



An HJS Studio Tutorial:

Fiber FAM

(Frequently Asserted Myths)



Introduction

It never ceases to amaze me to hear the same myths about wool and spinning over and over. Folks seem to hand the myths down like precious treasures, never questioning the Revealed Truth, let alone testing it.

Below you'll find a miscellany of myths that I've collected over the years. Most I've disproved to my own satisfaction through experience and experimentation, sometimes with some help from a variety of books and websites. Yes, I'm opinionated—in the form of having strong opinions based on personal, hands-on, I've done it myself many times, experience—in other words, I feel I've earned the right to have strong opinions, which is the more positive connotation of "opinionated". But I hope that you will acquire a more questioning attitude of your own in the process of assessing what I've written here and elsewhere on my website.

Many of the topics are covered more fully in my Tutorials if you want more information. With no further ado, and in no particular order (drum roll, please! :), I present:

A list of the myths in this FAM so you can jump right to what interests you:

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Frequently Asserted Myths and My Rebuttals

Sheep are harmed, even killed, to harvest their wool.

This is one of the saddest myths of all. I suppose it's at least partly the result of humans being so urbanized today. Few Americans have stepped on a farm of any kind during their entire lives, let alone seen something so basic as sheep being shorn.



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The process of removing wool from wool-bearing sheep is just like getting your hair cut—that is, if you normally allow yourself to be shaved bald :) Sheep don't like it, of course, because it only happens once a year so they're not used to it, they're handled rather abruptly, and the machine doing the cutting is much louder than the average barber's hair cutters.

There are occasional nicks, even small cuts, especially with small, wiggly sheep. Typically the shearer will spray these small wounds with something that seals it from the air, is anti-bacterial, and relieves pain. Judging from the calm behavior of a sheep after such an incident—they usually go right back to eating, chewing their cud, or nursing their lambs—it's not a lot worse than skinning your knuckle against something rough.

Far worse is the malicious myth that sheep are killed to harvest their wool. Sheep which die of diseases or old age or accident sometimes have their wool harvested after death. To harvest wool after death may be common in large commercial flocks; I have no knowledge of that. But in small spinners' flocks, or small farm flocks, it rarely happens. We care about our sheep, usually have names for each one, and often have special pets who look for treats when we come within view :) NONE of us would dream of killing a sheep just to harvest its wool!

The slightest logical look at the myth reveals its absurdity. If sheep are killed just to harvest their wool, there wouldn't be much profit in raising sheep! Instead, they're allowed to live for years, giving many harvests instead of just one.

Of course, some sheep are killed, for meat. Typically the sheepskin is taken and tanned for various uses. That's a much more profitable use of the wool than shearing a dead sheep.



I'm allergic to wool (or angora, or mohair, or yak hair or ...

Actually, probably no one is truly allergic to wool. The reason is that wool, like your hair and fingernails, is made of keratin, a protein. If you were truly allergic to wool, you would have to be allergic to your hair, as well. Perhaps there are a few unhappy souls out there who are allergic to their hair, but if so, I haven't heard of it.

So why do folks think they're allergic to wool? Frequently the belief is based on their experience of wool as itchy and scratchy.

In a few cases, people may be allergic or otherwise sensitive to substances added to the wool during processing. Wool is often processed rather harshly in commercial mills, to bring it from raw sheep's wool to a finished wool product like a coat. Many chemicals are used, including some like mothproofing and sizing, that are added to the finished yarn or cloth. Also, some shepherds choose to use different chemicals to treat the sheep with before the wool is shorn. There are even sheep that are "shorn" by giving them chemicals to make their wool fall off!

If you find that commercially-processed wool causes some sort of reaction, try handspun wool with minimal processing and chemical use before or after shearing. It's hard to wash wool thoroughly without at least some homemade soap, but no other chemicals are really needed.



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Certified organic wool guarantees no chemicals are routinely used during the life of the sheep, and that might help—but even organic wool can be treated with chemicals during processing after it's shorn from the sheep. Shepherds who use organic methods but aren't certified because the cost is too great might label their wool "chemical free", "natural", "green", or similar terms—always ask the shepherd what this means to her/him before you assume that a chemical you believe you're allergic to isn't used.

