



by Sandi Rosner

Never tie a knot in your knitting.

Always block the pieces before sewing together.

Whether you learned to knit from your grandmother, a class at your local yarn store, a book, or a YouTube video, you were subjected to a long list of knitting "rules." Have you ever stopped to question what you were taught? Much of what we think we know deserves to be challenged.

In this issue, we'll take a look at some questionable common knowledge. We'll talk about when, if ever, you should follow the rules, and when they are better broken.

The overriding principle

It is your knitting. You should do what pleases you. If you are enjoying yourself, and you are pleased with the results you produce, then you are doing it right.

It always disturbs me when I hear about knitting teachers who tell students that what they are doing is wrong. Knitting is an infinitely adaptable craft. There is rarely, if ever, just one way to do something. As an inquisitive knitter seeking to improve your skills, you should feel free to discard any advice once you've given it a fair shot. And if you aren't seeking to improve your skills — maybe your life has plenty of challenge, and simple knitting is your stress-free respite—then don't let anyone insist you try something new. It's your knitting. If it makes you happy, you're doing it right.

Rule #1: “Wind your yarn into a ball before you use it.”

Once upon a time, all yarn was sold in twisted hanks. Eventually machinery was invented that allowed manufacturers to wind the yarn into pull skeins and balls. Smaller yarn companies and hand-dyers tend to sell yarn in twisted hanks (ball-winding machinery is expensive), but most of what you'll find in today's yarn shop is a ball or skein. You may even find yarn wound on cones.



Repeat after me: If your yarn comes in a pull skein, in a ball or on a cone, there is no need for you to re-wind it. You can work right from the skein. If your yarn comes in a twisted hank, you'll find that it opens up into a large loop. If you try to work directly from this loop, you're likely to create a horrific tangle. Put the loop on a swift, or over the back of a chair, and wind it into a ball, either by hand or with a ball winder. I have a friend who often skips the ball-winding step. She sets up her swift on the table next to her knitting chair and knits the yarn off the swift. Not a great option for knitting on the go, but it works for her. Of course, she lives alone and doesn't have cats.

Balls of yarn should be soft and squishy. If you use a ball winder, the yarn is wrapped around a rigid core. When you remove the ball from the winder, it collapses into the space formerly occupied by the core, allowing the yarn to relax. If you wind your balls by hand, take care not to stretch the yarn while you are winding. A firm, hard ball of yarn is a sure sign that the yarn is stretched. Once it's allowed to relax, (usually when you block the piece) the yarn will contract back to its natural state and the gauge of your knitting may change. Avoid this problem by making soft balls.

Rule #2 “To make a looser cast-on edge, cast on over two needles held together.”

The least stretchy part of your knitting is often the cast-on edges. This can create problems, notably at the top of a sock worked from the cuff down.

The most commonly used method for getting stitches on the needle is the long-tail cast-on. With this method, the "tail" yarn creates a series of loops at the base of the yarn that wraps around the needle. It is this tail yarn that determines the tightness of the edge. Using a second needle, or a larger needle, does not change the amount of yarn consumed by the tail; it just makes that first row of stitches on the needle looser.

Take a look at these pictures. In this photo, you see ten stitches cast on over one needle and over two needles. The green yarn wrapping the base of each stitch is the tail yarn. I've marked the yarn at the beginning and end of the cast-on. The needle on the far right shows a single-needle cast on with more space between the stitches (more on that later).



In the next photo, I've unraveled the cast-on to measure how much yarn was used. On the right is the yarn used for the one-needle cast-on; in the middle is the yarn used for the two-needle cast-on. On the left is the yarn used for the more spaced-out cast-on. As you can see, casting on over two needles uses much more yarn in the strand that wrapped around the needles, but not in the tail.

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This photo demonstrates how much yarn was used in each cast-on.

So how can you make a loose edge using a long-tail cast-on? First, slow down and pay attention to your technique. Many knitters give that tail yarn an extra tug with their thumb as they set up for the next stitch. The loops formed by the tail should be even but relaxed.

