

Part 4 How to spin on a high top spindle - Videos 5-9

When it comes to spinning with a spindle, high top spindles are easiest to learn on and the most efficient.

A high top spindle has a hook in the end nearest the whorl. The yarn goes around this when you are spinning, so that the spindle is suspended from the hook by yarn that has already been spun. The spinner twirls the spindle by flicking it with their fingers, rolling it off their thigh or by kicking the spindle, i.e. holding it between their feet and drawing one foot back or forwards against the other. (This is easier than it sounds and looks really cool.)

You can get the spindle to spin very fast by doing this, which enables you to draft more fibre every time you spin the spindle. It also means you can ultimately learn to spin what is called extended draw on a high top spindle, which is a fast and enjoyable way of spinning.

Practise with a piece of yarn

Now that you can draft fibre, the next stage is to get the hang of twirling or spinning the spindle. To do this, use a cone or ball of yarn. The thinner this is the better, as thinner yarns can take up more twist than thicker ones, giving you more time to practise twirling without the yarn becoming overtwisted.



Take the end of the yarn twice around the shaft of the spindle then tie it on. Put the cone of yarn on the floor. Take the yarn through the hook on the top of the spindle and twist it round the hook a couple of times.

Hold the yarn coming from the hook in one hand, so that the spindle is suspended by the yarn. It does not matter which hand you use, so do whatever feels comfortable.

Right-handed people usually want to hold the yarn with the left hand and twirl the spindle with the right. Left-handed people tend to do the opposite but not always.

Twirling practice on a high top spindle; note how the hand is cupped under the bottom of the spindle shaft.

Cup the bottom of the spindle shaft loosely in the other hand, gripping the shaft between fingers and thumb. A snapping action, taking the thumb across the tips of the fingers will spin the spindle. If you snap your fingers in one direction the spindle will spin clockwise; snap them in the other direction and it will spin anticlockwise.

Practise twirling like this so that the spindle spins clockwise until you can get it to spin well. Each time you have 'spun' one length of the yarn, take it off the hook and wind it onto the spindle so that you have a new length to practise on, just as if you had spun it for real. The convention is to spin yarn (at this point it is called singles yarn) clockwise and then to ply it (twist two singles yarns together) anticlockwise. It is spun one way and then plied in the opposite direction in order to balance the twist and add strength.

Making a wrist distaff to hold the fibre

Now that you have practised drafting fibre and twirling the spindle, there is just one more thing to do before spinning for real. That is to make a wrist distaff to hold the fibre. Without this, it is hard to manage longer lengths of fibre. Having a long length of fibre ready to spin makes spindle spinning much easier and faster, because you do not have to keep stopping to join on more fibre. As a beginner joins are tricky on a spindle so having more fibre ready is very useful.

To make a wrist distaff take two broad shoe laces, two bits of thickish string, yarn or anything else that you have to hand. If you don't have thicker string, yarn or shoe laces, simply double up thinner ones or plait them to make them thicker. Use the shoe laces as they are, but if using string or yarn cut off four lengths about 45cm (18in) long – a bit longer if you are going to plait them. Although the distaffs in the photograph have beads on them, this is not essential. If you do not have large beads to use, simply tie a knot in the ends of the distaff tails to prevent the fibre from slipping off.

Measure them to fit round your wrist so that the distaff will be easy to slip on and off but not will fall off whilst you are spinning. Tie all the strands together with an overhand knot to make a loop that goes around your wrist. (An overhand knot is useful because it is a non slip knot but if you don't know how to do one any knot will do).



Tie one more knot in each of the four ends. This will help to keep the fibre from slipping off the ends of the distaff. It works best if you have the distaff on one wrist and twirl the spindle with the opposite hand so they do not get tangled up together. If you want to use your dominant hand to twirl the spindle, put the distaff on the opposite wrist.

Wrist distaffs with and without fibre.

Wrapping the fibre around the distaff



Winding pre-drafted tops onto a wrist distaff.

