

Part 1 Introduction - Videos 1 & 2

What we will do on this course

We are going to start by weaving on simple frame looms. These are a great way to begin weaving, because it is intuitively obvious what you need to do.

We will learn to:

- 'Warp' the loom, or put yarn on it
- Weave on the loom
- Get the edges straight
- Join on new yarn and change colour
- Deal with the ends of the yarn
- Take the weaving off the loom
- Finish the weaving

That takes care of the basic process, which is actually very simple. And those same principles work on other kinds of looms too.



A Create With Fibre Dinky Loom (left) and Midi Loom (right). Frame looms are simple to use. (Right hand photo and weaving by Helen Murray, Scotland)

Then we will progress to an economical and easy-to-use loom called a 'rigid heddle' loom. These amazing looms can be used to create anything from scarves to throws, small rugs and clothing. They come in a range of sizes and can produce patterned weaving using simple techniques. These looms are my passion - I love them and use them to weave all kinds of things, including clothing.



Course tutor Janet Renouf-Miller teaches weaving on a rigid heddle loom.

A tiny bit of history

Weaving is one of the oldest forms of craft work and probably the first way in which clothing was created, after animal skins. It pre-dates knitting by a long time and there is some evidence that weaving was produced as long as 27,000 years ago, in Palaeolithic times. Because cloth and wooden looms are both perishable, more evidence is found from areas such as the Andes which have a dry climate.

The commonest archaeological finds are loom weights made from stones or clay, with a hole in the centre. Larger weights were mostly used on a 'warp weighted loom' to hold the warp threads in place. Smaller ones were used on many kinds of looms to tension individual threads.

Another common type of loom was a 'back strap loom', where the weaver anchors the warps by attaching them to a stick. This is then tied around the waist at one end and a peg in the ground or a handy object at the other end. Back strap looms are still used in many parts of the world.



Left: A small, Andean-style backstrap loom being used to make braids, by weaver and archaeologist Ed Franquemont (1945-2003). Right: A warp weighted loom at the Scottish Crannog Centre.

Warp weighted looms are not commonly used these days but in the Western world, re-enactment groups often make and demonstrate them. Generations of people used these simple, upright frame looms, made from nothing more than sticks and string, to make all kinds of wonderful fabric, rugs and wall hangings for thousands of years.

The photo above (right) shows one in use at the Scottish Crannog Centre. The loom weights used here are very large but the size of the weights used would vary and depend on how much tension was required. Weaving is still done in many parts of the world using simple looms, or the equivalent of our modern, 'rigid heddle' looms. Some looms have been in families for generations.

Weaving terms and equipment

Warp - the yarn that is threaded onto the loom prior to weaving.

Warping peg – a peg used to hold the warp whilst the loom is being threaded.

Weft - the yarn that you actually weave with.

Weaving needle – a long, flat needle, usually cranked at one end and used to weave with.

Shuttle – there are different kinds of shuttles to do different jobs. We will use stick shuttles and weaving needles on this course. Stick shuttles look a bit like a narrow ruler but with a slot or hole in each end to wind the yarn around. They are simple, cheap - no extra equipment is needed. They are also easy to make.

NB Modern rigid heddle looms come with shuttles and heddles.

Rigid heddle – this is used on a rigid heddle loom. It has alternate slots and holes and the warp is threaded through these. You lift and lower it alternately then weave through the resultant gap using the shuttle. See the photo of a rigid heddle loom on Page 2.

Shed – the gap produced by the rigid heddle/heddle. The shuttle is then passed through this gap in order to weave.

Pick – with a frame loom or when doing tapestry weaving, the warp threads are picked up by hand or using a shuttle/stick. Then the weft is passed through as before.

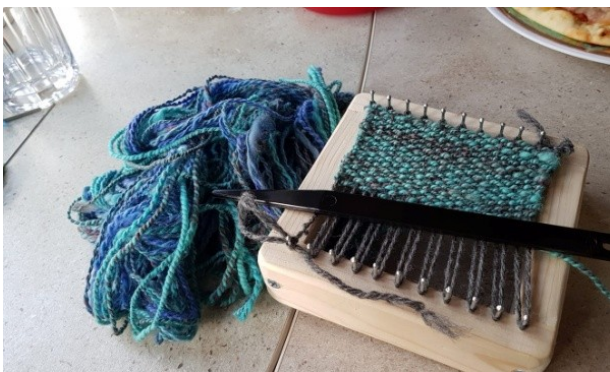
Shot – when the shuttle and yarn is passed through the gap created by the heddle, this is one shot of weaving.

How different looms work and which loom to use

Which loom should I buy?

You do not need a huge and/or complicated loom in order to make lovely things, and a large loom is not actually better. In fact, a common beginner mistake is to buy the 'largest loom I can afford so that it will do everything'. It won't and chances are you will struggle to warp it up.

So that huge loom will sit there in all its glory and seldom get used. But there is no need to give up the dining room or spare bedroom in order to weave and great things can be done on a small loom. One of the tricks of weaving at home is to learn to make things on smaller looms, using narrower strips of fabric, which is of course what people did for thousands of years.



Frame looms can be tiny and portable (left) but come in different sizes like the Create With Fibre scarf loom (right).

If you want to try weaving without spending much money, buy a small frame loom and have a go. If you like it, a rigid heddle loom like the ones used in this course is a great next step and you will never need another loom because once you know what they can do, they are so versatile. These looms do not take up much room when stored and some even fold up. The loom can be leaned against a table when weaving like in the picture above or you can get a stand for it. I do all of my own weaving on frame looms and rigid heddle looms, making clothing, towels, bags, throws and pictures.

Some uses for the different types of looms

Frame looms, as described above, are often used for tapestry weaving because the weaver 'picks' the pattern by hand a lot of the time in any case, meaning there is less advantage to having a loom with a heddle. They are often used for smaller weavings, as the size of the frame determines the size of the piece being produced. Pieces can be sewn together to make scarves, bags or other things but the weaving is the shape and size of the loom. The advantages are that they are very portable and cheap to buy.

Rigid heddle looms are the most versatile yet economical ‘proper’ looms available. It is far faster to weave on these looms as a whole shot can be woven in one go. You need a good, modern one such as the ones made by Ashford. Older ones such as those made by Dryad in the 1940s/50s are tricky to use and only suitable for fine yarns. The other advantage is that the loom has a roller for the warp, meaning that a far longer piece of weaving can be made in one go. Many different patterns can be created on these looms.



Folding Ashford rigid heddle looms.

A four shaft loom uses a different system to lift the warp threads in order to weave and create patterns. You can also get looms with eight, sixteen or more shafts. We will not be covering these looms in the course and if you learn to use a rigid heddle loom correctly you will most probably never need one. Although that is a matter of opinion and preference!