If handspun wool, too, gives you a reaction, then consider the possibility of a problem such as external parasites on the sheep before shearing. I'm "allergic" to angora (also keratin, like sheep's wool), which really means I'm allergic to the debris left in the angora fiber from wool mites on the bunnies. My sinuses clog up and I start sneezing almost uncontrollably within a few minutes of spinning angora that has received no processing since it was plucked. Washed angora doesn't cause this reaction. Gently washed chemical-free wool might work OK for you, too.

Wool is itchy and scratchy, even a lined coat over other clothing, so either a) I must be allergic to it or b) all wool is itchy.

The harshness of some wools is real, but not really the wool's fault, and it shouldn't be condemned wholesale.

There is an amazing variety of sheep breeds, each with a unique type of wool—and to make even a wider range of wool fibers, each breed has a range of normal wool types within that breed's sheep, and in the case of handspinning flocks, there are many, many crossbred sheep with mixes of characteristics.

Take Romney, for instance. It's widely raised in the US, and widely suggested as an ideal wool for beginning spinners (not endorsing that idea, mind you, just quoting popular opinion here :) Romney can vary from 4 inches / 10 cm in length to over 8 inches / 20 cm, from moderate crimp to more of a wave than a crimp, from silky in handle (feel and characteristics) to coarse and harsh.

So the wool you felt as scratchy may actually be wool that was too coarse for the end use it was put to.

Again pointing the finger at big commercial mills (**not** cottage carding mills, serving hand-spinners), they put wool through some pretty harsh processes, including baths in strong sulphuric acid to dissolve the cellulose-based debris in the fleeces. Some of these processes will permanently damage the wool, making it feel less soft than it did still on the hoof. As an example, wash some raw wool in hand dishwashing detergent, and another bit of the wool using washing soda (a mild alkali—alkalis damage wool but are effective at removing grease). What do the two samples feel like when dry?

The more gentle the processing, the better the wool will feel in the end product. Of course, that's not practical for textile mills, but handspinners have control over every step of wool processing, and can choose wool types and processing techniques that will banish "itchy and scratchy" wool from garments and other items that will touch the skin.



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So give wool another chance—talk to a handspinner and feel the yarn she shows you! You'll be amazed!



Wool felts so easily that if you look at it with damp eyes, it felts!

OK, so this is a ridiculous exaggeration, but hey, it makes the point, right?

Again, there is a very wide range of wool types. Some felt very very easily: the finewools, like Merino, Corriedale, Bond, Rambouillet, and the like. Some practically won't felt, no matter what: the Down breeds, like Suffolk and Dorset, and the carpet breeds, such as Drysdale and Carpetmaster (yes, that's really a sheep breed!). Medium wools, like Romney, Border Leicester, etc, will felt, but it takes more effort than with the finewools. Primitive breeds such as Finnsheep, Shetland, Icelandic and the like felt generally less than finewools unless they also have a pronounced downy undercoat, as that undercoat can felt pretty easily, binding the coarser overcoat with it.

What is felting, and what causes it, really? Setting aside needle felting, which is a whole different critter, wet felting is the process of raising the scales of the wool fibers, softening those scales so they're sort of plasticky, and tangling the scales beyond the point of return. Felt, made intentionally, is likely to be among the earliest cloths, and was still common among nomadic peoples well into the history of loom weaving because it could be made without equipment, making felt ideal for pastoralists who don't have a permanent home. In fact, as most of us now know, yurts, a non-permanent tent-like home, are made of felt.

The process of felting involves a combination of the following factors:

- ❖ Water
- ❖ Heat
- ❖ Agitation
- ❖ Alkali

In fact, to avoid unintentional felting, you could even make an acronym of these factors: WHAAaaaaaa! Which describes the feeling when it happens by accident as well as the process rather well :)

Water swells the scales on the wool fiber, making them rise up. These scales are like the scales on a pinecone. When they're in the "up" position, they can catch and tangle with other fibers very easily.

