

Chapter 1

get set!

Now that you have this book, you're ready to learn how to knit, but do you have everything else you need to start knitting? You need yarn, needles, and a few little tools to begin with. After you've been knitting for a while, you'll naturally accumulate more yarn—LOTS more yarn, if you love knitting—plus more needles and accessories, so don't buy too much at first. What kind of yarn should you get? And what size and type of needles do you want? This chapter tells you all you need to know to make the right choices.

it's all about yarn

One of the most fun parts of knitting is choosing yarn. You may feel overwhelmed when you set out to buy yarn for your first project. Knitting yarns come in so many fibers, weights, textures, and colors that it can be confusing. Take a deep breath, read on, and you'll get a better idea of what to look for.

natural fibers

Natural fibers come from animals and plants. Wool, alpaca, mohair, cashmere, and angora are spun from animal fibers, and they're really warm to wear—and fun to knit with. Certain wools, like Shetland wool, can be scratchy; some, like merino, are nice and soft. Be sure to hold a ball of yarn against your skin to see if you would want to wear something made out of it. It would be a bummer to spend weeks knitting a scarf that is too itchy to wear.

Alpaca is a soft fiber that knits to a flexible, soft fabric. Mohair is hairier than wool, and things knit in mohair—only yarns have a fuzzy halo. So do things made out of angora, which is softer than mohair and comes from angora rabbits. Cashmere comes from goats—it is one of the softest yarns, but it's very expensive. Silk, produced by silkworms, is warm but not as stretchy as wool.

btw: Don't worry; bunnies, sheep, and goats don't get killed for their hair or wool. Angora is harvested by combing the rabbits a couple times a year. Sheep get haircuts: Their wool is shorn once or twice a year.

Cotton and linen yarns—also not as springy as wool—are made from plants, and they're good for things you wear in the summer or in a warm climate. They are also great for bags and accessories.



unnatural fibers

There are a number of synthetic, human-made fibers, including acrylic, nylon, and polyester. These yarns are sometimes less expensive than natural fibers, and many are machine washable. In olden days, acrylic yarn was horrible, rough, scratchy stuff; now you can find some highly respectable acrylics. Nylon is often used to reinforce wool, like for sock yarns, but there are also 100% nylon furry yarns that are downy soft and almost weightless.

fiber blends

Spinning two or more fibers together into one yarn makes a *blend*. The combinations are infinite: Even yarns containing the same fibers can be vastly different due to the amount of each fiber in the blend. For example, a wool/mohair blend that has 85% wool and 15% mohair will be slightly hairy, while combining the same two fibers 50–50 results in a totally different yarn. Sometimes fibers are blended to produce a less expensive yarn or a machine-washable yarn. Mixing one fiber with another can change the undesirable aspects of a fiber for the better. For instance, cotton can gain body and springiness by being combined with acrylic; combining wool with alpaca, angora, or cashmere can soften it.

yarn textures and colors

In addition to coming in different fibers and weights, yarn also comes in a zillion different textures, colors, and color blends. Furry, bumpy, metallic, and hairy yarns are called *novelty yarns*. These yarns are fun for edgings and dressy stuff, and they can be doubled up with another yarn to add some pizzazz. Even non-novelty yarns vary in texture from one to the next, depending on fiber content and how they're spun. You'll also see lots of colorful yarns—yarns that come in variegated color mixes or tweeds.

You will no doubt be tempted to buy some of these fun and fuzzy or rainbow-colored yarns. But if you're a beginner, don't do it! You can't learn how to knit with this stuff: It's too difficult to see the stitches beneath all that texture or amid that riot of color, and knitting with novelty yarns even takes some skill and practice. So for now, stick with a nice smooth traditionally spun yarn, preferably good old 100% wool, in a light to medium shade (it's hard to see the stitches in too-dark colors) of your favorite color.

