

■ beyond the basics

Working with Two Yarns

Beth Brown-Reinsel

In the “Beyond the Basics” article in the Spring 2004 issue of *Interweave Knits* (“Different Ways to Knit,” page 72), I described different ways to hold yarn and make stitches. This article is a continuation of that one, addressing ways to hold and manipulate two yarns for working color-stranded patterns—patterns that call for two (or more) colors in the same row of knitting. Keep in mind that just as there is no “right way” to knit or purl, there is no “right way” to work with two yarns: each method has its advantages. Practice the techniques described here, then use your new skills to knit the Fair Isle Bag on page 74.

In color-stranded knitting, the stitches alternate colors based on a charted pattern. Both yarns travel across the entire width of the knitting, taking turns being used. The nonworking yarn trails, or strands, behind the stitches of the working yarn. The nonworking yarn may strand for a single stitch or several stitches, depending on the pattern; then the yarns trade places and the first yarn is stranded while the other yarn is worked. Knitters who hold just one yarn at a time must drop the old yarn and pick up and tension the new yarn at every color change, a process that can be slow and tedious and make some knitters shy away from color patterns altogether. However, knitters who can hold and tension both yarns at the same time can work this type of color pattern quickly and easily.

There are two predominant styles of knitting: English, in which the working yarn is carried in the right hand, and Continental, in which the working yarn is carried in the left hand. Each style can be used with two strands of yarn, or you can combine styles and hold one yarn in each hand. Whichever method you choose, you’ll want to keep the same tension on each yarn for even stitches.

Holding Both Yarns in the Right Hand

Most Americans learn to knit the English method, holding the yarn in their right hand. For these knitters, it is a relatively easy step to add another yarn to the same hand. Starting by placing both balls of yarn on your right side, bring the working end from each ball to the palm of your right hand, and insert your index finger down between the two yarns so that one yarn (the back yarn) is behind your index finger and the other yarn (the front yarn) is in front of your index finger (Figure 1). Tighten your other fingers around the two yarns for tension. (If necessary, wind the two yarns around your little finger for more tension.) Keep your hands relaxed and close to the needles.

Right-Side Rows

To knit with the front yarn: Holding both yarns in back of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back), twist your wrist so that your palm faces you, wrap the yarn that’s in front of your index finger counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 2), untwist your wrist, then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To knit with the back yarn: Holding both yarns in back of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back), twist your wrist so that your palm faces away from you, wrap the yarn that’s behind your index finger counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 3), untwist your wrist, then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Both Yarns in the Right Hand

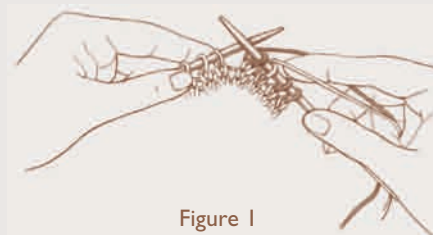


Figure 1
Holding two yarns in the right hand.



Figure 2
Knit with the front yarn.



Figure 3
Knit with the back yarn.



Figure 4
Purl with the front yarn.



Figure 5
Purl with the back yarn.

Wrong-Side Rows

To purl with the front yarn: Holding both yarns in front of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front), twist your wrist so your palm faces you, wrap the yarn that's in front of your index finger counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 4), untwist your wrist, then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To purl with the back yarn: Holding both yarns in front of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front), twist your wrist so that your palm faces away from you, wrap the yarn that's behind your index finger counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 5), untwist your wrist, then bring the new yarn through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Holding Both Yarns in the Left Hand

Most Europeans learn to knit the Continental method, holding the yarn in their left hand. Like the English method, two colors are worked by holding a second yarn in the same hand. Knitters who hold both yarns in their left hand have an advantage when they work with double-pointed needles—the tension on both yarns can be maintained as the work progresses from one needle to the next.