Heat softens the keratin wool is made of, and makes it sort of sticky—not like glue, but such that it's likely to stick to itself.

Agitation (or rubbing, squeezing, twisting, and the like) make the fibers all mixed up, providing more chances they'll tangle, as well as increasing the effectiveness of the stickiness.

Alkali damages the wool (and other protein fibers), creating additional places that are broken and can therefore catch and tangle. You don't need alkali for felting to take place, but if you want to felt, an alkali will speed things up. The wool is also likely to feel harsher afterwards.



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And use only a little alkali! Apply a drop of pure household bleach to a bit of wool (that's not part of something you value!) to see what I mean.

So next time you put your raw wool loose into the washer, fill it full of Hot Water and a splash of Washing Soda or Alkali Soap, then poke it around a lot to make sure it's well penetrated, and finally forget to turn off the Agitation cycle in the washing machine, don't be surprised to find a really well-felted Wreath of Wool when you're all done!

But if you heed the WHAA and avoid all you can, your wool can be washed—yes, even Merino and other finewools—without fear of felting. For a detailed description of how to do that, see my Wool Washing page. It's the most popular page on my website by far!

Note I haven't mentioned a sub-myth common to the felting myth: That wool will felt if it's not washed and rinsed in the same temperature of water.

Fact: Cold water applied after the other preliminaries of felting will solidify fibers in their tangled state. That's all it does.

If you avoid felting by, in particular, minimizing agitation and avoiding an alkali pH, a cold water rinse will Not Harm Your Wool! Yes, I shouted a bit there :) I've washed Merino fleeces in 160 degree Fahrenheit water many a time, taken it out of the washer, filled said washer with barely warm water (80-100 F typically), put the still-steaming Merino right in that water, then repeated the rinse with water straight from our well at 40 F year-round, and not had any felt at all. A cold water rinse does not create felt by itself, it merely solidifies felt you already created.



Don't dry your wet wool in the sun (or near a heat source) because something (generally unspecified) will harm the wool.

This one always cracks me up :) Where were the sheep for the year before their wool was shorn? In the sun! Yet we're not supposed to dry wool in the sun?

Fact: UV damage from the sun can make dry, crackly wool, brittle tips, and in the case of naturally colored wool, bleached tips. That's one of the reasons why some shepherds use sheep coats—not just to keep vegetable matter out, but to prevent UV damage, especially to colored fleeces.

However, drying a fleece in the sun doesn't take a year! The wool will only be out there a few hours at most. If the wool is dyed with a dye that isn't very light-fast or resistant to fading from light, it's a good idea to either dry it in the shade or cover it with a sheet to help prevent fading. Personally, I'm not crazy about drying wool in the shade, because in my yard, the only shade is from trees, and I don't like what they drop on my wool (especially in the spring, when sticky leaf sheaths drop out of the poplars).

The thing about not drying near a heat source has got to be the result of the various felting myths. When I lived in Germany, I used to drape wet wool (and items made of wool) directly on radiators—and a very fast and convenient way to dry them it was! Notice I didn't mention drying in a tumble dryer, though. The tumbling action on wet wool has the potential to felt almost as quickly as agitating in a washing machine. Not quite, though—I do use the dryer,



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on delicate (low) temperature, to tumble woven items of handspun wool. I keep it very short, just enough to remove major wrinkles, then I finish the drying by draping the cloth over something, often my loom (no, it doesn't hurt the loom, at least not in the winter with the heat running and the humidity very low—I probably wouldn't do it in the humid summertime).

One final note on drying wool: Make sure it really is dry before you bag it and put it away, especially if you're putting it in a container or bag that's fairly air tight. Damp wool can mildew and even spontaneously combust, given the right conditions. And remember that wool can feel dry even when it's not yet, because of how absorbent it is. Given these considerations, drying in the sun or near a heat source is actually not a bad idea at all!

Fulling and felting are the same thing.

