

Spinning Soft Yarn

Rhythmically spinning and plying low twist yarns

By Mary Spanos



Mary uses a *short forward draw* spinning technique, similar to worsted spinning, to create these fluffy wool yarns for soft and lightweight garments.

Several years ago I thought I'd finally learned to spin the perfect knitting yarn. That three-ply yarn was lovely and the skeins were beautiful. The yarn was a consistent, perfectly smooth, high-twist 3-ply. Unfortunately, the sweater I made with that yarn didn't turn out as I had hoped. The knitted fabric felt stiff and dense, and the sweater weighed more than it should (it was uncomfortably heavy and too warm). Too much twist in my singles and in the plying resulted in a yarn that looked good but was actually dense and firm instead of soft and fluffy as I had envisioned my sweater.

At that time, I was spinning wool with a long draw technique, which if broken into steps could be described as: 1) the hand holding the fiber supply moves away from the wheel as it controls the amount of fiber that enters the twist; 2) at the same time the other hand stays fairly stationary and controls the advancing twist by pinching the yarn to stop the twist entering the fibers or releasing the yarn to allow more twist in; and 3) then the fiber hand swings forward feeding the new yarn into the orifice.

When I tried to spin very low twist yarns using this long draw technique I had trouble getting just the right amount of twist into the singles. When there was too little twist, the singles would pull apart when I tried to ply them.

I remembered seeing Jaquie Teal demonstrate a different spinning technique that she called a modified worsted technique

at SOAR in Vermont in 1997. I've used Jaquie's technique to change from a long backward draw to a short forward draw, which is described below.

Changing my spinning technique was not easy. After years of spinning wool one way, those hand motions had become like so many other small habits that don't require attention or thought. It was difficult to change those motions, even when the new technique seemed so simple. But it was worth the frustration. Not only does this technique help me produce the kind of yarns I enjoy knitting and weaving, but it also offers a more comfortable sitting position and hand positions so I can spin for longer periods of time. Maybe the most important thing that I learned was that making a beautiful sweater was more important than making a beautiful skein of yarn.

In the following spinning and plying photographs, you may notice that I spin with my left hand holding the fiber and my right hand in front, closer to the orifice. If you spin with your hands in the other position—right hand in back holding the fiber and left hand in front toward the orifice—you can still use this spinning technique with your hands in your normal positions. I've tried to describe the technique without referring to hands as being left or right. In these pictures I am spinning commercially prepared Shetland top on a single treadle Timbertops wheel.

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Tearing strips

Whether I'm spinning from commercially prepared top or from roving prepared at home, the first step is to turn that preparation into a long strip that has about three times as many fibers in it as the yarn that I want to spin.



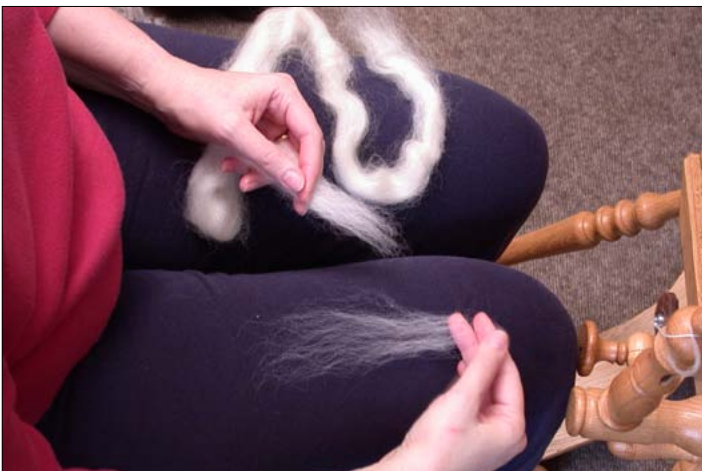
Pre-drafting

I *pre-draft* the fibers so the strip has about twice the amount of fiber as the finished yarn that I plan to spin. Tearing strips and pre-drafting takes a lot of time but when I'm careful with these steps, I can see a big difference in the consistency of the singles as I spin. In addition, the spinning is easier and more pleasant.



Pulling out trash

While pre-drafting, I pull out any trash or clumps of short fibers—anything that I don't want to end up in my yarn. To avoid pulling away more fibers than absolutely necessary, I hold the strip of fibers—on either side of the trash—between my fingers while I pull.



Finding the staple length

To use this short forward draw technique, I need to know how long the fibers are, so I pull some fibers out from the end of the strip and leave them on my knee as a reminder.

