

Chapter 1

Two Needles, a Ball of Yarn, and a Little Know-how

In This Chapter

- ▶ Exploring the many reasons to knit
 - ▶ Getting a quick overview of what you need
 - ▶ Collecting tips for how to best learn knitting from a book
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Knitting is a relatively simple process requiring minimal tools — two needles and a ball of yarn. Its basic structure of interlocking loops couldn't be less complicated. Yet the possibilities for design and pattern innovation are endless. Knitting has more than cozy socks and colorful sweaters to offer; it's also an excellent way to mitigate some of the stresses and frustrations of day-to-day life.

This chapter introduces you to knitting — what it is and what it takes, why it's so darn good for you, and how to best go about learning to knit from a book. With the info you find in this chapter and the skills you pick up in the others, you'll be able to explore with confidence the myriad things you can do with two needles and a ball of yarn.

Why Knit?

Knitting's been around for hundreds of years, and for a large portion of that time, it was a utilitarian endeavor. But chances are you're not taking up knitting because you need to restock your sock drawer or whip up much needed sweaters and scarves to keep out the winter chill. So why knit?

Knitting up good karma

Ask knitters why they knit and you'll get a variety of answers. But the one you'll hear from nearly every knitter, regardless of the other reasons they may give, is "It's relaxing."

The repetitive movements of needles and yarn truly knit up the raveled sleeve of care. Have you ever noticed a knitter's face while working away on the needles? Did you see the expression of relaxed alertness? The rhythmic movements of knitting, together with the mental focus needed for building fabric stitch by stitch, make for a kind of meditation. It's real. Ask anyone who knits.

And if you carry your knitting wherever you go, you always bring along a little well-being with you. In an increasingly global and anonymous world, a knitting project at hand reminds you of the comforts and familiarity of things small, local, and individual.

A feeling of accomplishment

A skein of yarn can be anything, but it's nothing — despite how beautiful the color or how soft the feel — until someone gives it shape and purpose. So when you knit, you use your skill, your imagination, your patience, and your perseverance to create something from nothing.

Turning skeins of yarn, stitch by stitch, into hats, afghans, socks, bags, sweaters, cardigans, and more gives you a feeling of competence and accomplishment that few other hobbies can offer. And it's a sense that grows with each row, with each wearing, with each "Oooh, it's so beautiful (or warm, or soft)" comment that you hear.

Keeping your mind and hands occupied

If you knit a little while waiting for your computer to load screens, red lights to turn green, and commercials to end, you'll never have to worry about wasting time again.

Knitting is portable, too, so you can work on your project wherever you find yourself. You can knit in the living room while you're watching TV or in the kitchen while waiting for the pasta to cook. You can knit while waiting to catch a plane or while sitting on a park bench watching your children play. You can take your knitting with you, whether it's a challenging project that requires quiet concentration or something simple that you can tote along and pull out at the odd moment for a quick row or two.

Studies have shown that hobbies like knitting can even be good for your waistline. How? Because it's really hard to snack while watching TV if your hands are busy.

Creating a one-of-a-kind piece

Knitting is a process of combining yarn, needles, pattern, and color. Even if all you do is follow a sweater pattern by using the exact yarn and needles it calls for, each stitch is of your own making, and no two sweaters from the same pattern worked by different knitters are ever exactly the same.

After your first project or two, there's a good chance that you'll be venturing with pleasure into the wonderland of new combinations of yarn, pattern stitch, color, and embellishment. You'll be wondering how you'll ever find the time to make all the ideas in your head a reality.



Creativity is less about being born with a friendly muse and more about putting time and effort into developing know-how. Granted, moments of inspiration *can* wake you up at 4:00 in the morning, but rarely do they happen unless you first lay the groundwork. Work all day on finding the right color combination for a project, and the solution will come at an unlikely moment. By learning, practicing, and mastering your art and craft, you become creative.

What Knitter's Need

You can go into the craft section of any discount store and get yarn and needles, but of all those available, which is the best for the thing you want to make? Step into a specialty yarn shop, and the selection is even more vast. And what exactly are the minimum skills and knowledge needed to knit? Without this basic info, any knitting pattern you pick up is sure to overwhelm you before you begin.

Before you pack it in, read this section, which serves as a very basic overview of the key knitting necessities. By the end, you'll have discovered that you really, truly, don't need much in order to knit. Needles. Yarn. A little know-how. And some time. With those few things, you can knit up all sorts of neat and exciting things.