We're kind of on a roll here with the whole felting myth thing, so I decided to throw this one in as another sub-myth.

Fact: Fulling and felting are **not** the same thing.

Felting is described pretty thoroughly above, so I'll jump right into defining fulling.

In my own words, fulling is the process of wet-finishing woven cloth after it's cut off the loom. In today's parlance, washing a knit item after it's finished is often included in the term "fulling", and although that's not technically correct, I feel it's a reasonable extension of the term.

Notice nothing is said about the fiber type. Wool felts (well, some wool has the potential to felt, we know now not all will :), but cotton or linen doesn't. Yet cotton and linen can be fullled.

Wet-finishing cloth after it's taken from the loom causes the yarns and individual fibers to relax. Substances such as sizing and spinning/carding oil are washed away, improving the handle of the cloth. That "wiry" look the cloth often has while on the loom disappears as the yarns fluff to their natural, unstretched state. Think of it as a relaxing bath for the cloth :) Do felting and fulling ever coincide? Yes, they sometimes do, with wool and some other protein fibers. Some woven wool cloth is deliberately agitated past the point of mere relaxation. It then begins to felt as part of the fulling process. You have to keep an eye on it to take it to just the degree of felting you want in your cloth. Fine wools might need only a few minutes of agitation; coarser wools might never felt much at all. The weaver chooses the combination of fiber and weave structure and fulling time to get the cloth she wants.

Cotton and linen, on the other hand, will only full, they can't felt. So you can agitate them forever in hot water if you want—but we're too "green" these days to do anything so wasteful :) And probably all you'd have at the end of "forever" is lint—but you certainly won't have felt!



Handspun singles a) can't be used for warp, or b) must have a hard twist.

Ah, how I wish I had a dollar (inflation, you know) for every time I heard one or the other of these statements. I would at least get enough money to pay for my website!

Fact: Handspun singles have been used for millennia in both warp and weft to weave functional cloth.

I vividly remember bringing a skein of handspun singles I was going to use for warp to make a shawl to a spinning group meeting. The ladies passed the skein around without any comment on its softness or beauty (both striking, though I do say so myself :) The only comment, muttered over and over, was "Does she think she can weave with this?" The next month I brought the finished shawl. I wish I could say their eyes were opened to the possibilities of soft handspun singles yarns, but I don't think that happened. At any rate, the shawl was passed quickly around like a hot potato and no comments of any kind reached my ears.

I cite this incident because it shows how enduring this myth is. In spite of holding the evidence in their own hands, these spinners chose to ignore the evidence and stick to their prejudices, without testing those prejudices. I don't go to that group any more.

There are lots of examples of handspun singles items on my website, from the "Magenta Madness shawl" on my home page to the coat I spun and wove for my daughter, and you can see photos of a collection of shawls in my Gallery made with handspun singles. According to archeological finds, singles yarns of wool, silk, linen, and cotton were pretty standard throughout the history of weaving. Guess what? Those spinners didn't have millspun yarns to work with, they hand spun those singles! And on drop spindles to boot!

Which brings us to a quick visit to the idea that warp yarns must have a hard twist. Every time singles warp yarns are mentioned, the statement is made that they must have extra twist to work. Can you hear my sigh? Girl, how I would love to have all those dollars! The coat mentioned above was singles in warp and weft spun to a twist angle of 10 degrees. Yes, that's accurate, TEN degrees. If you don't know what a twist angle is, let's just say that 10 degrees is a very low-twist yarn, close to the point at which a yarn won't hold together at all. Used for warp. As singles. Without a single break in the warp. And no, I don't do magic! I just pay attention to the choosing and preparation of the fiber.

I plan a series of articles for the website on the topic of weaving with handspun singles (will be linked from here and from my tutorials page when complete). Or you can get a copy of [Spin-Off Spring 2002](#) for my article on the subject if you don't want to wait. It's pretty complete, though there's always bits and pieces of information you wish you had managed to squeeze in :)

It's only fair to add that many (maybe virtually all) cloths dug up by archeologist have a pretty hard twist, as much as 50 degrees or more. It's probably a fair assumption to say that the spinners chose to put that much twist in because it was needed by the warp-weighted looms used and in order to make cloth that would last literally for generations (even when used as toilet paper and dumped in a cistern!).