Spinning

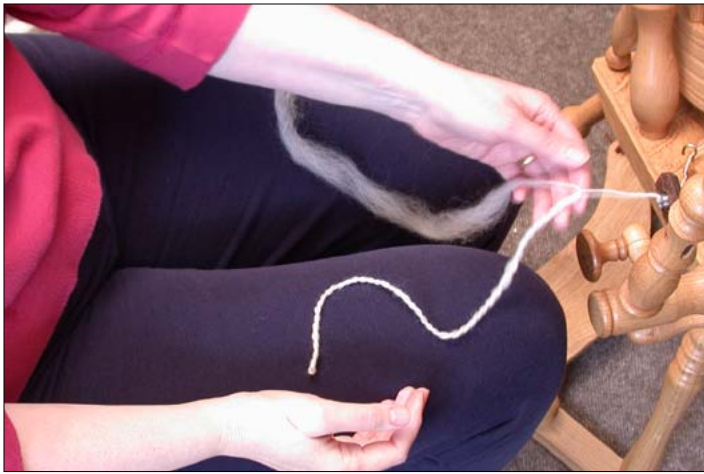
There is a definite rhythm in this spinning technique and the coordination between hands and foot. This sequence of hand motions occurs during one treadle. As my fiber hand fans the fibers to create a drafting triangle, my forward hand pinches the fibers just at the point where they are starting to twist and pulls them forward about one staple length.

As the forward hand moves away from the fiber hand and toward the orifice, it only pinches and pulls, it doesn't roll the yarn at all. Those subtle finger motions of rolling the new yarn to twist or untwist can be so tempting to do, but they can add to hand fatigue and aggravate sore or tired muscles.

When the forward hand is about one staple length away from the fiber hand, it lets go of the yarn, moves back toward the fiber hand, and the process repeats. Those three motions—pinch, pull, release—happen as my foot treadles one time. They go quickly but they are fairly small motions so it is easy to fly along, mesmerized by the rhythm.

For me, the right amount of twist is just enough to get the yarn onto the bobbin and, later, back off again to ply or to wind into a skein. To determine how much twist is just right, I stop spinning and hold more than a staple's length of yarn pinched between the fingers of both hands. As I tug the yarn, I roll my fingers in opposite directions to untwist the yarn. If I untwist the singles by rolling my fingers so the yarn rotates about 360-degrees and the yarn begins to pull apart then that is my ideal amount of twist. If I untwist the singles and there is still a lot of twist in it then I change the whorl on my wheel to a lower ratio whorl that will put in fewer twists per inch as I spin. I spin for a few yards with the new whorl and then check my twist again.





Making a plying sample

In my spinning, consistency in plying is more important than consistency in spinning singles. Consistent plying seems to make most of the lumps and bumps in the singles unnoticeable. Once I've gotten comfortable with a new spinning project and have settled into spinning the singles, I make a two-ply sample by pulling two to three feet of singles off the bobbin and letting it ply back on itself. I break this off and tie the ends together so the twist can't escape and so I can hang the two-ply sample loop on my wheel for easy access to check my consistency as I spin and ply.



Plying

An important aspect of plying low twist singles is that low twist singles aren't as strong as high twist singles so I have to be careful as I'm pulling them off the bobbin while plying. To minimize the tugging and yanking that can occur, I set the lazy kate at the same level as my chair. To keep the bobbins from flying wildly and tangling the singles, I created a little friction on the bobbins on the lazy kate by pushing wide rubber washers (purchased at the hardware store) on to the rod next to the bobbins. My technique for plying has a rhythm like the short forward draw spinning technique. My treadling foot keeps the beat and my hands follow the beat. As my foot treadles once, my forward hand moves back to the fiber hand, which is close to the lazy kate. The forward hand pinches the yarn and pulls a new length of singles from the bobbins while feeding the previously plied yarn into the orifice. The singles pass through the fingers of the fiber hand and when the proper length of singles has been pulled, that hand pinches the singles. At this point, the singles are pinched between the fingers of both hands and I give a quick tug to make sure they are taut and straight.



As my foot treadles a second time, my forward hand releases the yarn, letting the twist into the singles, while the fiber hand maintains its hold. The forward hand goes back toward the fiber hand to repeat the process.

Plying, continued



So, my foot treadles when my forward hand is at both ends of its path, first when my forward hand moves back to my fiber hand to pinch and pull a new length of singles, and second when my forward hand has pulled the singles out straight and taut and releases the singles to let the twist in. My fiber hand remains fairly stationary while my forward hand moves back and forth in a *pinch, pull, release* motion with my foot treadling two times during each repeat. You may notice that I don't *guide* the twist into the singles by running my fingers along the singles as the twist follows. There is no real need or benefit to doing that and not guiding the twist gives my forward hand a small moment to relax before pinching and pulling again.



I have arbitrarily chosen to base my plying on treadling two times for each repeat of the hand motions simply because it is an easy rhythm to get used to so I don't have to count while I ply. This technique could work just as well if three or four treadles per repeat were used. To get the right amount of twist in my plied yarns when treadling, I adjust the distance that I pull the singles out before releasing them and letting the twist in. To check whether I'm getting the right amount of twist, I stop plying, pull some of the newly plied yarn off the bobbin, and check it against the plying sample that I made earlier. If there is too much twist in the new yarn then I increase the distance I pull the singles before releasing the pinch and letting the twist in (this means that the number of twists produced by my two treadles will be spread across a longer length of yarn). If there isn't enough twist then I reduce the distance I pull the singles before releasing them. After a few minutes of plying, I get used to the distance the forward hand moves and I remember a target point in relation to my lap or the wheel where it is suppose to release the yarn and go back for more singles. So this rhythmic plying quickly becomes an automatic process that I can do while talking or watching television but it produces a very consistent yarn.