? It's got personality. Those slightly thicker sections where you were still finding your drafting rhythm. The places where twist angle shifts just a bit. The subtle color variations where one dye lot transitioned to the next. This isn't imperfection—it's the fingerprint of hand-making.

I learned this lesson from Elena, a weaver who's been working with handspun for thirty years. She showed me two scarves side by side: one woven with commercial silk yarn, one with handspun wool with visible thick-and-thin variation. "See how the commercial one is beautiful but quiet?" she said. "The handspun one has texture that catches light differently across every inch. It's alive." She was right. The handspun scarf shimmered and shifted as it moved, creating visual interest that the perfectly even yarn couldn't match.

Understanding what makes your handspun unique helps you choose projects that showcase rather than hide these qualities. That two-ply you spun with slightly uneven singles? It'll create beautiful texture in garter stitch or seed stitch. The high-twist yarn you spun from combed top? Perfect for lace or weaving where you want clear stitch definition. The thick-and-thin art yarn? Stunning in simple stockinette or single crochet where the yarn itself provides all the visual interest.

## **The Story Your Yarn Tells**

When you knit, weave, or crochet with handspun, you're not just making a hat or a scarf—you're creating an object with a complete story. You might remember where you got the fiber (that small farm stand at Rhinebeck, or the indie dyer's booth at your local fiber festival). You remember how the fiber felt as you drafted it, the rhythm of your wheel, the satisfaction of plying. Now, as you work stitch by stitch, you're adding the final chapter.

My friend Sarah spun yarn from her elderly neighbor's last flock of sheep before she retired from farming. Sarah dyed it with black walnuts from the tree in her backyard, spun it over one winter, and knit it into a blanket for her first baby. "Every time I wrap my daughter in it," she told me, "I think about Mrs. Henderson's sheep, and my hands spinning while I was pregnant, and all those

hours knitting while nursing. It's not just a blanket—it's a whole season of my life." That's the power of making with handspun.

## **Understanding Your Handspun: Assessing What You've Made**

Before you cast on or warp your loom, take time to really get to know your yarn. Yes, you spun it—but yarn reveals different qualities when you work it into fabric. This assessment isn't about judgment (your yarn isn't "good" or "bad"), it's about understanding what your yarn wants to become.

I keep a project journal where I record details about each handspun yarn before I use it. This habit has saved me from mismatches (like the time I almost used high-twist sock yarn for a drapey shawl—disaster averted!) and helped me learn which of my spinning habits create yarn suited for which projects.

### **Measuring Your Yarn: WPI, Yardage, and Weight**

#### **Measuring WPI (Wraps Per Inch):**

1. Take your yarn and wrap it around a ruler, laying wraps side by side without gaps or overlaps
2. Count how many wraps fit in one inch
3. Measure in 3-4 different places along your skein and calculate the average
4. Compare to standard weights:
  - 5-6 WPI = bulky
  - 8-10 WPI = worsted
  - 12-14 WPI = DK or sport
  - 16-18 WPI = fingering weight

#### **Calculating Yardage:**

1. Measure exactly one yard of yarn
2. Weigh that one-yard sample in grams
3. Weigh your entire skein in grams
4. Divide skein weight by one-yard weight = total yardage
5. Example: If one yard weighs 0.5g and your skein weighs 100g, you have 200 yards

Record these measurements in your project journal. They'll help you find patterns that match your yarn and build a reference library for future spinning.

**Visual element needed:** Photo series showing WPI measurement technique with yarn wrapped around ruler and count indicated; scale setup for measuring yardage; reference chart matching WPI numbers to commercial yarn weight categories with visual examples.

## Twist Assessment: Energy, Balance, and Angle

### Testing Twist Energy:

1. Hold a length of yarn and let it hang freely
2. Observe its behavior:

- **Balanced yarn** hangs relatively straight with minimal coiling
- **Energized yarn** twists back on itself, creating coils and kinks

### Understanding Twist Behavior:

- **Balanced yarn**: Works well for most projects, knits/crochets/weaves without fighting you, creates even fabric, doesn't bias
- **Slightly energized yarn**: Adds beautiful texture and bounce to knitted fabric, especially in garter stitch or textured patterns
- **Highly energized yarn**: Perfect for fringe, tassels, or deliberate spiral effects; will make stockinette twist like a corkscrew

### Evaluating Twist Angle:

Hold your yarn next to the diagonal of a Z or S letter. Compare the angle at which fibers wrap around the yarn:

- **Low twist angle** (fibers nearly parallel): Soft, lofty yarn with less strength—beautiful for cozy cowls and shawls
- **Medium twist** (fibers at ~45 degrees): Strong, versatile yarn for almost anything
- **High twist** (fibers wrap steeply): Firm, durable yarn perfect for socks, weaving warp, or lace that needs to hold its shape

**Visual element needed:** Photo showing hanging test for twist energy (balanced vs. energized yarn side by side); close-ups of low, medium, and high twist angles with angle lines drawn; comparison of fabric swatches made from each twist angle showing drape and texture differences.

### Fiber Content and Its Impact on Fabric

Remember all that breed information from Chapter 1? It matters enormously now. That Merino you spun will create soft, elastic fabric that's forgiving of tension variations—perfect for your first handspun sweater. The Romney you spun for durability? It'll make sturdy, structured fabric ideal for bags or outerwear. The Wensleydale with its long, lustrous staple? Gorgeous drape for shawls, but it won't have the spring and memory of shorter-stapled wools.

### Understanding Blends:

- **Wool-silk**: Combines wool's elasticity with silk's sheen and drape
- **Wool-alpaca**: Adds warmth and softness with slightly less memory than pure wool

- **Wool-cotton or linen:** Adds weight and drape but removes elasticity—beautiful for summer garments but less forgiving of uneven spinning

## Care Considerations:

Fiber content determines care requirements. That gorgeous handspun Merino cardigan? Hand wash in cool water and lay flat to dry. The Romney bag? It can handle more vigorous washing. The wool-silk shawl? Needs gentle handling to protect the silk. Consider whether you'll actually care for the finished object as the fiber requires—there's no point making a delicate lace shawl from precious fiber if you need something you can toss in the washing machine.

## The Essential Swatch: Your Yarn's Audition

I know, I know—nobody wants to hear "you must swatch." But with handspun, swatching isn't optional. It's how you discover what your yarn wants to become. Think of it as a first date between your yarn and various stitch patterns. You're seeing how they get along before committing to a relationship.

### How to Swatch with Handspun:

1. Cast on at least 4-5 inches square (for knitting or crochet) or weave a 6-inch sample
2. Work in the stitch pattern you're considering for your project
3. Use comfortable, consistent tension—not too tight, not too loose
4. **Wash your swatch** exactly as you'll wash the finished object:
  - Hot water if it's wool that can handle it, cool water for delicate fibers
  - Agitate or soak as appropriate
  - Lay flat or hang to dry, depending on your plan for the finished piece

### What to Observe:

Watch the transformation. Your yarn might bloom (fluff up and soften) dramatically. It might grow or shrink. The twist energy might relax, making fabric lie flatter. Those thick-and-thin sections might become more or less visible. This transformation is why you swatch—the yarn coming off your swift is not the same as the yarn in finished, washed fabric.

### Evaluating Your Swatch:

After washing, assess both quantitative and qualitative factors:

- **Gauge:** Measure stitches and rows per inch
- **Drape:** Does the fabric hang nicely or is it stiff?
- **Density:** Too dense and heavy, or too loose and floppy?
- **Stitch definition:** Does the pattern show clearly with your yarn's texture?

- **Color display:** Does stockinette show off your dyeing, or does a textured stitch better complement your spinning?

### **Try Multiple Swatches:**

Make swatches in different stitch patterns: stockinette, garter, seed stitch, simple lace. Try different needle or hook sizes. One of these swatches will make you think "yes, that's it"—that's the combination that honors your yarn. Trust that instinct.

**Visual element needed:** Photo sequence of the same handspun yarn swatch before and after washing, showing bloom and texture change; collection of swatches showing the same yarn in different stitch patterns (stockinette, garter, seed stitch, simple cable); close-up of measuring gauge on washed swatch with ruler.

## Knitting with Handspun: Stitches That Sing



Fig. Knitting with Handspun: Stitches That Sing

Knitting with your own handspun feels different from the first stitch. The yarn has more personality—it might be a little grabby or slippery depending on fiber and twist. It might vary in thickness, making some stitches looser or tighter than others. This isn't a problem to fix; it's texture to celebrate. Knitting with handspun means developing a conversation with your yarn, adjusting your hands and needles to work with what you've created.

The first handspun project I knit successfully was a simple stockinette hat with a folded brim. I'd tried a complex cable pattern first and fought with the yarn for hours—my thick-and-thin spinning made the cables look confused and lumpy.

When I switched to stockinette, suddenly the yarn made sense. The thickness variations created organic texture that looked intentional. The color shifts I'd dyed showed clearly. The yarn was happy, and so was I. Sometimes the simplest choice is the right one.

### **Choosing Stitch Patterns for Your Yarn's Personality**

Think about where you want visual interest to come from—the stitch pattern or the yarn itself.

#### **For Smooth, Consistent Yarn:**

If you spun smooth, consistent yarn from combed top with high twist, you've created yarn that can handle intricate stitch patterns. Your cables will be crisp, your lace will have clear definition, your colorwork will be precise. This yarn worked hard to be even—give it a pattern that shows off that accomplishment.

#### **For Textured, Variable Yarn:**

If your yarn has beautiful texture—thick-and-thin sections, slubs, or organic variation—keep the stitch pattern simple:

- **Stockinette:** Lets texture show clearly
- **Garter stitch** (knit every row): Creates horizontal ridges that play beautifully with yarn variation and hide tension inconsistencies
- **Seed stitch** (alternating knit and purl): Creates subtle texture that complements rather than competes with your yarn

These "simple" stitches aren't boring—they're showcases for handspun character.

#### **For Hand-Dyed, Variegated Yarn:**

Consider whether stitch patterns will enhance or confuse the colors:

- **Stockinette:** Lets colors pool and flow
- **Garter stitch:** Breaks up pooling if that's a concern
- **Highly textured stitches:** Can muddy color changes

Swatch to see what you prefer.

#### **Specific Pattern Recommendations:**

- **Garter stitch:** Loves all handspun, especially beginners' yarn with variable thickness
- **Stockinette:** Showcases color and creates smooth fabric that highlights subtle texture
- **Seed stitch:** Endlessly forgiving, creates beautiful, squishy fabric
- **Simple ribbing** (k2, p2 or k1, p1): Works well with even handspun, creates elastic fabric
- **Broken rib patterns** (like mistake rib): Forgive irregularities while adding interest

- **Simple lace** (basic yarn-over patterns): Works beautifully with smooth, fine handspun

**Visual element needed:** Photo grid showing the same handspun yarn in different stitch patterns: stockinette, garter, seed stitch, simple cable, basic lace. Each 4-inch square swatch should include captions noting which patterns work best for which yarn characteristics.

## Needle Selection and Tension Adjustments

### Choosing Needle Size:

Your swatch told you what needle size creates fabric you love with your specific yarn. Trust it, even if it's different from what the pattern suggests for that yarn weight. Handspun doesn't always behave like commercial yarn of the same WPI. Maybe your two-ply wants larger needles to create drapey fabric, or smaller needles to make dense, warm fabric. There's no wrong answer—only what works for your yarn and your vision.

### Needle Material Matters:

- **Wooden or bamboo needles:** Provide grip that helps control slippery fibers (silk blends, some longwools)
- **Metal needles:** Let stitches slide easily with grabby yarn (high-crimp wools, woolen-spun yarn)

Keep both types in your needle collection and choose based on the yarn's personality.

### Adjusting Tension for Variable Thickness:

When your yarn varies in thickness, adjust tension as you knit:

1. **At thicker sections:** Pull yarn through with slightly less tension so the stitch doesn't become too tight
2. **At thinner sections:** Maintain firm tension so the stitch doesn't get loose and floppy

Your hands will learn this adjustment—it becomes intuitive with practice. The goal isn't perfectly uniform stitches (that's impossible with variable yarn), but stitches that create fabric with overall even tension and pleasant texture.

## Managing Joins and Yarn Breaks

### Spit-Splice for Feltable Wool:

This technique creates nearly invisible joins without knots:

1. Untwist the last 2-3 inches of the old yarn and the first 2-3 inches of the new yarn

2. Overlap the untwisted sections
3. Wet the overlap with water (or saliva, hence "spit-splice")
4. Roll the overlap vigorously between your palms
5. The friction and moisture felt the fibers together permanently
6. Let it dry briefly, then continue knitting

This only works with feltable wool—not superwash, silk, cotton, or non-felting blends.

### **Alternative Joining Methods:**

For non-felting fibers:

- **Russian join:** Thread yarn tails through themselves
- **Simple join:** Leave 6-inch tails, tie a temporary loose knot to hold while you work, weave in ends later
- Try to place joins at edges or in inconspicuous spots

### **Handling Weak Spots:**

If you encounter a weak or thin spot while knitting:

- Splice in fresh yarn at that point
- Knit through the weak spot and reinforce it later by weaving in a short length of matching yarn
- Accept that this spot might eventually break and plan to repair it then

Handspun sometimes has imperfections—that's part of its charm and story.

**Visual element needed:** Step-by-step photo sequence showing spit-splice technique: untwisting yarn ends, overlapping fibers, wetting the overlap, rolling between palms, finished join close-up showing invisibility. Also include photo of Russian join technique as alternative.