The tools

In the 1600s, men's waistcoats were knit (by men) in fine silk thread on steel needles no thicker than wire. In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, the women of the Shetland Isles turned out several sweaters a year, knit on fine needles while they walked and between chores. Today, you can use the same width of needles the knitting forebears used, or you can knit with yarn as thick as rope on needles that measure an inch or more around.

So the two knitting supplies that you absolutely can't do without are knitting needles and yarn. That's it. The trick is to get the right yarn and the right needles for the project you want to create. Here are the two main things to know:

- ✓ **Yarns come in different weights, textures, and colors.** Although the color may be the first thing to catch your eye, the things you really have to pay attention to is the yarn weight (essentially its thickness) and its texture. These are the two key factors affecting how the knitted fabric feels.
- ✓ **Needles come in different sizes, are made from different materials, and fall into two main categories: straight and circular.** Although you may think the most important thing about needles is whether they're straight needle or circular, the other characteristics are more important. Needle size has a huge impact on the look and feel of the knitted piece. The material the needle is made from has a big impact on how the needle "feels" in your hand. Most knitters have a favorite needle material, and some are better than others for beginners or for different types of knit work.

In addition to yarn and knitting needles, a variety of other knitting tools are indispensable to knitters. Head to Chapter 2 for a rundown of all the knitting supplies you'll need or want.



In order to practice knitting, you need a ball of medium-weight yarn and a pair of size US 8 (5 mm) or 9 (5½ mm) needles. You don't have to buy the best-quality yarn, but if possible, choose wool, the knitter's best friend. Wool is elastic, making it easy to get your needles in and out of the stitches. Cotton doesn't "give" enough to make it a good choice for your first forays into knitting, and 100-percent acrylics can give you sweaty palms. Whatever yarn you choose, pick a light or bright color yarn, which makes it easier to see the stitches.

An understanding of the basics

To perform the most basic knitting, you just need to know how to do the following things, all of which we explain in Part II:

- ✓ **Cast on:** When you cast on, you create a series of loops on one needle as a starting row.
- ✓ **Knit:** A knit stitch is the most basic stitch in knitting; a purl stitch is its very close cousin. With these two stitches you can create a variety of patterns. Knowing only how to knit and purl, you can have a lot of fun knitting up square or rectangular pieces: hot pads, table mats, afghans, bags, and so on. To move beyond pieces with this basic shape, you need to know how to add (increase) or remove (decrease) stitches. Increasing and decreasing in a deliberate way creates pieces with more sophisticated shaping (think garments, socks, gloves, and so on) and lacework.
- ✓ **Bind off:** When you're done knitting, you have to remove the stitches from the needles in such a way that your hard work doesn't unravel. Sometimes (like when you want to create buttonholes or a neck opening in a sweater) you may bind off in the middle of a row.
- ✓ **Fix mistakes:** Knitters of all stripes mess up periodically. The most common mistakes, for novice and expert alike, are inadvertently dropping or adding stitches.

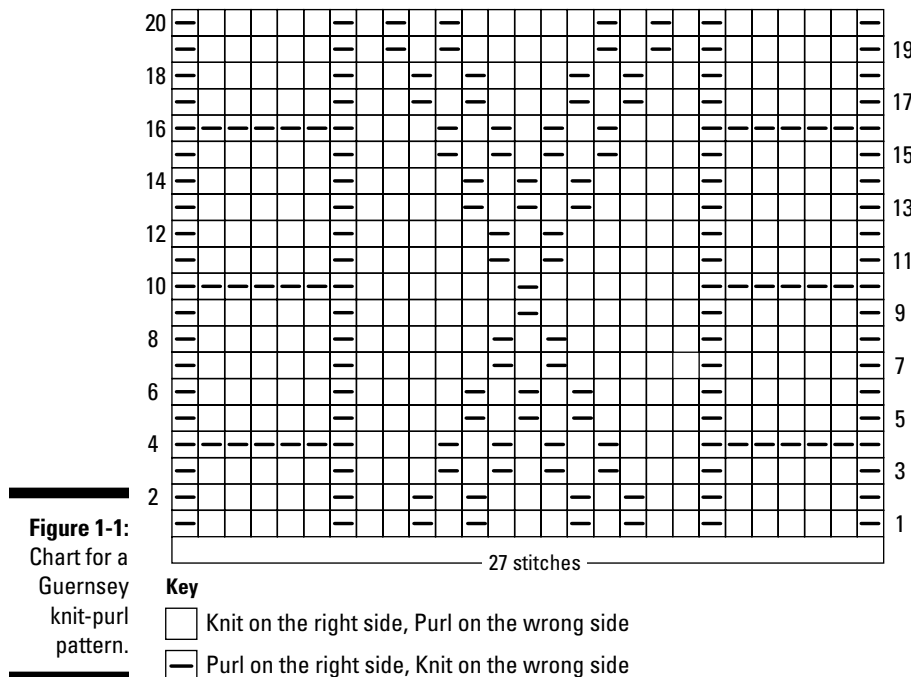
With a bit of practice casting on, knitting, purling, and binding off, you'll soon be amazed at your nimble fingers and ready to move on to more challenging techniques such as creating stripes, cables, and lacework and working with multiple colors of yarn. You can find those in Part III. And when you're ready to move on to garments, head to Part IV.