Start by placing both balls of yarn on your left side, bring the working end from each ball to the palm of your left hand and over your left forefinger. Insert your middle finger between the two yarns so that one yarn (the front yarn) is under this finger and closest to your wrist, and the other yarn (the back yarn) is over the middle finger and closest to your fingertips (Figure 1). Tighten your other fingers around the two yarns for tension. (If necessary, wind the two yarns around your little finger for more tension.) Keep your hands relaxed and close to the needles, and work the stitches close to the needle tips. Practice keeping the yarns on different areas of your two fingers, such as on either side of your first index knuckle so the yarns are separated and easier to work individually.

Right-Side Rows

To knit with the front yarn: Holding both yarns in back of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back) and scoop the yarn that's nearest to you (the one that's on your index finger only) in a counterclockwise motion (Figure 2), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To knit with the back yarn: Holding both yarns in back of the work, use the right needle to enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back), reach over the nearest yarn on your index finger (the front yarn) and scoop the farthest yarn (the one on your middle finger) in a counterclockwise motion (Figure 3), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Wrong-Side Rows

To purl with the front yarn: Holding both yarns in front of the work, bring the right needle behind both yarns and enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front), rotate the needle counterclockwise to catch the front yarn, and complete the stitch by bringing the needle forward through the stitch as if the back yarn were not there (Figure 4), pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To purl with the back yarn: Holding both yarns in front of the work, bring the right needle behind both yarns and enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front), rotate the needle counterclockwise to reach over the front yarn and catch the back yarn, and complete the stitch by bringing the needle forward and out of the stitch (Figure 5), pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Both Yarns in the Left Hand



Figure 1
Holding two yarns in the left hand.



Figure 2
Knit with the front yarn.



Figure 3
Knit with the back yarn.



Figure 4
Purl with the front yarn.



Figure 5
Purl with the back yarn.

Holding One Yarn in Each Hand

The method of holding one yarn in each hand involves both the English and Continental methods of knitting. If you're not already familiar with both methods, holding one yarn in each hand can be slow going at first, but once you master the technique, knitting is rapid and there is little chance of confusing the two yarns. Hold one yarn in the right hand as for the English method and one yarn in the left hand as for the Continental method (Figure 1).

Right-Side Rows

To knit with the yarn in the right hand: Holding both yarns in back of the work, enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back), use your right index finger to wrap the yarn counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 2), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To knit with the yarn in the left hand: Holding both yarns in back of the work, enter the stitch knitwise (from front to back), use the right needle to scoop the yarn in a counterclockwise motion (Figure 3), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Wrong-Side Rows

To purl with the yarn in the right hand: Holding both yarns in front of the work, bring the right needle behind the left yarn (to prevent it from stranding on the right side of the work) and enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front); use your right index finger to wrap the right yarn counterclockwise around the needle (Figure 4), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

To purl with the yarn in the left hand: Holding both yarns in front of the work, enter the stitch purlwise (from back to front);

One Yarn in Each Hand



Figure 1
Holding one yarn in each hand.



Figure 2
Knit with the yarn in the right hand.

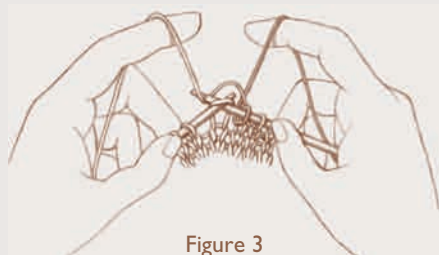


Figure 3
Knit with the yarn in the left hand.

Ads removed

use the right needle to scoop the yarn in a counterclockwise motion (Figure 5), then bring the new stitch through the old, pulling the old stitch off the needle as you do so.

Yarn Dominance

The way that two yarns relate to each other within a row is called yarn dominance. In her book *The Art of Fair Isle Knitting* (Interweave Press, 1996), Ann Feitelson demonstrates how the yarn that comes from beneath the other will appear more prominently in a design. This yarn will make a slightly larger stitch than that formed by the yarn that travels over (see illustration below right). The dominant color is typically designated the “pattern” color and the other color is designated the “background” color. No matter how you hold your two yarns, you can consciously choose to make one yarn dominant simply by being consistent in the way that you pick up the new yarn at each color change.