### **Project Ideas That Love Handspun**

#### **Cowls and Infinity Scarves:**

Simple, cozy, and endlessly wearable. A basic garter stitch or stockinette cowl in handspun becomes an everyday treasure. The Churchmouse Yarns "Welted Cowl" pattern is perfect for showing off handspun texture.

#### **Hats:**

Require relatively small yardage (100-200 yards depending on size) and let you practice knitting in the round. A simple rolled-brim beanie or slouchy hat shows off your yarn without complex shaping. The thickness variations in handspun often create beautiful organic texture in hat fabric.

#### **Fingerless Mitts:**

Quick to knit, use 100-150 yards, and let you wear your handspun every day. Simple mitts in stockinette or garter with ribbed cuffs are classic and satisfying.

### **Shawls:**

The ultimate handspun showcase. Triangle shawls knit from the top down let you use every yard you have—just keep knitting until you run out of yarn. Garter stitch shawls (like the Hitchhiker or Wingspan patterns) are meditative and beautiful. Simple lace shawls work wonderfully with smooth, fine handspun.

### **Simple Sweaters:**

When you're ready for a bigger project, choose straightforward constructions. Top-down raglan pullovers in stockinette or garter let you try on as you go and adjust fit. The Flax or Harvest patterns are handspun-friendly classics. Avoid complex colorwork or intricate cables for your first handspun sweater—let the yarn be the star.

### **Blanket Squares:**

If you spin lots of small batches in different colors, knit squares in garter or stockinette and seam them into a blanket or afghan. Each square becomes a memory of that fiber, that spinning session, that moment in your making journey.

**Visual element needed:** Photos of finished handspun projects representing each category: textured cowl showing thick-and-thin yarn, simple hat with visible color variation, fingerless mitts in garter stitch, triangle shawl displaying gradient dyeing, basic pullover in stockinette. Show projects being worn to demonstrate scale and drape.

## **Crochet with Handspun: Structure and Flow**

Crochet and handspun are natural partners. Where knitting creates fluid, elastic fabric, crochet creates structure and body—qualities that complement handspun's organic texture. That slightly uneven yarn that might worry you in stockinette? It creates gorgeous, intentional-looking texture in single crochet. Those color transitions you dyed? They flow beautifully through crochet stitches.

I learned to crochet specifically to use handspun in ways knitting couldn't achieve. My first project was a market bag in sturdy Romney yarn I'd spun with medium twist. The crochet fabric was dense and strong—perfect for carrying produce and library books. The thickness variations in my spinning created texture that made the bag look artisan-crafted (which, of course, it was). That

bag is still going strong five years later, softening and becoming more beautiful with use.

## **How Crochet Differs: Structure, Yardage, and Fabric**

### **Key Differences from Knitting:**

If you're coming to crochet from knitting, understand these fundamental differences:

- **Yardage:** Crochet typically uses 25-30% more yarn than knitting for comparable projects (a knit hat might use 150 yards; a crocheted hat of similar size might need 200)
- **Fabric structure:** Crochet creates denser fabric with less drape and more body than knitting
- **Durability:** That density creates structure perfect for bags, baskets, hot pads, and sturdy accessories
- **Ripping back:** Crochet fabric doesn't ravel like knitting—easier to rip back and reuse yarn if needed

### **When to Choose Crochet:**

Crochet is ideal for items that need to hold their shape:

- Market bags that won't stretch out when loaded
- Baskets that stand up on their own
- Cowls with sculptural presence
- Items requiring structure and durability

If you spun yarn intending to make something structured and durable, crochet might be the perfect choice.

## **Stitch Choices That Showcase Handspun**

### **Single Crochet:**

Handspun's best friend. Simple, rhythmic, creates fabric that shows off yarn texture beautifully. Those thick-and-thin sections in your spinning? They create organic bumps and texture in single crochet that look completely intentional. Color transitions flow smoothly row by row. Perfect for bags, baskets, hot pads, and sturdy cowls.

### **Half-Double Crochet:**

Works up faster than single crochet and creates fabric with a bit more drape while maintaining structure. Excellent for scarves, shawls, and garments where you want some body but not extreme density. The taller stitches show off color transitions in wider bands.

### **Double Crochet:**

Creates the most drape of the basic stitches and works up quickly—perfect when you have limited handspun yardage and want a larger project. Double crochet shawls in handspun are lightweight and beautiful, with more open fabric that shows stitch structure.

### **Granny Squares and Motifs:**

If you spin small batches in different colors, crochet motifs are perfect. Traditional granny squares, solid squares, or hexagons can be joined into blankets, bags, or garments. Each motif becomes a little showcase for one skein of handspun. I have a blanket made from years of handspun samples—each square is a memory of a different fiber, a different spinning experiment.

### **Simple Lace Patterns:**

Open, airy crochet patterns (using chains and double crochets to create spaces) work beautifully with smooth, fine handspun. The structure of crochet lace is different from knitted lace—bolder and more geometric.

### **What to Avoid:**

Extremely dense stitch patterns like moss stitch or very tight amigurumi stitches can become stiff and inflexible with handspun, especially if your yarn is already thick. Complex colorwork or intricate stitch patterns might compete with your yarn's natural texture rather than complement it.

**Visual element needed:** Swatch comparison showing handspun yarn in single crochet, half-double crochet, double crochet, and a granny square motif. Label each with stitch name and notes about fabric characteristics (density, drape, texture). Include photo of finished granny square blanket made from multiple colors of handspun.

## **Hook Size and Tension with Handspun**

### **Selecting Hook Size:**

Your swatch (yes, crocheters swatch too!) showed you what hook size creates fabric you love. With handspun, you might find you need a larger hook than you'd use with commercial yarn of similar thickness—handspun often has more loft and texture that needs room to express itself. Or you might want a smaller hook to create extremely dense, sturdy fabric for a bag or basket.

### **Experimenting with Hook Sizes:**

1. Make a swatch in your chosen stitch with a size G hook
2. Make another swatch with a size J hook

3. Compare the fabric—one might be stiff and dense, the other drapey and fluid
4. Neither is wrong—choose the one that matches your project's needs

### **Managing Tension:**

Crochet tension involves two elements:

1. **Yarn tension:** How tightly you hold the working yarn
2. **Stitch firmness:** How firmly you pull each loop

### **Adjusting for Handspun:**

- **Grabby yarn** (high-crimp wool, woolen-spun): Hold with lighter tension, let it flow through your fingers
- **Slippery yarn** (longwool, silk blend): Maintain firmer tension to control the yarn
- **Consistent stitches:** Pull each loop to a consistent size—not too tight (stiff fabric), not too loose (floppy fabric)

### **Hook Material:**

Ergonomic hooks with cushioned grips reduce hand fatigue, especially important when working with textured handspun that might be grabbier than smooth commercial yarn. Clover Amour hooks have comfortable grips and smooth throats that let yarn slide easily.

## **Perfect Projects for Crocheted Handspun**

### **Market Bags and Totes:**

Crochet's density and structure make it ideal for bags that will carry weight. A simple single crochet bag in sturdy handspun (Romney, Corriedale, or another medium wool) creates a durable, beautiful carrier for groceries, yarn, or library books. The thickness variations in handspun add character without weakening the fabric.

### **Baskets:**

Crocheted in continuous rounds with sturdy yarn, baskets hold their shape and organize your space beautifully. Use thick handspun or hold two strands together for extra structure. These are perfect for using practice yarn or less-than-perfect handspun—the dense fabric hides irregularities.

### **Cowls and Infinity Scarves:**

Single crochet or half-double crochet cowls in handspun are cozy and quick. The fabric has more body than knitted cowls, creating sculptural drape. A simple rectangular cowl seamed into a loop takes 150-250 yards depending on size.

### **Shawls and Wraps:**

Double crochet or simple lace patterns create beautiful shawls with more structure than knitted ones. Triangle shawls worked from the top down let you use all your yardage. The "Virus shawl" pattern (a free favorite in the crochet community) works beautifully with handspun and creates stunning geometric shapes.

### **Blankets and Afghans:**

Join granny squares, crochet stripes, or work a simple single-crochet blanket in rows. Blankets let you use multiple skeins of handspun, combining colors and textures. They're meditative long-term projects that showcase your spinning over time.

### **Dishcloths and Hot Pads:**

Practical, quick projects perfect for sampling handspun in crochet. A simple square in single or double crochet takes one small skein (50-75 yards) and creates something useful. These are great for practicing tension with handspun before committing to larger projects.

**Visual element needed:** Photos of finished crocheted handspun projects: sturdy market bag showing texture and structure, coiled basket with visible thick-and-thin yarn, cowl displaying drape and body, granny square blanket in multiple colors, simple dishcloth showing stitch clarity. Include people using/wearing items to show scale and function.

## **Weaving with Handspun: Warp, Weft, and Wonderful Fabric**

Weaving with handspun opens entirely new possibilities for your yarn. Where knitting and crochet create fabric through looping, weaving creates fabric through interlacement—warp threads running lengthwise, weft threads crossing side to side. This structure lets you combine yarns in ways other crafts can't, and it showcases handspun's color and texture in stunning ways.

My weaving teacher, Marta, showed me a scarf she'd woven with commercial cotton warp and handspun wool weft. The warp was invisible—just structure holding the fabric together. The weft was thick-and-thin handspun in gorgeous gradient colors, and it was the entire visual story. "Weaving lets you use small amounts of precious handspun," she said, "and turn it into fabric that's more

than the sum of its parts." She was right. That scarf used maybe 200 yards of handspun but looked like a masterpiece.

## **Understanding Warp and Weft: Where Handspun Shines**

### **Different Jobs, Different Requirements:**

In weaving, warp and weft have distinct roles:

#### **Warp Threads:**

- Stretched on the loom under tension
- Get abraded as heddles move up and down with every pick (pass) of weft
- Must be strong, smooth, and consistent
- Form the skeleton of your fabric

#### **Weft Threads:**

- Travel over and under the warp
- Create the visible surface of the fabric
- Can be textured, bumpy, thick-and-thin, or irregular
- Protected by the warp and held in place

### **Where Handspun Works Best:**

Most handspun is perfect for weft and challenging for warp:

- **Beautiful thick-and-thin yarn:** Gorgeous as weft, but would create tension problems as warp (thick sections tight, thin sections loose)
- **Smooth, high-twist yarn:** Could work as warp if strong enough, definitely works as weft
- **Textured, art yarn:** Showcase as weft where it's visible and protected

### **Using Commercial Warp with Handspun Weft:**

Many weavers use commercial yarn for warp and handspun for weft. This isn't cheating—it's smart design. You get reliable, strong structure from commercial warp, and you showcase your handspun in the weft where it's visible and protected. A cotton or linen warp with handspun wool weft creates beautiful fabric that drapes well and highlights your spinning and dyeing.

### **Spinning for Warp:**

If you want to weave with handspun warp, spin specifically for that purpose:

1. Use combed top or well-prepared fiber
2. Spin with high twist for strength
3. Ply firmly
4. Test by pulling hard—yarn should not break easily
5. Consider sizing (coating with starch or warp sizing solution) to add strength and smoothness

## **Loom Types and Handspun Considerations**

### **Rigid Heddle Looms:**

Simple, portable looms perfect for beginning weavers and showcasing handspun. Warp them with commercial yarn and weave with handspun weft, creating scarves, towels, or fabric yardage. The rigid heddle (a frame with slots and holes) lifts every other warp thread, creating plain weave—the simplest and most versatile weave structure. Handspun weft shows beautifully in plain weave.

### **Floor Looms:**

Multi-shaft floor looms (4-shaft, 8-shaft, or more) allow complex weave patterns like twills, overshot, and lace weaves. These looms give you precise control over tension and shed (the opening between lifted and lowered warp threads), making them suitable for using strong handspun as warp if you choose. The investment is significant, but the possibilities are endless.

### **Frame Looms and Tapestry Looms:**

These simple looms create weft-faced weaving where the warp is completely covered by weft. Perfect for using handspun weft in tapestry, wall hangings, or small art pieces. The warp (often commercial cotton or linen) provides structure while handspun weft creates all the visual interest.

### **Inkle Looms:**

These narrow looms create bands and straps. Strong handspun can work as warp for inkle weaving if it's smooth and firmly plied. Inkle bands showcase color patterns beautifully.

## **Weaving Techniques for Handspun Success**

### **Warping with Handspun:**

If using handspun as warp:

1. Wind it onto the warp beam with consistent tension
2. Use a warping board or warping mill to measure warp threads to exact length
3. As you wind onto the loom, place paper or thin sticks between warp layers to prevent threads from sinking into each other
4. Check tension frequently and adjust as needed

### **Weaving with Handspun Weft:**

1. Wind your handspun onto a shuttle (stick shuttle, boat shuttle, or rag shuttle depending on your loom and yarn thickness)
2. Pass the shuttle through the shed, leaving a tail at the beginning

3. Don't pull weft tight—let it arc slightly across the warp before beating it into place
4. This arc allows weft to pack in properly without drawing in the edges
5. Beat gently, especially with textured handspun—secure the weft without compressing its beautiful texture

### **Managing Selvedges (Edges):**

The edges of your weaving need consistent tension:

1. Don't pull tight at the edges—maintain the same gentle arc you use across the width
2. If edges are pulling in, you're tensioning too tightly
3. If they're loose and loopy, you're leaving too much slack
4. Practice finds the balance

### **Finishing Woven Fabric:**

1. Cut your weaving off the loom
2. Secure the warp ends (tie them, twist them into fringe, or hem them)
3. Wash fabric in warm water with gentle soap—this relaxes the yarns, lets them bloom and settle into their final positions
4. Some weavers full (gently felt) wool fabric by agitating it in hot water—this creates denser, warmer fabric
5. Let it dry flat or hang it, depending on desired drape
6. Press with steam if needed

**Visual element needed:** Photo sequence showing rigid heddle loom warped with commercial cotton and handspun weft being woven; close-up of shuttle passing through shed with proper weft arc; comparison of fabric on the loom vs. after washing showing transformation; detail shot of finished selvedge edge showing proper tension.