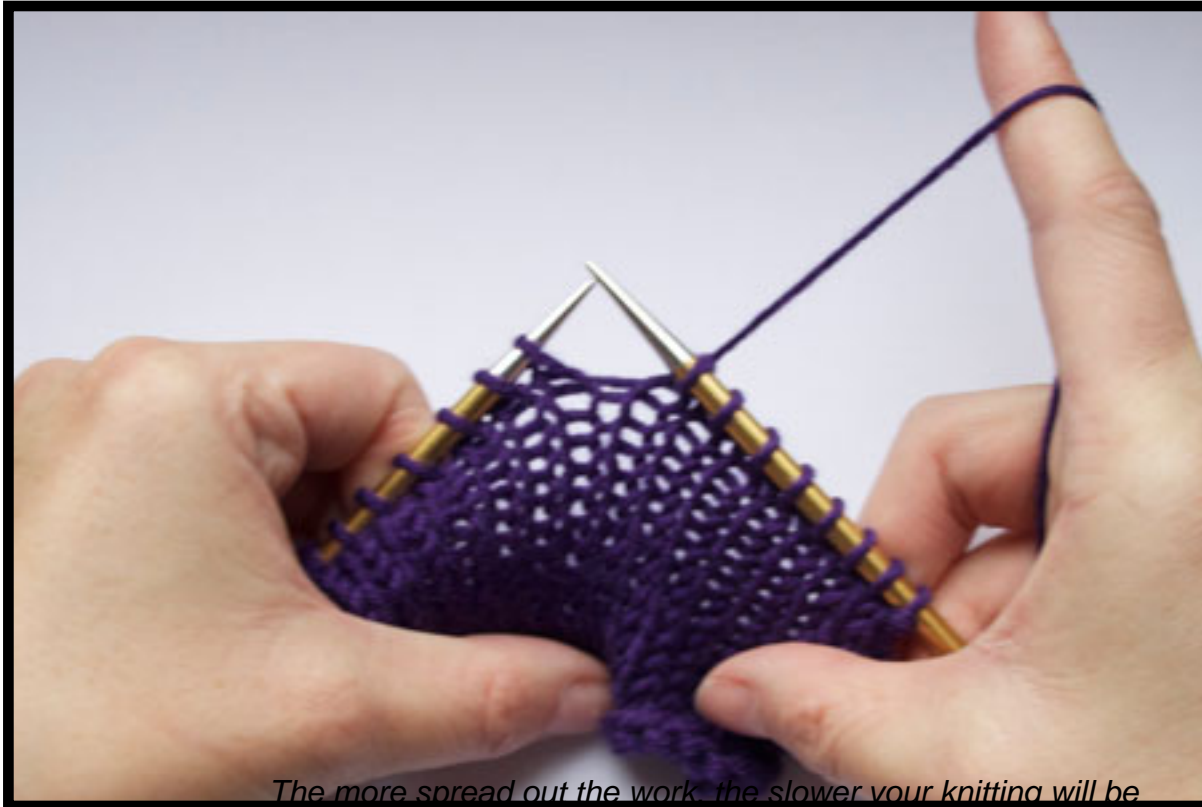
Second, keep the stitches spread out on the needle as you make them. You might have a tendency to bunch the stitches up under the hand that holds the needle. If you can maintain space between each stitch (about a stitch width is good), the tail will have to travel farther between stitches and you'll have a more elastic edge.

Of course, there are cast-on methods other than the long-tail that make a stretchy edge. The tubular cast-on is one popular option, particularly for ribbing. My favorite, and the one I use for socks, is a variant of the long tail known as the Twisted German cast-on or the Old Norwegian cast-on, depending on which reference you check. Try lots of options and see for yourself. You're sure to find a cast-on method with the right balance of ease of use, appearance, and elasticity for any project.

Rule #3 “Knit continental style; it's faster.”

The current holder of the Guinness World Record for fastest knitter is Miriam Tegels of the Netherlands, who knit 118 stitches in one minute on August 26, 2006. But a Scottish woman named Hazel Tindall won a speed knitting competition in Minneapolis in 2010 with a speed of 87 stitches per minute, which seems plenty fast to me. Miriam knits continental style (with the working yarn carried in the left hand); Hazel does not.

Before we look at the how of knitting fast, let's consider the why. For most of us, knitting is a leisure pursuit (excepting the two weeks before Christmas, of course). We may want to finish a project in time to wear it for a special occasion or finish that blanket before the baby is born, but there probably won't be serious consequences if we fail. Unless you are Miriam or Hazel, knitting is not a competitive sport. Is speed something to strive for? I'd rather focus on pleasure and quality of workmanship than on speed. But if you do want to knit faster, here are three steps you can take whether you are a thrower, a picker, or whatever.



First, work close to the tips of your needles. If you are holding your knitting well back from the needle tips, your hands have to cover more distance with every stitch. You should be able to easily touch the points of your needles with your index fingers.