When you’re working right-side rows with two yarns in the right hand, hold the pattern color behind your index finger (designated the back yarn) and always pick it up from beneath the background yarn held in front of your index finger (designated the front yarn), so that the back yarn always strands under the front yarn. The background yarn is held in front of the index finger and is always stranded over the pattern color. When you’re purling wrong-side rows, switch how you hold the two yarns so that the front yarn is the pattern yarn, and strand it under the background yarn (the back yarn).

When you’re working right-side rows with two yarns in the left hand, hold the pattern yarn closer to you (the front yarn) on your index finger and pick it up from beneath the background yarn held on your middle finger (the back yarn). When you’re purling wrong-side rows, place the pattern yarn in the back position, further away on your index finger, treat the back

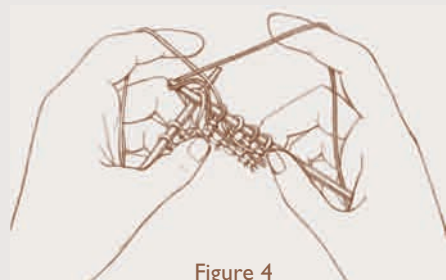


Figure 4
Purl with the yarn in the right hand.

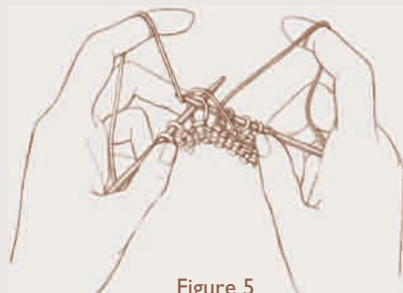
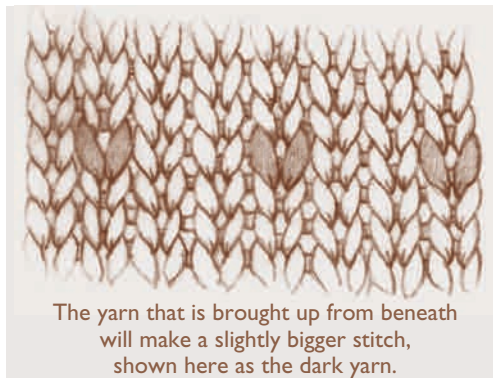


Figure 5
Purl with the yarn in the left hand.



The yarn that is brought up from beneath will make a slightly bigger stitch, shown here as the dark yarn.

Ads removed

two-color tips

When you're working two colors with double-pointed needles, stretch the knitting widthwise after working each needle to ensure that the stranded yarn is long enough to prevent puckering.

If you find you are stranding too tightly when you're knitting circularly, turn your work inside out. The knitting is still going in the same direction and you're still working on the right side, but you face the inside of the work. The yarns are stranded around the larger outside curve of the work, which makes the floats slightly longer. This technique is especially helpful when you're working with double-pointed needles.

Be sure to block your work when the knitting is done. Most unevenness will steam out.

Don't catch or twist the yarns around each other to secure the floats more than once per inch, unless you are making a heavy garment such as a jacket. Don't secure the floats on socks; it reduces the elasticity of the fabric and you may not be able to get them over your heel.

Don't switch yarns and hands; be consistent with holding the pattern yarn in one hand or position and the background yarn in the other.

yarn as the pattern yarn, and pick it up from underneath the front yarn.

When you're working right-side rows with one yarn in each hand, hold the pattern yarn in your left hand; it will naturally strand under the background yarn. Hold the background yarn in your right hand; it will naturally strand over the pattern yarn. When you're purling wrong-side rows, treat the yarn in the right hand as the pattern yarn—it will strand underneath the background yarn.

If all these variations seem too overwhelming, just look at your yarns as you work; all you need to remember is that the yarn that is picked up from underneath will be more visible.

BETH BROWN-REINSEL, author of *Knitting Ganseys* (Interweave Press, 1993), designs her own pattern line, Knitting Traditions, and teaches knitting techniques in workshops across the country.

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