

## *Tips, tricks, & techniques:*

### *Basics you may have missed: Winding balls, casting on, joining yarns, and getting the hem you prefer:*

#### *Winding hanks into balls: keep it loose*

When I'd been knitting for a while, one of the two sisters who ran our local hardware store told me she was going to stop knitting because everything she made shrank, and asked me if I'd take her stash off her hands. I said yes, I'd be delighted. And from the back room she hauled two cartons of yarn. Two cartons! I'd expected the equivalent, perhaps, of a brown paper bag from the supermarket.

I took it home and laid it out on a table. Some of it was still in hanks. Some, though, was in balls that she'd wound herself. And what balls they were! As round and hard as baseballs, wound so tightly that it was no wonder that, once knit up and given a chance to recover their woolly memory of their former shape, anything she'd knit had shrunk like mad.

Over several weeks, I made all those balls back into hanks. All of the hanks got washed, hung up, lightly weighted, dried, and rewound. It took me years to knit my way through them, all of them of handsome yarns bought near her summer home in Nova Scotia. Nothing made from them has shrunk. I suppose that they were, by the time they were knit, a kind of homemade Superwash.

I learned then to wind my own balls, **loosely**, and with a starting end long enough that I could pull them from the center.

I still, mostly, wind my own. I don't own a swift or a ball winder, so I use winding time to try to see and feel what the hank of yarn wants to be. That may sound crazy, but winding is rote work, and thereby frees one to let the imagination drift to colors and motifs, to ideas that may not be new—is anything in knitting actually new?—but seem fresh. I focus on the feel and the color, and on the growing ball or balls, and try to see the yarn as it might look best. If you haven't tried this, it's worth doing. By the time you finish, you'll have an idea of just what to make with it.

#### *Casting on: Long-tail vs. cable*

I have never learned the long-tailed cast-on. Here in Colorado—the land of the long-tailed cast-on--this means, to almost everyone I encounter, that I knit wrong. If you cast on the way I do, at something like a knitting group get-together, someone is sure to say, "What are you *doing*?"

Somewhere in my long-gone childhood, my mother, who had learned to knit in her native Scotland, may have tried to teach me by her method, which is knitting on in pattern, and I may dimly have remembered it when I finally learned to knit.

For some mysterious reason, this cast-on is called “cable cast-on.” You make a slip knot, and place it on your left needle. Then, though that slip knot, you knit or purl, lift the new stitch on to your right needle, and then place it on your left needle by way of turning the right needle to transfer the new stitch back to the left needle slightly twisted, so the back of that new loop slides onto the left needle, giving it a half twist that makes for a firm but elastic edge. The next stitch is always, of course, worked through the stitch on your left needle, and then placed next to it.

For garter stitch, you purl the cast-on row, and knit back. For k1, p1 rib, you slip the loop on, purl the second stitch, knit the third, purl the fourth, and so on. In short, this is a method that lets you cast on **in pattern**.

This makes a nice, even starting row—not too loose, not too tight. For newer knitters, it has the advantage of getting them knitting—really using needles and yarn to make loops. I teach all my students how to do this, and after the cat’s-cradle confusion of the long-tail, they seem relieved.

By the way, in the Department of Depressing Statistics, Montse Stanley’s wonderful *Knitter’s Handbook* details 41 cast-ons. Forty-one! It reminds me of the child who reviewed a book on penguins in one sentence: “This book tells me more about penguins than I want to know.” I hasten to add that each one of those cast-ons individually is probably perfect for some specific project, there’s a reason she included them, the book is wonderful, and if her designs were still available, or could be posthumously gathered into a fresh printing, I’d gladly make about ten of them and follow her instructions slavishly.

But I pretty much stick to the one I know that works for me.

### ***Joining yarns and weaving in ends:***

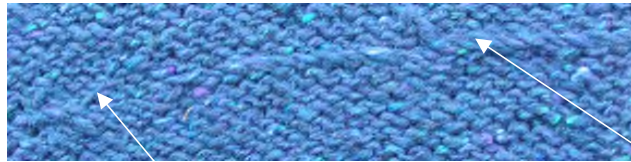
I have often said to my students, “There are no knots in knitting, just as there is no crying in baseball”—a take on a hilarious line from Tom Hanks’s boozy coach in *A League of Our Own*. They do, at least, remember it.

What’s certain is that knotting too often makes itself visible by the knot’s pulling to the front of the work, or entirely undoing itself, and partially unraveling a part of the garment, which is almost impossible to repair invisibly. Nothing so affects the durability of knitwear as this problem.