Next, focus on making your movements as small as possible. Looking around a room of knitters, you'll see some whose entire right arm is involved in wrapping the yarn for every stitch. This is terribly inefficient. If you watch video of Miriam and Hazel at work, you'll notice that their arms and upper bodies are still. All the action happens in small movements of their fingers. Most people who knit in the continental style rely on small finger motions. This more efficient movement allows them to knit faster. As a side benefit, smaller movements are less likely to provoke repetitive stress injuries (though you'll still want to take breaks and stretch periodically).

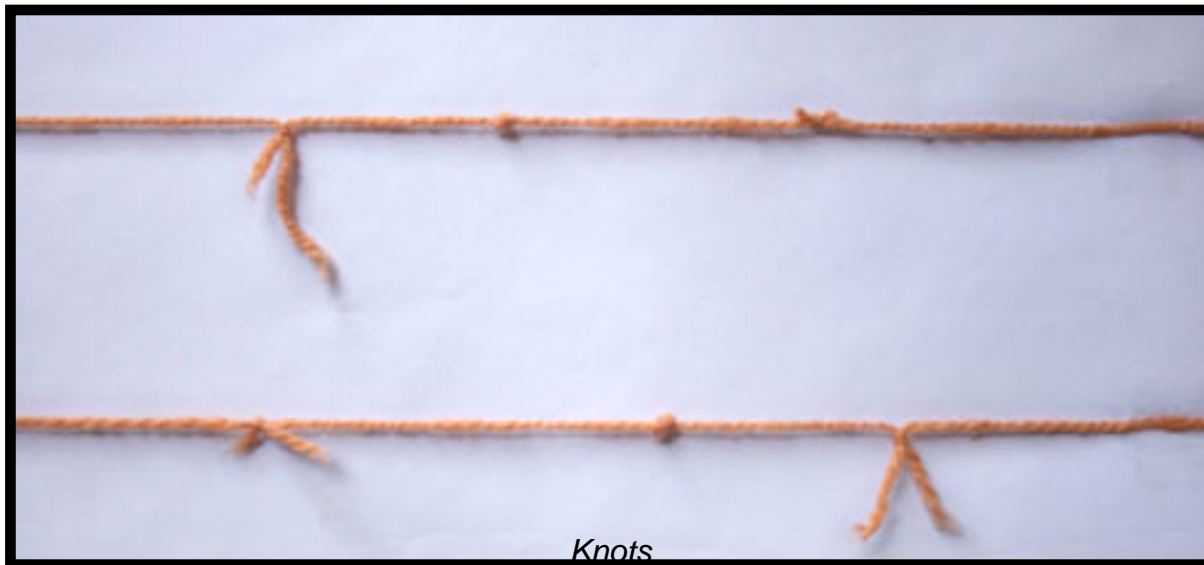
Finally, practice. Any change you make to your knitting style will take time to sink into your muscles. Without practice, your body will slide back into old habits. Spend some time each day being attentive to your knitting technique and aiming for smooth, efficient movements. Besides, the most productive knitters are those who knit most, not necessarily those who knit fastest. By spending time in practice, you improve your chances of having your blanket beat the baby to the nursery, even if you don't actually knit any faster!

Rule #4: “Never tie knots in your knitting.”

This rule shows up in many knitting books, often hand in hand with never joining a new ball of yarn

in the middle of the row. But is it one you must follow?

Let's start by talking about why knots matter. Knitting creates a fluid fabric. As you create a row and then knit into those stitches in the following row, the yarn slips and shifts in its loops. Even a small knot will stop this shifting, because it won't pull easily through the stitch below. This can distort the stitches on either side of the knot. A knot can also create a visible lump on the surface of the fabric. These problems are most visible in solid colored stockinette stitch. If you are working with a textured stitch pattern, or a multicolored or textured yarn, the knot might not be at all apparent.



Some knitters will tell you that knots are inelegant. That may be true, but does it matter to you? If I am aiming for a smooth fabric, I don't make a knot in the middle of the row. If I can spit splice the yarn, I do so (which tells you how much weight the inelegant argument carries with me). If I'm working with cotton, or another fiber that won't splice easily, I join new yarn at the end of the row. I usually make a knot, because I know it will be disguised in the seam.

If I'm making a fabric that won't show every irregularity, then I make knots with abandon, leaving plenty of tail to weave in.

That said, there is one knot that does need addressing: mill knots. These are the knots you find in a skein of yarn as you are knitting. Sometimes the entire strand is knotted, sometimes only one or two plies. These knots are made when the yarns break while being spun and wound at the factory. The ends are usually clipped very short so the knot won't catch on the machinery. There isn't enough left to weave in. I worry that these knots will loosen and come undone when the piece is washed, leaving a hole in my sweater. I always remove mill knots and rejoin the yarn as if I were joining a new skein.

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