

Part 2 Fibre - Video 3

Different fibre types

Just about any yarn you see in the shops can be replicated on a spinning wheel. People spin everything from fine lace weight to jumbo-textured yarn. When non-spinners think of spinning they probably think of using sheep's wool in natural colours. You can, of course, spin those and they remain a favourite with many spinners.

You can also spin almost any other fibre – silk, Merino, cotton, linen, musk ox and mohair to name just a few. There is a large range of prepared and unprepared fibre available, including wool in every colour of the rainbow and all different levels of fineness; from fine Merino for baby wear to hill fleece suitable for carpets.

Pre-prepared fibres

As a beginner, it is important to start with good fibre. When I teach beginners in a class they learn to select, properly wash and card a fleece before starting to spin. Using sub-standard or improperly carded fibre will prevent you from even getting started. As a beginner you will not know whether the fleece is a good one, whether it has been spoiled in the wash or whether you have carded it properly.

When learning on your own at home, if you struggle to card your own fibre or to find good quality fibre, start with commercially-prepared fibre. This leapfrogs you over all of the potential problems above. Once you have spun some commercially-prepared fibre, you will know whether any fibre you prepare yourself is good quality or not because you will have spun good quality fibre!

Commercially-prepared fibre often comes in the form of what is called a combed top – this is a long length of combed fibre; or in a carded mass which is a big, fluffy bundle of carded fibre. It is sometimes easier to start with carded fibre as opposed to tops but not always – either will do.

What to do when buying pre-prepared fibres

Pre-prepared fibres can be bought from specialist spinning suppliers. Use an established supplier rather than someone selling a bit of fibre on eBay. I know of at least one person who was sold special luxury fibre which was totally unsuitable for a beginner. Because she knew no better, she thought she was no good at spinning and gave up. A good supplier will be able to advise you, so phone them up for a chat and make sure they know you are a beginner. Here are a few general rules.

Ask the supplier as they will be able to give you advice about which fibres are best for a beginner. It is rare to find a supplier who is not also a spinner.

Avoid Merino at the beginning. This can be hard, as it comes in lots of lovely colours but Corriedale is usually available in similar shades and is a better choice.

If buying face-to-face ask if you can take the fibre out of the bag. Carefully pull a few fibres off it to take a look. This will give you an idea of the 'staple length' or length of the fibres. You are looking for 7.5-10cm (3-4in) length. If you think you might make a mess of the fibre by trying to do this, ask the supplier to do it for you.

If you do succumb to a multi-coloured, hand-dyed roving (another name for a combed top), unroll it and have a look. A hand-dyed roving with a lot of white space in it will go much paler when spun – which is fine as long as that is what you want.

Pre-drafting

Although pre-prepared tops or carded fibre do not need carding, they do need a bit of attention before spinning. The fibres tend to stick together slightly after being stored and pre-drafting as it is called loosens them up again. It makes them easier, more enjoyable and faster to spin as well as breaking the fibre down to a manageable size. Without it, tops can be a real challenge to work with and that is why some people struggle to spin them.

Pre-drafting is the same whether you are spinning on a spindle or a spinning wheel. The principle of how yarn is spun is also the same – the spinner pulls out, or drafts, the fibre and the wheel or spindle then twists that fibre. It is the twist that transforms it from fibre to yarn.

Pre-drafting means that you give the fibres little tugs – just enough to loosen them but not enough to actually pull the prepared top, or fibre mass, apart. Pre-drafting also reduces the amount of work your hands have to do whilst you are actually spinning. This is a big help when you are learning, but in fact all spinners should pre-draft, as it makes the resultant yarn much more even and the spinning flows better.

The pre-drafting process

First of all, check the length of the fibre (staple length) by pulling a few fibres out of the prepared top or carded mass. You can do the same thing with a fleece, by pulling out one of the locks or staples which make up the fleece. If using tops, you may need to pull the same piece of fibre several times to ensure you only have one staple length.

It should look fluffy and like every fibre is separate to every other fibre. If in doubt, pull off a single fibre and look at the length of it. If your section of fibres is twice the length of this single fibre, you have more than one staple length and need to pull it again.

This is important, because the length of the fibre governs how far apart your hands should be when drafting, or pulling the fibre apart. If they are too close together you will be pulling at both ends of the same fibres and will be unable to pull it apart. You might as well pull on both ends of a piece of string and expect it to come apart!