### **Projects That Showcase Woven Handspun**

#### **Scarves:**

The quintessential handweaving project. Warp your loom with commercial cotton, linen, or silk (or strong handspun if you have it), and weave with handspun weft. Plain weave shows off handspun texture and color beautifully. A scarf uses 200-400 yards of weft depending on width and length—perfect for one or two skeins of precious handspun. The drape of woven scarves is different from knitted ones—more structured, with beautiful body.

#### **Shawls and Wraps:**

Larger than scarves, shawls let you use more handspun and create statement pieces. Weave with gradient-dyed handspun to create color transitions across the

length. Twill weave (if your loom allows it) creates diagonal texture that complements handspun beautifully.

### **Kitchen Towels:**

Practical and satisfying. Use cotton or linen warp and handspun cotton or linen weft (or wool if you don't mind hand-washing your towels). Handspun creates texture that's excellent for drying dishes. Weave a series of towels as a set, each using a different color of handspun.

### **Table Runners and Placemats:**

Similar to towels but decorative. These showcase handspun in your home and make wonderful gifts. The structure of weaving creates fabric that lies flat and has body—perfect for table textiles.

### **Wall Hangings and Tapestry:**

If you're drawn to fiber art rather than functional textiles, weave tapestries or wall hangings using handspun. Frame loom weaving or tapestry technique creates weft-faced fabric where your handspun is the entire visual story. These pieces can be abstract color studies, representational images, or textural explorations.

### **Fabric Yardage:**

Weave wider fabric on a floor loom to create yardage for sewing projects. Handspun weft in woven fabric creates unique cloth for bags, garments, or home décor that no commercial fabric can replicate.

**Visual element needed:** Photos of finished woven projects using handspun: scarf showing gradient color transitions in the weft, set of kitchen towels in different handspun colors, wall hanging showcasing textured thick-and-thin handspun, shawl displaying drape of woven fabric. Include close-ups showing weave structure and how handspun texture appears in woven cloth.

## **Designing for Your Handspun: Letting Yarn Lead the Way**

The most successful handspun projects often happen when you let the yarn tell you what it wants to become. That skein you just finished might have been intended for a specific pattern, but as you hold it and swatch it, you might discover it wants to be something else entirely. This isn't failure—it's listening to your materials.

I spun 400 yards of BFL wool intending to knit a specific lace shawl pattern I'd been eyeing. But when I swatched, the lace pattern looked fussy and overcomplicated with my slightly textured spinning. On a whim, I tried simple garter stitch. The yarn bloomed and glowed. The subtle texture I'd thought was a flaw became the entire design. I ended up knitting a simple garter stitch triangle shawl, letting the yarn's character be the star. It's one of my favorite pieces—not despite the change in plans, but because of it.

## **Reading Your Yarn's Personality**

### **Assessing Visual Character:**

Hold your yarn. Look at it in good light. What stands out?

#### **If it's the color** (gradient shifts, variegation, subtle heathering):

- Choose simple stitch patterns that let color be the story
- Stockinette, garter, or plain weave showcase color transitions

#### **If it's texture** (thick-and-thin variation, slubs, interesting plying):

- Choose stitches that highlight rather than hide texture
- Simple patterns let texture shine

#### **If it's smoothness and consistency** (even spinning with clear twist):

- You can choose complex stitch patterns that will show clearly
- Cables, lace, and intricate weaves are possible

### **Evaluating Drape:**

Hold a length of yarn and let it hang:

- **Hangs softly and fluidly:** Wants to become something drapey—a shawl, a flowing scarf, a garment with movement
- **Has body and structure:** Wants to become something with shape—a bag, a hat, a structured cowl

### **Considering Yardage Realistically:**

You might have enough for a shawl but not a sweater. That's not a limitation—it's a direction. Some of the most beautiful handspun projects are small: a hat that uses one perfect skein, a cowl that showcases 200 yards of gradient dyeing, fingerless mitts that let you wear your handspun every day.

### **Adapting Patterns for Handspun**

Most patterns are written for commercial yarn with specific gauge and yardage. Your handspun is unique, so you'll often need to adapt.

## **Adjusting for Gauge Differences:**

1. Compare your swatch gauge (stitches and rows per inch) to the pattern's gauge
2. Recalculate stitch counts if they differ

### **Example:**

- Pattern calls for 20 stitches per 4 inches (5 stitches per inch) and instructs you to cast on 100 stitches for a 20-inch circumference
- Your handspun gauges at 18 stitches per 4 inches (4.5 stitches per inch)
- To get 20 inches:  $20 \times 4.5 = 90$  stitches
- Cast on 90 instead of 100

## **Adjusting for Yardage Differences:**

If the pattern calls for 400 yards and you have 300:

- Make a smaller size
- Shorten the piece
- Simplify elements
- A shawl could be narrower or shorter
- A sweater could have shorter sleeves or a cropped body

These aren't compromises—they're custom designs for your specific yarn.

## **Substituting Stitch Patterns:**

Don't be afraid to make changes:

- If a pattern uses stockinette but your textured yarn would shine in garter stitch, make the switch
- If a pattern uses complex cables but your yarn is thick-and-thin and would look confused, simplify to ribbing or seed stitch
- The pattern is a suggestion, not a law

## **Improvising and Intuitive Making**

Some of the most satisfying handspun projects happen without patterns. You cast on, you knit or crochet, and you let the yarn tell you when it's done. This isn't reckless—it's intuitive making, and it's a skill you can develop.

## **Triangle Shawls:**

1. Cast on 3 stitches
2. Increase at the beginning and end of every other row (or every row for faster growth)
3. Knit until you run out of yarn or reach desired size
4. Bind off

You've made a shawl. The beauty is in the yarn, and the simple construction lets it shine.

## **Rectangular Cowls:**

1. Cast on enough stitches for your desired width (12-18 inches is typical)
2. Knit or crochet in your chosen stitch until the piece is long enough to wrap comfortably around your neck (usually 50-60 inches)
3. Seam the short ends together
4. Done

## **Simple Hats:**

1. Cast on enough stitches to fit around your head comfortably (measure or use your gauge to calculate)
2. Join in the round
3. Knit or crochet until the hat is about 7-8 inches tall
4. Decrease for the crown by reducing stitches evenly every other round until you have just a few stitches left
5. Close the top
6. Add a pompom if you like

These basic constructions work with any yarn, any gauge, any yardage. They're frameworks for showcasing your handspun without the constraints of someone else's pattern. As you make more projects this way, you'll develop intuition for proportions, shaping, and design.

## **Caring for Handspun Creations: Making Them Last**

You've put hours into creating fiber, spinning yarn, and making a finished object. Proper care ensures your creation lasts for years—maybe even becomes an heirloom. Handspun items deserve thoughtful maintenance, and the care you give them is part of honoring the making process.

### **Washing and Blocking Handspun Items**

#### **Washing Wool Items:**

1. Fill a basin with cool or lukewarm water (not hot—heat plus agitation causes felting)
2. Add a small amount of wool wash or gentle soap (Eucalan or Soak work well)
3. Submerge your item and gently press it under the water
4. Let it soak for 15-20 minutes
5. Don't agitate, rub, or wring
6. Drain the water and gently press out excess moisture
7. Roll the item in a towel and press to remove more water
8. Lay flat to dry on a clean towel or blocking mat, shaping as desired

#### **Blocking to Shape:**

This process shapes your item and evens out stitches:

- **Shawls:** Pin them out to their full dimensions on a blocking mat, stretching gently to open up lace patterns
- **Sweaters:** Lay flat and pat into shape, measuring to ensure even dimensions
- **Cowls:** Shape over a form (a dinner plate) while damp
- **Hats:** Shape over a balloon or bowl while damp
- Let everything dry completely before removing pins or forms

### **Plant Fibers:**

Cotton and linen can usually handle warmer water and more vigorous washing than wool. They won't felt, but they can still be damaged by rough handling. Wash in warm water, rinse well, and lay flat or hang to dry.

### **Storage and Maintenance**

#### **Proper Storage:**

- Store wool items clean—moths are attracted to dirt and body oils
- Fold sweaters and shawls rather than hanging them (hanging stretches the fabric over time)
- Store in breathable containers like cotton bags or on shelves, not in plastic which can trap moisture
- Use cedar blocks, lavender sachets, or moth-prevention products in your storage area

#### **Regular Inspection:**

- Check stored items periodically for any signs of moth damage (small holes, webbing, or larvae)
- If you find moths, freeze the item for 72 hours to kill eggs and larvae
- Wash and store with fresh moth prevention

### **Repairs and Embracing Wear**

#### **Understanding Wear:**

Handmade items will show wear—that's part of their story. A cowl develops pilling where it rubs against your coat. Sock heels wear thin. Elbows on a handspun sweater might get fuzzy. This isn't failure; it's evidence of love and use.

#### **Basic Darning:**

Learn to repair small holes or worn spots:

1. Use matching yarn (save some from your project for this purpose) or contrasting yarn for visible mending
2. Weave yarn back and forth across the damaged area, creating new fabric that integrates with the old
3. Japanese boro and sashiko traditions celebrate visible mending as art

## **Preventive Reinforcement:**

If you notice a weak or thin spot before it becomes a hole:

1. Reinforce by weaving in a short length of matching yarn
2. Distribute the reinforcement across the weak area
3. This preventive repair extends the item's life

## **Embracing Patina:**

That handspun shawl that's softer and slightly felted from years of wear? It's more beautiful now than when you finished it. The hat with a slightly worn brim? It's shaped itself to your head. These items are living their purpose.

## **Conclusion: Your Fiber Journey Comes Full Circle**

You've come full circle. From raw fiber (Chapter 1) through washing (Chapter 2), dyeing (Chapter 4), preparation (Chapter 5), and spinning (Chapter 6), you've created yarn entirely by your own hands. Now, by knitting, crocheting, or weaving that yarn into finished objects, you've completed the journey that textile makers have traveled for thousands of years. You're part of an unbroken chain of makers who transformed fiber into fabric, function, and art.

This chapter taught you how to assess your handspun yarn—measuring WPI and yardage, evaluating twist and texture, understanding how fiber content affects fabric. You learned that swatching isn't optional with handspun; it's how you discover what your yarn wants to become. You explored how handspun behaves in knitting, where simple stitches often showcase yarn best, and where adjusting tension compensates for thickness variations. You discovered how crochet's structure and density create different possibilities, making handspun perfect for bags, baskets, and sturdy accessories. You learned how weaving lets you combine commercial warp with handspun weft, creating fabric that showcases your yarn in entirely new ways.

Most importantly, you learned to let your yarn guide your project choices. That textured, thick-and-thin yarn wants simple stitches that highlight its character. That smooth, consistent yarn can handle complex patterns. That gradient-dyed yarn shines in stockinette or plain weave. Your yarn has personality—honor it by choosing projects that showcase rather than fight its nature.

The items you make with handspun carry stories. When someone asks about your cowl, you don't just say "I knit it." You say "I got the fiber at a small farm in Vermont, dyed it with madder root from my garden, spun it over two weeks last

winter, and knit it while listening to my favorite podcast." That's not just a cowl—it's a chronicle of time, attention, and making. It's irreplaceable.

As you continue making with handspun, you'll develop intuition. You'll hold a skein and immediately know whether it wants to be a hat or a shawl, whether it needs garter stitch or stockinette, whether it's meant for you or for someone you love. You'll learn which of your spinning habits create yarn suited for which purposes, and you'll spin with intention toward specific projects. You'll build a reference library of swatches and finished objects that teach you about your own work.

Keep making. Try new stitches, new patterns, new combinations of craft and yarn. Let some projects be simple showcases for precious fiber. Let others be experiments where you learn what works and what doesn't. Save yarn from each project for future repairs. Take photos of your finished work—not just styled shots, but pictures of you wearing and using these items. These photos document your making journey and remind you why you do this work.

Remember that the goal isn't perfection. Commercial yarn is perfect—uniform, consistent, predictable. Your handspun is alive. It has texture and variation and personality. The items you make from it will have those qualities too, and that's what makes them beautiful and worth making. Every stitch you work with your own handspun is a celebration of slow making, of connection to materials, of hands that know how to transform fiber into something useful and lovely.

You're not just making hats and scarves and shawls. You're making heirlooms, stories, and connections—to fiber, to craft, to the long history of textile making, and to your own creative voice. That's powerful work. Keep going.