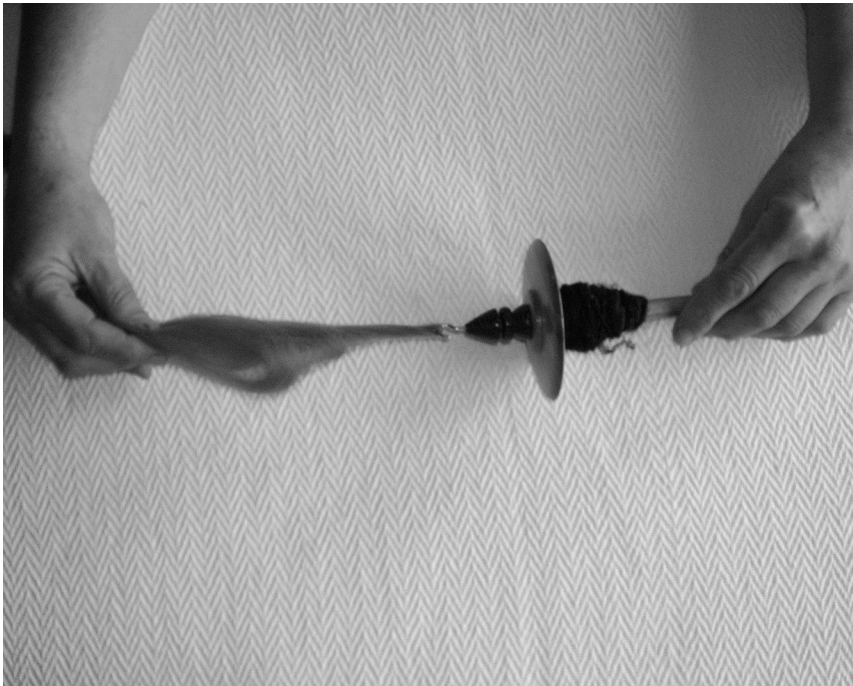
With the distaff on your wrist, take the longish length of the pre-drafted fibre and wrap it around it. The distaff can hold a lot of fibre and should end up looking a bit like an old fashioned bee hive. Wind the fibre around so that it is tight enough to stay on but not tighter. As you spin you have to remember to unwind fibre from the distaff by hand, it will not unroll by itself.

How to join the fibre onto the spindle

Unwind about 45cm (18in) of fibre from the distaff. Make sure there is not a surplus of fibre hanging down in a loop or this will catch into the spinning when you do not want it to.

Put the hook through the length of fibre so that it catches a narrow section of it. Begin to twist the spindle with your other hand, without letting go of it. At the same time, pull the spindle backwards so that fibre is drawn out from the main mass as you twist it. This is actually a form of spinning, although it would be a slow method if used all the time. Keep the yarn under tension or it will pop off the hook and unwind itself; if it does come off, just hook it back on and twist some more.

Once you have a 45cm (18in) length of yarn, remove it from the hook and tie it around the shaft of the spindle, near the whorl. Now twist the yarn around the hook and you are ready to spin some more. Describing this can make it seem harder than it really is, so do refer to the photos and the video.



The advantage of starting off like this is that it saves you from having to do a join before you get going. It is the best way to join on fibre to start any spindle spinning, whether you are a beginner or not.

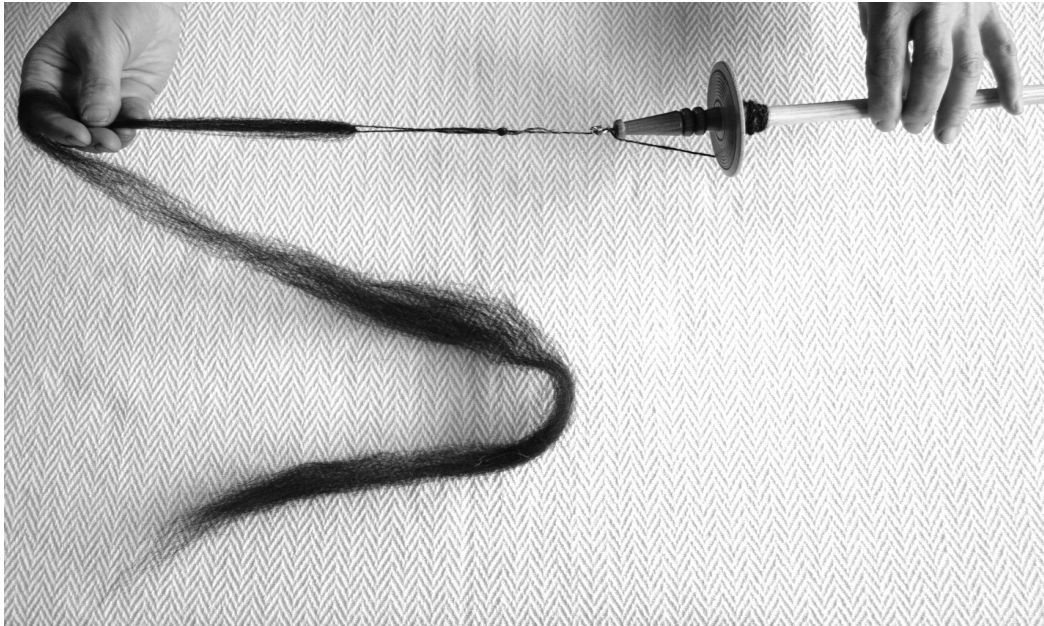
Once you have spun some yarn, you can leave a good long length on the spindle, ideally with a nice, fluffy, unspun end so that you can join new fibre onto it but there is never the need to join yarn to get started using this method.