balls, skeins, and hanks

Ball, *skein*, and *hank* are the names of the different forms yarn comes in when you buy it. A ball is—you guessed it—round. Skeins can be a few different shapes, sometimes long and cylindrical with a label wrapped around the middle, and sometimes shaped like an oblong ball. A hank is different from these two because it's not machine-wound into a ready-to-use form. It looks kind of like a twisted cruller, and you have to untwist it and wind it into a ball yourself. Sometimes a nice yarn shop will wind a hank into a ball for you using a yarn swift—if you're buying the hank from that shop, of course. If you see a yarn swift, a big contraption that looks like an umbrella skeleton mounted onto a table in the store, ask if they'll wind your hank into a ball. It will be well worth it in the end, since rolling it into a ball can take quite some time (and be frustrating, if it gets tangled).

btw: If you have to buy multiple hanks for a project, it's a good idea to wind all but one. This way, if you use less yarn than expected, you might be able to return the unused hank; most stores won't take back a hank that's been wound.

yarn weights

Yarn comes in many thicknesses, which are called *weights*—not to be confused with the actual weight, in ounces or grams, of the ball or skein. Yarn weight is labeled from thinnest to thickest as super fine, fine, light, medium, bulky, and super bulky. You use fat needles for bulky yarns and thin needles for fine yarns. Super-fine yarns are also called fingering, baby, lace-weight, and sock yarn. Fine yarns can be referred to as sport weight or baby. Light yarns include yarns called double-knitting (DK) and light worsted. Medium yarns are also described as worsted, Aran, or afghan yarn. Bulky generally refers to yarns labeled chunky or heavy worsted. Super-bulky yarns are usually called just that—super bulky. See the chart below for more information about yarn weight.

standard yarn weight system

Yarn Weight Category Name	Type of Yarns in Category	Knit Gauge Range* in Stockinette Stitch to 4 Inches	Recommended Needle Range, in US Size	Recommended Needle Range, in Metric Size
Super fine	Sock, fingering, baby, lace	27–32 stitches	1–3	2.25–3.25 mm
Fine	Sport, baby	23–26 stitches	3–5	3.25–3.75 mm
Light	DK, light worsted	21–24 stitches	5–7	3.75–4.5 mm
Medium	Worsted, afghan, Aran	16–20 stitches	7–9	4.5–5.5 mm
Bulky	Chunky, heavy worsted, bulky, craft, rug	12–15 stitches	9–11	5.5–8 mm
Super bulky	Super bulky	6–11 stitches	11 and larger	8 mm and larger

*The gauges listed are guidelines only; this table reflects the most commonly used gauges and needle sizes for specific yarn categories.

yarn substitutions

Chances are you'll want or need to substitute a different yarn than the one specified in a pattern. Either the yarn shop won't have the one you need, or you'll want a different fiber, or you'll want to spend less (or more) than the yarn in the pattern costs. The single most important thing to consider when subbing one yarn for another is the weight: If you want the pattern to come out the right shape and size, you need to get yarn that is the same weight and that knits to the same gauge. Remember that weight means thickness here, not the weight of the ball.



See the picture of the little knit squares called *swatches*? They were knit from yarns of different weights, using the same number of stitches; as you can see, they're completely different sizes. That's why knitting a gauge swatch is so important when you start a project. If you substitute a yarn with a different gauge, you can end up with a doll-sized hat instead of one that fits you. (For more about gauge, see page 37.) A fun thing to do is combine two or more different yarns to get the right thickness—you create your own new yarn that way! Once you find yarn that is the correct

weight, you need to check how many yards the pattern says you need and buy the same number of yards in the new yarn. See the next section for more on yarn yardage.