**Visual element needed:** Photo collage showing the complete journey: raw fiber, dyed fiber, handspun yarn on a niddy noddy, yarn being knit/crocheted/woven, and finished objects being worn and used. Include images of different makers (diverse ages, genders, backgrounds) working with handspun to emphasize the inclusive, welcoming community. Final image should show someone wrapped in or wearing their handspun creation with visible joy and pride.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/Concept	Description
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<b>WPI (Wraps Per Inch)</b>	Method for measuring yarn thickness by wrapping yarn around a ruler and counting wraps in one inch; determines yarn weight category
<b>Yardage Calculation</b>	Weighing one yard of yarn and comparing to total skein weight to determine total yardage available for projects
<b>Twist Energy Assessment</b>	Testing whether yarn is balanced (hangs straight) or energized (coils back on itself) by letting it hang freely; affects fabric behavior
<b>Twist Angle Evaluation</b>	Observing the diagonal slope of fibers wrapping around yarn (low/medium/high) to predict strength, drape, and stitch definition
<b>Swatching with Handspun</b>	Creating test fabric samples, washing them as the finished object will be washed, and evaluating gauge, drape, and stitch pattern compatibility
<b>Spit-Splice Join</b>	Felting technique for joining yarn invisibly by overlapping untwisted ends, wetting, and rolling vigorously; works only with feltable wool
<b>Tension Adjustment for Variable Yarn</b>	Modifying knitting or crochet tension stitch by stitch to compensate for thickness variations in handspun
<b>Stitch Pattern Selection</b>	Matching stitch complexity to yarn characteristics: simple stitches for textured yarn, complex patterns for smooth yarn
<b>Warp vs. Weft in Weaving</b>	Understanding that warp (lengthwise threads under tension) requires strength and smoothness, while weft (crosswise threads) can be textured
<b>Gauge Recalculation</b>	Adjusting pattern stitch counts based on your specific handspun gauge to achieve proper fit and dimensions
<b>Blocking</b>	Shaping finished items while damp to even out stitches, open lace patterns, and achieve desired dimensions
<b>Intuitive Design</b>	Creating projects without patterns by using basic construction techniques and letting yarn quantity and character guide decisions

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## Glossary of Terms

**Balanced Yarn:** Yarn with relaxed twist that hangs straight without coiling back on itself; creates even fabric without bias.

**Beat:** In weaving, the action of packing weft threads into place against previous rows using the beater or reed.

**Bias:** Diagonal distortion in knitted or crocheted fabric caused by excess twist energy in yarn.

**Bloom:** The expansion and softening of yarn fibers after washing, especially noticeable in wool; reveals yarn's final character.

**Darning:** Repair technique that weaves new yarn across holes or worn spots to create integrated new fabric.

**Double Crochet:** Tall crochet stitch that creates open, drapey fabric and works up quickly.

**Drape:** How fabric hangs and flows; affected by fiber content, yarn twist, and stitch pattern.

**Energized Yarn:** Yarn with excess twist that wants to coil back on itself; can create texture or cause fabric bias.

**Felting Join:** See spit-splice; joining method that uses friction and moisture to permanently felt wool fibers together.

**Fulling:** Intentional controlled felting of woven fabric through hot water and agitation to create denser, warmer cloth.

**Garter Stitch:** Knitting pattern created by knitting every row; produces reversible fabric with horizontal ridges that forgives tension variations.

**Gauge:** Number of stitches and rows per inch in knitted, crocheted, or woven fabric; determines finished size.

**Granny Square:** Traditional crochet motif worked in rounds from the center; perfect for using small batches of yarn.

**Half-Double Crochet:** Medium-height crochet stitch that balances speed, drape, and structure.

**Heddle:** Frame with slots and holes (rigid heddle) or individual wires (shaft loom) that lift warp threads to create the shed.

**Lace Pattern:** Open, airy stitch pattern using yarn-overs and decreases (knitting) or chains and spaces (crochet) to create decorative holes.

**Pick:** Single pass of weft through the shed in weaving.

**Plain Weave:** Simplest weave structure where weft alternates over and under each warp thread; showcases yarn texture clearly.

**Ply:** To twist two or more strands of yarn together; also refers to the individual strands in plied yarn.

**Russian Join:** Method of joining yarn by threading each end through itself to create a secure, smooth connection.

**Seed Stitch:** Knitting pattern alternating knit and purl stitches to create subtle texture; extremely forgiving of yarn irregularities.

**Selvedge:** The finished edge of woven fabric where weft turns to travel back across the warp.

**Shed:** In weaving, the opening between lifted and lowered warp threads through which the shuttle passes.

**Shuttle:** Tool that carries weft yarn through the shed in weaving.

**Single Crochet:** Short, dense crochet stitch that creates sturdy fabric and showcases yarn texture.

**Spit-Splice:** Technique for invisibly joining feltable wool yarn by overlapping untwisted ends, wetting, and rolling to felt fibers together.

**Stockinette:** Knitting pattern created by alternating knit and purl rows (flat) or knitting every round (circular); smooth on one side, bumpy on reverse.

**Swatch:** Sample of fabric created to test gauge, stitch pattern, and yarn behavior before beginning a project.

**Triangle Shawl:** Shawl knit or crocheted from a few stitches at the top, increasing at edges until desired size; uses all available yarn.

**Twist Angle:** The diagonal slope at which fibers wrap around yarn; determines strength, drape, and stitch definition.

**Warp:** Lengthwise threads on a loom that are held under tension; must be strong and smooth.

**Weft:** Crosswise threads that travel over and under warp to create woven fabric; can be textured and irregular.

**Weft-Faced Weaving:** Weaving where weft completely covers warp, creating fabric where weft is the only visible element.

**WPI (Wraps Per Inch):** Measurement of yarn thickness determined by wrapping yarn around a ruler and counting wraps in one inch.

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## Practice Exercises

### Exercise 1: Yarn Assessment Practice

Take three different skeins of your handspun (or borrow from friends if you only have one). For each skein, measure and record: WPI, approximate yardage, twist

energy (balanced or energized), twist angle (low, medium, high), and fiber content. Then create a 4-inch square swatch in stockinette or single crochet. Wash and dry the swatch, then measure gauge and evaluate fabric characteristics (drape, texture, density). Based on this assessment, write down three project ideas that would showcase each yarn's strengths. This exercise builds your yarn evaluation skills and helps you develop intuition for matching yarn to projects.

**Hint:** Look for: WPI between 8-16 for most handspun; yardage calculated by weight; twist energy visible in the hanging test; twist angle compared to Z/S letters; fiber content from your spinning notes. Swatches should show transformation after washing—bloom, texture change, possible size change. Project ideas should match yarn characteristics: textured yarn → simple stitches; smooth yarn → complex patterns; small yardage → accessories; large yardage → garments.

### **Exercise 2: Stitch Pattern Exploration**

Using one skein of handspun, create five different swatches (each about 3×3 inches) in different stitch patterns: stockinette (or single crochet), garter stitch (or half-double crochet), seed stitch (or alternating stitches), a simple cable or texture pattern, and a basic lace pattern. Wash and dry all swatches. Compare them side by side. Which pattern best showcases your yarn's color? Which highlights texture? Which creates the most appealing fabric for your intended use? This exercise teaches you how different stitches interact with your specific yarn and helps you make informed pattern choices.

**Hint:** Textured or thick-and-thin yarn usually looks best in simple stitches (stockinette, garter, seed stitch) where yarn is the star. Smooth, consistent yarn can handle complex patterns (cables, lace) that show stitch definition clearly. Variegated or gradient-dyed yarn often shines in stockinette or garter where color transitions are visible. Trust your eye—the swatch that makes you think "yes, that's it" is the right choice for that yarn.

### **Exercise 3: First Handspun Project**

Choose one skein of handspun (100-250 yards) and make a simple accessory that showcases your yarn. Options: a garter stitch cowl (cast on 80-100 stitches, knit until piece is 50-60 inches long, seam ends together); a single crochet cowl (chain 80-100, single crochet in rows until 50-60 inches long, seam ends); a simple triangle shawl (cast on 3 stitches, increase at edges every other row until

you run out of yarn); or a basic hat (cast on stitches to fit your head, work in the round until 7-8 inches tall, decrease for crown). Keep the pattern simple—let your handspun be the design element. Document the process with photos and notes about what you learn.

**Hint:** Success looks like: finished object that you love and want to wear/use; fabric that showcases your yarn's best qualities; even tension throughout (or pleasingly organic texture if yarn is irregular); proper finished size after washing/blocking. Learning moments include: discovering how your yarn behaves in fabric, adjusting tension for thick-and-thin sections, understanding how washing transforms the piece, building confidence in working with handspun. Save leftover yarn for future repairs.

## Chapter 9: Sharing Your Work: Markets, Sales, and Community



There's a moment I remember clearly: standing behind my first craft fair table at dawn, hands wrapped around a travel mug of coffee, watching other makers set up their booths. My handspun skeins hung on a makeshift display, and I felt equally thrilled and terrified. Would anyone understand the hours in each skein? Would they see the crimped Corriedale locks I'd spent an evening carding, the careful drafting that created those color transitions?

By noon, I'd sold three skeins and had a dozen conversations about fiber. One customer told me about her grandmother's spinning wheel. Another asked if I taught classes. A fellow vendor invited me to her guild meeting. I realized something profound: sharing your work isn't just about selling—it's about finding your people, building connections, and becoming part of a community that celebrates what we make with our hands.

This chapter guides you through the joyful, sometimes daunting process of sharing your fiber work with the world. Whether you dream of selling at festivals,

opening an online shop, teaching workshops, or simply connecting with fellow fiber lovers, you'll learn how to present your work with confidence, price it fairly, navigate different selling venues, and build genuine community around your craft. By the end, you'll understand how to turn your passion into a sustainable practice that brings both income and deep creative satisfaction.

## Why Share Your Work?

Before diving into logistics, let's explore why sharing matters.

**Connection over commerce.** Yes, selling helps fund your fiber habit—wool isn't cheap! But the real magic happens in conversations at your booth, comments on your Instagram posts, students' faces when they spin their first yarn. Sharing your work connects you to a global community of makers who understand the particular joy of transforming fleece into fabric.

**Skill development through teaching.** Explaining techniques to others deepens your own understanding. Answering questions reveals gaps in your knowledge and pushes you to experiment. Teaching a beginning spinner reminds you how far you've traveled from your own wobbly first singles.

**Validation and motivation.** When someone chooses your handspun over commercial yarn, they're valuing your time, skill, and creative vision. That validation fuels your practice, motivating you through challenging projects and skill plateaus.

**Sustainable creative practice.** Selling fiber goods—whether finished yarn, roving, or crafted items—creates a circular economy for your work. Income from sales funds new fiber, tools, and workshops, sustaining your practice long-term.

**Sharing knowledge.** The fiber community thrives on generosity. When experienced makers share techniques, beginners gain confidence faster. When you share what you've learned—even if you're still learning yourself—you strengthen the entire community.

## Understanding Your Offerings

What exactly will you share? Clarity here shapes everything that follows.

### Handspun Yarn

**Art yarn.** Thick-and-thin textures, coils, beads, locks—art yarn celebrates irregularity and visual drama. Price reflects both fiber cost and creative vision.

Market to knitters and fiber artists who want one-of-a-kind materials for statement pieces.

**Consistent handspun.** Evenly spun yarn in standard weights (fingering, DK, worsted) appeals to knitters and weavers seeking handmade quality with predictable gauge. Requires strong technical skills but commands premium prices when executed well.

**Specialty blends.** Unique fiber combinations you've created—maybe silk-merino gradients from your hand-dyed roving (Chapter 4) or art batts you carded specifically for spinning texture (Chapter 5). Your creative blending becomes your signature.

## **Prepared Fiber**

**Hand-dyed roving and top.** If dyeing ignites your passion more than spinning, sell prepared fiber to other spinners. Clear fiber content labeling and yardage estimates help customers plan projects.

**Art batts.** Carded blends featuring luxury fibers, sparkle, texture—small batches that inspire creativity. Include fiber content percentages and approximate weight-to-yardage conversions.

**Breed-specific fleeces and roving.** Source local fleeces, skirt and wash them, then sell as whole fleeces or processed roving. Educate customers about breed characteristics—that Romney's luster, Corriedale's versatility, Shetland's color range.

## **Finished Fiber Goods**

**Knitted, crocheted, or woven items.** Cowls, hats, shawls, scarves made from your handspun showcase your complete skill set—fiber prep through finished object. Price must reflect all labor stages.

**Felted goods.** Wet-felted vessels, needle-felted sculptures, fulled slippers using techniques from Chapter 7. Felting creates dimensional work that displays beautifully at markets.

**Teaching and workshops.** Your knowledge itself becomes the offering. Beginner spinning classes, dyeing workshops, fiber prep sessions—teaching generates income while building community.

## Pricing Your Work

Pricing handmade fiber goods challenges even experienced makers. Charge too little and you undervalue your labor; charge too much and nothing sells. Here's how to find balance.

### Calculate True Costs

**Materials.** Track every expense—fiber, dye, mordants, shipping supplies, labels, packaging. Don't forget seemingly small costs like sandwich bags for skeins or business cards.

**Time.** Be honest about hours invested. Dyeing four ounces of roving might take thirty minutes of active work plus overnight drying. Spinning that roving into yarn adds four to six hours. Washing, setting twist, skeining, and labeling add another hour. That's six to eight hours total for one four-ounce skein.

**Overhead.** Booth fees, website hosting, photography equipment, liability insurance, business licenses—these costs must be distributed across your products.

### Pricing Formulas

**Cost-plus method:**  $(\text{Materials} + \text{Labor} + \text{Overhead}) \times 2 = \text{Wholesale Price}$   
 $\text{Wholesale Price} \times 2 = \text{Retail Price}$

The first doubling covers business expenses and allows you to sell wholesale to shops. The second doubling reaches retail price for direct sales.

**Example:** Four ounces of Corriedale roving costs \$8. You spend six hours spinning at \$15/hour minimum (\$90 labor). Add \$2 overhead per skein.  $(\$8 + \$90 + \$2) \times 2 = \$200$  wholesale  $\$200 \times 2 = \$400$  retail

That \$400 price tag shocks new makers. But it reflects fair compensation for skilled labor.