Attaching fibre to a drop spindle. The spindle will be twisted whilst pulling the fibre out in order to make enough yarn to tie around the spindle shaft.

Emergency measures

If you cannot get the hang of the starting technique above do not despair. Here are some steps to follow instead.

1. Tie a length of medium thickness yarn onto the shaft of the spindle near the whorl and tie a loop in the end.
2. Pre-draft the end of the length of fibre so that it is quite thin.
3. Put it through the loop, double it back on itself and draft it back a little.
4. Put the yarn around the hook of the spindle.
5. Now twist the spindle in your hand whilst pulling it away from the fibre to draw it out as before. It can take a bit of time for the twist to go into the fibre – it will need to be thin enough for the twist to move onto it, otherwise it will twist the yarn and not the fibre.
6. Once the fibre has some twist in it, wind it onto the spindle and then proceed as below.



An 'emergency' join can be used on either a spindle or a spinning wheel.

Another option is to tie the yarn around a small amount of the fibre and draft it back as before. Spinning improves by doing it so it is better to tie it on and get on with spinning.

Twirl, stop and draft: you don't need to do it all at the same time



Spinning on a high top spindle.

Twirl

Now that you have done all of the preliminary stages, the next thing is to twirl the spindle again and spin some yarn. Beginners often imagine having to do everything at once but this is not the case. Especially at the start, it really helps to spin in stages and to stop in between. This stops the yarn from becoming overtwisted and breaking and you will learn more quickly if you take your time.

So twirl the spindle just like you did when practising with the cone of yarn. It is easiest to do this standing up. Whilst you twirl the spindle, make sure you pinch the newly-twisted yarn to stop the twist from travelling into the remaining unspun fibre.

Whilst you twirl the spindle, make sure you pinch the newly-twisted yarn to stop the twist from travelling into the remaining unspun fibre. Do not attempt to draft the fibre, or let the twist go into the fibre, just build up twist in the leader yarn first.

Stop and let the twist through

Then stop, sit down and wedge the spindle between your knees. Now let the twist through, slowly running your hand back onto the pre-drafted fibre. The twist will turn the fibre into yarn. If the fibre is still too thick you can draft it some more before letting the twist into it. Once it has twist in it, you will not be able to draft it. You may need to repeat this process two or three times before there is enough yarn to wind onto the spindle.

Wind it on to the spindle

Now take the yarn off the hook and wind it around the shaft of the spindle, near the whorl. Each time you wind the new yarn onto the spindle, leave about 45cm (18in) suspended from the spindle. The reason for this is that high top spindles spin fast, so you need enough yarn to deal with the twist. Otherwise the spindle will spin fast and then immediately 'bounce' back the other way and unspin again due to the yarn having too much twist in it. It may even break with an audible snap if it is severely overtwisted.

When winding the yarn onto the spindle, aim for a beehive shape that stays compact. It should be close to the whorl and not work its way down the shaft of the spindle, otherwise it will get in the way when you twirl the spindle. The widest point should be at the centre not closest to the whorl. This means the spindle can hold more yarn without it slipping over the edge of the whorl.

Do not wind the yarn on too tightly or it will work its way down the shaft. Wind it on neatly but not tight.