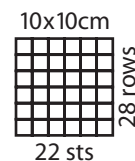
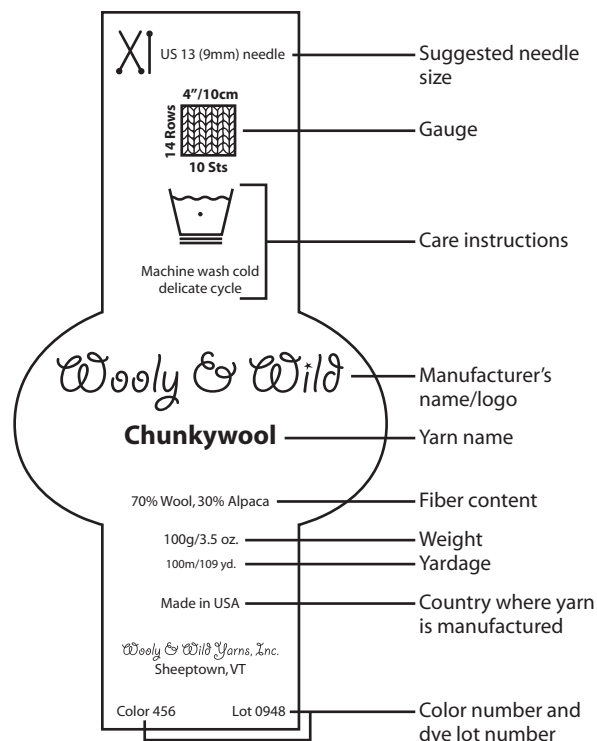
reading a yarn label

Most yarns come with a label, sometimes called a *ball band*, on them. It may seem really boring, but you need to know what all that tiny type on your yarn label means. You wouldn't want to skip reading the label and end up with a sweater that's so small you can't get it over your head because the gauge is wrong, or miss the care instructions on the label and turn your cashmere scarf into a felted potholder. So be sure to read the ball band and save it for later, with a little bit of the yarn it came with.

btw: To keep track of the details of your knitting adventures, try starting a scrapbook or diary. You can start by saving the ball band and bits of yarn. Then you can include your stitch pattern swatch, notes about the pattern, what size you knit, techniques you used or learned—even what was happening in your life when you knit the project.

The largest words on the ball band are usually the yarn manufacturer's name/logo and the name of the particular yarn. Also included is the fiber content of the yarn. The label lists the weight of the ball and the *yardage*, which is the length of yarn in the ball. In addition, you'll see a color number or name, along with a dye lot number. Yarn gets dyed in big batches, called *lots*, and each lot is slightly different from the next. So it's important to buy yarn for one project all from the same dye lot, or you'll end up with a funny-looking line on your sweater where the two lots meet. It doesn't usually look good. On the other hand, if you use no-dye-lot yarn, you don't have to worry about this problem at all. No-dye-lot yarn is an inexpensive acrylic yarn that you can buy at the big craft supply chain stores.

Somewhere on the label, you'll see what size knitting needles the manufacturer recommends for the yarn, along with the suggested gauge for that yarn on those needles. Gauge on a yarn label is simply how many stitches and rows it takes to get a 4-inch or (10 cm) square with that yarn on the recommended needle. This starts to get kind of mathematical, but it's *very* important, so read more about gauge on p. 37.



Finally, the care instructions for the yarn usually appear as symbols like the ones you see on clothing labels. You can use this chart to see what the symbols mean.

 MACHINE WASH	 BLEACH	 IRON	 DRY-CLEAN
TEMPERATURE		TEMPERATURE	TEMPERATURE
 Do Not Wash	 Do Not Bleach	 Do Not Iron	 Do Not Dry-Clean
 Hand Wash	 Any Bleach (when needed)	 Low	 Dry-Clean, Petroleum Solvent Only
 Normal		 Medium	 Dry-Clean, Any Solvent Except Trichloroethylene
 Delicate/Gentle		 High	 Dry-Clean, Any Solvent
 Cool/Cold			
 Warm			
 Hot			

the skinny on knitting needles

Knitting needles come in many shapes and sizes, and they are made out of different materials. You can get fat needles, skinny needles, straight needles, single-pointed needles, double-pointed needles, or circular needles—and they can be made of wood, metal, bamboo, or plastic. In case you're having a hard time figuring out what kind to get, here's a little help.

needle materials

Most knitting needles come in metal, plastic, wood, or bamboo. Metal needles are slippery, so the yarn slides easily along them. This can be a good thing if you want to go fast, but it can be a bad thing if you're a beginner and your stitches keep sliding off and unraveling. Plastic needles are lightweight and inexpensive. They can bend, particularly if exposed to heat, so don't leave them near a radiator. Wood needles are very pretty and are usually more expensive than metal or plastic. Bamboo needles are lighter and tend to be less expensive than wood needles. Bamboo is an excellent choice for beginners because the surface is smooth but not slippery, so it slows the yarn down and keeps stitches from sliding off the needle.