**Market research method:** Browse Etsy, Ravelry marketplace, and fiber festivals. What do similar items sell for? Price competitively while respecting your time. If market rates seem low, consider whether you're targeting the right audience or need to adjust your offerings.

**Value-based pricing:** For art yarn and unique pieces, price reflects artistic vision and scarcity rather than pure labor calculation. A sculptural art yarn using rare fibers and innovative techniques might command \$60-80 per skein regardless of time invested, because customers buy it as fiber art.

## Pricing Strategies

**Start higher.** It's easier to lower prices than raise them. Begin at the top of your range and adjust based on sales velocity.

**Tiered offerings.** Provide options at different price points. Maybe you sell everyday handspun worsted at \$35/skein and luxury art yarn at \$75/skein. Different customers have different budgets.

**Bundle pricing.** Offer small discounts for multiple skeins—"Buy three skeins, get 10% off." This moves inventory while rewarding larger purchases.

**Workshop pricing.** Calculate material costs, prep time, teaching time, and venue fees. Typical half-day workshops range \$60-120 per student depending on materials included and your experience level.

**Know your bottom line.** What's the absolute minimum you'll accept? Having this number clear prevents desperate underselling when sales feel slow.

## Craft Fairs and Fiber Festivals

In-person markets offer immediate feedback, face-to-face connections, and the joy of watching customers touch your work.

### Choosing Events

**Fiber-specific festivals.** Events like Maryland Sheep & Wool, Rhinebeck (New York State Sheep & Wool Festival), and regional fiber festivals attract your exact audience—people who understand the value of handspun and prepared fiber. Competition is fierce, but customers come ready to buy.

**General craft fairs.** Local farmers markets, holiday craft shows, and art fairs expose your work to broader audiences. You'll do more education about handspun, but you might find customers who've never encountered art yarn before.

**Juried vs. open markets.** Juried shows require application with photos and often charge higher booth fees but curate quality vendors. Open markets accept all applicants—easier entry but variable vendor quality.

**Research before committing.** Visit events as a customer first if possible. Are vendors making sales? Does the crowd match your target audience? Read vendor reviews and ask fellow makers about their experiences.

## **Booth Setup and Display**

**Create visual impact.** Your booth competes with dozens of others. Use height variation, clear sight lines, and cohesive color schemes. Hang skeins at eye level where customers can see them from the aisle.

**Touchable samples.** Fiber begs to be touched. Provide clearly labeled samples customers can handle—maybe small skeins or carded batts. The tactile experience sells fiber goods.

**Clear pricing.** Display prices prominently. Customers hesitate to ask about prices; visible tags encourage purchases.

**Professional signage.** A banner with your business name and simple signs identifying product types ("Hand-dyed Roving," "Art Yarn," "Breed-Specific Fleece") help customers navigate your offerings quickly.

**Lighting.** Many festival barns and market pavilions have poor lighting. Battery-powered LED strips make your booth welcoming and help customers see fiber colors accurately.

**Seating.** If space allows, a stool behind your table keeps you comfortable during long days. Some makers spin or knit during slow periods—demonstrating your craft attracts curious customers.

## **The Art of Selling**

**Greet warmly, don't pounce.** Make eye contact and smile, but let customers browse. A simple "Welcome! Let me know if you have questions" opens conversation without pressure.

**Tell fiber stories.** When customers show interest, share the story behind your work. "This roving came from a Corriedale fleece I bought at a small farm—I loved the crimped locks and natural color variation. I dyed it with madder root for these warm reds."

**Educate gently.** Many customers don't understand handspun's value. Brief explanations help: "This skein took about six hours to spin from fiber I hand-dyed. The thick-and-thin texture creates beautiful stitch definition in simple patterns."

**Handle objections with grace.** If someone balks at prices, acknowledge: "Handspun is definitely an investment! Many knitters use it for special projects like cowls or hats where one skein creates something meaningful." Don't apologize for your prices or get defensive.

**Suggest uses.** Help customers envision finished projects. "This bulky art yarn would make a stunning cowl—you'd only need one skein. I can recommend patterns if you'd like."

**Process payments smoothly.** Accept multiple payment methods—cash, credit cards via Square or similar readers, and Venmo or PayPal for tech-savvy customers. Have change ready and provide receipts.

**Collect contact information.** A simple signup sheet for your email list or Instagram handle builds your customer base beyond the single event.

### **After the Event**

**Track results.** Record sales by product type, total revenue, and expenses. Which items sold well? What didn't move? This data informs future inventory decisions.

**Follow up.** Email newsletter subscribers with thank-yous and sneak peeks of new work. Engaged customers become repeat buyers.

**Evaluate honestly.** Was the event worth your time and booth fee? Factor in not just revenue but also connections made and lessons learned.

## **Online Sales**

Digital storefronts let you reach global audiences and sell 24/7, but require different skills than in-person markets.

### **Choosing Platforms**

**Etsy.** The dominant handmade marketplace offers built-in traffic and easy setup. Fees include listing charges (\$0.20 per item), transaction fees (6.5% of sale price), and payment processing fees (3% + \$0.25). Good for beginners, but standing out among thousands of fiber sellers requires strong SEO and photography.

**Ravelry.** The social network for knitters and crocheters includes a marketplace specifically for yarn and fiber. Lower fees than Etsy and your audience is pre-qualified—they're all fiber crafters. However, less general traffic than Etsy.

**Your own website.** Platforms like Shopify, Big Cartel, or Squarespace give you complete control and build your brand independently. Higher startup effort and no built-in traffic, but no marketplace fees and full customer data ownership. Best once you've established a following.

**Instagram and Facebook shops.** Social commerce lets followers buy directly from posts. Works well for small-batch releases and building community, but limited storefront functionality.

**Combination approach.** Many makers maintain an Etsy shop for discoverability while building their own website and social media presence for long-term brand development.

## **Photography That Sells**

Customers can't touch your fiber online—photos must convey texture, color, and quality.

**Natural lighting.** Shoot near windows during daytime. Soft, diffused light shows colors accurately without harsh shadows. Avoid direct sunlight, which creates overexposed spots.

**Neutral backgrounds.** White, light gray, or natural wood backgrounds keep focus on your fiber. Busy patterns distract.

**Multiple angles.** Show skeins from several perspectives—full skein, close-up of twist and texture, yardage label. For roving, photograph it loosely arranged to show color transitions.

**Scale reference.** Include a common object (quarter, ruler, hand) so customers understand size.

**Lifestyle shots.** Photos of yarn in use—draped on a sweater, wound into a project bag, arranged with knitting needles—help customers envision using it.

**Color accuracy.** Photograph in consistent lighting and edit minimally. Include a note in listings: "Colors may vary slightly due to screen settings, but I've worked to represent them accurately."

**Invest in basics.** A smartphone camera works fine if you have good light. A simple light box (\$20-40) provides consistent conditions. Free editing apps like Snapseed improve brightness and sharpness.

## **Writing Compelling Listings**

**Descriptive titles.** Include key search terms: "Hand-Dyed Merino Roving, 4 oz, Fingering Weight, Blue Green Gradient, Superwash." Specific titles improve search visibility.

**Complete descriptions.** Cover fiber content, weight, yardage, preparation method (top, roving, batt), suggested needle size or project type, and care instructions. Anticipate questions customers might have.

**Storytelling.** Add personality: "I dyed this roving in my studio on a snowy February morning, layering indigo and a touch of golden yellow to create these deep teal shades. The Merino takes color beautifully—you'll see subtle variations throughout."

**Clear policies.** State shipping timelines, return policies, and custom order procedures upfront. Transparency builds trust.

**SEO optimization.** Use relevant tags and keywords. Think like your customer: what would they search for? "Handspun yarn," "art yarn," "hand-dyed fiber," "Corriedale roving," "weaving yarn."

## **Shipping and Fulfillment**

**Weigh accurately.** Invest in a postal scale. Incorrect shipping costs eat into profits or frustrate customers with unexpected charges.

**Protect your products.** Skeins ship well in plastic bags inside padded mailers. Roving needs more protection—use tissue paper and sturdy boxes to prevent compression.

**Fast turnaround.** Ship within one to three business days. Quick fulfillment earns positive reviews and repeat customers.

**Tracking numbers.** Always provide tracking. It protects both you and customers if packages go missing.

**Branded packaging.** Small touches—a thank-you note, sticker with your logo, printed care card—create memorable unboxing experiences that customers share on social media.

## **Building Online Community**

**Consistent posting.** Share works-in-progress, finished skeins, dyeing sessions, and spinning videos regularly. Consistency keeps you visible in followers' feeds.

**Engage authentically.** Respond to comments and messages warmly. Ask questions, celebrate customers' finished projects, share others' work generously.

**Behind-the-scenes content.** People love seeing your process—fleece washing, dye pots simmering, spinning wheel close-ups. This content builds connection and educates potential customers about handmade value.

**Email newsletters.** Collect email addresses and send monthly updates about new products, restocks, and events. Email converts better than social media because you own the list.

**Collaborate.** Partner with other makers for giveaways, bundle sales, or joint workshops. Cross-promotion expands your reach.

## Teaching and Workshops

Sharing your knowledge builds community while generating income and deepening your own skills.

### What to Teach

**Start with what you know well.** You don't need to be an expert in everything—just confident enough in one area to guide beginners through it. Maybe you teach drop spindle basics, hand-dyeing with kitchen tools, or simple wet felting.

**Beginner classes fill fastest.** Introduction to spinning, first-time dyeing, basic carding—these workshops attract the most students because everyone starts somewhere.

**Niche workshops.** Once you're established, specialized classes—like gradient dyeing, supported spindles, or breed-specific fiber preparation—attract intermediate makers seeking specific skills.

### Structuring Workshops

**Three-hour format.** Half-day workshops provide enough time for instruction, practice, and questions without overwhelming beginners. Students leave with a completed sample and confidence to continue practicing.

**All materials included.** Providing fiber, tools, and supplies simplifies the student experience and justifies higher fees. Send a supply list if students must bring anything.

**Limit class size.** Six to ten students allows individual attention while creating group energy. Smaller classes work better for complex techniques.

**Clear learning objectives.** Tell students exactly what they'll accomplish: "By the end of this workshop, you'll spin your first yarn on a drop spindle and understand how to continue practicing at home."

## Teaching Venues

**Local yarn shops.** Many shops host classes and handle registration, marketing, and space in exchange for a percentage of fees (typically 30-40%). Good for beginners—the shop provides built-in audience and credibility.

**Fiber guilds.** Spinning and weaving guilds often hire teachers for monthly programs or weekend workshops. Fees vary, but you'll teach engaged, knowledgeable audiences.

**Community centers and libraries.** Public spaces often seek craft instructors. Fees may be lower, but you'll introduce fiber arts to new audiences.

**Your own studio.** Teaching from home offers maximum flexibility and profit but requires enough space, insurance, and self-promotion.

**Online workshops.** Video classes through platforms like Zoom or pre-recorded courses sold on your website reach global audiences. Requires different skills—clear camera angles, good audio, edited videos—but scales beyond in-person limitations.

## Teaching Skills

**Demonstrate clearly.** Break techniques into small steps and demonstrate each one slowly. Repeat demonstrations as needed.

**Circulate constantly.** In hands-on workshops, move around the room checking each student's progress. Catch mistakes early before they become frustrating.

**Encourage questions.** Create a welcoming atmosphere where students feel comfortable asking for help. "There are no silly questions—we all started exactly where you are."

**Celebrate successes.** Point out when students do something well. Positive reinforcement builds confidence faster than only correcting mistakes.

**Provide resources.** Send students home with handouts, supply lists, and recommendations for books, websites, or videos for continued learning.

**Manage challenges gracefully.** Some students learn faster than others. Have extension activities ready for quick learners and patience for those who need more time.

## Building Community Beyond Sales

The fiber community thrives on generosity, collaboration, and shared passion. Building genuine connections matters as much as making sales.

## Join Existing Communities

**Local guilds.** Spinning and weaving guilds, knitting groups, and fiber arts organizations offer mentorship, friendship, and learning opportunities. Attend meetings, volunteer for events, and participate actively.

**Online groups.** Ravelry forums, Facebook groups, and Instagram hashtags connect you with makers worldwide. Share your work, ask questions, offer advice, and celebrate others' successes.

**Fiber festivals.** Attend as a customer, not just a vendor. Take workshops, meet farmers and dyers, and immerse yourself in fiber culture.

## Create Community Spaces

**Spin-ins and fiber meetups.** Host casual gatherings where makers bring projects and spend time together. Coffee shops, libraries, or your home can work. Shared making time builds deep friendships.

**Social media engagement.** Create hashtags for your work, host Instagram Lives showing your process, or start a YouTube channel documenting your fiber journey. Invite others to share their work using your hashtags.

**Collaborate generously.** Feature other makers' work on your platforms, participate in bundle sales supporting causes you care about, or organize group trunk shows where several makers share booth costs.

## Give Back

**Donate to causes.** Auction handspun items for fundraisers, teach free workshops at community centers, or donate fiber goods to shelters.

**Mentor new makers.** Remember how daunting your first spinning attempts felt? Offer encouragement and advice to beginners. Answer questions patiently and share resources freely.

**Share knowledge openly.** The fiber community grows stronger when we teach rather than gatekeep. Blog about techniques, create free tutorials, or demonstrate at events.

## Legal and Business Basics

Turning your passion into income requires some administrative attention.

### Business Structure

**Hobby vs. business.** The IRS distinguishes between hobbies (occasional sales without profit motive) and businesses (regular sales with profit intent).