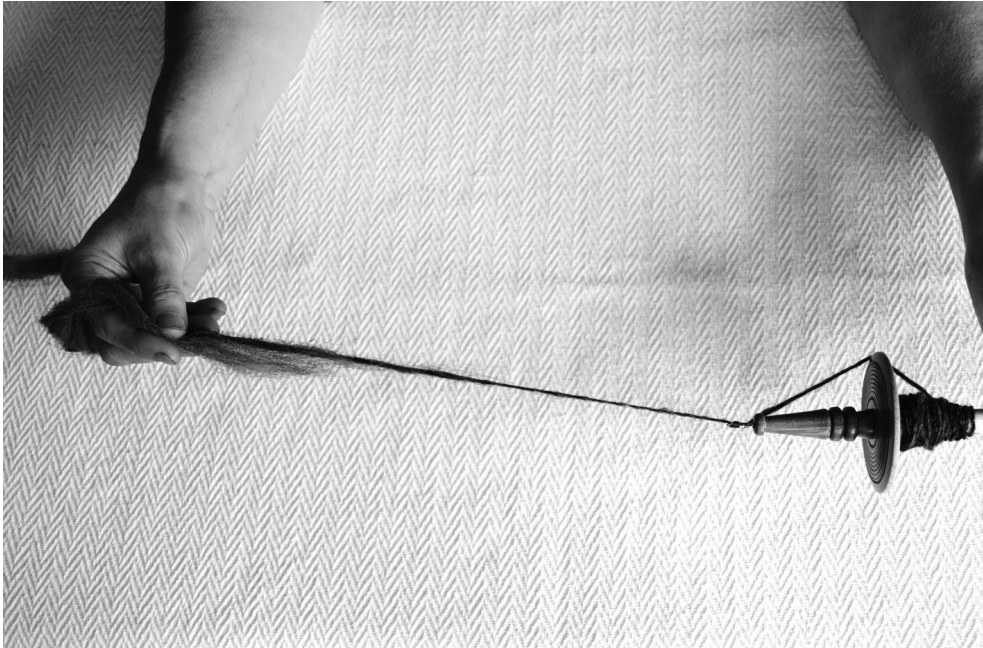
Winding yarn onto a spindle.

Take stock

Pause now and take stock of what just happened. You have hopefully managed to join the fibre, hand twist that first length, twirl the spindle to spin yarn and wind it onto the spindle. Now repeat this process over and over and you are spinning!

How to join the yarn on again if it breaks

As a beginner the fibre will pull apart every so often and need joining on again. Trying to prevent this merely leads to overtwisted yarn and fibre that will not draft. So if it breaks, treat it as a learning exercise and get some practise at joining the fibre back on.



Join two fluffy ends to make a firm join.

Joining can be trickier on a spindle than on a spinning wheel because the weight of the spindle is suspended from the yarn. The join can seem fine initially but as you spin and the yarn gets longer the twist spreads out, so there is less to hold the join together. The solution is to use plenty of twist when joining and to get the join wound onto the spindle as soon as possible.

Always join a fluffy end to a fluffy end. Tease the fibres out so that they are as fluffy as possible. Then build up some twist and pinch the yarn with the fingers to hold this twist back. Overlap the new and old fibre then let the twist through. Use a lot of twist and overlap the two ends by a good distance.

If you finish one lot of fibre remember to leave a fluffy end to join the next lot onto rather than spinning it right to the end. This is easier than joining when it breaks because there will be no fluffy end when it breaks. If any join keeps pulling apart either make a loop in the yarn or tie the yarn around the fibre as described before. If one kind of fibre is hard to join, another kind will often be easier. Wool is generally easy to join on but some wool is easier than others.

How not to get a sore shoulder



The spindle does not need to be held vertically up in the air, which can be hard on the shoulders and arms. Instead try drafting on the diagonal.

Eventually you can learn to draft horizontally across in front of yourself but for now drafting on the diagonal is a good habit to cultivate.

Keep on practising the techniques described above until you feel confident.

Then it is time to progress to the next stage, rolling or 'throwing' the spindle off the thigh.

Drafting on the diagonal as opposed to vertically.

How to roll/throw the spindle off the thigh

Although this is commonly called 'throwing' the spindle, you are actually rolling it on the thigh with a little flick (the throw) at the end.

Throwing the spindle off the thigh makes it spin much faster and keep going for longer, which is one of the reasons high tops can be so productive. This is easier than it sounds so do not be daunted by it; as soon as you can spin a bit of yarn by twirling the spindle you are ready to try it.

Wrap the yarn that is already on the spindle around the hook as usual. Hold this yarn in one hand so that the spindle is suspended from it but do not let it untwist. The other hand will throw the spindle.

To make the spindle go clockwise, roll the shaft either up the right thigh or down the left thigh. It is a steady action rather than jerky, despite being called throwing the spindle.



1. To begin, stand up and lay the shaft across the thigh so that it is almost vertical. Hold it against the thigh with the fingers flat and lying across the shaft of the spindle, pressing it onto the thigh.

2. Then roll the spindle steadily from the tips of the fingers towards the palm and continue to roll with the flat of the hand.

3. Finally, with a little flick, it becomes airborne. All this time, the yarn in the other hand is held under a slight tension and is ready to take up the slack once the spindle has been thrown.