When you are changing colors, you have no choice but to leave off one yarn and begin the other. If you are doing this, leave at least a six-inch end on both the color being left off, and the color being started. Make a simple overhand knot of the two ends,

preparatory to weaving each of them in diagonally in two directions on the back of the work, behind the matching color.

In ribbing, lead your two colors in opposite directions twice on the wrong side. Do not trim ends to their final length, about ½ to ¾ inch, until the garment is blocked and the ends are set.



diagonal weaving-in

twined line

**Twined joins:** To join one ball of a color to another of the same color, whether you're working in the round or back and forth, leave about 15 inches of the end being left off, and allow at least about 12 inches as the free end of the new ball as you begin the join. Twine, which means alternating stitches from the end of the old yarn and the main part of the new one until you have worked to a 6 inch end for the old ball. Leave that on the wrong side of the work. On the next round or row, again alternate the 12 inch end of the new ball with the main yarn from the new ball until you have about a six-inch end.

**Diagonal weaving in:** Again, weave those two remaining ends in diagonally—not in a straight line across a row of stitching, please—on the back of the work. The join will neither pull out nor show as a thick spot on the front of the work, once the garment has been blocked and the ends trimmed off. On the wrong side, you'll have a two twined lines, but, unless it's being worn inside out, who cares?

Many instructions advise you to join at the edge of a piece being worked back and forth, and that's fine if the join will be hidden in a seam or covered by an edging. But if you have a cardigan or scarf with joins at the free edges, they will look lumpy and clumsy. Better to join at a seam edge or across the center of the work, as described.

### ***Hems:***

Not long ago, I unraveled and repaired a beautiful Icelandic sweater to which a friend had, on a winter camping trip where it had been serving as her pajama top, taken a Swiss Army knife to cut away too-tight ribbing that kept crawling up. I managed to pick back from the bottom to get the first intact row, pick up, and, working downwards, knit a new non-binding rolled hem in almost-matching yarns, with a repeat of the motif on the sweater's yoke as a bonus.

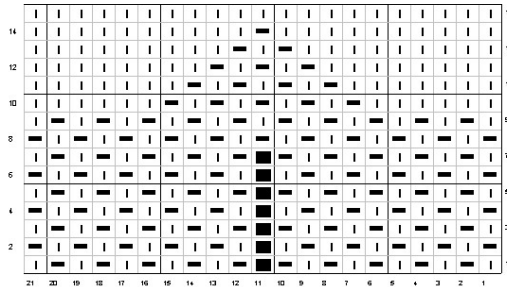
I seldom knit a sweater with a ribbed hem, though I sometimes do cuffs in ribbing. Tight ribbing tends to hike up around the waist, which I dislike, and loose ribbing too often stretches. So my standard hem involves about an inch and a half of stockingette after the cast-on, a turning row of purl stitches, and then an increase row. The stockingette gets

turned under and sewn in place, and makes for a long-wearing hem or cuff that does not stretch or ride up.

Other choices, all more comfortable to wear than ribbing, and with the bonus of being more flattering to the less than ideal figure, would be:

- a **gansey** hem, usually in moss or double moss stitch or garter stitch, worked back and forth for about an inch and a half, then joined or, better still, overlapped, to give a slight split on either side.

These are worked on the same number of stitches as the foundation row of the sweater body, but on smaller needles. And the number of variations is enormous. See *Knitting Ganseys*, by Beth Brown Reisel, in paperback for \$16.95



Above, charted detail of the gansey hem in moss stitch, front and back worked from side to side, then joined with an increase, and knit in the round, with the moss stitch tapering to a point above a slit provided for ease of movement. An alternative is to work the last few stitches in K1, P1 rib, and to overlap them by knitting the ribbed portions together at the sides about three inches up from the cast on.

- The **rolled** hem, knit in stockingette for six or so rows, on smaller needles, in the same number of stitches as the body; or
- a **cabled** hem, arrived at by working a longish cabled strip between a two groups of knit stitches--three or four on each side--and grafting it at the proper measurement, then picking up the sweater body on three of every four stitches of the long edge of the cable. A very long repeat will make it difficult to arrive at the proper length and get the cable to match at the join, so you need to swatch this one carefully, and use a cable with a modest number of rows in each repeat. You usually use the same size needles on this as for the sweater body.

Any sweater pattern can be modified to make the hem you want, and the one that becomes your own figure or that of the person you're making it for. Later on, I'll deal with modifying necklines to suit your own taste and style.