There's one more important thing to know as a knitter: how to figure gauge. *Gauge* is the one-word shorthand for "how big this thing will be when it's done." Although you can knit anything without determining gauge, you won't know what size you'll end up with until all is said and done. Although this isn't usually a problem for pieces for which size doesn't matter (such as scarves and bags), gauge is important when you want to make clothing. Chapter 3 tells you what you need to know about measuring gauge.

An understanding of knitterese

To make it through the instructions in this book and in any knitting pattern you pick up, you need to know what we call “knitterese” — a language full of abbreviations, asterisks, parentheses, and strange ways of spelling out (or rather *not* spelling out) instructions. To the untrained eye, these abbreviations look like gibberish: inc, k1, ssk, RH, WS, psso, and m1. Believe me, everyone who has knitted from a pattern has spent more time than they want to remember staring in earnest at the page, hoping that the sheer intensity of the gaze will unlock the meaning of the odd “instructions.”

Some patterns may convey instructions in chart form, like the one in Figure 1-1, which shows a chart for a Guernsey knit-purl pattern (you can find this pattern in Appendix A). Before you drop this book and clutch your eyes, keep in mind that charts like this typically simplify what otherwise would be fairly complicated written instructions.



Chapter 3 tells you everything you need to know about deciphering either written or charted instructions. Soon you’ll be breezing your way through patterns, relishing the pleasure of understanding.

Teaching Yourself to Knit from a Book



Everyone learns a new skill in a different way. If you're not confident that you can teach yourself to knit from a book, you can do the following things to make the process easier and help to ensure success:

- ✓ Study the illustrations carefully and compare them with what your own hands, needles, and yarn are doing.
- ✓ Use your right hand (not your left) if a right hand is pictured.
- ✓ Notice the path of the yarn in the illustration and see whether yours is doing the same thing. For example, does the yarn cross from right to left, or over or under the needle?
- ✓ Keep a pad of sticky notes nearby and use them on the book pages to help you focus on the illustration or text you're trying to understand.
- ✓ If you get stuck, gather your materials and head to your local knitting shop. Most store personnel are happy to help a new knitter get up and running. While you're there, ask whether the store sponsors a knitting group or knows of any that meet in your area. You can learn loads from other knitters. Or sign up for a knitting list on the Web, and you won't have to leave home. Whatever you do, don't give up. The rewards of being a knitter are worth the effort of learning how to be one.

Swatching

Swatching (making a sample of knitted fabric) is to the knitter what scales and exercises are to the pianist and what rough sketches and doodles are to the painter. A swatch is a sample of knitting. It can be big (50 stitches and 50 rows) or small (20 stitches and 20 rows). Most of the time, knitters make a swatch to measure gauge (to see how many stitches and rows there are to an inch). But dedicated knitters also work up swatches to learn, to practice, to experiment, and to invent.

Your swatch can tell you

- ✓ Whether your yarn and needles work up to the necessary gauge.
- ✓ Whether your yarn shows off your stitch pattern or obscures it.
- ✓ Whether your chosen color combination works or needs tweaking.
- ✓ Whether you understand a new technique.

As you go through or skip around this book, we urge you to keep your yarn and needles handy to try out the patterns, stitches, and techniques given. In some cases, we even provide specific instructions in the project sections for making a sampler of a particular technique.

The swatches you make will keep you limber, stretch your knowledge, and be your best teacher.

Putting it into practice

Each part provides projects to allow you to practice the skills introduced. Pick a few of these to knit up. Although swatches are invaluable when you want to practice a particular technique, there's nothing like an actual project to let you practice multiple techniques at one time. By making real things, your knowledge and confidence grow immeasurably — even if what you initially end up with are things that you wouldn't want anyone else to see!

Whatever you do, don't give up. Before you know it, you'll be wearing your knitted pieces out in public or giving them as gifts to family and friends. And when people inquire, "Did you *make* this?" you'll be able to proudly answer "Yes, I did!"