

Blended Tops: Managing Colour by Spinning from the Fold

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When I first started spinning, I lived in a tiny apartment and had no space to process a fleece, nor any budget for fibre prep tools. Instead, the blended tops sold in my local yarn shop conveniently ready-to-use and at an affordable price, were my entry point into the world of spinning. They came in a wide range of colourways, from subtle monochromes to eye-searing neons, and most were repeatable blends, giving me the safety net of being able to buy more if my project estimates fell short.

Back then, I found a wealth of information on how to manage the widthways colours in hand-dyed braids, but commercial blends like these, with the stripes running lengthways, were rarely mentioned. So, I simply did what everyone else seemed to do, and what I assumed I was 'supposed' to do with a combed preparation intended for commercial worsted spinning, I spun it short forward draw from the end of the top, never stopping to question whether there were other options.

As I built up my skills, I produced skein after skein of perfectly usable yarn but I began to feel limited by two things. First, because I always spun them the same way, I was only producing smooth, dense and drapey, worsted-style yarns which lacked the bounce I wanted for certain projects. Second, and perhaps most frustratingly, I often found that the vibrant colours which had attracted me to the fibre in the first place became muddled and merged together in the yarn.

This occurs due to a phenomenon called optical blending. When every draft contains a small amount of multiple colours, the fibres are so fine and close together that our eyes are unable to distinguish one shade from another. Instead, they interpret them as an average, so a top that contains bright reds, greens and blues might spin up as a murky brown.

The multi-tonal depth of those 'muddy' yarns was often really stunning, but I was producing them by default rather than by choice. So, I began to experiment with spinning blended tops in a variety of ways to change the colour effects, resulting in everything from completely blended to self-striping yarns and gradients. As it turned out, blended tops were far more versatile than I had realised.

One of my favourite ways to work with blended tops is spinning from the fold. It's a simple trick that can be used with any spinning tool, with multiple drafting styles and can make a huge difference to both the colour and texture of your yarn.

Instead of spinning from the end, you take a single staple length of top (the length of an individual fibre) and fold it in half, effectively spinning from one side to the other rather than end to end.



Technique comparison — clockwise from top right:
The swatches are spun from the fold (3-ply); from the fold (chain ply); from the end of the top (chain ply) and from the end of the top (3-ply)

All photos: Becks of Tiny Fibre Studio

By managing the fibre in this way, you work through the stripes of colour one at a time, keeping them more distinct from each other in the single. Your choice of plying method dictates whether your final yarn includes fun, random barber-poling or keeps the shades completely separated for a more variegated effect.

The top's fibres are less aligned when spun from the fold and, because they have a natural desire to return to their unfolded state, they exert an outward pressure within the yarn, creating more space for air. This often means you get more yardage from the same amount of fibre. It also has the potential to create a loftier, bouncier yarn which can vary depending on the drafting method you choose.

This technique is also helpful for working directly with flicked locks of fleece or for taming long or slippery fibres, like silk or mohair, which can sometimes be challenging when spun from the end. If the fibre is long enough for you to hang onto the ends when it's folded in half (and not so long as to be completely unmanageable!) spinning it from the fold is an option.



fig. 1 A single staple length of fibre



fig. 2-2 Alternative way of holding the folded fibre in the palm



fig. 2-1 Folding the staple length over the fibre hand's index finger



fig. 2-3 Using a hair clip

How to spin from the fold

- Pull a single staple length of fibre from your top. [fig. 1]
- Optional (but especially useful if you want to keep the colours separated): open the top out into a flat layer. This is easiest if you can find the 'seam' where the edges of the fibres were brought together after blending.
- Fold the staple length over the index finger of your fibre hand, holding the ends with very light pressure from your thumb at the front and other fingers behind. [fig. 2-1] Alternatively, just hold the folded fibre in your palm with the ends held gently under your thumb. [fig. 2-2] I've also experimented with using a hair clip to keep the fibre supply under control. As long as it doesn't hold the ends too tightly, this works quite well and may be more comfortable for some. [fig. 2-3]
- Fluff up a bit of fibre at the end of the fold and hold your leader underneath. Add twist and allow it to travel into the fibres. [figs. 3-1, 3-2 and 3-3]

Spinning from the fold allows you to create yarns on a spectrum of more worsted-style (smooth, dense and drapery) to more woollen-style (fuzzy, lofty and bouncy) depending on where the twist enters the fibre supply and which drafting technique you use.

