

#7 - Winding a Centre-Pull Ball from a Skein

Those of us born before 1970 will almost certainly remember seeing skeins of yarn, and were probably recruited for winding duties by our mothers and/or grandmothers. However, younger knitters may only have seen yarn in machine-made, ready to knit balls. So, for the uninitiated, here's how to turn that gorgeous, squishy, weirdly-shaped thing you just bought at a yarn show into something you can use!

Before we start I must stress, please, PLEASE, don't try to knit, crochet or whatever, directly from the skein. I once had a skein returned by a customer because "it got tangled while I was trying to knit with it". What came back looked like a bird's nest, or something that the dog or cat had been playing with, and clearly had not been wound first. All my skeins now include the advice to "wind into a ball before use".

The advantage of a centre-pull ball is that the yarn inside will usually be under less tension than that on the outside. Stretched yarn can relax after knitting/washing and so affect your tension/gauge. You can buy yarn winders which will do the job for you and give you a nice centre-pull ball - a good idea if you have lots of skeins to wind. If you know you can wind loosely and you're happy to knit from the outside of the ball, then feel free to do so (I normally do so myself) - you can ignore the instructions on keeping the inner end of yarn free

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First, remove any skein band and untwist the skein, laying it out into a circle (pic 1). There will be a number of ties around it. One of these should hold the start and end of the yarn - any others will usually just be there to keep things tidy. Carefully clip and remove all the ties and find the ends of the skein. Unravel a little of one end so that you can locate it easily - one end will usually unravel more easily than the other, depending how the skein has been wound (pic 2).



Now you need something to rest the skein on. This can be a willing pair of hands, if you have a friend, partner or child available - get them to hold both hands out in front, palms facing, drape the skein around their hands and then move their arms far enough apart to keep the yarn reasonably taut.

Yarn swifts are great as they hold the yarn steady and you don't need assistance from another person.



Horizontal table-top ones (top left) are quick and easy to set up and are usually adjustable to fit skeins of several sizes. You can also buy "umbrella" swifts (bottom left) that clamp to a table and adjust by pulling up or down to fit.

Alternatively, you can loop the yarn around a chair back. (You can also use your own arms, as I frequently do at yarn shows - but that's probably best left until you're a little more experienced!)

Now wind your ball - I'm right-handed, so reverse the instructions if you're left-handed.

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Keeping the first 6 inches (15 cm) of yarn in your left palm, wind the yarn around the four fingers of your left hand 20-25 times (pic 3), taut enough to stay in place but not too tightly. The number of wraps will depend on the thickness of the yarn - thinner yarn needs more wraps. Slip the yarn off your fingers and hold the bundle along your left forefinger. Wind around this bundle and your finger 10-15 times (pic 4). Slip off your finger, fold the bundle in half, still keeping the loose end free, then wind around this bundle 10-15 times (pic 5). Give a quarter turn and wind again (pic 6).

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Continue in this way, turning and winding - keeping your tension even and not too tight - and avoid winding directly over the free end. You may find it useful after the first couple of turns to push your left forefinger into the ball where the loose end hangs, to keep it free as you wind (pic 7). When you've finished winding all the yarn from the skein, tuck the outside end under a few strands to keep it tidy, leaving the inner end free (pic 8). The ball can now be stored until needed.

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To use the yarn, use your fingers to loosen around the inner end and carefully pull out a plug of yarn from the centre (pic 9) - this will be the first few wraps you did around your fingers. The yarn should then pull easily from the centre. If it doesn't come out easily, you may have wound a little too tight at the start, and may need to take a larger plug to start with.

Enjoy using your yarns!!