Keep this staple length as a reference for when you are pre-drafting and spinning and you can check that your hands are far enough apart at all times.



One staple length pulled off a combed top.



Splitting the fibre prior to pre-drafting.

Split the fibre before you pre-draft

Take a bit of fresh, good quality tops or roving and pull it apart totally so that a 60cm (2ft) long section of it comes away in your hand. If it is hard to pull it apart, then you are holding your hands too close together. Move them further apart than you think they should be and then try again.

It should be really easy to separate it if your hands are far enough apart. They should be at least 15-30cm (6-12in) apart most of the time. Be aware of this when you actually start to spin, because a lot of people find their hands get closer together without realising.

Working with this 60cm (2ft) length, find the midpoint along its length and poke a finger through it so that you have a section about twice the width of a pencil to one side of the finger and the rest of the combed top to the other. Then pull it apart lengthwise from this point. You will now have a finger-wide strip of fibre to work with, which is usually known as a pencil roving, so put the rest to one side. The reason you go to the midpoint of the fibre is simply so that you then do not have so far to pull and it keeps the fibre tidier.

Pull the fibre apart or it will not work!

Pulling the fibre apart sounds alarming to a beginner, whose impulse is often to try and hold it all together, but you cannot spin without pulling the fibre apart. The aim is to pull it apart by about half of its length. That way the whole roving becomes thinner without actually coming to bits. If you practise until you can do this really well, you will have mastered the major core task of the spinning process.

Get this bit wrong and the spinning will not work. It may seem like it is working for a few minutes. Then the spun yarn gets thicker and thicker until it is just one big lump. Once the fibre has some twist, it is almost impossible to draft it further.

So if you find yourself pulling hard on the fibre as you spin, trying to split it by pulling sideways or other little tricks to get it to draft, you need to go back to pre-drafting and practise some more. When you pre-draft or draft it should be easy to pull the fibres apart. You should feel them give as you pull. If you do not feel the give at any point when spinning or pre-drafting, go back and practise this to refresh your memory.

Start pre-drafting from one end of the fibre. With your hands about 30-45cm (12-18in) apart, pull for about half of the length of the fibres. Remember you checked the length of the fibres at the start – so if they are 7.5cm (3in) long you need to pull till it is about 3.5cm (1.5in) longer.

You should be drafting fibre from in front of your hand, not pulling it through the hand. So you need a good lot of fibre in front of that hand at all times. You cannot work on the fibre that is in your hand - it must be already in front of it.



The pre-drafted fibre is loose and you can see daylight through it.

Pause and look at the fibres. They should have loosened up and this section of the roving will be thinner, with daylight showing through.

Now let go with one hand at a time and move each hand about 10cm (4in) along the fibre so that you are pre-drafting a new section. The actual distance you move your hands will vary a little depending on the length of the fibre, but for medium length fibre this is about right.

It is important to let go completely with each hand in turn every time you move them along the fibre. This allows the fibre to re-align itself and keeps it tidy. Do not slide your hands along the fibre or pull the fibre through your hand.

If you do it will become untidy with bits sticking out all over the place. These will create a fluffy mess on the spun yarn and if you are using a spinning wheel the fluff catches on the hooks and stops the yarn from winding onto the bobbin. In other words, it makes it much harder to spin.

The pre-drafted roving should look reasonably even, although this takes a bit of practise. The most important thing is to check that all of the fibres have been opened up and you have not missed any sections out. If the roving comes apart at any time, just overlap it and draft the two parts together.

Here's a summary:

- Draft the fibres for only half of their length at a time and no more, or you will get an uneven roving
- Do not drag the fibre through your hands – make sure you draft fibre that is in front of your hand
- Do not slide - let go of the fibre every time you move your hands along the roving. If you get fluffy bits sticking out, you are sliding!
- If it comes apart, overlap the two lots of fibre then draft them both together

Practise, practise, practise

Practise pre-drafting until you are confident that you know how to do it easily. After pre-drafting a few lengths of fibre it will seem easier. Drafting the fibre is something that new spinners often struggle with, as the impulse is to hold the fibre together – the very opposite of what needs to happen. Remember, this is a core skill and worth spending time on.