Businesses can deduct expenses but must report all income. Consult a tax professional about your situation.

**Sole proprietorship.** The simplest structure—you operate under your own name or a DBA ("doing business as"). Easy setup but no liability protection.

**LLC.** A limited liability company separates your personal and business assets, protecting you if someone sues. More paperwork and annual fees, but worthwhile peace of mind as your business grows.

## **Licensing and Permits**

**Business license.** Many cities and counties require licenses for home-based businesses. Check local regulations.

**Sales tax permit.** If your state charges sales tax, you'll need a permit to collect and remit it. Requirements vary by state.

**Cottage food laws.** If you include handmade soap or other bath products with your fiber goods, research cottage food regulations in your state.

## **Insurance**

**Liability insurance.** Protects you if a customer claims your product caused harm. Policies for craft businesses typically cost \$200-500 annually.

**Property insurance.** If you maintain significant inventory or expensive equipment, consider coverage for theft, fire, or damage.

## **Record Keeping**

**Track everything.** Save receipts for fiber, dyes, equipment, mileage to events, booth fees, shipping supplies, and all business expenses. Spreadsheets or apps like QuickBooks simplify tax time.

**Separate finances.** Open a dedicated business checking account. Separating personal and business finances clarifies bookkeeping and looks professional.

**Quarterly estimated taxes.** Self-employment income isn't automatically taxed. Set aside 25-30% of profits for quarterly estimated tax payments to avoid surprises.

## **Sustainable Creative Practice**

Balancing making, selling, and living requires intention and boundaries.

## Avoid Burnout

**Make for yourself.** Reserve time for projects that aren't for sale—experimental art yarn, personal knitting, skill-building challenges. Creating without commercial pressure feeds your artistic soul.

**Set boundaries.** Decide which days you'll work on business tasks and which are for rest. Protect your non-business time fiercely.

**Batch tasks.** Dedicate specific days to specific activities—dyeing day, spinning day, photography day, shipping day. Batching improves efficiency and reduces mental switching costs.

**Know when to pause.** If selling starts feeling joyless, take a break. Your creative practice matters more than any market deadline.

## Manage Inventory

**Start small.** Don't invest thousands in fiber before you've tested the market. Buy small quantities, sell them, then reinvest profits in more inventory.

**Track what sells.** Keep notes on which colorways, fiber types, and price points move fastest. Double down on winners and discontinue slow sellers.

**Seasonal planning.** Fiber sales peak in fall and winter as knitters prepare for cold weather and holiday gift-making. Plan inventory and events accordingly.

## Price for Sustainability

**Your prices must support your practice.** If current pricing doesn't cover materials and fair labor, raise prices or reduce time-intensive offerings. Underselling yourself isn't sustainable.

**Factor in growth.** As your skills improve and your brand strengthens, gradually increase prices. Loyal customers understand that quality craftsmanship deserves fair compensation.

## Finding Your Path

There's no single right way to share your work. Some makers thrive at bustling festivals, feeding off the energy of crowds and conversations. Others prefer the quiet control of online shops, photographing and listing at midnight in their pajamas. Some teach weekly workshops and never sell a skein, finding fulfillment in students' progress. Others spin for themselves and share only through guild friendships.

Your path might combine all these approaches or focus deeply on one. It might change over time as your life circumstances and creative interests shift. The key is staying true to what brings you joy.

I think back to that first craft fair—the nervousness, the unexpected conversations, the thrill of someone choosing my handspun. Years later, I've sold at dozens of festivals, shipped hundreds of skeins worldwide, taught workshops in three states, and made friendships that span continents. But what I treasure most isn't the income or even the sales. It's the community I've found: the customer who emails photos of her finished shawl, the student who now teaches spinning herself, the fellow vendor who's become a dear friend.

When you share your work—whether through sales, teaching, or simply showing up at guild meetings with your latest project—you're joining a tradition of makers who've gathered around fiber for millennia. You're saying, "I made this with my hands, and I want to share it with you." That act of sharing, that generosity of spirit, is what keeps our fiber community vibrant and welcoming.

So take that next step, whatever it looks like for you. Set up that Etsy shop, apply to that local festival, offer to teach a friend to spin, or simply post a photo of your handspun with honest pride. Your work deserves to be shared, and the fiber community is waiting to welcome you.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Technique/ Concept	Description
<b>Cost-plus pricing</b>	Formula calculating retail price by doubling materials, labor, and overhead costs twice (first for wholesale, second for retail)
<b>Market research pricing</b>	Setting prices based on comparable items in the marketplace while respecting your labor value
<b>Value-based pricing</b>	Pricing unique art pieces based on artistic vision and scarcity rather than pure labor calculation
<b>Booth display principles</b>	Creating visual impact through height variation, touchable samples, clear pricing, and professional signage at in-person markets
<b>Online listing optimization</b>	Writing descriptive titles with search keywords, complete descriptions, and storytelling elements to improve discoverability
<b>Photography for fiber</b>	Using natural lighting, neutral backgrounds, multiple angles, and scale references to convey texture and color accurately

<b>Workshop structure</b>	Designing three-hour beginner classes with included materials, limited enrollment (6-10 students), and clear learning objectives
<b>Teaching circulation</b>	Moving constantly around the classroom to check each student's progress and catch mistakes early
<b>Community building</b>	Participating in guilds, online groups, and collaborative events; mentoring beginners; and sharing knowledge generously
<b>Sustainable practice</b>	Setting boundaries, batching tasks, making for yourself, and pricing to support long-term creative work
<b>Business record keeping</b>	Tracking all expenses, separating business finances, and setting aside funds for quarterly estimated taxes
<b>Inventory management</b>	Starting with small quantities, tracking what sells, and planning seasonally for peak fiber sales periods

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## Glossary of Terms

**Art yarn:** Handspun yarn featuring intentional texture variations, thick-and-thin sections, coils, beads, or locks; prized for visual drama and one-of-a-kind character

**Batching:** Dedicating specific days to specific business tasks (dyeing, spinning, photography, shipping) to improve efficiency and reduce mental switching costs

**Booth fee:** The cost charged by craft fair or festival organizers to rent table or tent space for selling

**Cost-plus pricing:** Pricing formula that calculates retail price by adding materials, labor, and overhead, then doubling twice to reach final selling price

**Cottage food laws:** State regulations governing home-based production and sale of certain food and body products like handmade soap

**DBA (Doing Business As):** A registered business name different from your legal personal name, used by sole proprietors

**Fulfillment:** The process of packaging and shipping orders to customers

**Juried show:** A craft fair or market that requires vendors to apply with photos of their work; organizers select vendors based on quality and fit

**Liability insurance:** Business insurance protecting you if a customer claims your product caused injury or damage

**LLC (Limited Liability Company):** A business structure that separates personal and business assets, providing legal protection

**Market research pricing:** Setting prices based on what similar items sell for in the marketplace

**Overhead:** Business expenses not directly tied to specific products—booth fees, website hosting, insurance, business licenses

**Sales tax permit:** Government authorization to collect sales tax from customers and remit it to the state

**SEO (Search Engine Optimization):** Techniques for improving online listing visibility through strategic use of keywords and tags in titles, descriptions, and tags

**Sole proprietorship:** The simplest business structure where you operate under your own name or a DBA with no formal business entity

**Trunk show:** An event where a maker displays and sells work, often hosted by yarn shops or guilds

**Value-based pricing:** Setting prices based on artistic vision, uniqueness, and scarcity rather than pure labor calculation

**Wholesale price:** The price charged when selling to shops or retailers, typically half of retail price to allow the shop to mark up and make profit

## Chapter 10: Creating Your Fiber Space: Studios, Shops, and Gatherings

There's something magical about walking into a space filled with fiber. Maybe it's the soft light filtering through windows onto baskets of wool, or the gentle hum of a spinning wheel in the corner, or the laughter of friends gathered around a table with their projects. Whether you're carving out a corner in your home, dreaming of opening a shop, or planning your first spinning circle, the spaces we create for fiber work shape how we experience this craft—and how we share it with others.

I've made fiber in every kind of space imaginable: a card table squeezed between the couch and the wall, a sunny spare bedroom that became my sanctuary, borrowed corners at coffee shops where I'd meet other spinners. Each space taught me something about what I truly needed versus what I thought I needed. And here's what surprised me most: the best fiber spaces aren't about having all the right equipment or perfect organization (though those help!). They're about creating room—physical and emotional—for the work we love and the connections we crave.

This chapter explores three ways to build your fiber world: organizing a home studio that fits your life and your stash, understanding what goes into opening a brick-and-mortar fiber shop if that dream calls to you, and creating gatherings that bring fiber people together. We'll talk about the practical stuff—storage solutions, lighting, furniture, business basics—but also the heart stuff, like designing spaces that invite creativity and building communities where everyone feels welcome.

# Your Home Fiber Studio



You don't need a dedicated room to have a fiber studio. You need a space that works with your life, holds what you use, and makes you want to sit down and spin.

## Assessing Your Space and Needs

Start by looking at what you actually do. Are you primarily a spinner? A dyer? Do you knit or weave with your handspun? Each activity has different spatial requirements.

## Space audit questions:

- Where do you currently work with fiber, and what frustrates you about it?
- What equipment do you use weekly versus occasionally?
- How much fiber and yarn do you store, and is that amount growing?
- Do you need a permanent setup or something you can pack away?
- Will you teach, dye, or photograph work in this space?

Be honest about your constraints. A corner of the living room with good light might serve you better than a dark basement with more square footage. I spent years feeling guilty that my "studio" was really just one wall of my bedroom until I realized it had the morning light I loved and kept my wheel close enough that I'd actually use it before work.

## Essential Elements

**Seating and spinning setup:** Your spinning chair matters more than almost anything else. You'll spend hours here. It needs the right height for your wheel (feet flat on treadles, comfortable arm position at the orifice), good back support, and enough stability that it won't slide. Kitchen chairs work for some wheels. Office chairs work for others. Test before committing.

Position your wheel where you can see out a window or into the room—spinning while staring at a wall gets lonely. If you use a spindle, you need standing room with clearance for your arms and the spindle's drop.

**Lighting:** Natural light shows fiber color accurately, but you'll spin at night too. Add a full-spectrum floor lamp or adjustable task light positioned to eliminate shadows on your hands and wheel. If you dye fiber, color-accurate lighting isn't optional—you can't judge dye results under yellow incandescent bulbs.

**Fiber storage:** Fiber needs to breathe. Plastic bins trap moisture and invite moths. Better options:

- Open shelving with fabric bins or baskets
- Clear containers with ventilation holes for visibility
- Hanging canvas organizers for small quantities
- Cedar chests or closets for long-term storage

Store prepared fiber (roving, batts) loosely—compressed fiber loses its loft. Keep it away from direct sunlight, which fades color. If you live somewhere humid, add cedar blocks or lavender sachets as natural moth deterrents.

**Tool organization:** Small tools disappear into chaos fast. Corral them:

- Magnetic strips for scissors and metal tools
- Small bowls or cups at your wheel for hooks and wrenches
- Drawer organizers for carders, combs, and brushes

- Pegboard walls for hanging larger tools

Keep your most-used tools within arm's reach of your spinning spot. Everything else can live farther away.

**Yarn storage:** Finished skeins need different storage than fiber. They're denser, heavier, and you probably want to see them. Options include:

- Open shelving organized by weight or color
- Large baskets sorted by project type
- Hanging closet organizers with cubbies
- Display solutions that double as décor

If you sell handspun, separate personal stash from inventory. You need to track what's for sale.

## Layouts That Work

**The corner studio:** One wall, one corner. Mount shelves above your wheel for fiber storage. Position your wheel to face into the room. Use a small side table or cart for current projects and tools. Tuck a floor lamp behind your chair. This setup fits in 4' x 6' of floor space.

**The closet conversion:** Remove closet doors and install your wheel inside with a small chair. Add battery-powered LED puck lights to the ceiling. Mount narrow shelves on side walls for fiber and tools. The closet becomes a contained studio you can close off when needed. Works beautifully in shared spaces or rentals.

**The dedicated room:** If you have a full room, resist the urge to cram it full.

Create zones:

- Spinning/handwork zone with wheel, chair, and side table
- Fiber prep zone with drum carder on sturdy table
- Storage zone with organized shelving
- Dyeing/wet work zone near water source (if applicable)

Leave open floor space for moving between activities and for photographing finished work.

**The portable setup:** No permanent space? Create a fiber kit:

- Rolling cart with your current fiber and tools
- Folding lap desk for spindle work
- Portable task light
- Small bins that stack and store in a closet

Wheel out your cart when you're ready to work. This approach works well in small apartments or shared family spaces.

## Climate and Comfort

Fiber is happiest between 40-60% humidity. Too dry and it gets brittle and static-y. Too humid and you risk mold or moths. In dry climates, add a humidifier near your fiber storage. In humid areas, run a dehumidifier or ensure good air circulation.

Temperature matters less than consistency. Wild swings stress fiber. Avoid storing precious fleece in attics or garages that get very hot or very cold.

Make your space comfortable for long sessions. Add:

- A small fan for air circulation
- A space heater if your fiber spot is chilly
- A footrest if your chair is tall
- A side table for tea (with a lid—trust me)
- Good music or podcast setup

## Managing the Stash

Fiber multiplies. You'll bring home fleece from festivals, order beautiful batts online, inherit bags from other spinners. Without a system, you'll lose track of what you have.