Aim to keep the spindle as close to vertical as possible so that it can spin easily as you flick it, rather than having to right itself from a horizontal position.

Throwing the spindle off the thigh.

Because the spindle spins much faster using this method, it is even more important that there is a decent length of yarn coming from the spindle to take up the twist. If it is too short, the spindle will spin for a short time and then unwind rapidly. In severe cases it will break.

How to kick the spindle

It helps to wear sensible footwear when doing this – some nice flat shoes with a thickish sole such as trainers are ideal. This technique makes it possible to get up serious speed and be really productive on a spindle. Because the spindle spins so fast, the twist will actually pass over your fingers with a bit of help.

Hold the yarn loosely or so that it is just suspended by a couple of fingers. Pulse the fingers if holding the yarn, or let go first with one finger and then the other if the yarn is suspended from the fingers. This helps the twist to travel over the fingers. Holding the yarn in this way will be useful in the future if you want to do extended draw horizontally in front of yourself – which is a wonderful way to spin - but for now just get used to feeling the yarn turn in the fingers.



1. To begin with, spin some yarn by throwing the spindle off the thigh.

This gets a good length of yarn going and means the spindle has some momentum. See if you can feel the twist in your fingers.

2. Just before the spindle stops turning, lower it almost to the floor and grip it between your feet.

3. Then either draw the right foot back or the left foot forwards with a steady action.

Kicking a high top spindle.

The spindle will spin a lot faster and keep going for longer if you do this correctly.

Once the hands and feet have learned to work together (i.e. without stopping the spindle whilst you draft) it gives the hands more time to draft the fibre and it is wonderful to have more time to spin before winding the yarn on.

Now that you can spin, the next step is to ply two strands of yarn together.



Drafting horizontally on a high top spindle.

How to ply 2 or more strands together

NB refer also to the section on how to ply on a spinning wheel, particularly the parts on sampling and how to fix over and under-plyed yarn.

Once you have spun 'singles' yarn – ie one strand of hand spun yarn, you can either ply it by twisting it in the opposite direction so that it is a two strand yarn with more balanced twist, or in certain circumstances, just use it as a 'singles' yarn.

When you have filled the spindle, wind the yarn into a ball. To do this put the spindle on the floor then wind the yarn off by hand. Do not worry if the spindle rolls around. This is far easier than trying to get it to stay in one place.

Then spin a second spindle full of yarn. To save time, it is not necessary to wind this second spindle fully into a ball. Put the spindle on the floor as before but this time put the first ball of singles yarn on the floor along with it.

Put the spindle on one side of you and the ball of yarn on the other so that they do not get tangled up together. Now take the end of each and wind them together into a *double* stranded ball.

Put this in a cardigan or apron pocket if possible. If not, it can roll around the floor as before. Join the two ends onto the spindle and you are ready to ply.

When you ply, spin the spindle **anti-clockwise**. In other words the opposite way to when you were spinning the singles yarn. This balances the twist and gives the yarn more strength.

To make a four ply yarn wind the singles yarn into *two* balls of double stranded yarn and ply the two together. To get a thicker yarn, spinners usually make original two singles yarns *thicker* and ply those rather than a larger number of thinner singles. This is because there is so much more spinning if you do it by using more singles yarn.

In certain circumstances you may want to make three or four ply yarns though. They are very pleasing to the eye because the yarn is rounder and it is also more durable which is no doubt one of the reasons that Guernsey fishermen's sweaters were made from five ply yarn.



Winding yarns into a double stranded ball prior to plying on a hand spindle.

Is it essential to ply yarn?

Spinners often use singles yarn in projects and it is not essential to ply it. When you are learning, yarn tends to be over-twisted in some places and under-twisted in others so plying is probably a good idea.

Many spinners always ply their yarn but singles yarn has a pleasing appearance too and is especially good if you are spinning a multi coloured roving as it keeps the colours more separate. There are also some tricks you can use when plying to help keep the colours separate if you do want to ply a multi coloured yarn.

Sometimes people worry that singles yarn will make their knitting slant on the bias (or diagonal). However unless it is *really* over-spun it rarely does, and then only when doing plain stocking stitch knitting.

Any kind of stitch pattern such as moss stitch or lace in knitting reverses the direction of the yarn so the twist is neutralised. Crochet and weaving also do this so singles yarn is fine for them.

It is best to use fibre that has a staple length of at least 7.5cm/3 inches if you do not want to ply the yarn. Otherwise it will tend to pull apart.