For today's spinners, that much twist is probably not needed, unless doing accurate reproduction spinning and weaving. Our handspun, handwoven cloth is generally made for things



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like shawls and woven sweaters and other items that will receive light use. For hard-wearing clothing today, I'd probably use 20-25 degrees, and I'd choose appropriate fibers to withstand wear-and-tear. But for soft shawls and warm coats, my usual 10-15 degrees would be my preference.

Socks have to have a hard twist, or fancy spinning techniques; preferably both, to stand up to wear.

That sort of sounds familiar! If you read the warp singles myth, you probably know what I'm going to say here :)

I spin 3-ply sock yarns that knit at 7-8 stitches per inch on size 1 needles (please, no negative reactions to that!). The singles typically have a twist angle of 15 degrees, and the plying is a standard balanced plied yarn, nothing fancy like cabled yarns. The socks wear well in spite of the "disadvantages" because I'm careful about the wools I choose, and I blend in some mohair. For the full story, see my handspun sock yarn tutorial.

Will cabled yarns wear better than standard 3 ply yarns? Yes, they will, but they're not essential. Cable away, my friend, if you enjoy the extra spinning and plying time!

Will a tighter twist wear better than a 15 degree twist angle? Yes, again, most of the time. But (you knew there had to be a but, right, given my bee in the bonnet about twist :), too hard a twist will feel wiry and unpleasant on the foot, and won't necessarily wear a lot better. I have a pair of socks made of a specially-designed and commissioned millspun yarn. The twist angle of the singles is pretty high—I haven't taken apart the yarn to check it, but I would say at least 25 degrees. It's a balanced 3 ply yarn that knits at 8 sts to the inch. And, after fewer hours of wear than my handspun socks require, the socks of this yarn are getting very thin under the heel and will have to be darned before they can be worn again. And yes, they do feel wiry and hard on my feet—but also very elastic and supportive, so there can be advantages to tightly-spun sock yarns.

Choice of fiber and the way the socks are knit have as much to do with how the socks wear as does the amount of twist in the singles. Which leads right into the next myth to bust...

Merino yarn makes great socks.

Unequivocally and without apology, no, Merino does **not** make great socks, no matter what catalogs and magazines say, not if you want to wear your socks more than darn them! This myth really annoys me. It's clearly designed to sell yarn or Merino fiber, not to serve the customer. Makes me growl just thinking about it.

Merino and other fine wools are lovely to work with, soft and elastic and fluffy and warm—comfort spinning :) However, as most spinners and knitters know, it pills easily, especially in areas like under arms and on cuffs where there's a lot of rubbing. That means it's not very resistant to abrasion. And there's the rub (pun intended) in using Merino and the like for socks: It's not resistant to the type of wear and tear socks normally get, so thin areas, then holes, will be showing up shortly.



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Of course, if you don't mind darning holes every time you wear a pair, or if you plan to felt them (but even felted fine wools can get holes when made into footwear—voice of experience here!), or if you only wear them "with your feet up on the coffee table" as Elizabeth Zimmerman put it, go ahead and choose one of those lovely space-dyed 100% Merino "sock" yarns. Far be it from me to destroy your happiness in a pleasurable activity :)

The best use of Merino, if you must use it in socks, is in the legs. Those get relatively little abrasion, allowing Merino's softness and elasticity to caress your ankles and legs. But use something else for the foot!

What I haven't personally tried is a Merino/nylon yarn. I would strongly suspect your sock would be down to nylon only under the foot pretty quickly, but that's just a guess. And buying a "superwash" Merino or Merino/nylon yarn is not going to make a difference. Superwash just means it doesn't felt, it doesn't mean it's more resistant to abrasion.

Wool must be spun "by the book", according to rules some expert figured out.