needle shapes

Knitting needles come in three shapes: straight, double-pointed, and circular. Straight needles, a.k.a. single-pointed needles, are the ones most commonly used. They're sold in pairs and have a point on one end and a knob on the other. They come in a couple different lengths: 10 inches for small stuff like scarves and baby things, and 14 inches for sweaters and larger items. Double-pointed needles are sold in sets of four or five, and they have a point on each end. They're good for knitting tubular things like socks, mittens, and hats. Circular needles are sold singly. They have two points connected by a nylon cord, and they come in many lengths and materials. They're good for large tubular items like pullovers and skirts; but you can also use them for knitting big, flat things like blankets, sweaters, and shawls. They hold a large number of stitches easily and are more portable than straight needles. Also, if you're knitting in close quarters, like on an airplane or on the subway, circulars are best because you won't keep elbowing and jabbing your neighbor.



needle sizes

Needle sizing can be very confusing. Just one needle can have three numbers indicating the size. The most important measurement is the diameter, or the thickness, of the needle. The diameter is measured in millimeters, and the size for this is the number followed by “mm.” There is also a US size system that starts with 0 for the thinnest and ends with 50 for the thickest—you’ll learn what US size equals which “mm” as you knit more and more. Watch out if you’re knitting from Canadian or British instructions: They may use a different numbering system. And if you buy needles online, especially in an online auction, you might get needles produced somewhere that uses a different numbering system. That’s why it’s always best to buy needles based on the diameter in millimeters than on the numbering system.

The needle size is listed on the package, but what if you lose the package? Most straight needles have the size imprinted on the knob at the end or stamped into the wood or bamboo near the end. For circular needles, the size is trickier to find. It’s sometimes engraved into or printed on the metal at the base of the tip, or if not there, it may be printed on the nylon cord between the tips. If your needles don’t show a size, you can use a needle gauge (see page 10) to measure the diameter. A needle package also lists the length in inches; remember that short needles are good for small things, and long needles are best for big things.

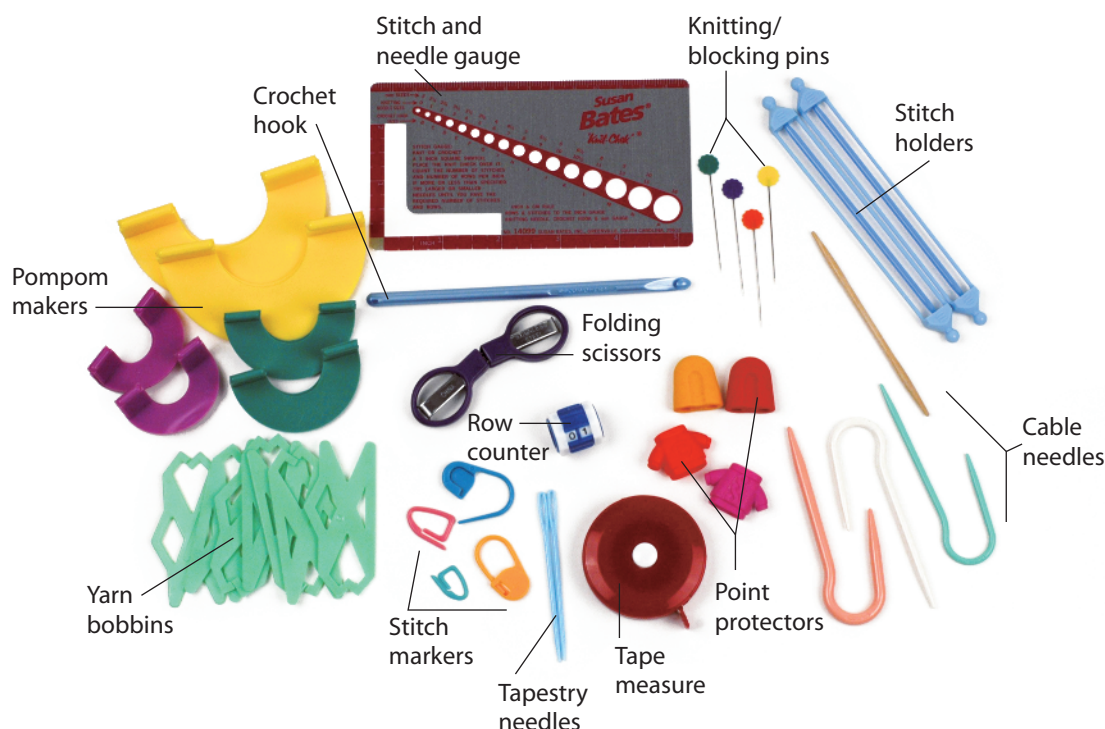
So, now that you know how to find the needle’s size, it’s time to learn why this little diameter number is so important. The diameter of the needle determines the size of the stitches and therefore affects the gauge. *Gauge* is the number of stitches and rows knit per inch. All knitting patterns are written based on a certain gauge. For example, a scarf that is 6 inches wide, knit at a gauge of 5 stitches per inch, will require 30 stitches on the needles. (After the knitting and purling how-to sections, there is an in-depth lesson on gauge. Check out page 37.) Yarn labels usually list a recommended gauge and needle size. So if you’re just starting out, buy the needles recommended on the ball band. Don’t try knitting fat yarn on skinny needles, or you’ll hate knitting so much that you’ll give up after one row. Here’s a handy chart that lists the US sizes and their corresponding measurements, in millimeters.