For a more worsted-style yarn, try drafting with the top of the folded edge facing the wheel or spindle. [fig. 4] This keeps the fibres more aligned, especially when paired with a short forward or short backward draw. It can also make it easier to work with slippery fibres and gives more control over the order of the colours. In a multi-fibre blend, bear in mind that you're also spinning the textures in order. This might result in singles with an abrupt transition between different fibre types, which may or may not be your cup of tea!

If you're aiming for a more woollen-style yarn, draft from the end of the fold [fig. 5], pointing the tip of your finger towards the orifice or spindle and using point-of-contact/American longdraw

(where twist enters the drafting triangle continuously as the fibre hand moves backwards, optionally using the front hand to control the twist). Spun this way the fibres are less aligned and have more ability to trap air. It also blends the fibres and softens the transition between colours a little more, plus it's a really fast way to spin.

Feel free to mix and match the techniques to suit the fibre you're working with. For example, if you want slightly blended colours but still with a smoother texture, try drafting from the end of the fold with a short forward draw.

Joins

When you're coming to the end of a section of fibre, add your next one directly behind the first. [fig. 6] The twist should continue into the new fibre for a smooth, natural join.

You can vary the look of your yarn by always spinning the colours in the same order or randomising them instead.

Troubleshooting:

- You're left with some very short fibres at the end of a staple length: this is normal. The commercial combing process removes most of the shorter fibres, but a small amount may remain.
- You're left with a handful of longer fibres at the end of a section: you may have started with more than one staple length. Try to only work with one staple length at a time.
- It's hard to draft the fibre: you may be holding the ends too tightly, so loosen your grip a little. Alternatively, it could mean that the twist is entering the fibre supply too quickly. Add twist more slowly (e.g. switch to a slower ratio) or speed up your drafting to resolve this.
- The fibre becomes messy part way through the staple length: feel free to stop and re-organise it before continuing.



fig. 3-1 Fluffing up a bit of fibre at the end of the fold



fig. 4 Drafting from the top of the fold for a more worsted-spun yarn



fig. 3-2 Holding the leader underneath the fibres



fig. 5 Drafting from the end of the fold for a more woollen-spun yarn



fig. 3-3 Adding twist and allowing it to travel into the fibres



fig. 6 Joining a new section of fibre

Plying

Traditional Plies

When you ply multiple singles together, you're essentially mixing the colours again. The difference now is that the colours are thick enough for your eyes to be able to distinguish as an individual shade and therefore less prone to optical blending.

Unless you're incredibly consistent with both your drafting and the amount of fibre in each folded section, there will be barber-poling – twisting together of two or more different colours – throughout the plied yarn.

You'll notice occasional 'blips' of solid colours whenever two or more singles of the same shade happen to meet up. The more plies, the more likely the colours are to overlap. However, as the number of plies increases, the visual impact of any single 'blip' decreases, resulting in a more harmonious, heathered effect.

Chain Plying

If your goal is to keep the colours completely separated, the easiest option is to chain ply. You can adapt the length of your chain's loops, so if you hit a long section of one colour, you can

make a longer chain; if the colours are shifting rapidly, make your chains shorter to keep the transitions crisp.

As with anything in spinning, a small sample is worthwhile to ensure the colour effect, texture, and loft match your expectations.

So next time you find combed tops in your favourite colours, have difficulty with a slippery fibre, or just want to give your yarn more bounce, try spinning from the fold – one simple technique which opens up a world of possibilities.

About the author: Becks began spinning in 2011 and quickly became fascinated with the process of creating yarn. Her YouTube channel, Tiny Fibre Studio combines her professional background in television and education with her love of fibre arts. There she shares the projects she's working on and provides instructional content for other spinners.

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