One thing I really don't like is "rules" laid down to spin by. You'll see that again in the count your treadles myth below. Sure, there are general guidelines that are helpful to know. But there are absolutely no absolutes in fiber. Well, OK, other than that felting is irreversible :)

A number of spinning books available purport to lay down rules regarding how different wool types can be spun. One goes by the amount of crimp, for example. I kid you not, it states a narrow range of yarn sizes and amount of twist based on the crimp of the wool you're using.

It should be needless to say that this kind of rigidity is just plain silly, but since many folks believe every word a person with a famous name says, it's here in black and white that you don't have to!

Fact: Every type of wool can be spun into a wide variety of yarn types. Of course, there's a range of types that are the most sensible use of a given kind of wool. For example, don't use Merino for the feet of socks you actually intend to wear—instead, use it for fine and soft baby clothes or shawls or next-to-the-skin sweaters that won't get a lot of wear.

Play with your wool, don't be afraid to transgress someone's "law" of spinning (even mine :)! Sure, you'll have a few failures, but using a little common sense will minimize those, and being willing to examine and learn from your failures is a priceless learning experience.

You must count your treadles as you spin to produce good, consistent yarn.

Another myth that makes my blood boil, at least at high altitudes. We're not machines!

Spinning machines "count their treadles" in the gears that are used to determine the speed of the draft. That can be done because a) they're machines and therefore extremely consistent and b) the fiber has been through a lot more processing than most handspinning fiber, so it's much more consistent than what handspinners usually work with.



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Real handspinners are much better than machines because they can take an inconsistent fiber prep and make consistent yarn out of it (at least up to a reasonable limit :) We must have the freedom to speed or slow our treading, speed or slow our drafting, according to the demands of the fiber, in order to make a consistent yarn. Conversely, if a highly-textured look is desired, we must have the freedom to change spinning to make an irregular yarn. These can't be done very well by counting treadles.

Another point—what about those of us who use an espinner? We have no treadles or other points of reference to count! OK, maybe we could count the turns of the flyer, but only if it's going very slowly. Yet we manage to spin reasonably consistent yarn.

There are two main factors to spinning consistent yarn: good fiber prep, and practice, Practice, PRACTICE. The more you spin, the better you get. The better the fiber you start with, the better the resulting yarn. Another good tool is to mark a pencil or section of a dowel with inches / centimeters, and check your wraps per inch / cm periodically. Any spinner can drift off the standard she's aiming for, whether she counts the treadles or not, because it's the combination of fiber, draft, and treading that determines the resulting yarn. Checking the wraps per inch / cm every so often (I do it each time I change my yarn onto a new hook) will enforce consistency.

Consistency is a very worthwhile goal in handspinning. Let's just not be rigid about getting there.



1500 rpm is fast enough for any spinner.

I've heard this from various spinners, and I've read it in more ads for espinner than I care to count. Needless to say, it's another myth.

I outgrew the speed available on my Ashford Traveller wheel years ago. With the Lace Flyer on it, the wheel has a ratio of 30:1. Treadled at my usual, comfortable and maybe leisurely pace of 60 treadles per minute, that's 1800 rpm (revolutions per minute of the flyer)—60 treadles x 30 turns of the flyer per treadle. That isn't fast enough to keep up with my potential drafting speed. Treadled at 100 times per minute, my maximum speed on that wheel is 3000 rpm (100 treadles x 30). Not fast enough.

By "not fast enough" I mean that I can draft fiber faster than the wheel can provide enough turns of the flyer to hold that yarn together, even the kind of low-twist yarn I usually spin. Eventually I bought an espinner because of the frustration of slow spinning on various treadle-driven wheels. I've written about the process of deciding whether to buy an electric spinner because I found there's a great deal of misinformation about them, and a lack of full information from the manufacturers in many cases.

And one major piece of misinformation is that 1500 rpm is fast enough for all levels of spinning ability. Let's look at that assertion: Say you like to treadle at 60 treadles per minute (not a very fast pace). $1500 \text{ rpm} / 60 \text{ treadles per minute} = 25$ turns of the flyer to one treadle, or the flyer ratio of 25:1. There's a lot of treadled wheels out there with that and faster ratios, so clearly 1500 rpm isn't going to accommodate a spinner used to 25:1 or higher ratios from her treadle wheel.