In order to spin you must pull the fibre until you feel it give. Without doing this the spinning will not work. It takes practice to get full control of the twist when you actually start spinning and, if you are working from a very long piece of fibre, it is easy to end up with twist in the unspun fibre, making it hard to draft. With a reasonably short length it is simple to hold the fibre up in the air and let it untwist.

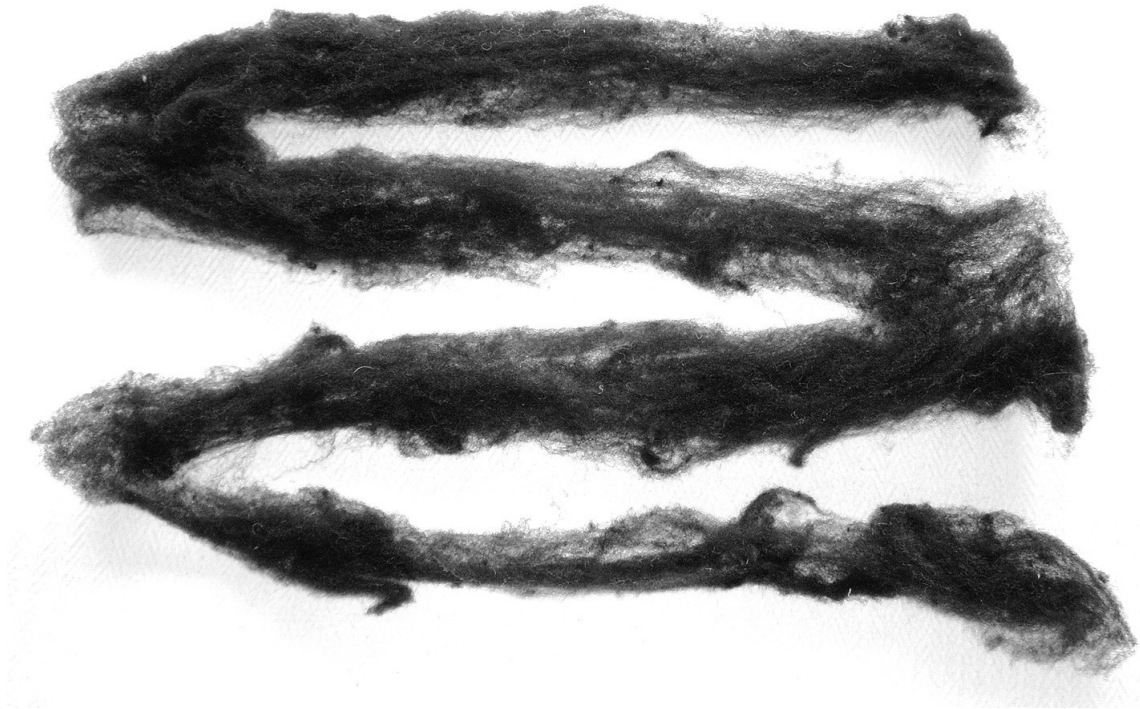
How to pre-draft commercially carded fibre

To pre-draft commercially-carded fibre as opposed to combed tops, pull off a length of fibre, check the staple length and pre-draft it as above. If you are working with a carded mass of fibre rather than a carded roving, it may be more of a lump of fibre than a length that you pull off but treat it in the same way.

Zigzag a carded batt

If the fibre is in an oblong batt produced on a drum carder, it is possible to spin it as one continuous length. Split off a length almost from one end of the batt to the other but do not detach it from the batt completely. Now turn around and split it going up in the opposite direction. Continue to zigzag like this until you have a long length. Do not worry about the corners being thicker than the rest of it.

Now pre-draft and even it out but again do not worry about the corners being different to the rest – if you fiddle with it too much the batt will come apart.



A zigzagged carded batt ready for pre-drafting.

If you are a beginner on a spinning wheel, though, work with shorter lengths at first so that they do not get tangled up. It is ideal once you have got the hang of the basics because you do not have to stop so often to join on new fibre.

Working from a longer length of fibre is a good method when using a hand spindle. It means you don't have to do as many joins - and joins on a spindle are a little trickier than on a spinning wheel. A great way to work with a longer length of fibre is to work with a wrist distaff. This is explained further in Part 4.