### Inventory basics:

- Photograph each fiber addition
- Note fiber type, weight, and source
- Track what you paid (helps with pricing handspun later)
- Mark special fibers (gifts, rare breeds, sentimental)

You can do this in a notebook, spreadsheet, or apps like Ravelry. The method matters less than doing it consistently.

**The one-in-one-out rule:** When stash threatens to overtake your space, adopt this guideline: for every pound of fiber that comes in, one pound gets spun or leaves. It's not rigid, but it creates awareness about accumulation.

**Destashing with grace:** You'll eventually own fiber you won't spin. Maybe you've moved past that color or discovered you dislike that breed. Don't let it guilt-sit in your stash. Offer it to your spinning group, sell it at a destash discount, or donate it to a teaching program. Fiber wants to be used.

## Opening a Fiber Shop

Let's be honest right up front: opening a brick-and-mortar fiber shop is hard, expensive, and risky. It's also one of the most rewarding things you can do if you're called to it. A good fiber shop becomes the heart of a community, a place where people find not just supplies but connection, learning, and inspiration.

I'm not going to sugarcoat the challenges, but I'm also not going to talk you out of your dream if you have one. Instead, let's look at what it really takes.

## **Before You Sign a Lease**

### **Reality check questions:**

- Do you have 12-18 months of living expenses saved, separate from business funds?
- Can you work 60+ hour weeks for the first year?
- Is there an underserved fiber community in your area?
- Have you worked retail or managed a business before?
- Do you have a business partner or will you do this solo?

If you answered no to several of these, that doesn't mean don't do it. It means prepare more first. Work in another fiber shop if possible. Take business courses. Build your savings. Connect with your local fiber community to understand what they need.

**Market research:** Visit every fiber shop within 50 miles. What do they stock? What's their vibe? Where are the gaps? Talk to fiber artists in your area about what they wish they could buy locally. Search online for fiber guilds, spinning groups, and knitting circles—these are your potential customers.

Calculate realistic numbers:

- How many fiber artists live within 30 minutes of your proposed location?
- What's the average income level? (Fiber is a discretionary spending hobby)
- Are there competing shops, and how do they survive?
- What other foot traffic exists in your location?

## **Business Fundamentals**

**Business structure:** Most fiber shops start as LLCs (limited liability companies), which protect personal assets if the business struggles. Sole proprietorships are simpler but riskier. Consult an accountant and attorney before deciding.

**Startup costs:** Budget for:

- First and last month's rent plus security deposit: \$3,000-\$10,000
- Initial inventory: \$15,000-\$40,000
- Fixtures and furniture: \$5,000-\$15,000
- Signage and branding: \$1,000-\$3,000
- POS system and technology: \$2,000-\$5,000
- Insurance and licenses: \$1,000-\$2,000
- Marketing and website: \$1,000-\$3,000
- Operating cash reserve: \$10,000-\$20,000

Total realistic startup: \$38,000-\$98,000. If you're renovating a space or buying equipment like looms or wheels to rent, add more.

**Funding sources:** Personal savings, small business loans, investors, crowdfunding, or partnerships. Each has tradeoffs. Loans mean debt but retain ownership. Investors mean shared control but less personal risk.

## Location and Space Design

### Location priorities:

- Visibility and foot traffic (corner locations, window displays)
- Parking accessibility
- Proximity to complementary businesses (bookstores, coffee shops, art galleries)
- Rent you can afford even during slow months
- Space for classes and events, not just retail

A charming spot on a quiet street might feel perfect until you realize no one discovers you by accident. Fiber shops need visibility or a destination-worthy reputation.

### Shop layout:

- Retail area with clear sightlines (theft prevention)
- Checkout counter positioned to see the whole shop
- Comfortable seating area that invites lingering
- Classroom or event space (can be the same as seating)
- Back room for inventory, office work, and dyeing
- Bathroom (legally required in most places)

Design for touch. Fiber is tactile. Use open bins, sample skeins customers can handle, and tools they can pick up. Display finished projects made from your yarns and fibers.

### Accessibility matters:

Ensure your shop welcomes everyone:

- Wheelchair-accessible entrance and aisles
- Seating options at different heights
- Good lighting for customers with vision challenges
- Clear signage with readable fonts
- Gender-neutral bathroom

## Inventory: What to Stock

This is where new shop owners overspend or underbuy. Start focused, then expand based on what actually sells.

### Core inventory for a fiber shop:

- Yarn: Range of weights, fibers, and price points (budget, mid-range, luxury)
- Prepared fiber: Roving, batts, and fleece if you're serving spinners
- Tools: Needles, hooks, spindles, basic spinning wheel accessories
- Notions: Stitch markers, tape measures, scissors, project bags

- Books and patterns: Current popular patterns and timeless references
- Finished samples: Show what's possible with your products

## **Sourcing inventory:**

- Wholesale yarn and fiber companies (minimum orders typically \$250-\$500)
- Local dyers and fiber artists (consignment or wholesale)
- Directly from mills (larger minimums but better margins)
- Indie dyers (smaller batches, unique offerings)

Build relationships with vendors. Attend trade shows like TNNA (The National NeedleArts Association) to discover new products and negotiate terms.

**Pricing strategy:** Standard retail markup is keystone (double wholesale cost). A skein you buy wholesale for \$12 sells for \$24. This covers rent, labor, utilities, and profit. Consignment typically splits 60/40 or 70/30 (shop/artist).

Track inventory carefully. Use POS software that manages stock levels, flags low inventory, and tracks what sells. Ravelry integration helps customers see your inventory online.

## **Classes and Events**

Classes generate income and community. They bring customers into your shop regularly and build loyalty.

### **Class structure:**

- Beginner-friendly workshops (intro to knitting, spinning, dyeing)
- Technique classes (cables, colorwork, supported spindles)
- Project-based classes (make a hat, spin a gradient)
- Ongoing groups (knit nights, spinning circles)

Charge enough to value your teaching time: \$35-\$75 for a 3-hour workshop, depending on your market. Include materials or offer a kit option.

### **Event ideas beyond classes:**

- Trunk shows with visiting dyers or designers
- Charity knitting groups
- Fiber swaps and destash sales
- Seasonal celebrations (Tour de Fleece kickoff, Sheep to Shawl day)
- Book clubs discussing fiber arts books

Events don't always generate direct income, but they build the community that sustains your shop.

## **The Reality of Shop Ownership**

**Time commitment:** You'll work more hours than you expect. Evenings and weekends are prime retail time. You'll order inventory, manage finances, teach

classes, handle social media, clean, and troubleshoot problems—often alone, especially at first.

**Slow seasons:** January and February are brutal for retail. Summer can be slow too. Plan for seasonal cash flow. Save profits from November and December to cover lean months.

**Emotional labor:** You'll comfort frustrated beginners, navigate customer complaints, and manage the loneliness of solo entrepreneurship. You'll also celebrate customers' finished projects, witness friendships forming in your space, and know you've created something meaningful.

**When it works:** A successful fiber shop becomes self-sustaining after 2-3 years. You'll have regular customers, steady class enrollment, and enough cash flow to pay yourself a modest salary. You might hire part-time help. You'll have created a space that matters to your community.

**When it doesn't:** Many fiber shops close within five years. Rent increases, online competition, or insufficient customer base can make the math impossible. There's no shame in closing a shop that isn't working. You'll have learned invaluable lessons and served your community while it lasted.

## **Creating Community Gatherings**

You don't need a shop to build fiber community. Some of the best fiber gatherings happen in living rooms, libraries, and coffee shops.

### **Types of Fiber Gatherings**

**Spinning circles:** Regular meetups for spinners to work on projects together. Usually casual—bring your wheel or spindle, spin whatever you're spinning, chat and learn from each other.

**Knit nights:** Similar vibe for knitters and crocheters. Often held at yarn shops, but you can host independently at cafes or community centers.

**Skill shares:** Structured sessions where members teach each other techniques. One month someone demonstrates Turkish spindles, next month another person teaches Andean plying.

**Fiber retreats:** Weekend or day-long intensive gatherings, often at rented venues. Include workshops, shared meals, and dedicated making time.

**Festivals and fiber fairs:** Larger public events with vendors, demonstrations, and workshops. These require serious planning but can become annual traditions.

## **Starting a Regular Gathering**

**Choose your format:** Decide if you want a casual drop-in group or a more structured commitment. Drop-in groups are easier to sustain but harder to build depth. Regular committed groups create stronger bonds but require more coordination.

### **Find a location:**

- Coffee shops with large tables and tolerance for groups
- Public libraries with meeting rooms (often free)
- Community centers
- Your home (if space allows)
- Yarn or fiber shops (ask permission; offer to encourage purchases)

Visit potential locations during your proposed meeting time to check noise levels, seating, and lighting.

### **Set clear logistics:**

- Day and time (weeknight evenings or weekend afternoons work best)
- Frequency (weekly, biweekly, or monthly)
- Duration (2-3 hours gives time to settle in and actually work)
- How people find out about it (social media, Ravelry groups, library bulletin boards)

### **Establish group culture early:**

- Is this beginners-welcome or experienced-only?
- Do you want teaching to happen or just social making time?
- Are non-fiber crafts welcome?
- What's the policy on children or partners attending?

Be explicit about inclusivity. State that all skill levels, ages, genders, and backgrounds are welcome. Mean it.

## **Hosting Gatherings in Your Home**

Inviting people into your space creates intimacy but requires boundaries.

### **Practical setup:**

- Arrange seating in a circle or around a large table
- Ensure good lighting for handwork
- Have a side table for drinks and snacks
- Provide a place for coats and bags
- Keep pets contained if anyone has allergies

## **Set boundaries:**

- Decide maximum attendance (8-10 is manageable for most homes)
- Establish start and end times
- Clarify whether it's BYOB or you'll provide refreshments
- Determine if it's invitation-only or open to friends-of-friends

## **Safety considerations:**

- Meet people in public first before inviting them home
- Let someone outside the group know you're hosting
- Trust your instincts about who you invite back

## **Making Gatherings Inclusive and Welcoming**

The best fiber gatherings make everyone feel like they belong. This takes intentional effort.

### **Welcome newcomers warmly:**

- Greet people at the door or when they arrive
- Introduce them to others by name
- Ask about their fiber interests and current projects
- Sit with them initially so they're not alone

### **Create space for all voices:**

- Notice who's talking a lot and who's quiet
- Invite quieter members into conversation
- Redirect if someone dominates discussion
- Validate different approaches and techniques

### **Handle skill-level differences gracefully:**

- Celebrate beginners' progress enthusiastically
- Ask experienced makers to share knowledge without condescension
- Frame questions as curiosity, not judgment
- Remind the group that everyone started somewhere

### **Address problems directly:**

- If someone's behavior makes others uncomfortable, talk to them privately
- Don't tolerate racism, sexism, homophobia, or ableism
- Be willing to uninvite someone if necessary
- Prioritize group safety over individual feelings

## **Growing Your Gathering**

As your group grows, structure helps maintain good energy.

**Rotating facilitation:** Take turns hosting or facilitating so one person doesn't burn out.

**Communication systems:** Create a group email list, Facebook group, or Discord server for announcements, questions, and sharing finished projects between meetings.

**Special events:** Plan occasional variations:

- Fiber swaps where people trade stash
- Show-and-tell nights focused on finished objects
- Skill-building sessions with invited teachers
- Potlucks or holiday celebrations
- Field trips to fiber festivals or farms

**Handling money:** If your group collects dues for supplies, space rental, or guest teachers, be transparent. Track income and expenses. Share financial updates regularly.

## **Virtual Fiber Gatherings**

Online gatherings expanded during the pandemic and many continue because they work.

**Platforms:** Zoom, Google Meet, or Discord work well. Test audio and video before your first meeting.

### **Format options:**

- Video chat while everyone works on projects
- Screen-share for technique demonstrations
- Show-and-tell via camera
- Recorded sessions for people who can't attend live

### **Making virtual gatherings engaging:**

- Keep meetings shorter than in-person (90 minutes max)
- Use breakout rooms for small group conversations
- Encourage cameras on but don't require it
- Record sessions for later viewing
- Share resources and links in chat

Virtual gatherings can't replace in-person fiber community, but they connect people across distances and include those who can't travel easily.

## **The Heart of Fiber Spaces**

Whether you're organizing a corner of your living room, opening a shop, or hosting your first spinning circle, you're creating more than a physical space. You're making room for creativity, learning, and connection.

The best fiber spaces—the ones that sustain us—share certain qualities: they're comfortable enough that we want to linger, organized enough that we can find

what we need, and welcoming enough that we feel safe to try new things and make mistakes. They hold our tools and materials, yes, but they also hold our attention, our growth, and our community.

Your fiber space doesn't need to be perfect. It needs to be yours—shaped by your needs, your constraints, and your vision of what fiber community can be. Start where you are. Use what you have. Invite others in. The magic isn't in the square footage or the inventory or the fancy furniture. It's in the making, the sharing, and the moments of connection that happen when fiber people gather together.

Now go create the space that's calling to you. Your fiber community is waiting.