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Not everyone wants or needs speed from their spinning devices, but if you think you might be a production spinner at some point, or want to spin faster as you gain skill, or just like being as productive as possible with as little energy expended as possible (known as "productive laziness" :), then don't be limited to spinning devices that can only deliver 1500 rpm. It's just not going to even be adequate.

Drop spindles are slower than spinning wheels.

I used to believe this myth! Yes, really! Then my daughter started spinning, and glommed onto spindles because they allowed her to be a spinner but still be different from me. I've learned a lot from watching her skill and her collection of spindles grow. The book Prehistoric Textiles also helped, as I read great descriptions of the way drop spindles were used in the past. Other books about specific archeological digs taught me still more. Today I realize that a well-designed spindle, with the right fiber, is a lot faster than most modern spinning wheels—faster even than most, maybe all, esp spinners.

This myth got built, I think, on the belief that having to frequently interrupt one's spinning to wind the yarn onto the spindle slowed a drop spindler down, while a flyer automatically winding yarn onto the bobbin of a flyer wheel is a faster way to store the yarn.

Not having done any in-depth studies of the relative speed of winding on, I can't comment on that. But I have done quite a bit of study of the issue of the speed of spinning, and a spindle that's well chosen for the fiber being spun is much faster than the vast majority of flyer wheels, spindle wheels, or esp spinners. The time spent winding on, assuming it's significantly slower than automatic winding on to a bobbin (big assumption, probably incorrect), is more than covered by the time saved with a fast spindle.

Another contribution to this myth is probably that "modern" drop spindles, until the 90s, were pretty slow and clunky. Bottom whorl spinning is slower than top whorl, but bottom whorl is all we ever heard of back then. And the spindle weights were high, so were suited only to rather chunky yarns. A three-ounce spindle is much too heavy to spin the kinds of yarns that would spin very fast. So we spun thick, chunky, slow yarn on those old drop spindles.

Although I'm a dedicated flyer spinner (even if it doesn't have a treadle :), I can see that today's well-designed drop spindles are much more efficient for spinning very fine yarns which require a lot of twist to hold together. I still keep the clunky spindles around for demos—just like I keep my Ashford Traveller around for demos. But I use the fast spindles when I want to drop spin. It's a lot faster and therefore more fun!

Handspun yarns must be blocked before using.

Only if a) it's high-twist singles yarn and you've washed it, or b) you want to prettify your skein before entering it in a show.

Blocking yarn is often recommended, especially in older books on spinning. However, it's only rarely needed and only temporarily effective.



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An explanation of how blocking works is an analogy involving hair. If you put your hair in rollers after a shampoo, when your hair is dry and you brush it out, your hair looks great—for a little while. Any humidity will make the curls sag; rain will make the curl melt away entirely. Remembering that wool is very like hair, it performs very similarly. You block a wet skein over a form or with a weight (good thing we don't need weights when we roller our hair! :) and let it dry in that position. Voila! Blocked skein! But...a humid day comes and the skein "shrinks" a bit. Wet finish the item you made from it, and it "shrinks" more, sometimes disastrously so.

Fine wools are the worst in this, because they're fine, so they stretch out more easily, and because they've lots of crimp, so there's more stretching "room". For example, take a skein of Merino you've spun and wound on a skein winder or niddy noddy and left alone for a day or more (one type of blocking), then wash it. What on earth happened to the length?!?! Blocking artificially stretches the yarn, but only temporarily.

Twist is the deciding factor in blocking. If you've spun a high-twist singles yarn for some purpose, and you must wash the skein before using the yarn, blocking is probably the only way you'll be able to use the yarn, because the washing will have made the fibers relax—which, with high-twist, means there'll be plenty of kinks and curls to tangle and test your patience.

