

HANDLING TOPS FOR BEGINNERS

Tops are the smoothest, most processed preparation for wool. The shorter bits have been combed out and the fibres aligned to be parallel in a long continuous length. They come in solid colours or blends of colours or fibres. A coloured blended top has long lengthwise stripes of colour, but a top of blended fibre types will generally be very well mixed together.

****Please note that this type of prepared fibre can be referred to as top, tops or sliver.**



Three types of blended fibre. Left to right: Wool/Silk blend (dyed the same colour, Raspberry), DHG Tempura Blend in Madame Matisse (stripy blend with solid colours) and DHG Sugar Candies Blend in Make-Up (more blended with mixing of colours).

To break off a section of top easily, make sure your hands are more than a staple length apart. The staple length is the length of the individual wool fibres.



If your hands are too close, you won't be able to pull the fibres apart.



This is a better distance to gently pull the top apart.

Just a little twist is enough to turn top into a giant yarn and make pulling it apart difficult. Untwist the free end and it should come apart easily.



Make sure your top isn't twisted



Untwisted top with hands further apart.

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Although it may seem like a round sausage, top is actually a flat ribbon and you can gently open it out back into that shape. If you want a fluffier preparation, you can steam it by waving it through the steam from a steamer, iron or kettle until it puffs up. Steaming will also help if the top is compacted from long storage, which can make drafting evenly more difficult.

You can spin tops directly from the end, either as is straight from the package or back and forth across an opened strip, but there are several quick ways to change it up for an easier spin or a different effect.



Left to right: Original top, opened top and steamed top

- Create “fauxlags” (false rolags) by rolling up a short strip into a tube. This will create a more woollen/fluffy yarn, but not as airy as true rolags. Use it to save time or when you want rolags but a multicoloured top would blend together too much if carded.
- Strip the top along its length into smaller sections for an easier drafting experience and a more consistent yarn, especially for finer spinning. You can also use this method to arrange the colours in a blended top and get larger runs of colour in the finished yarn.
- Spinning from the fold is another way to get a more woollen yarn without carding rolags. Break off a small section of top and bend it over your finger, drafting from the ‘fold’ of fibre. This technique is also popular for preserving the separation of vibrant colours in a blended top.



Different preparation methods for spinning top fibre. Clockwise from the top left: fauxlag, stripped and drafting from the fold.

If you’re going to spin tops in long lengths, either as it comes, steamed, or stripped into thinner sections, break it off into pieces only about as long as your arm or a little longer. It will be easier to handle as well as to ensure roughly even amounts on every bobbin by counting strips.

You can also work with hand cards, a hackle, drum carder or other tools to turn your tops into other preparations such as blended roving or rolags, or felt them.