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## Key Techniques & Concepts

Concept	Description
<b>Space audit</b>	Systematic assessment of current fiber workspace identifying what works, what frustrates, and what's actually used regularly
<b>Zone design</b>	Organizing studio by activity type (spinning, prep, storage, wet work) to create efficient workflow
<b>Fiber storage principles</b>	Storing prepared fiber loosely in breathable containers away from light and moisture to prevent damage and pests
<b>Stash inventory system</b>	Tracking fiber acquisitions with photos, weights, sources, and costs for management and pricing
<b>Startup cost calculation</b>	Comprehensive budgeting for shop opening including rent, inventory, fixtures, technology, and operating reserves
<b>Keystone pricing</b>	Standard retail markup doubling wholesale cost to cover business expenses and profit
<b>Market research</b>	Analyzing local fiber community size, needs, competition, and demographics before opening a shop
<b>Class structure</b>	Workshop format with clear duration, student limits, materials inclusion, and learning objectives
<b>Drop-in vs. committed groups</b>	Two gathering models: casual open attendance (easier to sustain) vs. regular core members (deeper connection)
<b>Inclusive facilitation</b>	Intentional practices for welcoming newcomers, amplifying quiet voices, and creating safe community spaces
<b>Virtual gathering adaptation</b>	Online meeting formats using video platforms with shorter durations and engagement strategies

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## **Glossary of Terms**

**Accessibility:** Design and practices ensuring spaces and events welcome people of all physical abilities, including wheelchair users and those with sensory challenges

**Brick-and-mortar:** Physical retail shop location (as opposed to online-only business)

**Consignment:** Arrangement where shop displays and sells artist's work, taking percentage of sales rather than buying inventory outright

**Destash:** Process of reducing fiber or yarn collection by selling, trading, or giving away unused materials

**Drop-in group:** Casual gathering with open attendance requiring no commitment or registration

**Inventory:** Stock of products available for sale; also the process of counting and tracking that stock

**Keystone pricing:** Retail pricing method that doubles wholesale cost (100% markup)

**LLC (Limited Liability Company):** Business structure protecting owner's personal assets from business debts and lawsuits

**Market research:** Investigation of potential customers, competition, and demand before starting a business

**Minimum order:** Smallest purchase quantity required by wholesale vendors (typically \$250-\$500 for fiber suppliers)

**POS (Point of Sale) system:** Technology managing sales transactions, inventory tracking, and customer data

**Skill share:** Gathering where members take turns teaching techniques to each other

**Sole proprietorship:** Simplest business structure where owner and business are legally the same entity

**Trunk show:** Special event where visiting dyer, designer, or vendor displays their full collection at a shop

**Wholesale:** Bulk purchasing from manufacturers or distributors at reduced prices for resale; typically 50% of retail price

**Zone:** Designated area within studio or shop organized for specific activity type

## Chapter 11: Your Fiber Fate



So here we are. We've talked about everything from skirting a fleece (the glamorous work of picking out the, uh, less-than-desirable bits) to pricing your handspun at a market without underselling your soul. We've covered spinning wheels and drop spindles, dyeing roving in your kitchen, setting up shop, and building community. If you've made it this far, you've got the roadmap—or at least a really detailed, wool-scented trail guide.

But here's the thing: knowing the steps doesn't mean you'll walk them all, or walk them in order, or even walk them the way I did. And that's exactly how it should be.

This final chapter isn't about teaching you one more technique or giving you another checklist. It's about taking a breath together, looking back at what we've covered, and talking about what happens next—for you, in your own fiber life. It's about passion: mine, yours, and how it grows and shifts and surprises you when you're not looking.

I want to send you off with a little rumination, some encouragement, and maybe a nudge or two toward whatever part of this wild, woolly world calls to you loudest. Because your fiber fate? It's yours to spin.

## **My Fiber Story (and Why Yours Will Be Different)**

I didn't set out to do all of this. I didn't pick up my first spindle thinking, "Yes, this will eventually lead to running a shop, dyeing yarn, teaching classes, and writing a book about it." I just thought spinning looked cool. I wanted to make yarn. That was it.

But then I made my first lumpy, overspun single and thought, "I can do better." So I did it again. And again. I started buying fleece because I wanted to understand the fiber itself—what made Merino different from Corriedale, why some locks felted in my hands and others stayed springy and separate. I started dyeing because I couldn't find the colors I wanted. I started teaching because people kept asking how I did things, and I realized I loved sharing what I'd learned.

Each step led to the next, but none of it was inevitable. I could have stayed a spinner who never dyed a thing. I could have dyed yarn and never sold a skein. I could have taught one workshop and decided I hated it (I didn't, but I could have). The point is: my path made sense for me, in my life, with my interests and resources and the opportunities that came my way.

Yours will be different. Maybe you'll fall in love with art batts and never touch a spinning wheel. Maybe you'll spin for decades and never sell a single skein because you want it all for yourself (valid). Maybe you'll skip the dyeing entirely and become the person who knows every sheep breed by sight and touch. Maybe you'll open a shop, or maybe you'll host a monthly spinning circle in your living room and that will be your whole fiber community, and it will be perfect.

## **The Permission You Don't Need (But I'll Give You Anyway)**

You don't have to do it all. You don't have to sell your work. You don't have to teach, or dye, or raise sheep, or go to every fiber festival. You don't even have to join a spinning group if that's not your thing. You're allowed to just... do the parts you love.

You're also allowed to try something, decide it's not for you, and move on. I've met spinners who tried dyeing once, hated the mess and the chemistry, and never did it again. I've met dyers who can't stand spinning. I've met people who love preparing fiber but get bored actually spinning it. All of these people are doing fiber arts right, because they're doing what brings them joy.

And here's the biggest permission slip of all: you're allowed to change. What excites you now might bore you in five years. What seems impossible now might become your obsession later. I never thought I'd care about running a shop, and then I did. I never thought I'd write a book, and here we are. Your fiber life can grow, shift, contract, expand, and surprise you. Let it.

## **The Many Shapes of Fiber Passion**

One of my favorite things about the fiber world is how many ways there are to be part of it. You can be the technical spinner who chases perfect consistency. You can be the art yarn spinner who makes wild, chunky, beaded creations that look like they came from another planet. You can be the fleece nerd who knows everything about sheep breeds and fiber preparation. You can be the dyer who's all about color theory and the perfect repeatable formula—or the dyer who never wants to make the same colorway twice.

You can be the community-builder who organizes spinning circles and fiber swaps. You can be the quiet spinner who never shows anyone their work but finds peace in the rhythm of the wheel. You can be the teacher, the seller, the festival-goer, the online enthusiast who never attends an in-person event but is deeply connected to the virtual community.

You can be the person who spins the same yarn, the same way, for years, because you love the meditative repetition. Or you can be the person who's always chasing the next technique, the next fiber, the next challenge. You can be the maker who hoards every skein, or the maker who gives it all away, or the maker who sells it to fund the next fleece purchase.

## **What Calls to You?**

If you're not sure where your passion lies yet, that's okay. You might still be exploring. But here are some questions that might help you figure out what's calling to you:

What part of the process do you never want to skip? What do you do even when you're tired, even when it would be easier to just buy the thing ready-made? When you talk about fiber arts with someone who's never heard of it, what do you get most excited explaining? When you're scrolling Instagram or Ravelry, what makes you stop and stare? What do you want to learn next—and why that thing, specifically?

The answers to these questions will tell you a lot about where your passion lives. Maybe it's in the tactile pleasure of fiber itself—the crimp, the softness, the way it drafts through your fingers. Maybe it's in color and the way dye transforms plain wool into something vibrant. Maybe it's in the mechanics and problem-solving of spinning techniques. Maybe it's in the finished object and what you can make with your handspun. Maybe it's in the people—the conversations, the community, the shared language of fiber folks.

There's no wrong answer. There's just your answer.

## **When Passion Shifts (and That's Okay)**

Here's something nobody tells you: passion isn't constant. Sometimes you'll be on fire for spinning, staying up late to finish a project, thinking about fiber constantly. Other times, your wheel will sit untouched for weeks or months, and that's fine. Life happens. Other interests emerge. You get busy, or tired, or you just need a break.

I've gone through phases where I spun every single day, and phases where I didn't touch my wheel for two months. I've been obsessed with dyeing, then not dyed anything for half a year. I've taught workshops every weekend, then taken a whole season off. None of that means I stopped loving fiber arts. It just means my engagement with it shifted.

And sometimes your passion shifts focus entirely. Maybe you start out loving spinning and then discover you actually prefer weaving. Maybe you get really into felting and spinning becomes the side project. Maybe you move from making to teaching, or from selling to just making for yourself. That's not failure or fickleness—that's growth. That's learning more about yourself and what brings you joy.

The fiber world will still be here when you come back. Your wheel will wait. The fleece won't judge you. And if you decide to move on entirely? That's okay too. What you learned and made and experienced still matters.

## **Carving Your Own Path: Practical Encouragement**

So how do you actually move forward from here? How do you take everything we've talked about and turn it into your own fiber life?

First: start with what excites you. Not what seems most practical, or most marketable, or most impressive. What makes you want to clear space on your kitchen table right now and dive in? That's your starting point.

Maybe it's finally trying that spinning technique you've been reading about. Maybe it's buying that fleece you've been eyeing for months. Maybe it's signing up for a class, or a fiber festival, or a local spinning group. Maybe it's setting up a corner of your home as a dedicated fiber space. Maybe it's listing your first skein for sale, or teaching your first friend to spin, or just... spinning more, because you love it.

Whatever it is, do that thing. Not someday—soon. This week, if you can. Because passion needs action to stay alive. It needs you to show up and engage, even in small ways.

### **Small Steps, Real Progress**

You don't need to quit your job and buy a flock of sheep to be serious about fiber arts (though if you do, send pictures). You don't need a dedicated studio, or a huge stash, or expensive equipment. You just need to show up regularly, even if "regularly" means twenty minutes a week.

Spin a little every Sunday morning with your coffee. Dye one skein a month. Attend one spinning circle. Take one class this year. Buy one special fleece and take your time preparing and spinning it. Set up one small, organized fiber corner in your home.

Small, consistent steps build real skills and deep satisfaction. They also build identity—you become someone who spins, who dyes, who makes. And that identity, that sense of yourself as a maker, is worth more than any single finished project.

## Finding Your People

We talked about community in Chapters 9 and 10, but I want to come back to it here because it matters so much. Fiber arts can be solitary—just you and your wheel, or your dyepot, or your fleece. And that's lovely. But it's also richer, funnier, and more sustainable when you're connected to other people who get it.

Your people might be at a local spinning guild, or a fiber festival, or in an online group. They might be the three friends you taught to spin, or the vendor at the farmers market who always asks about your latest project, or the strangers on Instagram who comment on your yarn photos. Community takes many shapes.

If you haven't found your fiber people yet, go looking. Show up to that spinning circle even though you're nervous. Post a photo of your lumpy first skein. Ask questions. Share what you're learning. Compliment someone's work. Offer encouragement. Be the person you wish had been there when you started.

The fiber world is overwhelmingly kind and welcoming. Yes, you'll occasionally meet a snob or a gatekeeper, but they're rare and universally ignored by the rest of us. Mostly, you'll meet people who are just excited that you're excited. Who want to share what they know. Who will cheer for your wonky yarn and your ambitious projects and your weird experimental dye jobs.

Show up. You belong here.

## When Things Get Hard (Because They Will)

Let's be real: this stuff is hard sometimes. You'll spin yarn that breaks. You'll dye a colorway that turns out muddy and disappointing. You'll spend hours on a project that just... doesn't work. You'll compare your work to someone else's and feel like you'll never be that good. You'll get frustrated, or bored, or overwhelmed.

This is all normal. This is all part of it. Every single fiber artist you admire has made terrible yarn, ruined fleece, screwed up dye jobs, and wanted to throw their wheel out the window. The difference between people who keep going and people who quit isn't talent—it's persistence, and self-compassion, and the willingness to try again.

When things get hard, take a break. Ask for help. Watch a tutorial. Join a class. Lower your expectations for a while and just play. Remember why you started. Look at your early work and see how far you've come. Talk to your fiber people—they've been there, and they'll remind you that it gets easier, and better, and more fun.

And sometimes, the hard thing is knowing when to step back. If fiber arts stops bringing you joy and starts feeling like an obligation, it's okay to take a break. It's okay to scale back. It's okay to redefine what this looks like in your life. Your worth isn't tied to your productivity or your skill level. You're allowed to just... enjoy it, at whatever level works for you.

## **A Final Sendoff: Go Spin Your Story**

We've covered a lot of ground together. From raw fleece to finished yarn, from setting up a wheel to setting up a shop, from dyeing your first skein to pricing it for sale, from spinning alone to building community. You've got the knowledge. You've got the roadmap. Now you've got to walk your own path.

I can't tell you what that path will look like. I don't know if you'll be a production spinner or an art yarn maker, a dyer or a teacher, a shop owner or a quiet hobbyist. I don't know if you'll raise sheep or just buy fleece at festivals, if you'll sell your work or hoard it all, if you'll join every spinning group in town or prefer to spin alone with a podcast.

But I know this: if you've read this far, you care. You're curious. You're drawn to this work in a way that matters. And that's enough. That's everything, actually.

So here's my final bit of advice, and it's simple: keep going. Keep spinning, keep learning, keep experimenting. Keep showing up, even when it's hard. Keep connecting with other fiber people. Keep making things with your hands, because in a world that's increasingly digital and disconnected, that matters more than you might think.

And when you're standing at a fiber festival, holding a braid of hand-dyed roving in a color that makes your heart sing, or when you're at your wheel late at night and the yarn is finally doing exactly what you want it to do, or when someone picks up your handspun and says, "You made this?"—remember that this is your fiber fate. Not because it was predetermined, but because you chose it. You showed up. You learned. You made.

The fiber world is big and weird and wonderful, and there's a place in it for you. Exactly as you are, wherever you're starting from, whatever you want to make or learn or share.

So go. Spin your story. Dye your yarn. Build your community. Make something beautiful, or weird, or perfectly imperfect. Make something that's yours.

I'll be here, cheering you on. We all will.

Happy spinning.