Remembering my preference for low-twist yarns, especially for singles, I would probably block yarns that have a twist angle of 30 or higher if I a) had no time to let the yarn rest 24 hours on a bobbin, or b) had to wash the yarn before weaving with it (knitting with such a high twist wouldn't be my idea of fun, but I could see doing reproduction weaving with it). That's it for blocking!

Because people tend to assume high-twist yarns are necessary for handspun warps, blocking warp singles is most often recommended. If you want and need to put that much twist in, by all means, block the yarn to make it easier to work with. You'll be glad you did! At least, until it turns humid :) Otherwise, don't bother. I blocked my yarns for the first year I spun, then I found I didn't need to after all. I haven't blocked any yarn for any purpose for at least 20 years now, but I'm leaving the door open for reproduction weaving....



You must hold the fiber in your dominant hand while spinning.

Assuming, for the moment, that you're right handed. You're a spinner today, with a modern spinning wheel. Your teacher says since you're right handed, hold the fiber in your right hand, and that's how you learn to spin.

Fast forward a year or more. You buy a charkha, great wheel, or Rio Grande wheel. You're holding your fiber in your right hand...but you can't spin! The spindle points left, so the fiber has to be in your left hand.

Fortunately, spinning is essentially an ambidextrous activity. Both hands are used in specialized ways, and either hand can learn to do what the other does. I learned to spin with the fiber in my left hand (more about that below) and found it made switching to a charkha, then a great wheel, then the Rio Grande absolutely painless. Since then, I've taught myself to hold the fiber in my right hand, just to see how much effort it would take. Not nearly as much as I expected! Both hands work in spinning, and neither much cares just what job it's doing.



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No, I'm not ambidextrous—I would rate myself as strongly right-handed. But handedness doesn't matter in spinning, anymore than it does in knitting or weaving—except for using point spinners like a great wheel, that is!

I have a theory about why the left hand "should" hold the fiber. I learned to drop spin from a little booklet back in 86 (my how time flies when you're having fun spinning!). I'd have to get the booklet out and look to be sure, but I don't think it specified which hand to hold the fiber. One major job with a drop spindle is keeping the spindle turning so the yarn gets enough twist to not break. Pretty obvious, right? But have you tried to turn a spindle with your non-dominant hand? It's not so easy! Most people being right-handed meant that spinning conventions started in which the left hand held the fiber because the right hand was busy with the more challenging task of keeping that spindle turning. So I naturally spun my spindle with the right hand while managing the fiber with the left.

Equally naturally, other spinning devices which had to be turned, like the charkha and the hand-turned point spinner common in medieval Europe before the flyer wheel was developed, were turned with the right while the fiber was managed with the left—not because the right hand needed more skill to turn the device this time around (although if you've ever turned a ball winder with a non-dominant hand, you probably know the dominant hand is better even at this simple task), but because all the spinners were used to holding the fiber in the left. So point spinners have points pointing left today. Likewise, flyer wheels with a traditional styling virtually all have the flyers to the left of the drive wheel. While you can spin on one with the fiber in either hand pretty easily, having the fiber in the left hand still provides an advantage in managing take-up, changing fiber on the hooks, and reaching out to the drive wheel when it needs a little extra boost by using the more dextrous (for most people) right hand.

I encourage every spinner who's used to holding the fiber in the right hand to "make the switch" to the left hand. It will be a little awkward at first, but you'll be surprised how fast you learn the new trick. And you will then be able to switch to any point spinner with ease, and manage drop spinning more easily, too.

For that matter, I encourage folks who hold the fiber in the left hand to switch it to the right at least occasionally. You'll be surprised how fun it is to become relatively ambidextrous with your spinning! But, if you're a long draw spinner, make sure you leave enough room for your reach! I sit next to a picture window, for instance, while I spin—though I haven't put my right hand through it yet while long-draw spinning :)



This is all I can think of at the moment for my list of Frequently Asserted Myths about fiber. If you have a favorite myth you'd like to see challenged or explained, please feel free to contact me. If I feel I have, or could gain, the experience needed to test the myth, I'll write it up and thank you on the website for bringing it to my attention.



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