knitting needle sizes

Metric (mm)	US Size
2.0 mm	0
2.25 mm–2.5 mm	1
2.75 mm	2
3.25 mm	3
3.5 mm	4
3.75 mm	5
4.0 mm	6
4.5 mm	7
5.0 mm	8
5.5 mm	9
6.0 mm	10
6.5 mm or 7 mm*	10 ¹ / ₂
7.0 mm*	10 ³ / ₄
8.0 mm	11
9.0 mm	13
10.0 mm	15
12.0 mm–12.75 mm	17
15.0 mm–16.0 mm	19
19.0 mm	35
25.0 mm	50

* Needle manufacturers can’t seem to agree on the size of US 10¹/₂ needles. Some produce 10¹/₂ needles that are 6.5 mm, and some make theirs 7.0 mm. Some manufacturers even call their 7.0 mm needles US 10³/₄.

accessorize



In addition to yarn and needles, you need to get a few accessories to keep in your knitting bag at all times. Oh, right—first things first. You need a knitting bag. It can be a little shopping bag from your favorite store, or it can be something more permanent if you're really committed. Look around in your closet or under your bed for a bag that is roomy, has a pocket or a few pockets, and stands open. Canvas tote bags are great. (As you get going, you'll probably acquire a lot of knitting bags. Different size projects require different size bags, right? Most knit-a-holics are bag-a-holics, too.) Following are a few lists of accessories to put in your bag alongside your yarn and needles. Only the things in the first category are essential; the rest you will accumulate over time.

btw: Avoid using bags that have Velcro closures as knitting bags. Yarn—or even worse, your knitting project—can get snagged and damaged on those little loops.

essential accessories

- Tape measure for measuring your knitted pieces (the retractable ones are best)
- Small pair of scissors (folding scissors don't poke into your knitting or bag)
- Stitch and needle gauge to measure gauge and needle diameter
- Tapestry needles for sewing seams and weaving in ends
- Crochet hook for fixing dropped stitches
- Point protectors to prevent your knitting from slipping off the needles
- Row counter to keep track of how many rows you have worked
- Stitch holders for holding stitches to be worked later (you can use a strand of scrap yarn in a pinch)
- Plastic-headed, rustproof knitting pins to fasten knitted pieces together before sewing

useful accessories

- Stitch markers for marking a point in knitting where an increase, a decrease, or a pattern change occurs
- Cable needles for holding stitches to the front or back when making knit cables
- Yarn bobbins for holding small quantities of yarn in color knitting
- Pompom maker for making perfectly round, full pompoms